

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 9th June 1991 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Commemorating John Thomas Denny

Citation by Ian Denny

John Thomas Denny was born in 1836 in County Waterford Ireland, the fifth of seven children and the first son born to Joseph Jacob Denny, a merchant and his wife Mary. The family have for generations been Freemen of Waterford. Currently this honour is held by Henry Denny of Waterford, a second cousin of the family here today.

John Thomas's mother died when he was nine years old; so he was probably brought up by his older sisters. He was educated at the Waterford Academy and then obtained employment in a merchant's office where he stayed for four years before entering the service of the Provincial Bank of Ireland at Cork in 1856.

His father died in 1860 and thinking that brighter prospects existed in Australia he sought and was appointed to a position in the Union Bank of Australia in Melbourne by its London Board of Directors.

He arrived in Melbourne in 1863 on the ship "Result" and worked there until April 1866 when he was appointed to the Portland Branch, first as accountant & afterwards as Manager. During these years he married Frances Wilcox and their first child was Charles Maynard, father of Rosalind Janet Denny, who is present here today along with other family members.

John Thomas & Frances had four more children Henry, Arthur Gerald, Kstherme and Enid Mary who married Laura Fanny Gill, Mildred Davies, Alfred Bussell and Charles Sweeting respectively.

In 1878 John Thomas Denny was sent to Perth to set up the first branch of the Union Bank in Western Australia. The opening of the Perth branch was soon followed by branches in York, Geraldton and Albany. The first issue of "The West Australian" dated 18th November 1879 contains a notice inserted by J.T. Denny, advising that :

"Branches are now open at Perth (with agency at Guildford), York, Albany, Geraldton and Fremantle where every description of banking business, including exchange operations with Europe, America, Mauritius, India, China, all the Australian colonies, Tasmania and New Zealand is transacted on the most favourable terms.

Present rates of interest on deposits :
for 3 months 3% per annum
for 6 months 4% per annum
for 12 months 5% per annum".

By 1882, a branch had been established at Roebourne. The Union Bank was therefore strategically placed when major gold discoveries were made in the Kimberly region in the 1880's.

In 1885 there was an incident at the Bank in Roebourne in which the Manager, Thomas Anketell and his Clerk Henry Thomas Burrup were both found murdered on the premises. To this day the murders have not been solved. As W.A. manager John Thomas Denny had to write to Burrup's mother in Gloucestershire to notify her of her 23 year old son's death. Burrup Peninsula (associated with the North-West Shelf Gas Project) was named after his family.

Twenty years later, in 1905, the son of John Thomas Denny, Arthur Gerald, aged thirty-one, died of peritonitis while working for the Union Bank in Roebourne, leaving a widow and two young children.

It is interesting to peruse official records and discover that when John Thomas Denny commenced work in London he received the grand sum of 270 pounds per annum. Upon commencing employment in Perth it rose to 600 pounds plus another 100 as "servant's allowance". At the time of his death in 1892 he was receiving a total of 1000 pounds per annum.

In later life John Thomas Denny must have been lonely as his wife suffered from ill health and lived in Sydney with his younger daughter. His three sons, after attending school in Melbourne, sought work outside Perth. About twenty letters written by John Thomas Denny in Perth to his oldest daughter Kitty studying in Melbourne have survived. The letters cover the period December 1887 to February 1890. They express old-fashioned sentiments, and are sometimes humorous, sometimes serious and moving. He speaks of his dull life in Perth. He tells of tennis tournaments at Government House and meeting the new Dean, the Rt Rev. Goldsmith. "He is a great success, a good preacher and most enthusiastic. He is trying to put new life into the old bones of Church Services to work here."

Life for his eldest son Charlie a surveyor however, appears to have been far from dull in the Bridgetown area. He had little time for writing and was in demand with the young ladies as he was an excellent dancer. Harry the second son, after a short time as a bank clerk went up north to seek more adventurous work.

John Thomas Denny took a keen interest in Kitty's education, exhorting her to work hard and pass her exams. Upon the subject of proper manners he wrote "I hope you will keep your head inside railway carriages on your future trips. I don't think it good form to do otherwise". Kitty was very upset that nature had not been kind to her in the matter of stature - she was only 4 feet 11 inches tall.

The poems of Henry Longfellow were great favourites of John Thomas Denny. He recommended one to Kitty entitled "Maidenhood", and particularly the ninth verse : "O, thou child of many prayers ! Life hath quicksands,- Life hath snares! Care and age come unawares!"

He tells her in the letters about various families in Perth with young people of her own age - the Steere family "any amount of black-stockinged girls" - the Hicklings late arrived from Warnambool "the fair-haired blue-eyed type evidently very attractive as they always have young cavaliers laughing after them" - & "Florrie Wittenoom has not grown up nice looking she is pleasing and very "jolly" as of old always ready for a pleasant laugh and like all the family chatters like a magpie". On social matters generally he wrote "Perth appears to be broken up into cliques more pronounced than ever and there is but little going on that is worth narrating".

On 13th April 1892 John Thomas Denny died following an operation for an abscess on his right hand, performed under chloroform.

His funeral, "held in very heavy rain", was attended by a large number of people, many of whom were prominent citizens of the Colony including Sir John Forrest. The service was conducted by Dean Goldsmith. According to his death notice "The head office of the Union Bank in W.A. was established by John Thomas Denny in Perth and with the exception of a short interval when he visited Fiji on the Bank's business - he has remained ever since without having a holiday and it is feared that his assiduous devotion to his work, has in a measure been the cause of his death".

"The Australasian Insurance and Banking Record" published on May 18th 1892 when reporting the death of John Thomas Denny remarked that he "was a man assiduously devoted to his work and considered an able banker. He had been Chairman of the associated Banks since their inauguration into an association". He was also an active member of the Perth Chamber of Commerce and one of the leading men in the Perth business community.

To his wise management may be attributed the prosperity of the Union Bank in Western Australia which in turn contributed to the prosperity of the Colony in the late 19th century as the Bank did more than any other financial institution to build up its pastoral industry. Today, its successor, the ANZ Bank continues on the solid foundations laid by the pioneer we are remembering here today John Thomas Denny.