

FINDING THE ELUSIVE CHARLES SPENCER:

Partners in Genealogy

by Mary Nutting AGS #4697

When the staff at South Peace Regional Archives Society began to process the Charles Spencer collection, the first task was to write a biographical sketch. There was plenty of information regarding his life in Canada; in fact, as Bill Scott of the Daily Herald Tribune noted, he could be labelled a Renaissance Man. He was the architect of many of our early public buildings, served on numerous civic boards, loved good books and classical music, and bequeathed his estate to benefit our public library.

But about his life before he came to Canada, there was absolutely no information. “It is believed he had some nieces and nephews in England,” his obituary simply said. Who was this man? He appeared to be educated and wealthy; and he had emigrated from Northamptonshire, where the Spencer family has a large estate, and where Princess Diana Spencer is now buried. Could he possibly be connected to that Spencer family?

Among Mr. Spencer’s own papers we found some letterhead from which we were able to determine that he had been a builder in England, but that was the only trace we could find. Bill Lappenbush, a member of our archives society and a genealogist, was able (through his membership in several genealogical organizations) to trace Charles back to 1871. There were several inconsistencies, however, that made us less than 100% sure we had the correct individual.

So we called in the big gun—Judy Bradley, president of the Grande Prairie Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society and an expert in British genealogy. She in turn sent the request to Angela White in Dorset, England who specializes in Spencer family genealogy. It wasn’t long before we had the story, with a surprising twist—Charles Spencer wasn’t correctly Charles Spencer at all!

Charles Spencer SHATFORD was born on April 4, 1867 at Highgate, Kendal, Westmorland. His mother was Sarah SPENCER and his father was Charles SHATFORD. He had an older sister named Elizabeth. The 1871 census reveals

that they had moved to Liverpool, Lancashire, where the youngest child, Sarah Louise was born. This was not a



Charles Spencer standing in the doorway of Spencer Block

wealthy family for they were sharing a home with two other families—a total of 12 people in one tenement home. It was here that Charles’ mother contracted tuberculosis. She died in Irchester, Northamptonshire in 1873, when Charles was only 6 years old. One year later, four year old Sarah Louise also died.

It was about this time that the family moved south, perhaps because the air in the south was cleaner and less polluted by industry. “From now on”, Angela White states, “the names of SPENCER and SHATFORD become interchangeable.... The reason remains a bit of a mystery. Perhaps it was a way of honouring and remembering Sarah, the wife and mother who died aged just 35 years.”

The 1881 census shows the family as SPENCERS. Charles is living with his father and sister in South Stoneham, Hampshire, and, at 13 years of age, is a “scholar”—he is still in school. By the time of the 1891 census, he was employed as a house builder. Records discovered by Angela in the Hampshire record office show that by the

late 1890s, Charles was employing others in building houses. By the time he reached Grande Prairie in 1910, he had gathered enough experience to work as an architect and had amassed enough wealth to become a partner in the Argonaut Company.



Above shows the Spencer Block two doors down from the Imperial Bank on Richmond Avenue, Grande Prairie, Alberta



Spencer Building, 2015

The connection between SHATFORD and SPENCER was at first just a theory. The document that confirmed [Angela's] suspicions was the will of Charles's father, Charles SHATFORD. It states, 'This is the will and testament of me Charles Shatford otherwise Charles Shatford Spencer otherwise Charles Spencer...'. 'I devise and bequeath all my estate and effects both real and personal of whatsoever nature and whatsoever situate unto and equally between my son Charles Shatford otherwise Charles Spencer and my said daughter Elizabeth Ann Glasspool...'. Looking at our own records, we see that the death of his father in 1928 coincides with one of Charles' trips back to England.

No, Charles Spencer was not one of "the" Spencers' of Northamptonshire. Neither was he born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was motherless by the time he

was six, and although his father appeared to have been educated and hard-working, they were not a wealthy family. It was through his own efforts that Charles Spencer became what he was—the Renaissance Man of Grande Prairie.

Thank you to the Grande Prairie Branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society, and also to Angela White, the Spencer contact in England. Now we are able to tell the story of the real Charles Spencer.

Charles Spencer fonds. – 1896-[1950]. – 7 cm of textual records. – 32 photographs. – 9 negatives.

Scope and content

The fonds consists of various textual records related to Charles Spencer's personal, business and commercial interests. The contents of the fonds deal primarily with his life and interests after moving to Grande Prairie in 1910, although the material dates from 1886 to 1941. Records include correspondence, notebooks, daily journals, receipts, contracts and agreements, sales and account books, share certificates, photographs and postcards, and the blueprints of the 1917 Montrose School which he designed.

Custodial history

The records were donated to the Grande Prairie Public Library with Mr. Spencer's book collection in 1952. In 2008, GPPL passed them on to South Peace Regional Archives.

Editor's note: *Angela White's grandmother was a cousin to Charles Spencer and she corresponded with him. Some of her letters are in the archives and make up part of the Charles Spencer fonds. We made contact with Angela White through the Surname List at Northamptonshire Genuki. Genuki is a place that should not be overlooked if your genealogy takes you to the United Kingdom and Ireland. Genuki is found at <http://www.genuki.org.uk/>.*