

The 2004 OCAPG Award

Part 1: The Winning Essay Charles Spriggs

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Charles William Spriggs, my grandfather, is the mystery member of my family tree. I am thoroughly acquainted with the beginning of his story and the end, but have failed utterly in finding the middle.

Imagine someone who was *in utero* when the census taker showed up, ledger in hand, at Charles's parents' Belleville door in the spring of 1871. I doubt he was visible—ladies sought to conceal their condition in those days—and certainly the future Charles never made it into the record that day. Nor did two other siblings who had died in infancy early in the family's residency in Canada. His parents and older brothers-to-be did, however, as follows:

George Edward Spriggs, father. Emigrated from England between December 1864 and March 1867.

Pauline Frances Spriggs, née George, mother. Apparently emigrated with husband.

George John Spriggs, brother. Born December, 1864, in Poplar, Middlesex, England; emigrated with parents.

Frederick Charles ["Fred"] Spriggs, brother. Born March 10, 1867, in Canada.

Charles William made it a family of five on October 15, 1871, and three months later was baptized at St. Thomas Anglican Church, Belleville.¹ His life seems to have been nothing extraordinary for about three years. Actually, it was reasonably extraordinary simply to have nothing disastrous happen, and the tranquility did not last. His mother died; his father remarried. His father died, and Charles, five weeks short of his sixth birthday, found himself the youngest of three brothers with a husbandless stepmother about to give birth to a baby half-brother.² By 1878, from that hapless family situation, Charles William vanishes.

Fast forward to 1897. Charles William Spriggs, now 26, marries Charlotte Elizabeth Wildin, a former Barnardo orphan who had found her way to Prince Edward County and into my grandfather's life. My grandparents were an easy catch in the 1901 census, farming on Concession 5 (Burr Road to the locals) in the Township of Hillier, Prince Edward County. Charles's bachelor brother Fred was living on Burr Road too, farming less than a mile away. Into this rural neighbourhood my mother, Minnie Pearl Spriggs, was born in December 1903, a younger sister for yet another George. Prospects were again good for an uneventful family life, but once more misfortune overtook the Spriggs. Fred fell ill in 1907, and Charles and Charlotte took him in to convalesce. Charles became ill. Fred died, and in July 1908 Charles succumbed. The brothers are buried in Grove Cemetery, Ameliasburg, both of them young men in their thirties.

So where was Charles William Spriggs between 1877 and 1897? The spoor ran cold as soon as he and Fred died. Charlotte might have heard stories, and might have shared them with my mother. But this sad background is the sort that surviving descendants are inclined to put out of mind, and I grew up

¹ January 14, 1872. Vol. 7-B-4, Diocese of Ontario, in Kingston. Full details for this and other references in this paper are available on request.

² Pauline Spriggs died in childbirth December 13, 1874; the infant Thomas lived 22 days. George Edward Spriggs married Eunice Ingham Gallishan of Tay Creek, New Brunswick, in Belleville on December 31, 1876. George Edward died in Toronto on September 8, 1877. Eunice gave birth to their child, John Edward ("Eddie") Spriggs, on November 2, 1877 in Belleville.

without a grandfather even in memory. My grandfather probably had no more than the rudiments of education, and surely was not in the habit of writing diaries or letters. So today, without personal memoirs, I turn back to the documentary record. Perhaps the name “Charles Spriggs” lies in a school-master’s attendance book, or on a confirmation card at church. But surely, if nowhere else, I should be able to find him in the two intermediate censuses.

At the time of the 1881 census Charles William Spriggs was in his tenth year. I found his two brothers (George and Fred) and half-brother (Eddie) all living on farms close by.³ But Eunice and Charles have vanished. Apparently she had (quite literally) farmed out these three boys, one of them her own 3½-year-old son, so it seems highly unlikely that she would have kept Charles. She may have returned to her roots in New Brunswick, but everything points to finding Charles somewhere in the Bay of Quinte area. A census line for a nine-year-old school-boy named Charles Thompson caught my attention, simply because this was the name of the family where Eddie was living. Could this Charles Thompson be my grandfather, carelessly misnamed by the enumerator and living with Thompsons who were perhaps related to Eddie’s family?⁴ Is it too far-fetched to imagine that he was absorbed into this household just by hovering around while the enumerator was making his entries? I cannot imagine that my grandfather had been officially adopted, for the name “Spriggs” continues through his married life. So my husband and I combed the 1881 census manuscripts throughout Prince Edward County and the first tier of townships, on the Bay of Quinte front, in Hastings County.⁵ No Charles William Spriggs. We waded through again, with the same result. So much for 1881.

Eunice resurfaces in Belleville in 1883, marrying Hugh Reid there on December 11. A Thompson was a witness. Charles William Spriggs would have just turned 12, too young to have signed as a witness on the marriage certificate, had he even been present. Eunice and Hugh lived in Milltown, Township of Tyendinaga, in Hastings County. She was widowed again in 1889; life was tough. I have pursued her no further.

In 1891 Eddie and George show up in the census in Belleville, but now both Fred (24) and my grandfather Charles William (19) are missing.⁶ I seem to be losing rather than gaining. But their mutual absence gave me slim hope that if I found one I might find both. Charles and Fred were of an age when young people spread their wings. They could have gone anywhere, and quite likely as a twosome. Perhaps they were inland at the mines of Marmora or Coe Hill, or hoping to strike it rich at Deloro. Or maybe they had hired aboard a cargo schooner or steamship plying Lake Ontario. Again my husband and I plodded through township census manuscripts in ever widening circles out from George and Eddie, but to no avail.

Well, the hole remains pretty large—half a life—and any opportunity to fill it in prospectively or retrospectively would indeed bring me great satisfaction. Ancestors are precious, and nobody should have to live with an incomplete one.

Duane Bell McIlwraith’s essay is the winner of the 2004 OCAPG Award, offered by the Ontario Chapter of the Association of Professional Genealogists for the best essay on an unsolved Ontario genealogy problem. The annual award includes a certificate plus professional research on the problem. For more details visit www.rootsweb.com/~onapg

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³ George, 16, lives in Murray Township, Northumberland, with the Faul family. Fred, 13, lives in Hillier Township with the Noxon family. Eddie, 3, lives with Thomas and Rosa Thompson in Belleville. They would have been like grandparents to him.

⁴ William and Margaret Thompson, both 38, and daughter Jane, 17. A William Thompson is named as present at the funeral of George Spriggs’s infant son, Charles Henry, on August 10, 1869. Could this be the same William?

⁵ Census microfilm reels C-13237 and C-13238.

⁶ Census microfilm reels T-6342, T-6343, T-6344, T-6364, T-6365. George John Spriggs, 25, was married to Jennie (“Jane”) Thompson, 27. Could she be the same Jane who was 17 in 1881? They were living with Thomas (64), a bricklayer (her father?) and Annie (23) (her sister?). Here is the Thompson name again. Eddie, 13, continued in Belleville with George (who aged only 7 years this decade, to 74) and Rosa (who aged 8 years) Thompson in Belleville.