

My most unusual ancestor – Uncle Jim alias Snowy PARTRIDGE

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Our whole family is unusual, so, where to start? I have chosen ‘Snowy PARTRIDGE’ aka ‘Uncle Jim’.

He was the man who wasn’t born¹; whose daughter had another man named as father on her birth certificate²; who married, but not to the mother of his child³, and whose wife was never mentioned again either officially or unofficially; whose death certificate states that he died single and without issue⁴; who was known only by the names ‘Snowy Partridge’ or ‘Uncle Jim’⁵; who was an itinerant labourer who drank to excess⁶; who nevertheless left enough clues to be identified over a hundred years after his birth. Finally, the man who I now feel I can claim as my maternal grandfather.

As a child I had an early memory of having heard of an ‘Uncle Jim’, and of once asking my grandmother who he was. I don’t remember her answer, but obviously she didn’t give me the accurate one.

What we knew about my mother’s early life was that she had been born in Broken Hill in March 1908 and grown up in Adelaide, and that her father was German, and died when she was twelve, after which she became the main emotional and at times financial support of her mother and two younger sisters, as they grew up in extreme poverty.

We didn’t know much more for several decades, until a family tree surfaced among family papers prepared by solicitors tracing possible heirs to a relative’s estate.⁷

From this, we learnt that Nana and her German husband had married only six weeks before my mother was born. My sister and I both had no hesitation in expressing the opinion that although his name was on the birth certificate, we didn’t think he was the biological father. My mother from baby photos looked quite different from her younger brother and sister, and we had even wondered about this previously.

By this time I was actively researching family history, and had been taught to trust certificates over family stories, but knowing who the legal father was did not for me equate to biological father. But we had no name for other possibilities, and wondered, but nothing more could be done.

Then, soon after our mother died in 1988, our aunt and uncle contacted us in the interests of genealogical accuracy to confirm what we had long suspected.

Amazingly, beyond our expectations, they had a name, of sorts. They were sure, and had been since their youth, without ever talking about it, that the ‘Uncle Jim’ who I remembered hearing of as a child, was actually the unacknowledged father of their older sister. His name was ‘Snowy PARTRIDGE’, but he told them to call him Uncle Jim. Nana had met him in Broken Hill where she was working, and she had frequently told a story about Jim suddenly vanishing, without including the reason why. After Nana’s husband died, Uncle Jim had intermittently turned up in the family’s life, and it was my aunt’s and uncle’s memories of these occasional contacts that provided more clues to research.

My aunt’s memory was that Snowy’s visits began about three years after their father had died, but were brief and few and far between. She recounted a story of Uncle Jim taking the children to the races one day, where he introduced them to a friend. She did not hear how he introduced my mother, but he then introduced my aunt as ‘her half-sister’. She thinks that after she asked her mother what this meant, the visits from Uncle Jim were stopped. She remembered that their mother had later told them that after her marriage, she had anxiously watched the papers every day during World War I to see if Snowy had been killed.

¹ No birth registration can be found, in spite of searching indexes and the original district registers

² NSW birth certificate Reg no. 12331/1908, District Broken Hill

³ Marriage to Jane Ward, widow, at res of Mrs Powardy, Brompton Park, 16 Oct 1909; no further reference to her has been found

⁴ WA death certificate no. 82, 1938

⁵ Information from family

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Correspondence from Olsson Lowrie & Co., Solicitors, 10 December 1973

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My uncle further remembered that into his early twenties he had continued to keep in touch with Snowy, after Snowy had stopped visiting them. He had visited him in the 'Rehab' hospital when he (my uncle) was about nineteen, in the early 1930s. Snowy was hospitalised because of Bright's Disease, but my uncle also noted that he had a deformed left hand, with an amputated finger. My uncle also revealed that Snowy 'drank all the time but never staggered, just got quiet.' During a hospital visit, Snowy had said, 'I've lived hard, and I'll die hard.'

Snowy had told him that after the War he had worked as a railway ganger, and was very proud of having been in charge of building the spur line to Iron Baron, near Whyalla, BHP's port in South Australia.

When my uncle went looking for Snowy a few years later, one of his friends told him that 'Snowy had died in the West.'

Aware that family myths are often just that, I made notes of what they 'remembered', and set about trying to find someone who matched these criteria, to provide documented confirmation.

We had many clues by now, and it seemed just a matter of searching for a James PARTRIDGE of about the right age, who had been in Broken Hill in 1907, and South Australia, had fought in the First World War, worked on the railways as a labourer and ganger, and died in the West ... though did this mean west coast of South Australia or Western Australia? How hard could it be?

Very hard, unfortunately! After many years of following the then usual methods of research⁸, I knew a great deal about many James PARTRIDGES, but nothing to say which, if any, was the one I was looking for. I gave up.

The subsequent release of digital indexes to the WWI army records provided me with new incentive to search again, and all James PARTRIDGES were re-considered, with non seeming certain enough to request the record. I thought that a breakthrough had come when the records themselves were digitised and freely available. But again, *no* James PARTRIDGE matched the information from my uncle.

More searches, for *any* PARTRIDGE enlisting in South Australia and in the right age group and place to have fathered a child in 1907. There at last was someone: *George* PARTRIDGE!⁹ I had previously ignored the information that there was an E George Partridge employed in the BHP mine in Broken Hill in 1907 and 1908¹⁰. This now looked very promising!

George's attestation papers show that he enlisted on 3 August 1915, occupation Labourer, aged 35 years 2 months, giving him a supposed birth date of about May or June 1880, and his next of kin was given as his stepbrother, Francis Kenneth POWARDY of Coglin Street, Brompton Park. And, among the record of his service was the information that on the Western Front he had received a gunshot wound to his left wrist and thigh. (Several punishments for being AWOL after leave also feature in his army records).

He was returned to Australia as a convalescent, and there was a brief note of his receiving a pension on discharge, and a scribbled note: '12-5-38, died after discharge', a date that fits with my uncle's memory. A search of Western Australian deaths confirmed that this George had indeed 'died in the West', with his death certificate stating that he was a railway ganger, aged 57 years, had died of Nephritis and Pulmonary Tuberculosis, and was born in Kapunda, South Australia.

⁸ This included searching shipping lists, birth, marriage and death indexes in New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, contacting the Army Records Office who could not help because we could not provide the required information (this was pre-internet days), writing to family history societies in Broken Hill and Whyalla, asking for information from the *West Australian* newspaper, looking for railway records, etc.

⁹ NAA: B2455, Partridge George

¹⁰ Letter from Broken Hill Historical Society, 2 June 1992

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Then came an unexpected real breakthrough. In the National Archives index there was another entry listed only as 'Partridge George, born 24 May 1881'¹¹. This proved to be the personal case file of his application for a War Pension, containing 33 pages of precise military, medical and employment records (from 1918 to 1932) detailing George's dealings with the Repat in an attempt to get a full pension.

So here was proof that he had been involved with the Repat and Pension system, also as my uncle remembered!

The file confirmed that he had been a patient in the Keswick Repatriation Hospital; he had an injured left wrist, with an amputated ring finger; he had Nephritis, aka Bright's Disease; he had been a labourer, and employed by SA Railways; and had been employed by BHP in Whyalla as a railway ganger, i.e. overseer of a gang of labourers.

There was little doubt now that George was Snowy/Uncle Jim and my biological grandfather, so who exactly was he, and who was his family? My ancestral search could start now!

George had given a stepbrother, Francis POWARDY, as his next of kin. Armed with this knowledge it was easy to find a marriage of a Hannah Ellerby PARTRIDGE to Ramsam POWARDY, son of Nhyan POWARDY, when George would have been about five years old.

We already knew from George's attestation papers that he had been born in Kapunda, South Australia, so it should have been straightforward to find his birth registration. Again, it wasn't. Even a search of the original registers still kept in Kapunda did not produce a George PARTRIDGE. It did, however, produce a big sister for him. Hannah Ellerby PARTRIDGE had had a daughter, Ethel May, to a James JAMES, watchmaker, in 1876¹². George may never have known this, as research shows that she was brought up by older childless neighbours who were named as her parents at her marriage, although she had retained the Partridge name¹³.

The South Australian birth indexes hinted at a possible reason for Hannah not registering George's birth: in July 1880 there was a baby born to another woman for whom James JAMES, watchmaker, was documented as father¹⁴. What we can presume is that Hannah did raise her second child herself, as he appears to have been accepted as one of Ramsam POWARDY's sons¹⁵.

And what of Ramsam himself? What little is known adds another unusual new dimension to the story. According to his death certificate, Ramsam had been born in Madras, India and had come to South Australia when he was fifteen. The most likely explanation is that he was one of the 'Afghans' brought out as camel handlers with the camels brought to South Australia, and used for transport for explorers and traders in the outback. By the time of his death he was a cane worker¹⁶.

It is surmised that Snowy's stepfather and stepbrothers would have been much darker skinned than he was¹⁷, and this possibly is the origin of his nickname, especially as his hair colour is given as brown in his army records, and my aunt puzzled about his being called Snowy, as 'his hair wasn't that fair, more tobacco coloured.'

George's death certificate, with information presumably gained from medical origins¹⁸, is somewhat poignant. I feel that we his descendants probably know more than he did about his origins. His parents' names

¹¹ NAA: A2433: PARTRIDGE George, born 24 May 1881 (other sources suggest the birth date as 24 May 1880)

¹² Kapunda District Registers, Births, 4 363. The informant for the registration was Hannah's sister

¹³ Marriage certificate, 2 May 1896, Dist Nai 187/613

¹⁴ SA Birth index, 7 July 1880, Dist Kap, Book 244, p492

¹⁵ Death certificate 16 August 1909, 5 male children mentioned; there were 4 POWARDY sons

¹⁶ SA Death certificate, 16 August 1909, Dist Hin Book 342 p452

¹⁷ Memories from POWARDY family members

¹⁸ At the time of his death he was resident in the TB sanatorium in Perth

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are given as John PARTRIDGE, blacksmith, and Hannah JAMES, and that is very possibly what he grew up believing.

In fact John PARTRIDGE was Hannah's father¹⁹, and it was George's father who was presumably the JAMES. (And was Jim the name that Hannah called him, in unofficial acknowledgement of his father?) All official documents agree that George was born in Kapunda ... except a birth certificate, of course.

As a bonus, Hannah's second name of Ellerby provided the clues for tracing her through a long line of North Yorkshire farmers who had their own very interesting stories. Hannah's mother had married a seaman from Middlesex named John PARTRIDGE who brought the family to South Australia. And John's London family on his mother's side can be documented back through the plague and the Great Fire to Elizabethan times.

While we have other unusual ancestors, George stands out, in that his life seems to have been so anonymous and secretive, and he lived on the fringes of 'respectable' society²⁰, but his story and its link between the present and the past show the unique value of every life.

¹⁹ He had moved to Footscray, Victoria when George was a baby, according to his death certificate

²⁰ Both my aunt and uncle stressed that Snowy was a 'great reader' and my aunt further described him as 'not like us, but not common, just not well educated!'