

## Robert Dick (1870-1961)

Robert's life was both interesting and tragic: he spent 45 years of it in the Seacliff/Orokonui Asylum!

Born in Portobello on 9 November 1870 to John Gilston Dick (1840-1920) and Isabella Gillan (1844-1934), he actually became an American citizen and fought in the Spanish American war. It is thought that he took this step precisely because he wanted to enlist!.

After a short unsatisfactory plumbing apprenticeship in NZ he went to Melbourne where he worked until he had enough money to get to London to join the Police Force.

Later he moved to Canada to publish some of his violin music. Sometime around then he built a 5 string violin himself which he called a violinola.



He then went to United States and became an American citizen. The family believed this was solely to enable him to fight in the Spanish American war which seems possible however unlikely. He served in the Philippines but became ill and was hospitalized first in Manila and then in Japan. It seems like a complete physical and mental breakdown.

He returned to his parents who were then in Melbourne and came back to Dunedin with them. Unfortunately he did not settle and had disturbing episodes beyond the family's ability or willingness to tolerate.

In 1916 he was committed to the Seacliff Asylum where he was a long term patient at the Orokinui Retreat, eventually moving to Cherry Farm – a total of some 50 years in institutional care! The Orokonui Hospital was situated in Blueskin Bay near Waitati. Dr Truby King had wanted a separate site for the care of people with drink problems and in 1901 the site was purchased – part of a former school. It eventually housed some 30 male patients in the old school buildings while there were some 10 females in what had been the former headmaster's house. Once the experiment ended the females were removed and it became a psychiatric hospital<sup>1</sup>.

*I remember visiting him at Orokonui when I was about 20, and found him quite lucid and very knowledgeable. But when he started talking about his incarceration and his intention of suing the New Zealand Government for the money he would have won at the races had he been free, one realised his mental instability<sup>2</sup>.*

While at Orokonui he complained about the lack of fish on the menu. He therefore began to build a boat from a felled tree trunk, hollowing it out with few tools. It was never finished but formed a talking point for visitors!

*He also made two violins – one for a giant and one for a dwarf.*

*A brother and a sister took up his war service with the American Government which agreed to pay him a war pension but not to pay it to the New Zealand Government for his upkeep. On the passing of the Social Security Act in 1938, hospital care became free and from then on he received his pension.*

*By the time of his death it had accumulated to the tidy sum of 10,000 pounds which was divided between his sisters and brothers or their descendants.<sup>3</sup>*

With the opening of Cherry Farm he was transferred there. In his last few years he became quite frail, almost bedridden. Carroll reports that he was well regarded by the nursing staff.

There was only one family member at his funeral – John Carroll.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dunedinfamilyhistory.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/DFHG-2011-April-newsletter.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, the Dick family, p 10

<sup>3</sup> Op cit, p9.