

# AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY HISTORY RECORD

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.....  
Contents

Arthur C. Webster AM, FACVS, BVSc, Ph “The long distance race.”: Arthur C. Webster

Queensland Government Veterinary Laboratory Services: Lionel Laws.

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**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: MELBOURNE MAY 2001**

Members of the Society have been advised by Trevor Faragher, the Convenor of the Melbourne meeting, of the details of the forthcoming gathering. There is a full program of historical papers and social activities including a visit to a Museum at Bundoora where bovine pleuropneumonia was first introduced into Australia. Trevor is still interested in hearing from members who would like to present a paper.

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**ARTHUR F WEBSTER AM, FACVSc, BVSc, PhC**  
**“The long distance race”**  
**Arthur C. Webster 19-23 Bridge St Pymble 2073**

[A paper presented at the Annual General Meeting Sydney May 2000.]

## **The Man**

- A gentleman, quiet spoken, thoughtful, compassionate, but shy, which was interpreted by some as aloof.
- Artistic, he loved reading, music and the arts.

- Scientist and veterinarian, his depth of knowledge, innovation, practical common sense and tenacity ensured enduring success.
- Businessman. Not really, he was much more interested in the scientific development
- Employer who commanded strong loyalty from his staff by his availability and sympathetic understanding.
- Father and husband who found the time to be there and with his withering look or grunt retained family order.
- Received many awards from the nation, industry, AVA and University for his major contributions to veterinary science in the latter part of his long and successful career.

**Towards the end of his life he likened his career to that of a marathon runner, "Always in the race, sometimes in the lead, and hopefully finishing somewhere around the middle of the field."**

I have been asked here today to present an overview of the early years of my Father. I hope that in the following paper I give a glimpse of the life's "struggle" of an immensely proud Australian.

### **The early years**

Born on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1906 my father spent his youth above the family pharmacy on Burwood Road Burwood NSW. His father had been a pharmacist all of his professional life having received his training by serving his apprenticeship under other pharmacists. In those days pharmacy was almost entirely practical experience. The pharmacist who owned a chemist's shop took an apprentice who was in turn trained "on the job". It was apparently the same with dentistry. The chemist and the dentist were mostly one and the same in country towns. His father was both pharmacist and dentist for many years, neither with formal training. He spent all his formative youth living above and helping in the shop.

My father's formal education was gained at Scots College Bellevue Hill. He left school in 1923 having achieved with distinction academically, in music and on the sporting field. Being fleet of foot

he was a champion state athlete in the 100 yards, winger in the rugby school fifteen and a leg spin bowler in the first eleven.

Being generally expected of him to return to the family business, he graduated in pharmacy from Sydney University in 1926. His heart was never in it, because of the shop-keeping aspect. He developed however a bit of a long distance interest in bacteriology during his university years. There were just a few odd medical practitioners of bacteriology in those days, so he did a few short courses in the agricultural school, not with any definite aim. At about the time of graduation he was introduced by a mutual friend to a Frenchman, Francois Ray, who came to Australia as a young man (about 26) some years before (1906) as a representative of the Pasteur Institute to make PPLO and anthrax vaccines for cattle. This was quite a profitable business as there was little or no opposition until CSL commenced about 1917. Ray stopped this production in 1920 but continued a not very profitable business in producing and administering autogenous human vaccines for individual clients.

His recall of meeting Ray was that he was a not very prosperous man, who had some small human vaccine business and who drank too much. Father was working full time in the pharmacy, where he wiled away the hours (8am opening – 7pm closing although living above the shop on call 24 hours) by making a couple of violins, a viola and a cello which he played in a local orchestra. It is probably worth noting these instruments are still in the family possession and when played by skilled musicians apparently producing excellent sound. He also played the organ at the local church on Sundays and for weddings and other special services.

### **The induction**

In 1928 father ceased full time work at the pharmacy to spend three mornings a week for a couple of years with Ray under a contractual work agreement, part of which required Ray to teach him bacteriology. Ray was apparently the only “practitioner” apart from university teachers of bacteriology and he only possessed a practical

knowledge of large-scale production that was unique in Australia at the time. Ray had no formal education gaining his knowledge and experience working as a laboratory assistant and sometime tutor at the Pasteur Institute. He knew a number of the classical names of the Institute and could tell all sorts of anecdotes about them, including Pasteur himself.

Towards the end 1929 father was informed that if he wished to continue to handle pathogenic organisms he had to be licensed. In addition authorities would not accept the practical experience of a non-formal course as adequate for a license so father had to look around to get some sort of formal report. (This represented the first regulation of an industry, which some 70 years on is totally controlled, by regulation).

As his bacteriology training under Ray had a veterinary focus it seemed that The Veterinary School course was the most appropriate, so he approached the School. Professor Stewart would not allow a student to take only the bacteriology subjects. He then approached the Registrar who being pushed a bit agreed that there was no legal reason to prevent his attendance, and very much against Prof. Stewart's inclination he forced his way into the year. Prof. Stewart was a man of great energy and assertiveness exemplified by the Sydney Veterinary School remaining open largely because of his ability to encourage students into the faculty at a time when the appeal of being a vet was not as it seems today. Some might say his continued Professorship depended on his having enough students to keep the school going.

Although father excelled both in the practical side of the course and in the exams, the faculty failed him. This was in 1930. Having by this time made a personal commitment to a career in bacteriology he was forced to return the following year and enrol in Veterinary Science, then a four year course. He sat his final exams in 1935 whilst continuing to work with Ray over the four year period. Towards the end of the course they were approached to make some

sheep vaccines in the small laboratory in Randwick. As a result of this approach Ray and he started a partnership, Ray & Webster, working from the same location.

My father's time was split with his studies, the pharmacy and Rays business, which was proving to be very unsatisfactory. Ray was most unreliable, with his drinking habits and dishonesty making it almost impossible to run a business, so when he graduated (got his license) my father decided to establish his own company. This decision coincided with his father's retirement and sale of the pharmacy in Burwood. The whole family moved to West Ryde in 1936.

### **The commencement**

Websters started in an ordinary residential street in a very ordinary (rented) home with a fairly large back yard and most importantly a largish (20ft sq) garden shed and a couple of smaller outhouses. These were used to house mice and chickens for quality testing (my mother also often complained the laundry was also used similarly to house animals). He fitted out the shed with the basics some of which he purchased from Ray the remainder purchased second hand, for sterilising and incubating on a small scale. His father provided sufficient funds for the first few months for him to establish the business. He had resigned himself to the fact that his son was not destined to be a pharmacist and apparently quite enjoyed helping him get started in the new venture. Two years after making this move he married Eva Marion Knox on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1938. He had met Eva some 12 years earlier through her brother Bob Knox who had studied pharmacy in the same years as him.

Improvisation and good engineering skills remained a hallmark of his industry with he and his father constructing a "coolroom" store from fibro with sawdust filled cavity wall for insulation and attaching a small compressor to cool it!!!









processes demanded to go from 20 litres to 4,500 litres. The culture medium was ox heart, ox liver and pig maw infusion so he was a familiar figure at the Homebush abattoir collecting meat each Monday sometimes with children in tow. He applied the lessons and processes he had learned from Ray to scale up culture volumes and was almost immediately successful with tank fermentation and the down stream processing.

These innovations demanded the employment of fulltime staff, having relied on family up till this time to help out. One of the first qualified employees was Dr. Ozols (a Professor of Microbiology at the Vet School in Latvia and worked in their Department of Agriculture as well) who came to Australia with his young family as displaced persons. I can just recall them arriving at Telopea station carrying all their possessions with them. They moved into a very small, basic fibro cottage build on the property for them. This remained their home until Dr Ozols died many years later and Mrs Ozols elected to move to live with one of their children. Dr Ozols worked on product development and in product quality control making a significant contribution to the struggling business.

Competition came from a veterinarian named Roy Stewart an equine practitioner and vaccine producer who was to become a significant influence in my father's life in the late 50's. Stewart lived and worked in Randwick. He was not well liked by both staff and customers because of his difficult personality. He was infact an almost impossible man to work with at any level. His company was named The Biological Institute of Australia (BIO as it was known) which was also servicing the poultry industry. As a colleague manufacturer there was a great competition between BIO and Websters in the 40's and 50's. BIO had a focus on and mastered the production of antigens in embryonated chicken eggs. This allowed them to keep pace with Websters in the manufacture of poultry vaccines.





































