

# Chapter 13. Childhood, University, Marriage and Family

## Primary School, 1888 to 1895

My father, Charles Albert Edward Fenner, was born on 18 May, 1884, in Dunach, a small village 35 km north of Ballarat and at the foot of a volcano, Mount Greenock. In December 1879, his father, Johannes Fenner, who had been living in the area and working in the local gold mine, had taken over the license of the Dunach Hotel. It was a low, rambling building, and apart from the rooms used by the family there were eight rooms for public use. He gave up the license in 1892 and became a poultry farmer, keeping turkeys which used to free-range over the plains. The Fenner family stayed there until the old building was burnt down in about 1910; then they lived in the school-house for some years. I remember my father telling me that when he was a boy one of his jobs was to take the turkeys out before he went to school and collect them after he came home.

As Father related to my brother, Bill Fenner, in 1954, when he was in bed in Adelaide with a stroke, he had always had a dog, although he said that his most vivid early memory was when the family bought him a pony, Dolly, who was part of his life, although he was thrown off and broke several ribs. He went across the road to the one-teacher school when he was four years old; he cried on the first day, as I did myself. When he was eight years old and had just finished Grade Four he received a certificate from the Victorian Education Department saying he had completed the necessary education and could leave school. However, he went on and at age 11 got his merit certificate.

His mother got Charles a job as an 'apprentice' at the printing office of the *Talbot Leader* (a local newspaper). He was paid two shillings and sixpence a week, which he gave to his mother. He couldn't think of anything else to do with it. At the time Talbot, seven kilometres from Dunach, had a population of about 5,000 compared with Dunach's 400. After five years as a 'printer's devil', when he was 17, he left the *Talbot Leader* and joined the Victorian Education Department as a pupil-teacher in local primary schools. Two years later, in 1903, he became 'principal' of two one-teacher bush schools. He supervised these two schools (I will call them 'A' and 'B') by teaching in school A for two days, setting enough work for the rest of the week, and then going to school B, teaching there and setting work for the first days of the next week. He would then have the weekend at home.



Figure 13.1. Students and teachers at Dunach School in 1890

At that time there were three Fenners at the school, Charles, Jack and May.

## Melbourne Teachers' College and the University of Melbourne

In 1907, Charles Fenner was accepted for the two-year course to the Melbourne Teachers' College, then a residential college within the grounds of the University of Melbourne. During this period he gained university entrance qualifications and engaged in College activities, including editorship of the College magazine. From there it was a succession of brief appointments, in each of which the local inspector reported his performance as most promising. Then he departed from the normal course of teacher training by returning to the University of Melbourne as a Kernot Research Scholar, majoring in geology, under Professor E. W. Skeats, and biology, under Professor Baldwin Spencer. He won all the scholarships and prizes that were available to him at that time, graduated BSc with First Class Honours in 1912 and gained a Diploma of Education in 1913. His archives in the Basser Library of the Australian Academy of Science contain several large notebooks with drawings relating to first-year physics (1907), human anatomy (1910), comparative anatomy (1911), and two books of field notes on geology (1911 and 1912). These testify to his artistic abilities, which were also used in his early scientific papers, for which he was awarded the degree of DSc by the University of Melbourne in 1917.

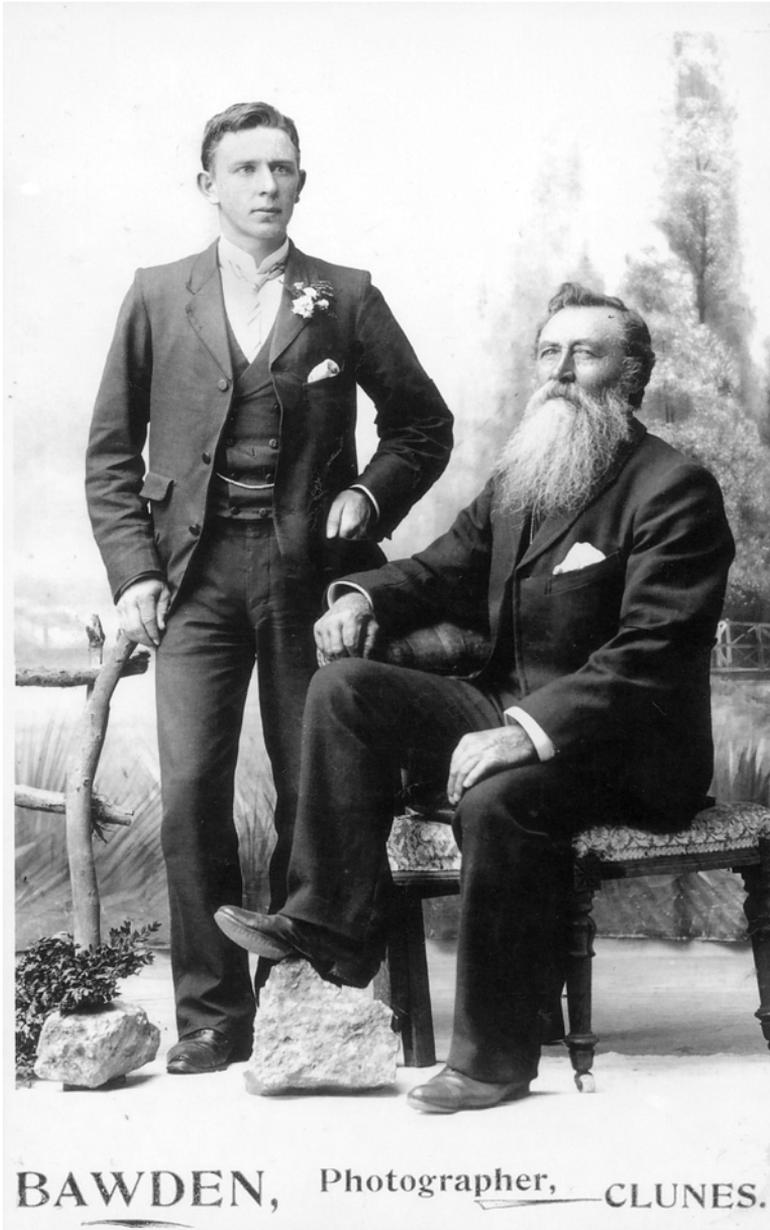


Figure 13.2. Charles Fenner with his father Johannes Fenner, in 1903, when Charles was 'principal' of two one-teacher schools

### **Marriage to Emma Louise Hirt, 4 January 1911**

Emma Louise Hirt was the youngest child of Johannes Gottlieb Hirt and Maria Hirt (née Kaiser). Her father migrated from Germany to California and then to Victoria. Starting as a gold-digger in Ballarat, he later became a successful

boot-maker. Maria Kaiser was born in Dreysa, a village near Bautzen, in Saxony, and migrated to Australia at the age of 15. She and Johannes married in 1859 and she died in 1934.

When the gold ran out, they and their nine children moved to 101 Eyre Street, Ballarat. Some years later, Johannes and Maria moved to Thorpdale, in Gippsland, where he bought a cherry orchard. The older children who had not married stayed in Ballarat, acting as housekeepers and looking after the younger ones who were still at school. Much later, the older sisters, Lin and Anna, who were widows, and Crin and Paula, who were spinsters, looked after one or two of us children in the same house during our school holidays.

On 19 August, 1883, when Johannes was about 70 and Maria about 50 years old, they had another child, who was christened Emma Louise. After her husband's death in 1898, Maria moved back to 101 Eyre Street and Emma Louise (names she hated) went to primary school and then to Grenville College, a co-educational secondary school in Ballarat. In 1906 she began training as an infants' teacher at the Melbourne Teachers' College and met Charles Fenner, also a resident at the College. Charles responded to her dislike of her given names by calling her 'Pegasus', shortened to 'Peggy' or 'Peg'. After completing her training she taught at the primary school in Inglewood, northwest of Bendigo (Figure 13.3). Late in 1910 she bought her wedding dress in Bendigo. They were married in Ballarat on 4 January, 1911, and went to live in Fitzroy, a suburb of Melbourne. Charles taught and continued his studies at Melbourne University and their first child, Charles Lyell (named after the famous English geologist) was born in Fitzroy on 17 August, 1912.

### **Later Teaching Positions in Victoria**

After a few months at Sale High School, in 1913 Charles was appointed Headmaster of the Mansfield Agricultural High School and the family moved to Mansfield. However, in November 1914 he was appointed Principal of the Science Departments in the Ballarat School of Mines and Industries, with teaching responsibilities in the Geological branch of the School. The family moved to a house on 2 Doveton Street, next door to 101 Eyre Street. The next two children, Frank Johannes (later John) and Winifred Joyce (Winn), were born in Ballarat on 21 December, 1914, and 26 August, 1916, respectively.



Figure 13.3. Photograph of Miss Emma L. Hirt

Miss Emma L. Hirt (the adult on the left) teaching at Inglewood Primary School.



Figure 13.4. Photograph of the married couple

From left: the bridesmaid, Emma's sister Paula; the bridegroom; the bride; the best man, W. M. Sullivan. Seated: Emma's nieces Joyce Love and Elva Hirt.

Field trips for the geology students and his own weekend studies focused on the geology of the Bacchus Marsh district, including Werribee Gorge, and it was for papers on this work that he was awarded the degree of DSc by the University of Melbourne in 1917. Scientific papers written while he was living in Victoria are listed in the Bibliography in Chapter 16. In 1915, he was appointed Principal of the Ballarat School of Mines, but he was soon to move on. When he left, the Council recorded the following testimonial:

Mr Charles Fenner has held the position of Principal of the Ballarat School of Mines and Industries since November 1914. Throughout his appointment he has fulfilled his duties with a zeal and enthusiasm that merit the highest praise. He is an organized man of exceptional ability and his keen insight into the needs of technical education has enabled him to place the departments under his control on a higher level of efficiency than they have ever before reached.

In his lecture work Mr Fenner has had charge of the Geological branch of the School and his labors therein have met with marked success. In the Technical Schools' examinations in Geology, Mining Geology, Petrology and Mineralogy, the examiners have on each occasion specially commented on the excellence of the work done by his students. He has made a special point of the field work, which has become a very popular part of the students' curriculum, and in all branches the economic bearing of the subjects taught has been continually stressed. Mr Fenner has also prepared students for the Geology Examinations (Science and Arts Courses) at the Melbourne University, and there, too, his students met with more than ordinary success. He has the power of inspiring in his students a love for the subjects he teaches. Mr Fenner's brilliant University record speaks for itself. He is a cultured gentleman, and combines with the qualities of decision and tact a charming personality that has made him exceedingly popular with the Staff and students.

### **Appointment as Superintendent of Technical Education**

In 1915, the senior officers of the South Australian Department of Education were the Director, the Superintendent of Primary Education and the Superintendent of Secondary Education. On 5 November, 1916, Charles Fenner, after the passage of an Act to consolidate and amend the Law relating to Public Education, was appointed Superintendent of Technical Education, a newly created senior post in the Department. His subsequent career in the Education Department is described in the next chapter.

### **Retirement and Death**

Charles Fenner, who had been appointed Director of Education in 1939, retired because of ill health in 1946. He then worked at home and as a volunteer at the

South Australian Museum until he had a stroke early in 1954. He died on 9 June, 1955. The house at 42 Alexandra Avenue (see Chapter 1) was sold in November 1956 and Mother moved to a smaller house at 10 Springbank Road, Panorama, where she lived until 1964, when she went into a nursing home. She died on 9 February, 1966. Lyell's eldest son Ted lived in the house for about a year and then it was sold.

The obituary notice in the *S.A. Teachers' Journal*, after recording my Father's career in detail, concludes with the following comments:

A sense of humour and other human qualities which he possessed endeared him to those who worked with him. In conference his remarks were flavoured with wit and his serious pronouncements were received with respect. He always convinced his hearers that he knew what he was talking about, because he really did know. Many people have fine bodies but very ordinary minds. Dr Fenner had a remarkable mind but by no means a robust constitution. It may be said that for many years his mind had to fight his body and that a lesser man would have yielded to the infirmity of the flesh long before he did. Even after his retirement from the Department he continued to work and gave part time service to the South Australian Museum for a number of years. He wrote as long as he was able.

He came to South Australia during World War I and served as Director of Education during the whole of World War II. In the foreword of one of his books he wrote: 'In a world of war, I have as far as possible not referred to war, for wars pass, and peace ultimately prevails.' Those who admired and respected him and held him in affection will like to think of him as at peace. He was a man of great attainments and he rendered outstanding service to his day and generation.

## References

- Fenner, C. 1931, MS178/6/3A5 (1931 diary) Bassett Library, Australian Academy of Science. Also lodged in PRG 372: papers of Dr C. A. E. Fenner, held in the Mortlock Library of South Australiana.
- Fenner, C. 1937, MS178/6/5B (1937 diary) Bassett Library, Australian Academy of Science. Also lodged in PRG 372: papers of Dr C. A. E. Fenner, held in the Mortlock Library of South Australiana.

