

SPURR OF THE MOMENT

The Story of Noel Spurr OAM



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Norm and Laurie Spurr and to my children
Richard and Elizabeth Spurr

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank all those people who have contributed to this book, in particular Betty Fussell OAM who has encouraged me for many years to write my story.

To the organisations and staff that had the biggest impact on my ability to live life to the full, these include:

Fairfield Hospital Ward 12

Yooralla

Nunawading High School

Coonac Rehabilitation Centre

FOREWORD

BY BETTY FUSSELL OAM

The year 1956 was an important year in the history of poliomyelitis in Victoria, and indeed throughout the world. In Victoria it was the last year of an eight year epidemic during which time 3025 cases of polio were recorded. On 17th August 8 year old Noel Spurr became severely ill, becoming one of those unfortunate people to suffer from this disease only such a short time before the very successful immunisation program for the prevention of polio was introduced in Victoria in that same year.

Noel suffered from paralyses throughout his body; but of most concern was the effect on his respiratory muscles, being life threatening in the beginning and again periodically in the ensuing years. He required assistance through a respirator box, full time in the early months; then gaining more independence, he used a respirator only at night. This, with the acquisition of the trick breathing mechanism based on 'Frog Breathing', he was able to move home where a respirator was installed for night use. He has needed readmission to Fairfield Hospital from time to time for reassessment and to deal with any lung infections, and later to the Austin Hospital.

Poliomyelitis can occur in almost random pattern throughout the body, and in various degrees of severity. Such cases required individual assessment and treatment programs, especially during the growing years to prevent deformities; thus long-term relationships developed between staff and patients, some of which continue to this day.

My contact with Noel began about 50 years ago, when, as a physiotherapist with the State Health Department Poliomyelitis

Division based at Fairfield Hospital, I had contact with Noel in the early stages; again when he was attending Yooralla Hospital School; and later to attend to his respirator at home. Later we were both working to improve conditions for the physically disabled in the community. I was on various committees and met with Noel when he was employed in the same department, in particular when we were involved in Access for the Disabled Groups. After my retirement I met him again when he was Mayor of Nunawading and later a Councillor with the City of Whitehorse.

In 2000 an exhibition of poliomyelitis was mounted in Melbourne University, and Noel was invited to open it. Since that time we have kept in touch. Noel has been helpful in my project to try to record the history of polio in Victoria, and both he and Margaret were interviewed for the history of the physiotherapy profession published this year.

Noel's persistent attitude is perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of this man. This, coupled with his insight into the needs of the physically disabled, has been effective in identifying the problems, and being innovative in finding solutions. The physically disabled continue to benefit from his advocacy in the community and in government circles at all levels.

The story of his journey will be of great interest to others who find life difficult at times; and to his family, illustrating his life as a physically disabled man with his wife Margaret, their two children, and now grandchildren. It is a story worth telling.

CHAPTER 1

FAMILY VALUES

My great, great grandfather Richard Spurr was born in 1800 in Truro, Cornwall, where he became a cabinetmaker and carpenter. He was married on his 21st birthday in St Helier Island of Jersey to Ann Mary Babot who was born there in 1803. There is much written about Richard Spurr in the newspapers of the day, but also in books including full chapters in 'Cornish Studies' and 'Crime, Protest and Popular Politics in Southern England 1740-1850'. He became involved in peoples' rights, and was a leader of the Chartist Movement in Cornwall, and later represented London at the famous 1840 Manchester Conference. By 1848 Chartists were being hunted down and imprisoned, but eventually democracy was won by the Chartists with people power.

He migrated to Australia in 1850 with his wife and children. It is written in the book 'Victoria and its Metropolis' that he built the first Police Barracks in Melbourne and that he had his business near the corner of Elizabeth Street and Flinders Street Melbourne. There's a possibility that he was at Eureka Stockade as he was in Ballarat for a while at that time, and the rights being fought for at the Eureka Stockade were very similar to those sought by the Chartists. Many of

the leaders at the Eureka Stockade were Chartist members. He died aged 55 years within 12 months of the Eureka Stockade, he never saw true democracy introduced to England or Australia and I think he may have died of a broken heart, believing that after half a lifetime of involvement, nothing had changed, that people were killed for nothing.

Richard's son, William Spurr, who was my great grandfather, was born in 1844 in London; he also had much written about him, including in 'Victoria and its Metropolis' and the centenary book for the North Fitzroy Church of Christ. He was married in 1869 to Elizabeth Wild, who was born in 1846 in Melbourne. William Spurr was one of the most successful builders in Melbourne, and some of his buildings are heritage listed and still standing. At one stage he built and owned all the houses in Rae and Rose Streets, North Fitzroy. What he did was build one house, rent that out, often to family members, relatives and friends, then build another house next to it. All the building materials were brought in by horse and cart or by train to Edinburgh Gardens, and he ended up owning all the houses in the street. He also helped build the Church of Christ and the Temperance buildings in North Fitzroy. William's son Arthur Edwin Spurr, my grandfather, was born in 1876 in North Fitzroy and he also became a builder.

During the 1880s because of the 'Land Boom' people could not afford to pay their rent, so mortgages couldn't be paid. William Spurr sold off most of his houses, retired at 44, and became a lay preacher in the Church of Christ. Before he died in 1920, William Spurr had again built houses mainly for relatives this time in Warra Street, Kooyong, opposite the Tennis Stadium and he owned many of them.

THE COWLEY FAMILY

My other great grandfather, Thomas Henry Cowley, was born in 1844 in Berkshire, England. In 1865 he married Eliza Emma Dyer who was born in 1845 in London.

Thomas Henry Cowley became a chemist and was the Superintendent of the North Fitzroy Church of Christ. In 1901 Arthur Edwin Spurr married Elizabeth Jane Cowley who was born in 1874 in North Fitzroy. The wedding ceremony was performed by her father, Thomas Henry Cowley.

My father, Norman Clarence Spurr, was born in Sandringham in 1916. Dad told me that at one stage his father had the fastest yacht on Port Phillip Bay when they lived at Sandringham, and that Grandpa's hobby was making crystal radio sets.

A similar thing happened to Arthur Spurr during the 'Great Depression' of the 1930's as happened to his father William Spurr during the 'Land Boom' of the 1880's.

Grandpa built many of the prestige homes that are in the Camberwell Golf Links estate including Cristowel Avenue. When the depression hit they were already living in a house. Grandpa had built another one in Christowel Avenue for his family, but as his building partner didn't have a house, he allowed his partner to move in. Later he had tried to repossess it, but was unsuccessful; those houses now sell for up to two million dollars. The Great Depression was very difficult for the family. Grandpa had to give up building as few people could afford to buy houses. Because different members of the family had orchards at Bacchus Marsh and Diamond Creek, they set up a fruit and vegetable shop in Camberwell Market.

About this time Dad had represented Victoria in school football and his brother Arthur was playing football for Camberwell. Dad had to leave school; he was about 13 and he worked 16 or 17 hours every day. All of them had to work to survive. Nothing was wasted; people ate bread with dripping instead of butter, and really stale bread was boiled in water for breakfast cereal, and old vegetables were boiled into soup. Dad said his father would send him to give damaged old fruit from the shop to those working for 'Susso' benefits on the Kew Boulevarde. Dad said most of the kids he grew up with did not even have shoes as the depression worsened.

After the 'Great Depression' the two sons of my grandfather, Dad and Uncle Arthur, were builders, and quite a lot of their cousins and uncles worked in the building industry.

THE SINCLAIR FAMILY

My mother's parents were Charles Henry Sinclair born 1885 in Prahran, and Amy Florence Clenaghan, born 1892 in Geelong. They married in 1913 in Ascot Vale and my mother Laurie Mabel Sinclair was born in Footscray in 1919.

My grandparents' marriage broke up in the 1920's, some time after the horse riding accident that put my grandmother in a wheelchair. In those days there was little support other than charity for the disabled, and no social security or support of any type to live independently; you were forced to rely on family, and stay with the family. Mum's uncle Alfred Earnest Sinclair was very supportive to Mum growing up, as was her Auntie Nellie (Sinclair) Shaw. Alfred Earnest Sinclair was the brother of my grandfather. He served in Gallipoli and at the famous Cavalry Charge at Beersheeba during WW1 and became the driver for Police Commissioner General Blamey in 1924. He would sometimes talk about 'canaries' at Gallipoli, which is what he called the bullets, and said as long as you could hear them whistling you were all right. He was wounded and lost an eye.

The Clenaghan side of the family, that my grandmother came from, also stayed close throughout Mum's life. They had real class, always well dressed, cultured and sociable. Mum was similar to them in many ways. Mum was very sociable. She'd come from a poor family but in 1933 she had won a full scholarship to Stott's Business College during the depression years, which must have been like gold then. This training stood her in good stead and she was highly regarded everywhere she worked. She worked at Lanes Motors before she married. Mum also won a trophy at ice-skating in 1936. As well as being very sociable, Mum was very well presented. She always wore high heels and fine clothes when she went out, she liked her jewellery, in particular, her pearls.

My parents were married in 1939 at the Malvern Methodist Church. It seems a coincidence that Dad's best man had polio, albeit only in one leg, and years later I too would have polio, and also that Mum's mother, my grandmother, was disabled and in a wheelchair as a result of a horse-riding fall.

THE WAR YEARS

Dad was a builder before World War II, so during the war he was classified as being in an essential industry and served in the Civil Construction Corps (CCC), building military bases, munitions factories and airfield hangars. He told me that when they went to Queensland by train with the CCC there were so many troops on board they had to take it in turns to lie down to rest or sleep in the luggage racks.

Dad's grandmother Elizabeth (Wild) Spurr died in February 1940 aged 94 years.

My brother Bob was born in May 1940 and my sister Shirley was born in July 1942.

In March 1943 Dad's mother Elizabeth (Cowley) Spurr died on the same day as my mother's birthday. Also in 1943 Dad had a major accident when he fell from the top of a bomber hangar being built for the USAAF in Queensland. He fell from the rooftop onto a large pile of timber, which saved his life by breaking his fall. Dad said the base was mostly Negro, or as they are now called, African Americans. He couldn't use his arm for about six months and was discharged from the CCC in March 1944. After months of rehabilitation at the Alfred Hospital, finally regaining the use of his hand and arm, he joined the RAAF. I always thought it was ironic that he was no longer fit enough for the CCC, but acceptable for the RAAF.

My brother Jeffery was born in May 1944 and three days later Jack Cowley, the cousin Dad was closest to growing up, was killed in action with the RAAF; his body was never found. The transcript of

the attack on their aircraft was graphic. He is listed on the Ambon Memorial. Before the war he had played for Croydon Football Club including in the 1937 Premiership team.

Dad served in New Guinea at Finschhafen and Lae, and he was on Morotai Island when the Japanese surrendered. In the RAAF he was usually close to, behind or between enemy lines. The war was turning or moving back against the Japanese, so Dad's unit in the RAAF would go in first to put in the landing strips so that our army and supplies could be flown in. They'd build the strips and then guard them while the battles continued around them. He also served in both the 5 and 10 RSU and I have read about the dangerous work they undertook.

On one occasion Dad mentioned that in New Guinea they arrived totally exhausted, just after the bulldozers had been through. As it was getting dark, Dad lay down to sleep against the mound of dirt; he pushed what he thought was a branch away from him several times, before he realized it was an arm of a dead soldier buried under the mound of dirt.

When Dad was in New Guinea he had the greatest respect for the local native people, nicknamed the 'fuzzy wuzzy angels'. He said they were the most honest and helpful people, and the only things they wanted from the soldiers were new or even rusty razor blades, but even the brand new ones rusted in the jungle. Dad brought home a wooden comb from one of the 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' he was friendly with.

There were many troops affected by tropical diseases, such as malaria and beri beri, but any injury even a scratch, sunburn or mosquito bites can fester in the tropics and Dad learned to use mentholated spirits to stop skin infection.

I remember Dad saying one of the men in his unit could be ready in about 20 seconds when there were air raids or ground attacks. Morotai Island was bombed virtually every day. He would have everything set up, all he needed including boots, helmet and rifle. Dad said the plane nicknamed 'whispering death' was the scariest thing, as it was upon you before you knew it.

There was a colour American documentary on Channel 2 a few years ago, I think it was called 'Victory in the Pacific' that included film of Australians and Americans fighting on Morotai Island, and I saw what it must have been like for Dad. The Japanese came out to surrender, supposedly, but with their grenades under their arms, and blew everybody up. The film showed hundreds of dead bodies. In the finish it was absolute slaughter. The Americans would just shoot to kill, and when they couldn't find all the Japanese, they used flamethrowers to flush them out of their bunkers and caves. Dad said the use of flamethrowers on Morotai was the worst thing he saw during the war. They showed that in the documentary and I saw what he meant.

He rarely spoke of the war, but the few times he did included how they celebrated after the surrender. One of the things he said was, 'We did have beer, but we had also made our own drinks leading up to the surrender.' I think he said that it was pure alcohol that was mixed with fruit, and some of them got really drunk. One of the blokes was so drunk he was shooting all over the place and shot some of our own men; another one drowned; he just walked out into the water and drowned because he was so drunk. Dad just missed being hit.

He said that Morotai was captured in 1944 and turned into one of the biggest bases in the Pacific. The airfield was on the coastline; most of the island was controlled by the Japanese, and they attacked Morotai airfield most days as it was the stepping stone to the Philippines and Japan. Dad was disappointed that after peace was declared Australia had to destroy many of their aircraft and equipment purchased under the 'lend lease' program from the USA, because it had so many aircraft they just pushed them into the ocean with bulldozers, to rust. He told me that when he was flown back to Australia in a DC3 cargo plane after the war was over, all they had to wear was jungle clothing and the flight was freezing, so they had to cover themselves with mailbags and parachutes to keep warm.

I remember Dad watching the news one day, when someone had shot and killed their own family members, and Dad saying something like, 'I do not understand how they could do that, it is hard enough to

kill someone you do not know', which indicated to me he most likely had to kill during the war.

Dad's brother, Uncle Arthur, was in the Navy as a carpenter/joiner. His ship was at Milne Bay during very heavy fighting which, along with the Kokoda Trail, was the first time the Japanese were defeated up to that stage of the war, so he went through all that. Whatever he saw or did there he never really recovered from. And there were other places but the heaviest fighting, and one of the biggest battles, was at Milne Bay. Dad said that before the war Uncle Arthur was one of the best builders in Melbourne, but after the war he did not cope well; there was not the help available for veterans that there is now.

Dad's cousin, Colin Spurr, was awarded the DFC, flying in the Pathfinder Squadrons with Bomber Command over Germany. It seems that most of our relatives served in World War II. So as well as my dad, his brother Arthur and his cousins, there were also the relatives of my mother in the services. Her brother, Ron Sinclair served in the RAAF and Harold Jordan, who was married to Mum's sister Marjorie (Sinclair) Jordan, served in the Army. Mum's cousin Joan (Sceney) Braund, and her husband Lou Braund, both served in the RAAF. Doug McFarlane who married Mum's cousin Betty (Carrow) McFarlane, served in the RAN. Charles Miles, husband of Mum's cousin Molly (Clenaghan) Miles, served in the RAAF.

PEACE – LIFE GOES BACK TO NORMAL

After the war, Dad was working for himself as a builder. At one site, he was confronted by union officials and he was expected to join the union. But he said, 'Who am I going to strike against?' Because he wouldn't join the union, he was physically intimidated. One thing Dad did say was that everyone in the building industry should have individual contracts, give a quote and stick to it. So even though he was not political, it seems that he was 50 years ahead of his time.

Although my great, great grandfather was a leader of the Chartists, who worked for democratic representation that eventually led to the

formation of the Labor Party and the unions in England, my father didn't want to be involved in unions or politics at all. However he was very tolerant of the political views of others. I can only guess having lived during the depression and war, he may have become disillusioned with any one group, whether it be a union or a political party, having all the answers.

The first years after the war were hard. Rationing was still in place up to about 1950; even petrol was rationed. It was very hard to get building supplies, so Dad would build a house and sell it, then move into the next one he was building. The family lived in Ferntree Gully, Upwey, Belgrave, and several other areas. Around this time, with three young children to bring up, Mum also ran a milk-bar next to the theatre in Belgrave. I am not sure when but it burned down, Dad was involved in fighting bush fires, probably through the early CFA. I remember him saying they did not have much equipment so they used hessian bags soaked in water to battle the grass fires.

I was born on August 7, 1948 in Ferntree Gully. When I was about six months old I fell out of the high chair, cutting off the top of my finger. It's still a problem because of the way it was stitched.

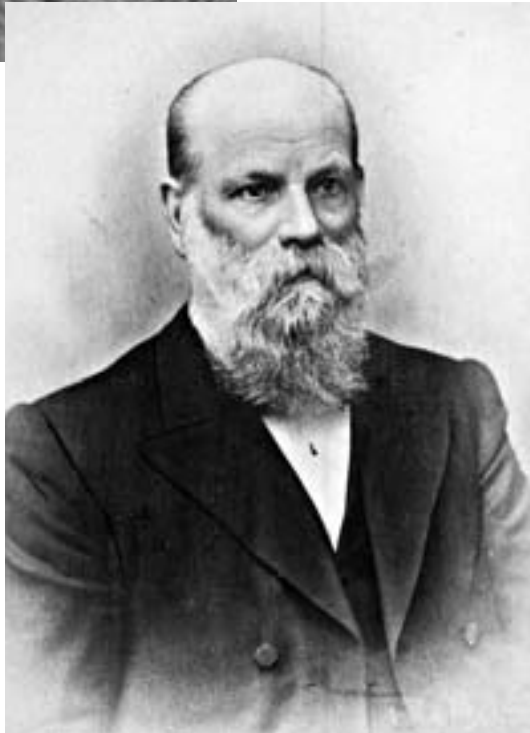
In 1951 Dad received his 'War Gratuity' payment and it was possibly because of this, when I was three, that we moved, as the 'War Gratuity' was banked in South Yarra, where my younger sister, Patsy, was born in 1953. We used to have an open fire in South Yarra and I remember clothes drying in front of it, which caught on fire one day. I think it was my fault.

My brother Bob, who was in the top group of students in the State, went to Toorak Central then Melbourne High School. That was a government school with selective entry. It was easier for him to get there from South Yarra so I presume we moved there to give him that educational opportunity. Also Dad's father lived in Warra Street, Kooyong, which wasn't very far away. I remember when I was about five years old seeing my brother Bob marching with the Melbourne High School Cadets on Flinders Street Station, and thinking he was going off to war.

My father came from a fairly conservative, religious background, with Cornish roots. My mother's background was from Scotland and Northern Ireland. From my family background I gained a framework of Christian values, a commitment to human rights, democracy, freedom and equality, the virtue of hard work and the importance of volunteer work. I also learned from the experiences of my ancestors, William and Arthur Spurr, the financial lesson of 'not putting all your eggs in one basket', and at all times legally protect your assets.



1915 – Great Grandparents
William and Elizabeth
(Wild) Spurr



1909 – Great Grandfather
Thomas Cowley



1915 – Grandparents Arthur and Elizabeth (Cowley) Spurr





1915 – Grandmother
Amy Florence
(Clenaghan) Sinclair



1914 – Grandfather
Charles Sinclair



1939 – Norm and Laurie Spurr

1970 – Norm and Laurie Spurr

