

Annotations

First a physician

William Henry Drummond (1854–1907) is internationally known as a poet. His life as a physician is often overlooked. He died in 1907, in Cobalt, a rough new mining town in northern Ontario. He owned a silver mine there and could have stayed in the comfort of Montréal, enjoying his new-found wealth. However, medicine was his life. He was often in Cobalt, helping out when the town “had no doctor.” In April 1907, he answered a call for help from the town’s company doctor. He made the arduous journey to Cobalt and died while helping with an outbreak of smallpox.

Cobalt was the first mining town in northeastern Ontario. It sprung up in the middle of the forest, when silver was discovered during railway construction in 1903. Dr. William Henry Drummond was one of the early mine owners and came to Cobalt from Montréal in 1904 before the railway was finished. Access was by an arduous water route through the wilderness. There were no permanent houses. The Bank of Commerce was in a tent and its manager slept on the strong box at night. There were already 100 mining companies setting up operations and no doctor. Drummond not only oversaw the building of his own mine, but also provided medical care in emergencies for all the mining companies. When the “company” doctor arrived, it is not surprising that he and Drummond met over a medical emergency.

Dr. Charles Harvey Hair was the first company doctor in Cobalt, arriving in 1905. The following story was told to the author by Dr. Hair’s son, Dr. Hugh Charles Hair:

He arrived by train just before noon. As the train slid into Cobalt Station and came to a stop, loud repeating triple whistles held the attention of everyone. My father enquired of those about him, “Why is that whistle blowing?” He was told that it signaled a mine accident at the Nippissing Mine! He then asked how he might hire transportation to the mine across the lake and up the hill?



Town of Cobalt, Ont., 1905–6. The rough wilderness and tents give no indication of the fortunes being made from new-found silver.

Someone led him to Tripp’s Livery Stable and he was soon in a carriage that brought him to the mine gate. A word from the driver was all that was needed for entrance to the mine property with instructions to drive to the Headframe.

My father entered the high, dank, darkened structure. The odours from underground workings produced a musty smell. The light was limited to a small area near a wide doorway at the far end of the timbered structure. Here he could see a group of men surrounding someone, stretched out face down, upon a rough wooden bench. At his side in a kneeling position a man was calmly trying to close an extensive laceration of skin and back muscles.

My father drew closer and watched the kneeling man thread a horsehair suture through the eye of a straight needle, then push it through both edges of the wound. He then removed the needle and poked it into a pillow supporting the patient’s head, while he tied a knot and cut the ends.

My father felt it was time to introduce himself and said, “I am Dr. Hair from Toronto. Can I be of any assistance?”

The kneeling figure looked up smiling and said, “I have been hoping you would arrive soon. I am Dr. Drummond and there is something you can do Doctor! You can hold the needle!”

After this exchange the needle was passed from the hand of Dr. Drummond to the hand of my father. More sutures were instilled until the wound was closed and the areas was swabbed with tincture of iodine. Gauze dressings were held in place with yards of 3 inch bandage.

The patient was then transported to a bunkhouse bed on the property and the two medical men went for lunch!

Drummond’s fame as a poet and increasing reputation as a man of letters, never affected the conscientious discharge of his professional work. Throughout his years in practise, the rich and poor shared his consideration. Drummond felt obliged to answer all calls for help, even after he had become a wealthy mine owner. He had chosen medicine and he knew it for a way of life.

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Dr. Taylor is compiling a history of the physicians who worked for the mining companies and railways in northern Ontario.