

## MAKERS OF VICTORIAN PHARMACY.

### **WILLIAM WITT (1833-1910)**

*As announced elsewhere in this Journal, Miriel Witt has celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday in November 2005 and this tribute to her great uncle, William Witt, is gleaned from an article written by A.T.S. Sissons in the Australasian Journal of Pharmacy, September 1969 issue.*

Early in 1857, a little more than twenty years after Port Phillip Settlement had been established and less than six years after the discovery of gold in Victoria, **William Witt** arrived in Melbourne.

His story is a fine example of a chemist and druggist who was closely associated with the hectic, adventurous days of the gold rushes in Victoria.

#### ***The Early Years***

William Witt was born in 1833 in the English city of Salisbury in the shadow of its beautiful Cathedral, the Salisbury Plains and Stonehenge.

At an early age he was apprenticed to a chemist and druggist in Salisbury and served a five years apprenticeship for which he paid a premium of £80 ( in those days a very considerable sum.) It would appear that he had a good master who gave him a thorough if arduous training. Toward the end of his apprenticeship he seems to have been entrusted with considerable responsibility and when his indenture was completed he remained as assistant to his former master until he was able to secure a position at Maidstone in Kent, so that he might extend his experience.

However he was soon back in Salisbury as manager of a branch pharmacy for his former employer and eventually Witt purchased this business.

At the age of 24 he was urged by some friends, who had emigrated to Victoria and settled in the town of Beechworth, to come and join them as there was an opening for a chemist and druggist in Beechworth, which was then a thriving mining township in the centre of a considerable mining district.

His wife approved of the proposition so they decided to go adventuring.

#### ***Victoria and the gold rush days.***

Prior to the arrival of the Witts and their party, ( which also included Miriel Witt's grandfather )the Port Phillip District, in 1840, had a population of 10,000 people and 800,000 sheep. By 1847 there were 43,000 people and 4,000,000 sheep.

The people of Port Phillip District had become very dissatisfied with distant rule from Sydney as this caused much misunderstanding and led to vexatious delays. Early in the 1840's agitation commenced for separation from NSW. Ultimately the British Government introduced an Australian Colonies Government Act, which provided for

the separation of Port Phillip District from NSW and the creation of a new colony to be named "Victoria". in July. 1851

A few weeks later gold was discovered in several different parts of the colony and this had a profound effect on the growth and wealth of Victoria.

In 1851 its population was 77,000; but by 1861 it had increased sevenfold. Gold had now been added to wool as the prime sources of the colony's wealth.

Wool growing required large holdings but few workers as opposed to gold mining which introduced a migratory population rapidly increasing in numbers and moving quickly from one gold field to the next exciting, new discovery.

The majority of the male population of Victoria became infected with the gold fever, abandoned their usual occupations and set out, some prepared but many unprepared, for the diggings.

Towards the end of 1852 large numbers of immigrants began to arrive from abroad especially from Great Britain.

Among these were a due proportion of chemists, some proposing to try their luck on the gold fields, some reasoning that with the great increase in population there would be good openings for chemists and druggists.

Familiar names, such as von Mueller, Bosisto, Johnson, Blackett, Kruse and Neild were attracted to Victoria by the lure of gold. Joseph George, William Archer, J. B. French were among others. Alfred Felton (later of Felton and Grimwade) came in 1853. For some little time Felton had traveled the gold fields in a horse-drawn vehicle distributing drugs in demand by the miners. These included Holloway's Ointment and Pills, Cockles Pills, Chlorodyne and various pain killers. Shortly afterwards he opened as a merchant in Melbourne.

### ***Beechworth***

William Witt and his party sailed in the *Queen of the Seas*, an Aberdeen clipper, and the voyage from London took 99 days.

They landed in Melbourne on February 6, 1857 and within a few hours of their arrival they were on a six-horse coach bound for Beechworth on the rough and meandering track that was the main Sydney road.

Beechworth had developed rapidly after the discovery of gold in 1857 at May Dag Hills and when production was at its peak, 25,000 ounces were sent to Melbourne each fortnight under escort..

The Witts found Beechworth to their liking and it was not long before William opened his first shop as a chemist and druggist in their adopted country. For the next 10 years Witt was closely identified with all activities in this township.

During the period he was in Beechworth he was honorary secretary of the Ovens District Hospital and for some years chairman of its committee. In 1863 he was made a JP for the district as well as being elected a member of the local council. He became Mayor of Beechworth in 1867.

### ***The Pharmaceutical Society of Victoria. .***

Due to the large number of chemists among the new arrivals in Victoria from around the world, great impetus was being given to the movement for the formation of a Pharmaceutical Society of Victoria, which was accomplished in 1857.

William Witt was a foundation member of the Society and its honorary local secretary for the Beechworth district.

Two other activities were to greatly influence his own career. Firstly he became a member of the Prospecting Association and secondly he was a founder of the Ovens-Murray Railway League. The object of the Prospecting Association was to encourage the discovery of new gold fields in the Ovens and adjacent districts.

Witt saw opportunities to establish branch pharmacies in many of the new mining townships.

Among these he had two branches in Rutherglen and another in Chiltern. The latter resulted in considerable financial loss and he made the business over to his assistant in lieu of wages.

#### **The Chiltern Medical Dispensary, established by William Witt, as it was in 1866 under the ownership of Thomas Marum**

In his enthusiasm he opened too many branches in what proved to be short-lived mining camps and made considerable losses. A major problem was that travel between Beechworth and Witt's far flung businesses was arduous and dangerous since the country was rugged and undeveloped and the roads were very bad. It was necessary to carry a kit of tools to constantly repair the buggy and harness,

A much more ambitious venture took him across the Murray into NSW where gold had been discovered on the Lachlan River near the present townsite of Forbes. When the consequent rush occurred Witt decided to investigate the possibility of a branch there.

He set out by buggy on the long trek via Albury, Wagga and Junee. The road was bad and there were few dwellings along it. From Wagga to the Lachlan there was only one roadside hotel, and he had to camp at night in the bush beside the buggy.

The gold rush on the Lachlan did not last long, so Witt dismantled his pharmacy and had it re-erected in Wagga Wagga. This was the first pharmacy in that part of the Riverina, and for a time was the only pharmacy within a radius of 80 miles.

Witt found the climate too hot for him during the summer so he sold the pharmacy to his assistant who, as Wagga Wagga grew, built up a very successful business.

These long journeys through difficult and largely unmapped areas, were full of dangers and mishaps. Once he was nearly drowned while trying to cross a swollen river. Frequently he was delayed for days by the state of the tracks. Twice he was held up by bushrangers who suspected he was carrying gold. On one occasion after being very roughly searched he was left bound to a tree by the roadside. It was hours before he freed himself and resumed his journey.

Road transport at this early date was so difficult, so uncertain and so costly that Witt and some others formed the Murray Railway League. Gold mining had so greatly increased the population and wealth of the colony, that in the period 1860-1880 the Government announced that it was favorably disposed to an extensive scheme of railway construction. The Ovens district people wished a north-east railway from Melbourne to Wodonga to link ultimately with an Albury-Sydney line on the NSW side

William Witt was asked to secure the support necessary to ensure Government action. He became secretary of the Railway League and traveled widely through the district as an advocate for the scheme. He secured the support of some Melbourne merchants, and a large deputation interviewed the Premier and the Minister of Railways. Finally, despite the opposition of some vested interests, the Government agreed to construct the desired railway which was built in three stages from Melbourne to Wodonga, the last section being officially opened in 1873.

***The Hon. William Witt M.L.A.***

Meantime, Witt had become so well known throughout the district through his work on the Beechworth Council and by his well planned campaign for the railway, that he was urged to contest the Murray electorate for a seat in the Legislative Assembly. This electorate was huge but with characteristic determination and enthusiasm he rode to most settlements in this scattered area and put his views to the electors. He won the election in 1868 and held this seat for three successive parliamentary sessions.

In parliament he continued to work for the completion of the north-east railway, and for a branch line from Wangaratta to Beechworth but it was not until 1883 that Wodonga was joined by rail to Albury.

At last Melbourne and Sydney were connected by rail. Even then, at the border there was delay due to change of gauge and customs inspections.

To discharge his parliamentary duties satisfactorily he found it necessary to reside in Melbourne, so he transferred from Beechworth to Burwood. Very soon he was on the council for the Shire of Nunawading and was for years its president.

To improve the roads, toll gates were set up to provide revenue for road maintenance. For some years Witt's home was "Hethersett", a property of some 30 acres on Burwood Road. This site is now occupied by the Presbyterian Ladies' College.

As a politician Witt worked with some success for progress in Victoria and the betterment of conditions for its increasing population.

Some time after he settled in Melbourne he opened a pharmacy in Bourke Street but his parliamentary duties made it difficult to conduct a large business. Later he had a smaller business in Burnley. Then from 1884 to 1905 he was in Chapel Street, Prahran, and became a well known and greatly respected citizen of that suburb.

In 1886 he was President of the South Suburban Chemists' Association.

William Witt became a member of the Council of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australasia (Victoria?) in 1890 and remained on the Council until 1909. He was President of the Society from 1897 to 1900.

**Witt & Co.,-Chapel Street, Prahran (about 1888**

During his term of office as president which Witt oversaw among many other matters, an extension of services provided by the Pharmacy College for dental students, and the production of a Victorian pharmaceutical formulary, which was the forerunner of the APF. A course in practical pharmacy was also introduced into the college syllabus, but efforts to secure reciprocity between the colonies were not successful.

In 1901 as president, William Witt represented the Victorian Pharmaceutical Society at the inauguration ceremony in Sydney that marked the achievement of federation in Australia..

Also in 1901, Dr. G. A. Fetherston, Chairman of the Prahran Bench, died after 21 years of distinctive service and Witt was appointed to this position, which is an indication of the high esteem in which he was held by the citizens of Prahran.

In 1902 William Witt was succeeded as President of the Pharmaceutical Society by E. T. Church who was the first Australian-born and the first who had qualified under the Pharmacy Board of Victoria, to occupy this important position.

***The twilight years.***

For many years after the passing, in 1887, of the Dentists Registration Act, chemists who had acted as dentists prior to the Act were entitled to be on the Dentists' Register. Hence in its early years chemists were represented on the Dental Board. William Witt was a member of this board and for a period, its treasurer.

Later when the University of Melbourne set up a Faculty of Dentistry, Witt was a member of the faculty nominated by the Government.

In 1905 he sold his pharmacy in Chapel Street and opened one in Flinders Street, City. When the Pharmaceutical Society celebrated the 50th anniversary of its foundation In 1907, Witt was recognised as one of four surviving foundation members.

The last pharmacy he conducted was in Park Street, South Melbourne, near its junction with St. Kilda Road. This was a quiet area and the volume of business was not great, so that running this pharmacy was really partial retirement.

During his long association with pharmacy in Victoria extending over 50 years, he had encountered many changes in fortune. Sometimes he had been comparatively wealthy but each time success had been followed by reverses. In the collapse that followed Melbourne's great land boom he was badly hit and never recovered financially. After all his efforts he was in his last years a comparatively poor man. The death of his wife in 1900 had been a great blow to him.

In his later years his own health deteriorated and he resigned from the Council of the Pharmaceutical Society in 1909. In a letter addressed to the members he wrote: "As one of the founders of the Society 52 years ago, I feel such satisfaction that it has overcome the many difficulties which beset the ways of inaugurating and establishing a scientific organisation and maintaining interest in such for so many years."

He died in 1910.

**AND SO WE REMEMBER WILLIAM WITT.**

**A man of ideas but also of action, respected for his integrity and steadfastness.**

**A considerate and kindly employer who watched carefully over the welfare of his staff and the progress of his apprentices.**

**A hard worker for the advancement of pharmacy and a man who took a larger share in public life than almost any of his contemporaries.**

**Original author's note:**

(In preparing this article I am greatly indebted to Miss E. M. Witt, for permitting me to see some of the Witt family records and for providing illustrations. A.T.S.)