

## Alexander Crow McGeorge



Alexander Crow McGeorge was born in Dunedin on 4 August 1868, the fourth of five children of James McGeorge, a wagoner, and his wife, Isabella, nee Crow. After attending Park Street School and spending two years as a shop assistant, Alex completed an engineering apprenticeship with Cossens and Black in 1889. He worked briefly at R.S.Sparrow's engineering works on dredge construction, but little work was available and he moved to Melbourne. Long hours on a ship repair yard there enabled him to amass a little capital.

Back in Dunedin in 1892 he and some friends leased an abandoned dredge to work a claim at Deep Stream. This initiative repaid their capital, provided a meagre living for six months, and gave them worthwhile experience. Next Alex was appointed engineer on a new dredge on the Clutha near Clyde, and shortly afterwards entered a successful project on the Manuherikia with his brothers.

At picnic on Boxing Day 1894, Alex met Charles Coote who, with James Horn, held claims on the Kawarau River. Sensing the possibilities, he called a meeting the next day at which the Electric Gold

Dredging Company was formed (Coote had named his claim the 'Electric' after a patent medicine he sold). After the initial of 2,400 pounds was raised with some difficulty, Alex supervised the construction on the Kawerau of its first dredge, designed by his brother Jack. This was ready for work in August 1895, on his 27<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Alex became the first master of the dredge.

For four months it worked with little success and the company was almost bankrupt, but Alex persisted until rich gold was struck at Cornish Beach in January 1896. The company went from strength to strength, placing two larger dredges on the river and attaining several record returns, the best being 1273 ounces (48kg) in four and a half days. So began the Central Otago gold dredging boom.

In 1899 Alex married Ethel Aldred, daughter of the Allanton school headmaster. In 1901 they moved to 'Kawarau', a large new house in half a hectare of garden on Highgate. Dunedin became the family home of their five daughters and three sons.

In 1902 the McGeorge brothers were able to take an option over a claim of 200 acres (80ha) at Waikaka. As the claim was on dry land they were able to prospect it accurately using boreholes. They once again put three dredges on their claim, and the venture was even more successful for them than the Kawerau. Alex later developed a technique for top-dressing the tailings with soil. Ill-drained river flats eventually became first-class farmland, and his method was later adopted in many parts of the world.

He died at his seaside home at Karitane on 14 January 1953 and is buried in Dunedin's Southern cemetery.

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