Biography

Dr. James Beall Morrison began his study of dentistry in Steubenville, Ohio, in 1848, by apprenticing in the office of two established dentists. After a year or so, he formed a partnership with one of them and they set up a travelling practice among the towns in the area. By 1857, Morrison had gone to St. Louis, Missouri, where he practiced dentistry with his brother, William, until 1861 or 1862. He then went to practice in Paris for about a year, which he followed with six years of practice in London. He then returned to Missouri, where he practiced dentistry and worked at improving dental equipment until his death in December 1917.

Morrison had developed an aptitude for the mechanical side of dentistry early on, particularly during his apprenticeship in Steubenville. An example of his denture work, exhibited before the Ohio State Board of Agriculture in 1852, had been awarded a first prize. His first major contribution to dentistry came in 1871, when he developed and patented the first practical dental engine. Morrison's "bracket engine" consisted of a moveable arm and handpiece, both of which could be operated by either foot power or other (belt-driven) energy source. This was the pioneer of power-driven dental tools. Later, in 1887, Morrison patented an improved dental operating chair which provided a wide range of movement.

Scope and Content

This collection consists of ten letters, arranged chronologically, received by Dr. Morrison between 1869 and 1873. All are from dentists in London and all but two are from Dr. Edwin Sercombe, Morrison's good friend and leading advocate on his behalf in England. Sercombe's letters are the most interesting. He writes about Morrison's dental engine and its warm reception in London: "All who have it are delighted with it and I hope before long every man of any claim to consideration must have it" (February 11, 1873). Although he suggests minor improvements in some of its features, Sercombe was pleased with how well it worked. Without prior approval, but on Morrison's behalf, he even entered the engine he was using in his own practice into an International Exhibition held in London in the summer of 1873.

Sercombe also describes alterations he made to his own dental chair and writes that he was eagerly awaiting Morrison's new and improved chair; he repeatedly requests Morrison to send him one, without delay. These letters indicate that Morrison was actively working on his dental chair long before it was patented in 1887. In addition, Sercombe writes about his own practice and about dentists whom both he and Morrison knew. Among the latter was Dr. Thomas Evans, the American dentist who rescued the French Empress from Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of
1870. Sercombe evidently did not like Dr. Evans, referring to him as "your friend" in one letter and criticizing his dental work in another!
Provenance

These letters were among the items in a suitcase found by a construction worker during the demolition of a bank building in Kansas City, Missouri. The suitcase, which was unclaimed following a fire in the bank, had evidently belonged to one of Dr. Morrison's daughters; other items in the suitcase were identified as having belonged to Dr. Morrison. Those items and these letters were donated to the Division of Medical History, NMAH, in November 1991. The letters were transferred to the Archives Center in January 1992.

Letters Received by Dr. James Beall Morrison from the Following Individuals:

Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London),
December 23, 1869.

Ditto, February 1, 1871.

Ditto, March 21, 1871.

Ditto, June 13, 1871.

Garrett, H. S. (42 Finsbury Square), October 10, 1872.

Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), December 5, 1872.

Ditto, February 11, 1873.

Sercombe, Edwin (59 Gloucester Gardens, Hyde Park), February 24, 1873.

Ditto, May 18, __.

Tomes, Charles S. (Upwood Gorse, Caterham), April 17, __.

C. A. Orr, 5-21-92

For more information contact the Archives Center at archivescenter@si.edu or 202-633-3270