

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Pharmacy under three colonial administrations: William John Swann in Samoa, 1889-1936

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Abstract

William John Swann (1859-1936) was the first pharmacist to open for business in the Samoan Islands in the Western Pacific. Following Stuart Anderson's article about James Butler Swann and his three sons, this short communication considers further information about the life and work of William in Samoa, mainly from local newspapers and German archival sources. William practiced pharmacy in the same location under three separate colonial administrations. This communication illustrates the impact on pharmacy practice of the arrival of each new administration.

Introduction

On Saturday 11 May 1889, William John Swann became the first pharmacist in Samoa when he opened his shop in the port town of Apia, directly opposite the Hotel International on Main Street (later renamed Beach Road) in the Matafele district of the town.¹ He came from an English family of pharmacists, and had obtained a licence to practice in the Fiji Islands.² Swann was both chemist and trader, and had just turned 30 at the time. He made his final home in Samoa until his death on 20 May 1936.³ At the end of the First World War – nearly twenty years after his arrival in Samoa – the *Samoa Times* reported the following about his previous life:

Mr J. W. Swann [...] is the son of one of the oldest Fiji settlers, who arrived in Fiji as far back as 4 July 1867, where he started cotton planting, which he carried on in conjunction with his pharmacy, the first business of its kind to be started in Fiji. Mr. J. W. Swann after serving his apprenticeship in Lincolnshire, England, returned to Fiji, and acted as assistant to his father for a few months. He then took the dispensership of the Suva Hospital, and was afterwards in business for himself, when he was burnt out.⁴

During his nearly fifty years in Samoa, William Swann lived under three different systems of colonial rule. Before he arrived, and until 1879, Samoa was a formal sovereign state ruled by a king. In that year a zone around Apia was recognised by the king as an extrater-

ritorial area and governed jointly by a consortium consisting of Great Britain, Germany and the United States of America. This arrangement continued until 1900, when Germany took sole control over administration in Western Samoa. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 Britain asked New Zealand to take control in Western Samoa, which they did under various arrangements until Samoa achieved independence in 1962.

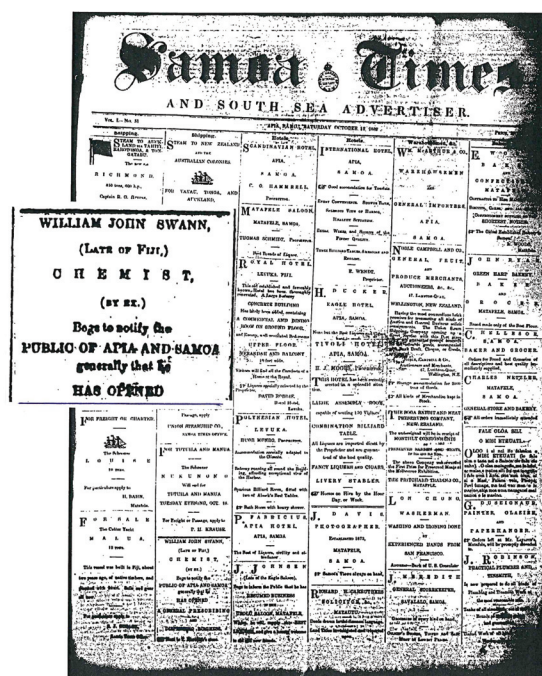


Figure 1. Front Cover of *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 12 October 1889

Pharmacy under the Kingdom of Samoa and Municipality of Apia, 1889-1900

When Swann started his business, Samoa was a formal sovereign state ruled by a king, although important areas had been leased to foreign powers. The port town of Apia, surrounded by an extensive commercial zone, was defined as both a 'neutral territory' and a 'municipal zone'. This was brought under the jurisdiction of a consular-controlled Municipal Board after the Municipal Convention of Apia was signed on 2nd September 1879. Great Britain, Germany and the United States of America governed jointly in this administration. Apia had become a European state within the Samoan state. The Great Powers disenfranchised the Samoan king increasingly, but their consuls were highly suspicious of each other, and each feared lest Samoa should fall to one or other of the Powers.

Four months after opening his shop in the Matafele district, in September 1889 Swann moved to new

premises that he had erected adjoining the store of Mr T. Meredith.⁵ The new shop was surrounded by a ground-level veranda,⁶ was both “commodious and handsome”, and afforded “a far better opportunity to display his large stock of medicines”.⁷ At the time, there was a flurry of rebuilding and construction of new buildings in this central location, after several large and small shops had burnt down in Apia in January 1889.⁸ William Swann had sailed for extended periods as an assistant apothecary onboard the *USS Mohican*, an American steam sloop of war, in the early 1880s.⁹ In 1890 he returned to the *USS Mohican* for a two-month spell “as apothecary on board”,¹⁰ after which he settled permanently in Apia.

In the tax system of the Municipality, Swann was not registered as an apothecary or chemist, but as a druggist. This was also more favourable for him, because select professions such as lawyers and doctors required a much more expensive Special License than a merchant. A differentiated system for the taxation of gainful employment had already been introduced in the Municipal Convention of 2 September 1879.¹¹ This specified the special taxes to be levied annually on warehouses for traders. They were divided into five license classes. With a monthly sales value of less than \$250, Swann had been grouped into the lowest Class V, which meant \$12 in taxes.¹² Members of certain occupations specified as professions – from lawyers to tailors – usually required expensive Special Licences.¹³ These were listed exhaustively. The occupation actually performed was apparently irrelevant, or depended on who they were performed for. It was known, for example, that William Swann extracted teeth for the Samoans,¹⁴ but this did not lead to any additional description or reclassification as a dentist, as this would require a Special Licence.¹⁵

British, German and American cooperation

William Swann was also politically and socially active during this period. He was a staunch British citizen, and was closely connected with all patriotic movements in Samoa.¹⁶ In 1893 he nominated two candidates for election to the Municipal Council,¹⁷ and in March 1899 he stood as an Anglo-Saxon candidate himself, but was defeated.¹⁸ Because Samoa was under joint British, German and American control he worked closely with German and American colleagues. He was on a committee with the German doctor Funk to raise funds for the establishment of an international hospital in Samoa.¹⁹ As early as 1882, the Germans had acquired a house and a plot of land, and had established a small hospital in Apia with a capacity of seven beds for seafarers. In addition to German navy personnel, the hospital had

been opened to seafarers of other nations in the following years. But it fell increasingly into disrepair. Parallel to the old German seamen’s hospital, a ‘sick asylum’ had been established in Apia by North American Presbyterians. But overall, there were still practically no functioning health care facilities at the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁰

Samoa was a war-torn country in that time. Two ruling native families rivalled for political supremacy in a constant warlike confrontation. The consuls advocated annexation as the solution, and vehemently represented their own interests. The Great Powers nearly went to war over the Samoa group in 1899, when all sent warships to the harbour of Apia. A hurricane prevented the naval battle. However, it claimed many lives among the ship’s convoys. Whilst battles between different Samoan factions were inconclusive, warships of the imperial Powers continued to bombard villages on the island of Upolu.

Swann had a lively and probably also lucrative professional relationship with the German medical practitioner, Funk. Dr Bernhard Funk came to Apia in February 1880 as a medical adviser for the German trade company, Godeffroy & Sohn. At the end of July 1886, Funk was appointed health officer of the municipal government for the town of Apia. However, he was responsible for treating the Samoans as well as the white settlers,²¹ as a result of which he was also considered the “de facto health officer” of the Samoan government.²² The prominent and busy ‘Apia Doctor’²³ would have found in Swann a welcome relief to his work pressure, someone who was able to supplement the care he was able to provide. For Funk, the arrival of a pharmacist meant, in practical terms, the end of his dependence for the supply of certain medicines on the London Missionary Society’s base at Malua – a small village on the island of Upolu – which was the key supplier of Funk’s croton oil.²⁴

Their most prominent joint patient was the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson,²⁵ who settled permanently in Samoa in September 1890.²⁶ At Funk’s request, Swann assisted in the treatment of war casualties for the Samoan government, and was able to charge the latter for his services.²⁷ While the war activities in Apia were initially a blessing for Swann, they became a curse at the same time when he suffered a great financial loss by a bombardment of his private property in the spring of 1899.²⁸

Pharmacy under German occupation, 1900-1914

When Germany raised its flag in Apia on 1 March 1900, it was a peaceful new beginning after a political disaster. After the events in 1899, the Powers had to

admit to themselves, that the only solution to the Samoan ‘problem’ was partition. In a conference at Berlin in that year, the main islands of Upolu and Savaii were given to Germany, while the United States assumed control of Eastern Samoa. The first German Governor was Wilhelm Solf, who was also the last President of the Municipal Council in 1899. Solf adopted the idea of citizen participation and set up a civil advisory council to advise his administration (Gouvernementsrat). The Anglo-Saxon part of the population would therefore participate in decision-making from the beginning of German occupation.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the German protectorate was accompanied by fears of discrimination among the Anglo-Saxon population of Samoa. One incident provides evidence of alleged German harassment. The correspondent of the *Fiji Times* published an article, which subsequently spread throughout the English-language press of the British Pacific colonies. He reported that on 23 June 1903 Swann had been ordered by the German health officer to employ a German assistant in his pharmacy for the second time in a period of four months, or his pharmacy would be closed within six weeks.²⁹ However, an interview in an Australian newspaper with the British manager of a large cocoa plantation in Samoa suggested that it was not a nationalistic demand, but legitimate professional differences between the German administration and Swann. In 1903, the Governor had granted him a permit for his business, but the point of contention was probably the implementation of German pharmacy regulations, which Swann obviously could not meet without professional German support.³⁰

Retail pharmacies from pioneer times were often not limited to medicines, but also offered a wide range of non-medicinal products.³¹ Swann’s pharmacy was probably more like an American drugstore than a traditional Prussian pharmacy, and did not meet the expectations of the German Empire. Even if the government did not doubt Swann’s personal qualifications as a pharmacist, it did have doubts over the requirements for recognising his business as a pharmacy; it concluded that it was in fact a drugstore. The conditions for cooperation between the administration and Swann’s pharmacy were open to question. The Governor wanted to ensure that Germans in Samoa were offered services equivalent to a domestic standard.

The official report into Swann’s pharmacy found that a drugstore functioned as a substitute for a pharmacy as described by the German administration. In addition, the qualifications of the previous health personnel of the Municipality – Dr Funk and Swann – had already come under scrutiny in a report by the Medical

Officer of the Imperial Colonial Office at the end of 1900. The Medical Department was of the opinion that in a German protectorate – in principle – only doctors licensed in Germany could perform official functions such as that of a Health Officer.

The arrival of a German pharmacist

The operator of the government pharmacy was expected to do something similar.³² This meant that Swann’s pharmacy was not recognized as an approved one in the German Empire. After the proposed compromise or ‘employee solution’ did not come about, the Governor looked to establish a separate German pharmacy for Apia, which would be in addition to Swann’s.³³ In April 1904, when the German pharmacist Guido Sabiel, who had previously worked in a pharmacy in Sydney for several years,³⁴ arrived, the small town of Apia – with less than 400 white inhabitants – had the luxury of two trained and experienced pharmacists. Both were about the same age, came from pharmacy families,³⁵ and now resided on Apia’s only main street, Beach Road.



Figure 2. Beach Road, Apia, location of Swann’s pharmacy (Source: © Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg)

From then on, both Swann and Sabiel drew attention to this fact in bilingual advertisements. In April 1904 Swann immediately reminded readers that he was open for business, advertising in English: “W. J. Swann, Apothecary, wishes to notify his friends and customers that he has a full stock of all requirements”. Later, he presented himself to the German-speaking public, in German advertisements, as a “pharmacist and druggist” who offered “medicines and chemicals of the best quality only, patent medicines etc., sponges, toilet articles etc. etc.”. His “consulting hours” were “daily from 6 o’clock in the morning to 8 o’clock in the evening, except on Sundays”.³⁶ Both may thus have seen each other more as competitors than colleagues.

Otherwise, not much is known about Swann during this period. But the cards may have been laid. Sabiel had received all official orders from the government and supplied the German-speaking community. Swann may still have had a regular following in Apia's strong Anglo-Saxon community and among the Samoans. Until the end of German rule in 1914, Western Samoa had a strong minority of the population of Anglo-Saxon descent.³⁷ The English language remained a common *lingua franca*.

On the other hand, he was well known to the Samoans through family connections – he was married twice to Samoan women³⁸ – and generally from the time of the Municipality. As a chemist he had a good reputation with the Samoans in all parts of the islands. They implicitly believed in his knowledge and advice, particularly regarding children's disease, and came from the most remote districts to obtain his assistance.³⁹ He was known to the natives throughout the islands as “The Children's Father”, as he made a special study of their ailments.⁴⁰ The Governor was not interested in ousting Swann, and provided proof of this.

The Governor initially left the legislation of the previous municipal government in place, but its effect was limited to the Apia district. However, there were no regulations for pharmacies in place. It was not until 1911 that the Imperial Colonial Office issued uniform regulations for the professional practice of private pharmacists for most German colonies, which also applied to Samoa.⁴¹ Initially the German administration was confronted with the practical problem of how to implement the decree without disadvantaging Swann. Since the new decree required a licence to practise in the territory of the German Reich as a prerequisite for permission, Swann – who qualified abroad – could not actually be allowed to continue his pharmacy business.

The German governor looked for an advantageous solution to the problem, and turned to the Imperial Colonial Office at Berlin with his concerns on 30 May 1911. If, through a ‘ruthless implementation’ of the regulations, Swann was restricted only to the sale of approved medicines and drug goods, this would mean serious damage to his business. Such an arrangement would also contradict the spirit of earlier understandings between Great Britain and the German Empire. The governor appealed: “It would only be desirable from the point of view of equity if an exception could be made for Swann in the form of a transitional provision”.⁴² The Imperial Colonial Office granted an exception for Swann barely three months later, which would have to be taken into account when Sabiel was granted permission.⁴³ The Governor, who from the very begin-

ning was intent on balancing the different population groups, remained true to itself and kept its promises.



Figure 3. *Government Hospital, Apia* (Source: © Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg)

Pharmacy under New Zealand control

In 1914, when the First World War erupted and Britain asked New Zealand to occupy Western Samoa. So, an Expeditionary Force was swiftly occupying the territory on 30 August, 1914 without any fight. New Zealand established a Military Government in Western Samoa; this lasted until 1920. Afterwards, Western Samoa was placed under New Zealand as a ‘C’ Class Mandate of the League of Nations. The ‘C’ Class Mandate gave New Zealand the power to administer the islands as part of her own territory. The New Zealand Government, through a series of Orders in Council and the Samoa Act of 1921, started evolving a civil administration for Western Samoa.

After the German pharmacy was confiscated by the military administration in 1916, and Sabiel and his family were deported to Germany in 1920, Swann was again the only chemist on Samoa.⁴⁴ It is unclear according to which rules he practised his profession. Theoretically, the pharmacy regulations of the German administration were still in force. But it is difficult to imagine that they were also applied to Swann. He had in any case been privileged under New Zealand military administration. From 2 November 1916 to 31 December 1919 he served in the Samoan Reserve force.⁴⁵ During that time he proved himself during the influenza epidemic.⁴⁶ Swann worked with the Apia Government Hospital in such a way that he was allowed to fill prescriptions prescribed by the Medical Officers for outpatients in order to relieve the staff of the Hospital Dispensary.⁴⁷

Privately, too, in Samoa Swann had found his centre of life. He had a total of five children with two

Samoan women.⁴⁸ His sister was a member of the Marist Sisters' Order and moved from Levuka to Apia.⁴⁹ In addition to his pharmacy business, he ran a cocoa plantation, which he had acquired in 1898.⁵⁰ It is likely that Chinese coolies worked for him there.⁵¹ Swann took a very active interest in sport, especially in racing and yachting, and was a staunch supporter of the Apia Turf Club.⁵² He owned horses⁵³ and cars.⁵⁴ He jockeyed his horses very successfully,⁵⁵ and enjoyed motoring as well, so much that he sometimes drove too fast.⁵⁶ It is all the more tragic that he most probably died from the consequences of a car accident, which occurred on 10 April 1936. The *New Zealand Herald* reported it as follows:

As a result of a motor accident on Good Friday, Mr. W. J. Swann, suffered severe injuries. In company with his son and two companions, he was proceeding by motor-truck to his daughter's plantation [...]. After passing Malolai a halt was called and the truck run on to the roadside. After a few minutes it commenced to move backwards and ran over an embankment, where it capsized. The others in the truck manage to escape, but Mr. Swann was pinned beneath the cab and was severely injured. He was removed to the Apia General Hospital, but is now under treatment at his home.⁵⁷

Six weeks later Swann died at the age of 77 years at Apia Government Hospital, as one of the best known and respected identities of the territory of Western Samoa.⁵⁸

Conclusion

William John Swann was a pioneer in the Pacific Ocean just like his father. While his father opened the first western pharmacy in Fiji, Swann succeeded in doing so in Samoa in 1889. However, he was not limited to that, as he was a trader and planter as well. Swann was able to make a successful livelihood for himself under three different regimes. He had obviously found his life's dream in Samoa and was allowed to live it there. Swann led a pleasant colonial life. Unlike the German pharmacist Sabiel, who was also searching for this life's dream, he was fortunate that his compatriots were victorious in the murderous battles of northern France, thus securing his existence in the remote Pacific.

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Endnotes and References

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2. Anderson, Stuart. Pharmacy and migration: James Butler Swann (1834-1901) and his three sons in New Zealand, Fiji and Samoa 1862-1936. *Pharmaceutical Historian*. 2020: 50(1); 7-8, 12.
3. Death of Mr W. J. Swann. *Auckland Star*, 12 June 1936: Vol LXVII (138); 10.
4. *Samoa Times*, 16 February 1918: 18(7); 4.
5. Thomas Meredith was also the owner of the Hotel International.
6. Pringle, Gary. *Heritage Assessment Apia, Western Samoa*. Master's Thesis, University of Sydney 1989: 83.
7. *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 7 September 1889: 1(46); 2.
8. G. Pringle (Note 6) 1989: 29. Disastrous Fire in Apia. *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 12 January 1889: 1(15); 2.
9. Anderson, Stuart. (Note 2) 2020: 50(1); 9. *New Zealand Herald*, 11 June 1936: 73(22442); 14.
10. He had probably given the impression that he wanted to leave Samoa for good on 26 May 1890. *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 31 May 1890: 2(84); 2. But in August 1890 he was again present in Apia at the Supreme Court. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 8 December 1894: 2(106); 2.
11. Convention between Great Britain, Germany, the United States, and Samoa, as to the Revision of the Convention of September 2, 1879, relative to the Municipal Board of Apia (1883 September 29). Burgoyne, Leilani. *Re-defining 'the beach': the municipality of Apia, 1879-1900*. Master's Thesis, University of Auckland 2006. *Concerning Trades and Profession*, XVII Licenses, XVIII Person (Special Licenses), 31 December, 1879: Appendix B; 209-210.
12. Store License Rate for the year 1894, *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 2 February 1895: 7(17); 2.
13. Burgoyne, L. (Note 11) 2006: 8; 94.
14. *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 2 February 1895: 7(17); 2.
15. *Samoa Times and South Sea Advertiser*, 2 May 1891: 3(132); 4.
16. *Auckland Star*. (Note 3) 12 June 1936: Vol LXVII (138); 10.
17. Municipal Elections. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 28 January 1893: 1(9); 2.
18. Municipality of Apia. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 17 June 1899: 11(30); 2. Swann later challenged the election unsuccessfully. Supreme Court of Samoa. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 15 July 1899: 11(34); 2.
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20. Eckart, Wolfgang U. *Medizin und Kolonialimperialismus*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 1997: 445-446.
21. Burgoyne, L. (Note 11) 2006: 8; 109.
22. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, Vol 2, Issue 76, 12 May 1894: 2(76); 2.
23. Burgoyne, L. (Note 11) 2006: 8; 109.
24. Burgoyne, Leilani. *Going 'Tropo' in the South Pacific: Dr Bernhard Funk of Samoa 1844-1911*. Working Papers of the Research Centre for Germanic Connections with New Zealand and the Pacific No 6, The University of Auckland - Department of German and Slavonic Studies, 2007: 7.
25. Funk regularly treated Stevenson until his death in 1894, Burgoyne L. (Note 24) 2007: 11-13. Swann's pharmacy provided Stevenson with his medicines. Nelson, Eustis. *Aggie Gray of Samoa*, Adelaide: Hobby Investments Pty. Ltd, 1979: 25.
26. Anderson, Stuart. (Note 2) 2020: 50(1); 10.

27. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 12 May 1894: 2(76); 2. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 26 May 1894: 2(78); 2.
28. Around Apia. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 6 May 1899: 6(18); 2. The cost of his damage was not reimbursed, since King Oscar of Sweden – the arbitrator – decided that Great Britain and America were responsible for it. A Samoan Grievance. *The Evening Star* (Dunedin), 13 September 1904: 12298; 1.
29. This report was adopted by both New Zealand and Australian regional newspapers. *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin), 29 July 1903: 12727; 5. *The Poverty Bay Herald* (Gisborne), 3 August 1903: 9811; 3. English harassed in Samoa. *The Australian Star*, 10 July 1903: 4806; 5.
30. Francis Harman gave the interview during a visit to Sydney, which was reproduced as follows: "The agitation against Mr Swann may be merited, but for what reason Mr Harman did not state. He was only recently granted a German license to practise at Apia, and is the only chemist there, but the Germans have their own way of dispensing medicines, and probably want Mr Swann to employ a German assistant. Mr Harman thought it possible that a clause providing for a German assistant may have been embodied in the license". Samoa: Are Britishers Harassed There? *The Australian Star* (First Edition), 24 July 1903: 4818; 6.
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32. Eckart, W. (Note 20) 1997: 446-448.
33. *Samoaanische Zeitung*, 3 October 1903: 3(27); 2.
34. *Samoaanische Zeitung*, 9 April 1904: 4(2); 2.
35. *Samoaanische Zeitung*, 9 September 1911: 11(36); 1.
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37. On 1 January 1905, English (89) and Americans (39) together accounted for 33.6% of the white population (381). On 1 January 1906, the proportion fell slightly to 31.1%. *Jahresbericht über die Entwicklung der deutschen Schutzgebiete in Afrika und der Südsee im Jahre 1905/1906*. Issued by the Imperial Colonial Office, Berlin, 1907: 373.
38. Anderson, Stuart. (Note 2) 2020: 50(1); 10-11.
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40. *New Zealand Herald*. (Note 9). 11 June 1936: 73(22442); 14.
41. The decree's official title was: *Verordnung des Reichskanzlers betreffend die Errichtung und den Betrieb von Apotheken in den Schutzgebieten Afrikas und der Südsee, mit Ausnahme von Deutsch-Südwestafrika vom 12. Januar 1911*.
42. German Federal Archives, Berlin: R/1001/5821, fol. 50-51.
43. Letter from Imperial Colonial Office dated of 19 August 1911. German Federal Archives, Berlin: R/1001/5821, fol. 52-53. Letter from Imperial Colonial Office dated of 20 August 1911. German Federal Archives, Berlin: R/1001/5821, fol. 54.
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45. N. Eustis (Note 25) 1979 (54)
46. Ravages of Influenza (Report dated of 14 February 1919). *The Daily Mail* (Brisbane), 4 April 1919: 5122; 7.
47. *Samoa Times*, 28 March 1924, 24(13); 3
48. Anderson, Stuart (Note 2) 2020: 50(1); 10-12.
49. *Auckland Star*. (Note 3) 12 June 1936: Vol LXVII (138); 10.
50. *Samoa Weekly Herald*, 19 November 1898: 10(41); 2.
51. Coolie No 1261, named Lem Sing, was employed by him. *Samoa Times*, 15 June 1918: 18(24); 4.
52. *New Zealand Herald*. (Note 9) 11 June 1936: 73(22442); 14.
53. *Samoa Times*, 29 April 1927: 27(17); 6. *Samoa Times*, 20 May 1927: 27(20); 6.
54. *Samoa Times*, 18 October 1929: 29(42); 5.
55. *Samoa Times*, 2 September 1927: 27(35); 7.
56. He was once fined 3 pounds and 13 shillings for negligent and dangerous driving. *Samoa Times*, 15 May 1925: 25(20); 6.
57. The report is dated 7 May 1936. *New Zealand Herald*, 16 May 1936: 73(22420); 23.
58. *Auckland Star*. (Note 3) 12 June 1936: Vol LXVII (138); 10.