He prepared the slides for the magic lantern, preserved the bodies and specimens, allotted the parts, procured and sold the articulated skeletons – indeed, there was no activity except that of lecturing in which he did not take part. But above all he was the guardian of the helpless inmates, and the Curator of their home, the dissecting room. – Dr Herbert Moran, ‘Beyond the Hill Lies China’

Louis Schaeffer, who came to work at the Sydney Medical School as a laboratory attendant in 1886 and remained for 53 years, still holds the record today for the longest standing employee of the University. But he almost didn’t get the job.

At the age of 15, he vied with 117 other boys hopeful for the position, only managing to make the short-list at the last minute when he demonstrated curiosity about a medical diagram posted on the wall. At interview a week later with Anderson Stuart, Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, Schaeffer was asked, “Are you afraid of dead bodies?” to which he replied, “I don’t think I am!”

The medical school at this time was housed in a four-roomed cottage which was later demolished and replaced with the Edgeworth David Building. This tiny medical school consisted of a single dissecting room, leading to an injection room and an anatomy lecture theatre, with a fourth room serving as Stuart’s workshop.

Right from the start, Schaeffer was trained in the “preservation of the material of practical anatomy.” Many of the photographs and specimens in the Wilson Museum and the Museum of Pathology are the result of his painstaking work.

In 1890, the medical school moved from the cottage to the Anderson Stuart Building. Schaeffer was charged with moving everything, including cadavers, on the old University cart:

“It fell to the lot of the caretaker (Mr McLean) and me to bring the coffins across. So we arranged to take them one night. Old Mac and I had one on our shoulders. A chap and a girl were walking across the paddock. The girl let out a scream and the pair fled!”

Schaeffer confessed that even he could be a little spooked by the dissection room at night:

“I always liked my work but I had a little fear at being left alone, particularly at nightfall. I used to like getting out of that bally dissecting room! I’ll never forget one night… it was a moonlight night. Six corpses were there bathed in moonlight. I raced through, got what I was sent for, and bolted out, not staying to lock up. I was properly frightened!

All accounts portray Schaeffer as deeply respectful towards the corpses that came under his care. Moran wrote: “Louis always handled the hardened, blackened, almost unrecognisable specimens with something of a loving caress.”

When the Department of Anatomy was subsequently divided in two, Schaeffer remained with the Department of Anatomy under Professor James Thomas Wilson. Wilson trained him in photography, photomicrography and plate-making. Wilson’s key interests at the time were in the embryological development of marsupials and monotremes, and also the central nervous system and human neurology.

Aside from his general departmental duties and checking the attendance roll at the door of the Vesalian lecture theatre, Schaeffer was trained by Wilson to mount and preserve specimens for conversion into slides for the epididiascope. During the mid-1890s, the two made slides of every kind of nerve cell that could be seen in the mammalian body.

In her book ‘J’ T Wilson and the Fraternity of Duckmaloi’, Patricia Morison wrote:

“In the shade of Wilson’s increasing stature, Louis grew into ‘the prince of technicians’ and a skilled photographer and photomicrographer. With a perfect understanding of Wilson’s exacting requirements he presided over the dissecting room, gave ‘unwearied assistance’ to his research, operated the epididiascope in lectures, punctuated with the urgent whisper...”

By Lise Mellor and Vanessa Witton
'focus, Louis, focus', and at other times remained on the alert for the louder whisper 'Lou-ée’ resounding down the corridor. Generations of students were said to parody this whispering.

When Professor Wilson left Australia to accept the chair of anatomy at Cambridge in 1920, Schaeffer reported to Professor John Irvine Hunter. In an interview in 1933, he remarked that, “John Hunter was a genius”, then boldly stated that he felt he had influenced Hunter’s career by bringing him to the attention of Wilson. He also said that Hunter used to give demonstrations to rooms packed with students whilst he was still in second year.

Many deceased bodies came into Schaeffer’s care, but none as notorious as ‘the pyjama girl’. For the 10 years she remained unidentified, she was housed in a zinc-lined bath and displayed in the basement of the medical school. Schaeffer was responsible for embalming and preserving the body until his retirement.

The mystery began on September 1, 1934 when a farmer found the brutally bashed and partially burnt body of a young woman in a culvert off one of the main roads in Albury. The woman had suffered a bullet wound to the face and multiple injuries to her skull before being hidden in a hessian sack, still dressed in her Chinese-style yellow silk pyjamas.

Initially, she was identified as Linda Agostini, a British migrant, but the local dental records did not match those of the murdered woman. A decade later, it was found that the original dental records had been misrepresented and that she was in fact Agostini after all. Her husband was charged with murder and her body was released from the Medical School and buried in Preston Cemetery.

During her years of anonymity, a death mask made of the pyjama girl represented the first serious attempt at forensic reconstruction in Australian history and the original is still housed in the Shellshear Museum.

Schaeffer’s length of service gave him an unmatched perspective on the Professors.

Summing up, students stood in awe of Professor Stuart, but took their troubles to Dr Wilson. Dr Wilson and Dr MacCormick used to give picnics to students of their years. They were good oh – I used to go!

He also worked for Professors F A Maguire, Claude Witherington Stump, and Arthur Burkitt, who was Dean at the time of Schaeffer’s retirement in 1939 aged 69. He had risen to the rank of Chief Laboratory Technician with three attendants working under him, and was able to claim: “I have met and spoken with every person that has graduated from the Sydney Medical School.

I have had a wonderful time in the department. We have had such a succession of gentlemen that you couldn’t help liking them. In a sense I am married to the department … I have really lived for it …. hours have meant nothing to me … they have let me run around, sweet willed, and a fellow just couldn’t help doing his best.

On his death, two years after his retirement, Burkitt wrote an obituary which appeared in the Medical Journal of Australia and Sydney University Medical Journal in 1942.

One of the outstanding features of his life was the complete devotion to the medical school and the department of anatomy. It was said that “Louis”, as he was known to the many generations of students, lived, worked for and thought only of the department.

Schaeffer was a foundation member of the University Welfare Association and a foundation and life member of the Society of Laboratory Attendants of Australasia. radius