

EARLY HISTORY OF DENTISTRY IN ST. GEORGE, UTAH

The profession of dentistry in St. George and Southern Utah began with the graduation of Wilford Charles Cox from Northwestern University in 1911. For a short while Dr. Cox advertised as an itinerant dentist travelling to where and when needed in southern Utah. From one of his advertisements a woman Elizabeth Lean noticed a picture of him and immediately thought this is the man I will marry. She was in her thirties at the time and he was forty, but the impression came to reality and they were married. The marriage now placed them in a permanent home in St. George and the first full-time dentist.

The next dentist I have any memory of is Michael (Mike) O. Hutchings. His office was in the McGregor Medical Clinic on 250 East Tabernacle. The next dentist in St. George was ElMyrr Cox followed by Walter Snow who practiced at 30 North Main. Other dentists who followed were Alpine Prince, Jay Blake, Lee Atkin, Joseph Hamilton, Mervyn Cox, George Sanford, Larry Staples and Richard Whitehead 1971.

Dentistry really began to change in scope at this point. Richard Whitehead hired, Jan Creason, the first dental hygienist in 1971. The first Panorex (full mouth x-ray machine) appeared in St. George in the early 1970's.

After completing an Oral Surgery program at the University of Maryland Dr. Whitehead was the first dentist admitted on the hospital staff in 1970. He performed the first dental implant in St. George. The implant was made of carbon and was tooth shaped. It worked, but soon the gingiva (gum tissue) turned dark.

Another implant procedure was introduced by a dentist in Beaver, Utah. Teeth extracted from one person for orthodontic purposes were frozen in an antibiotic solution and when another needed that tooth they were reimplanted into another patient. This procedure was successful on several patients in St. George.

Another interesting transplant procedure performed in St. George follows: After verifying that a teenage patient had the same biologic father and mother, a bicuspid tooth that was removed for orthodontic purposes from a girl was immediately transplanted into the mouth of her brother who was missing that tooth. It worked well, but after 7 years the roots began to resorb and the tooth had to be removed.

Dr. Whitehead studied extensively with Dr. Lenny Linkow in New York City. Dr. Linkow was considered to be the father of implantology in the United States. He also studied several weeks with Dr. Sinjar Bhaskar the Chief of Oral Pathology, United States Army.

In 1978 the first full mouth mandibular implant was placed by Dr. Whitehead. The patient was his aunt Cleo Wardle. As of this writing, nearly 50 years later the implant is still in place and functioning well. Undoubtedly one of the longest functioning implants of that type ever placed anywhere. Similar implants of this nature were later placed by Dr. Whitehead and Dr. Richard Jennings

With new technology, tooth shaped dental implants were safely placed by many dentists in St. George. When properly placed these implants are very successful and a real blessing to the patients that receive them.

In 1971 there were 9 dentists practicing in St. George. In 2022, there are reportedly more than 160 practicing here.

The history of dentistry in St. George has revolved around many families. However, a few early St. George families have produced more than 55 dentists and dental hygienists.

THE COX FAMILY

In mentioning these families, we will begin with the offspring of Dr. Wilford Cox. Dr. Wilford and Elizabeth Cox had several children: two girls, Carol and Ila and two sons Everard and ElMyrr. Everard went on to become a well-known teacher and surgeon at the University of Maryland. Everard had two sons who became surgeons specializing in the field of breast cancer. Wilford's other son, ElMyrr Leany Cox (Oct. 19, 1924 – June 13, 1965), followed in the footsteps of his father becoming a dentist and practiced in St. George until he was killed in a tragic airplane crash searching for survivors and the wreckage of a crash of two commercial aircraft that had collided while flying over the Grand Canyon. El Myrr had twin sons who also became dentists. Another contribution of the Cox family came when Mervyn K. Cox the son of Boots Cox became the first board certified orthodontist in St. George in 1964. His brother Wendell also became a dentist. Mervyn also has three sons that are dentists: Daniel, Joshua and B.J. who practice here in St. George. Making 8 dentists, and 3 MD surgeons and 1 dental hygienist, Kim (Cox) Jensen, that came from the Cox family.

THE WHITEHEAD FAMILY

Another prominent family that contributed to the field of dentistry was that of Gordon Whitehead. Gordon had four sons two which Howard and Rulon became dentists. Howard had a son Gordon who also is a dentist and three of his daughters, Elaine, Kathleen and Wendy became dental hygienists. Elaine and Kathleen are also married to dentists. Elaine and her husband, Bruce Miller are the parents of two dentists, Matthew and Gregory and three daughters: Jillyn Pugmire, Mindy Stewart and Amber Pitt who are dental hygienists. Bruce and Elaine also have a grandson who is now in dental school. Another son, David, of Howard and Nelda Whitehead has a son Tyler who is a dentist. Grant Whitehead another of Gordon's sons had a son Richard Grant that also became a dentist completing an oral surgery internship and then practiced in St. George being the first dentist to practice oral surgery in St. George. Grant Whitehead also had a daughter who graduated as a dental hygienist. She also married a dentist. They had one son who is a dentist and daughters in dental hygiene. Wayne Whitehead's only son, Clark Wayne Whitehead also was a dentist. This makes 11 dentists and 7 dental hygienists from the family of Gordon Whitehead.

THE PRINCE FAMILY

Another group of dentists came from the family of Antone and Vilate Prince. Their oldest son, Clayton became a dentist. He had three sons, John, Gregg and Stephen who also became dentists. His son John's wife, Beverley, is also a dental hygienist and they have a son, David, a dentist and another son Edward who is an orthopedic surgeon who practices in St. George. David has a son Tyler who is a dentist. Another son Alpine was the first dentist in St. George with any orthodontist training. Alpine died in tragic accident as he was preparing final equipment for his new office to open two days later. That facility was named in his honor the Prince Memorial Clinic. Alpine and Marian Prince have a son, Robert, who is an orthodontist and he has a son Ashton who is a dentist a daughter who is a hygienist and another son Ben who is a medical doctor. Ashton's wife is also a hygienist. Making 10 dentists and 4 hygienists from the Prince family.

THE ENCE FAMILY

Kenneth Ence has two sons, James and Kenny who are dentists and a cousin, Dwayne who is a dentist and he has a daughter-in-law who is a hygienist. James is a dentist and has a son, Mark who is a dentist and two daughters Ashlee and Angela that are dental hygienists and a daughter-in-law, Amy who is a hygienist. Lee Ence who is a dentist has two sons, Nate and Eric who are dentists. Making 4 dentists and 4 hygienists in the Ence family.

THE BLAKE FAMILY

Jay Blake an early dentist in St. George has a son, Joel, who is a dentist and two daughters Sydnee and Shandra who are hygienists and a grandson who is a dentist. Larry Blake has a son who is a dentist. Making 4 dentists and 2 hygienists from the Blake family. Larry Blake has a son, Clint who is a dentist and a daughter who is a dentist. He also has-a-son in law who is a dentist. Making 4 dentists and 3 hygienists in the family.

Amazingly, more than 55 dentists and hygienists have come from these five St. George families.