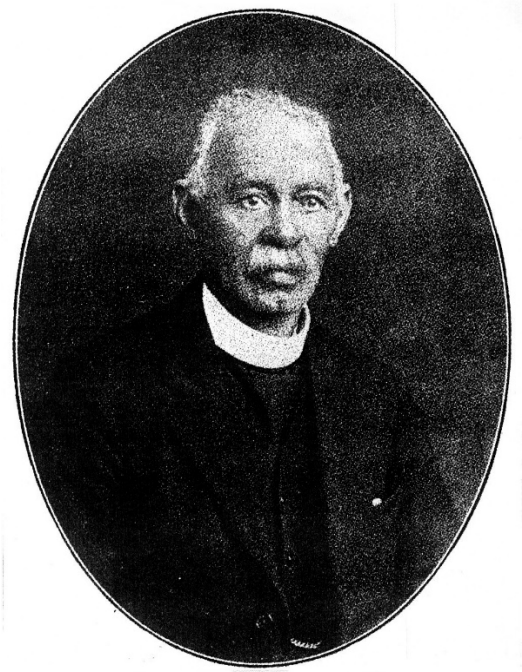
Dr Jotello Festiri Soga

General History

Jotello Festiri Soga was born in 1865 at the Mgwali Mission, in the formerly Transkei, South Africa as the fourth son of Reverend Tiyo and Janet Soga and died on December 6, 1906 in Amalinda, East London, South Africa. Tiyo and Janet had five sons: John Henderson, William Anderson, Allan Kirkland, Jotello Festiri and Alexander, who was stillborn; and three daughters: Jessie Margaret, Isabella McFarlane and Frances Maria Anna.



John Henderson Soga

All of the sons completed matric at the Dollar Academy in Fife, Scotland, and completed their university degrees in Scotland. Three of the sons - John, William and Jotello - married Scottish women. Allan married Ellen Mba, a Xhosa girl. After earning his degree from the Royal (Dick) College of Veterinary Medicine at University of Edinburgh in 1886, Dr. Soga became, at the age of 21, the first South African to qualify as a veterinary surgeon. The next South African-born veterinarian, P. R. Viljoen, did not qualify until 1912.

In 1886, after earning his degree in veterinary medicine, with a gold medal distinction in botany, Jotello Soga returned to the Cape Colony. On July 9, 1892, Jotello visited Scotland and married Catherine Watson Chalmers. Three daughters, Catherine, Doris and Margaret were born from this marriage.

Jotello Soga and his wife Catherine

In November 1889 he was appointed a veterinary surgeon for the colonial government. He was posted to Fort Beaufort and was also responsible for veterinary services for Victoria East, Stockenström and neighbouring districts. His immediate task was to inoculate against contagious lung-sickness, which was decimating cattle in South Africa. He conducted his own inoculation experiments on lung-sickness and his vaccinating methods was accepted as standard thereafter, according to Heloise Heyne, of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute's Agricultural Research Council, who has written about Dr. Soga's career.

Throughout the Cape Colony, as well as in the Transvaal - teams of veterinarians dealt with foot-and-mouth disease, tick infestations, redwater and biliary fever – illnesses that seasonally affected cattle, sheep, goats and horses. Dr. Soga also lectured farmers on ways to control and treat diseases of livestock diseases throughout the Cape Colony and the former British Bechuanaland (now Botswana). In addition, he conducted research on the effect of plants on animals and comparative physiology. Often he served as a judge at horse shows at the East London Agricultural Show, and he was regularly invited to give lectures to farmers' associations.

As a trained veterinary doctor, his skills were ideally suited – and required – in the South Africa of the late 19th Century when rinderpest

and other animal diseases threatened to decimate farmers' herds and flocks.

The second phase of his career began when the threat of rinderpest was on the horizon in the early 1890's. To the north, cattle were becoming sick and dying by the thousands. "Like some belated biblical plague of Egypt . . . it left a trail of bleaching bones and poverty," said one historian of that period.

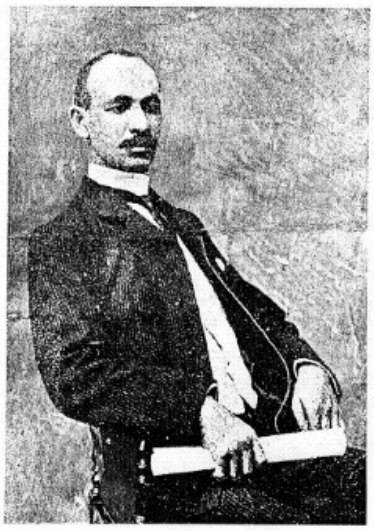
Dr. Soga was among the first to warn of the dangers rinderpest posed to the Cape Colony. "Our new Colonial enemy is rinderpest," he wrote in 1892, "Lung Sickness and Redwater are simple fools to it." With small teams of professional veterinarians as the front-line troops, the authorities in Orange Free State, South African Republic and the Cape Colony instituted a twin-pronged operation to control rinderpest - killing infected animals and inoculation.

Dr. Soga was the only black professional who attended the 1st Inter-Colonial Conference in Mafeking on August 17, 1896, when the key role players gathered to discuss how to control rinderpest, according to Ms Heyne's research.

The most dramatic control tactic was, of course, the culling of herds, and since the cattle industry was so important and wide spread it meant killing a lot of animals and traveling great distances on horseback. But many more – tens of thousands more - animals were dying on their own from the disease everyday.

In the Cape the team of veterinary surgeons increased to eight to cover the entire territory. Dr. Soga's earlier work with farms and his ability to speak Xhosa was of considerable help. But he and Dr. Hutcheon often needed police protection while explaining to farmers the necessity of shooting infected cattle.

The entry on Dr. Soga in the South African Biographical Dictionary mentions that because of the danger to the Cape Colony's economy, the government asked Dr. Soga's brother, Allan, then a labour agent and magistrate in the old Transkei to gather a group of herbalists and sangomas so they could see for themselves that traditional cures would not work and that the only effective ways to control the disease was to kill affected cattle. They agreed.



Jotello's brother Allan Kirkland

At the same time, a serum was being developed, but not fast enough or in large enough quantities to handle rinderpest that was raging throughout Southern Africa. Dr. Soga also was involved in the team effort to develop a serum. But it was a challenge to convince farmers that the serum was effective. Mortality after being inoculation was only 15 percent. By comparison, mortality from the disease was more than 90 percent.

Finally, these combined efforts had positive results and the disease eventually waned. The cattle industry as well as the Cape Colony's economy were crippled but saved from total collapse, but at enormous costs. More than 35 percent of the cattle died – either from the disease itself or from culling. In financial terms in 1897, the bill was £1.2 million, then a staggering sum.

In the Transvaal, nearly a million cattle died from rinderpest, more than two-thirds of the livestock population.

He was a leading member of the team of veterinarians who were successful in eradicating rinderpest – a highly contagious and fatal cattle disease – in South Africa. When the rinderpest was at its zenith, Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal Republic, met a group of veterinarians from the Cape Colony. "Paul Kruger was happy to accept the assistance of [the group] including J F Soga, in helping to curb the rinderpest in the Transvaal, even though they spoke English and one of them was a Xhosa who spoke English," Dr. Manton Hirst, an anthropologist who works at the Amathole Museum in King William's Town, said. The Cape Colony Governor, Lord Alfred Milner, commended him for this work.

The battle against rinderpest also took its toll on Jotello Soga. Thus began the last phase of his career - and his life. His health deteriorated, and in 1902 he left government service and tried to establish a private

practice. Later he was employed as a farm supervisor near East London and ran a small veterinary practice.

“His move to the farm was an effort to save his marriage and give his family a more stable existence,” said Dr. Hirst, of the Amathole Museum.

But sometime in 1904, according to Dr. Hirst who has seen family correspondence from that period, Dr. Soga’s wife, Catherine, returned to Scotland with the couple’s young daughters, Catherine, Doris and Margaret.

Near end of his life, he developed “unsettling habits connected with his work” that “severely tried his health” and “undermined his constitution,” his brother Allan wrote in Dr. Soga’s obituary that appeared in the Cape Colony Agricultural Journal. He died on December 6, 1906, at the age of 41. The cause was an overdose of laudanum, a derivative of opium that was used as a painkiller during the time.

Dr. Soga was a founding member, in 1905, of the former Cape of Good Hope Veterinary Association, which joined other organisations to become today’s South African Veterinary Association (SAVA).

Prof. Gerry Swan, Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria at Onderstepoort, said that Dr Soga played an “important role in combating rinderpest and lung-sickness in the country as the first qualified South African veterinarian. He also laid a foundation for veterinary education in South Africa.” “But he is better known in veterinary circles as a pioneer researcher in the study of toxic plants and their effect on animals – both for their poisonous a nd curative effects,” Prof. Swan said. To acknowledge his original research work, the "Jotello Soga Ethno Veterinary Garden" was created at ARC-Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute next to the Veterinary Museum.

Entrance to the Jotello Soga Ethnoveterinary Garden at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute

In part the inscription at the entrance says that Dr. Soga “suffered many ordeals and hardships that led to his untimely death at the age of 41” and states that the garden is dedicated to ethno botany and ethno veterinary medicine, the subjects in which he earned a gold medal at university. “His memory is an indelible part of the history of veterinary medicine in South Africa,” Dean Swan said.

The South African Veterinary Association (SAVA) also has established a tribute to Dr. Soga, who is mentioned on its website, where his photo appears. The SAVA awards the annual Soga Medal in “recognition of exceptional community service” rendered by a veterinarian who is an Association member and registered with the South African Veterinary Council or a veterinary student enrolled at a South African veterinary faculty. Any type of community service, and not necessarily veterinary service, rendered to any community, may be considered for this award. “The fact that we award the Soga Medal is an indication that we respect and admire his contribution – not only his work as a veterinarian but his commitment to the community,” said Dr. Colin Cameron, the Chief Executive Officer of the SAVA. “This is what we want to instill in our profession. Veterinary medicine is not only a job but a commitment to the community – the entire South African community,” Dr. Cameron said.

(Photo credits: Onderstepoort Veterinary institute)