

4.5 COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES GREYMOUTH. THE GREY RIVER HOSPITAL COMMITTEE

At various times, members of the Gilmer Brothers business were involved in community activities which involved significant time and effort and without any remuneration. The question is the motivation. Did they volunteer because they were successful and contributing to the community was expected of them? Alternatively, were voluntary community activities an element of business strategy which contributed to the success of the business and enhanced the reputations of the individuals involved?

These roles brought business and government connections, allowed their skills and expertise to be demonstrated, and the detailed newspaper coverage of the activities helped to build reputations with the wider community. To illustrate we will review in detail the role of Hamilton Gilmer on the Grey River Hospital Committee.

GREY RIVER HOSPITAL COMMITTEE

The Grey River Hospital was established in 1866 and Dr C Li Morice was appointed as surgeon superintendent. GW Moss, a businessman was the Chairman of the Hospital Committee and the Secretary was J Payne who was also the County Clerk. It was located in Guinness St which was then known as Hospital St. Dr Morice was succeeded as Surgeon Superintendent by his son Dr Charles Morice in 1894. He died in 1904.

In Greymouth's early days the Westland County Government was very slow to provide all kinds of government services. Much was left to the drive to the community to establish these especially where it was felt these services were essential. The Grey River Hospital was seen as one of these institutions.

Hamilton Gilmer displayed an early interest in the Committee that had oversight of the operations of the Grey River Hospital. In March 1867¹ the Annual Public meeting of the Committee was held at Sweeney's theatre, no doubt at Hamilton's invitation. That year he stood for election to the committee². He was not yet 30 years of age and while he had been in Greymouth at Sweeney's for about 15 months he had not yet built his reputation. There were 24 nominations to elect 13 members of the committee and Hamilton missed a seat by two votes.

The list of people standing read like a "who's who" of Greymouth business people. The Committee also included the representatives of the two governments, W.H. Revell, the Resident Magistrate representing Westland and T. A. Sneyd Kynnersley, Resident Magistrate at Cobden, and Superintendent of the Nelson South West Goldfields representing the Nelson Government. Both were very important people and significant business advantage could be gained by working with them and developing close relationships.

The funding of the hospital's operations was always controversial and difficult. The Westland Government funded the hospital with Two Pounds for each Pound subscribed by the residents. The hospital was located in Greymouth while the need and use of its facilities was shared with the Nelson side of the Grey River. As more people rushed to the diggings the demand for the

¹ Grey River Argus 12 March 1867

² Grey River Argus 30 July 1868

hospital's services grew and there was a greater need to organize and collect funds from the Nelson side. This was difficult because of the many remote and distant locations of the miners.

Funding was a major issue immediately prior to the election in the next year. In June 1868³, Kynnersley visited Mr. Bonar, President of the Westland County Council in Hokitika to raise a number of issues. These were:

- Reduction of the Westland subsidy to one Pound for each Pound subscribed by residents. This would throw a huge burden onto the residents.
- Whether the committee members would be personally liable for the debts of the hospital. It was known that some would no longer take a role on the committee if there were to be liable.
- Issues with the collection of subscriptions from the miners in remote and distant locations
- The Nelson Government required the government representatives to be *ex officio* members.

Mr. Bonar's initial response on funding was that it would reduce to one Pound for each pound subscribed but he later changed his mind and kept the funding at two Pounds for each Pound subscribed by residents. He also agreed, after a delay, that the members would not be personally liable for the hospital's debts.

After this advice the committee decided that the government representatives would be *ex officio*, a committee of 9 would be elected with power to add country members who would come to meetings when in Greymouth, visit the hospital and importantly recommend patients for admission.

Despite his earlier disappointment, Hamilton Gilmer stood for the election in 1868 as one of 22 nominations and was elected. His name was shown as George H Gilmer.⁴ Hamilton was also appointed to the Visiting Committee.

Lists of the people who subscribed to the hospital were always published by the newspaper as an acknowledgement of their contribution. Hamilton Gilmer was always very generous with his contribution and 1868 he contributed 5 Pounds. In the same list John Hamilton "the Greek" at Ahaura contributed 3 pounds and John Hamilton contributed one guinea which was acknowledged on the Cobden list⁵. He also contributed one Pound on the Greymouth Town List.

The newspaper reported fortnightly on the details of the committee's activities. People were expected to contribute to support its operations and this was a very transparent way of reporting back to the community.

On 10 June 1869, there was an emergency meeting of the committee to consider a letter from the Nelson government indicating that money had been voted to enlarge the hospital and it was necessary to proceed immediately as all unexpended votes would lapse on 30 June. Hamilton Gilmer together with J. Parkinson and W. F Strike (later to be a partner of Andrew Hamilton in

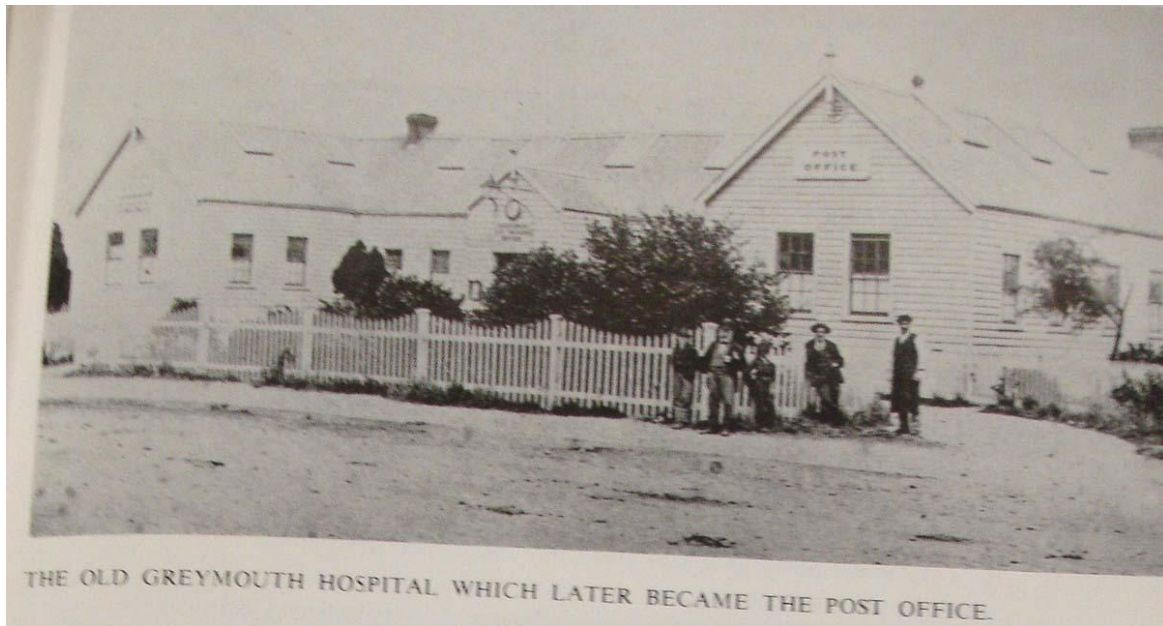
³ Grey River Argus 30 June 1868

⁴ Grey River Argus 2 July 1868

⁵ Grey River Argus 21 November 1868

Wellington) were appointed to form a Building committee to decide the plans and to call tenders.⁶

This extension was badly needed as the hospital was inadequate to meet the needs of the growing population. On 22 June 1869 it was reported that it was very full with 29 patients of whom 5 had to sleep on the floor.



The committee moved very quickly with the plans being presented and adopted on 17 June with the call for tenders being advertised on the same day. On 22 June tenders were opened and the contract let to the lowest tenderer, a C. Hughes, with a price of 278 Pounds.⁷

In the midst of this activity there was a further election. Hamilton Gilmer was reelected, one of 13 from the 22 who nominated. He was appointed again to the building committee to oversight the additions.

Funding remained an issue and Hamilton Gilmer was appointed as a collector at the same meeting that a further committee was appointed to review and to reduce expenditure.⁸ At the next meeting a fortnight later Hamilton and his collecting partner, Martin Kennedy, reported they had not yet finished collecting but had obtained 90 Pounds 12 shillings with promises of 12 Pounds 10 shillings and 6 Pence.⁹ This demonstrated that two very busy but well connected business men could get significant fund raising results in a very short time.

Hamilton and Martin Kennedy were to have a long standing business relationship. Martin was later to be the chief executive of the Brunner Coal mine and Hamilton, one of the directors. Later in Wellington, Martin was to be Managing Director of Staples Brewery and Hamilton was to be a director and the largest shareholder.

⁶ Grey River Argus 10 June 1869

⁷ Grey River Argus 17 & 22 June 1869

⁸ Grey River Argus 12 August 1869

⁹ Grey River Argus 26 August 1869

At the meeting of 26 August 1869 Mr. Lowe representing the Nelson Government said that he was empowered to pay the 150 Pounds share of the cost of the additions whenever the Westland Government paid their share. At this time the opening of the building was becoming urgent with 33 patients including 9 sleeping on the floor. The Secretary was directed to write to the Westland Government

Westland continued to delay their payments and Nelson paid their share of the additions in September. By 21 October Westland owed for three months subsidy and the additions a total of 432 Pounds 2 Shillings and 9 Pence.¹⁰ There had been no response to any of the letters or telegrams that had been sent. On 4 November it was reported that they had paid the July subsidy and will pay "*when County funds could afford it.*"¹¹

This was an absolutely disgraceful response given the large sum of money involved meaning that there had to be substantial delays in payments to staff and contractors. The committee for its part had reviewed the staff and management structure, let some staff go and brought in some new and better people to reduce costs and improve outcomes.

Throughout this period there were fortnightly meetings and the record shows that Hamilton Gilmer did not miss a single meeting. He was involved on the Visiting Committee, the Building Committee and in collecting. All of this in addition to the not insignificant work of his hotel and the other work of Gilmer brothers. This could not possibly go unnoticed by anyone else who was involved.

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 21 October 1869

¹¹ Grey river Argus 4 November 1869