



PINELLAS

BEACHCOMBER DENTIST - James Montgomery Baggett

by J "Charlie" Grandmason

There were very few roads along the Florida West Coast in the 1880's, and even fewer bridges! How could a dentist make a living by just hanging out his sign and waiting for patients to come by? Most of the Pinellas pioneers lived on or near to the coastline, and traveled around by boat.

Doctor Baggett lived in Dunedin and based his practice there. He owned a sailboat, and used it to sail to ports from Hudson to Sarasota. Sometimes he sailed as far as north as Cedar Key or south to Naples. When the wind was against him, or in the doldrums, he rowed to get to port. His sea-going practice earned him the name "Beachcomber Dentist". He was able to sail to places where a horse and wagon could not easily get to go. Doc Baggett would sail his craft to farms along the coast, and into the bays so that he could help those persons who needed his skills. Word of his approach by sail was quickly spread from neighbor to neighbor. He usually stayed overnight at the home of one of his patients, and those needing dental help would come from the nearby farms and villages to visit the doctor.

His operating room was usually a chair propped up on the outdoor porch. A tooth extraction cost \$1, and a gold filling cost \$2. A foot powered drill, pumped like an old time sewing machine, was used to open and clean the cavity. Gold foil was used to fill the tooth. One thin layer at a time. The good doctor saved all of the little left over pieces of gold foil. The anesthetic and painkiller was usually corn liquor! Some of the other medical instruments in his bag included pliers, very strong string, and a sharp knife.



"One Hundred Years of Dentistry in Florida"
by Dr Robert Thoburn

Dr J Baggett also was active in producing a weekly newspaper in Dunedin. It began publication in 1884 and was called the "West Hillsborough Times". That same newspaper and its press would later become known as the "St Petersburg Times". His partner in this early newspaper was Dr J L Edgar, formerly of St Louis MO, and now a drugstore owner in Dunedin. This early newspaper was printed in the back of the drugstore. The mechanic and press operator was M Joel McMullin. Doc Baggett was the editor. When the newspaper was sold a few years later, Joel McMullin went on to continue to supervise the printing press. That original press is on display at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

J M Baggett was born in Copia County, MS. He went to Philadelphia to attend Dental College, and then returned to Mississippi to begin his practice. Soon after, Dr Baggett moved to Dunedin, and he was the first dentist to be issued a certificate by the newly established Florida State Board of Dental Examiners in the year 1887.

Dr James Baggett married Clara Hope, 9 Jan 1888. Her family also has an extensive pioneer history that includes action in the Civil War in Florida. The Hope family will be featured in the next issue of the Pinellas Genealogy Quarterly. When Doc Baggett married Clara, he gave her a "huge" wedding ring engraved with the words "Love from Doc" on the inside. The golden wedding band had been fashioned from the many scraps of gold foil that the Doc had saved over many years of filling teeth! Years later, the wedding band would be cut in half for the wives of the two grandsons. They had three children, but only two daughters survived to marry, the other child died while they were serving as Lighthouse Keepers on Anclote Key. A grandson, William Baggett Boyd was the source for some of the material in this article.

During the Spanish-American War, Dr Baggett went to Port Cortez, Honduras with his wife and daughters, and helped with dental needs in that location. The Spanish-American War only lasted four months. When he returned to Tarpon Springs, he worked as the Lighthouse Keeper at Anclote Key from 1888 to 1891. He later became a city judge in Tarpon Springs, and was active in a few business enterprises, including a restaurant. Doc Baggett died in 1922. There are many ancestors, descendants and cousins associated with the Baggett, Boyd, Hooker, and Hope families.

This article is not intended to be a genealogy. It is a history of an important Pinellas Pioneer, that is not available anywhere else a single article. You, the interested reader, now have more resources at your command to complete the genealogy of Doc Baggett and family.

More information about J M Baggett and his family may be obtained from the following sources;

Largo Library;

Pinellas Pioneers microfilm.

Manuscript Files.

Census Microfilms

Gulfport Historical Society;

Oral History by W Baggett Boyd

Tarpon Springs Library;

Manuscript Files.

"Tarpon Springs Florida" by Gertrude K Stoughton

"Tarpon Springs History" by Pent

Tarpon Springs Hist Society;

Manuscript Files.

"Keepers of Florida Lighthouses" by Hurley

Florida Historical Quarterly, Fall 1999

Dunedin Historical Society;

"Dunedin thru the Years"

Dunedin Library;

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Hillsborough County Marriage Records, Book G, page 80.

Correction to Fall Issue, Pinellas, p. 60. In the third paragraph, lines 4 and 5, Eelje died 17 March 1984 - not 1884.