

The Story of Frederick John Kempster 13 Apr 1889 - 9 Apr 1918

by James Kempster, his great-nephew

Frederick Kempster was born to Joseph and Jane Kempster on 13 April 1889 in the Bayswater district of London England. His ancestors had lived in the farming area surrounding Wingrave, Buckinghamshire since the 17th century working as agricultural labourers, but Joseph moved his family to London where he found employment with The Aylesbury Dairy Company in 1870. Their family grew over the years to include sons and daughters Emily (1869), William (1872), Ruth (1874), Joseph (1880), Susan (1886), Frederick (1889), and finally my grandfather George (1895).

Disaster struck the family in 1897, when on Christmas day Joseph died of asthma and bronchitis at the age of 50. The insurance money that Jane received was spent on funeral costs, and soon she and her three youngest children were living in a single room in Islington. She tried to earn a living doing housework and laundry, but she couldn't earn enough and soon fell behind in the rent and was evicted. She applied for help at Barnardo's Commercial Street Shelter, and to enable her to get a job in domestic service, the two younger boys were placed in the care of Barnardo's, while Susan was adopted by her older sister Emily and her husband and went to live with them in Eastbourne. Frederick would not live with family again until he was an adult.

On 10 September 1898, George and Frederick went to Barnardo's receiving house in Stepney. On 23 March 1899, the 10 year old Frederick sailed to Canada aboard the SS Scotsman arriving at St. John on 3 April 1899. His younger brother George remained in England until 11 October 1906, when he too sailed to Canada to begin a new life. In October 1899 Frederick was placed with a Mr. Allan in Manitoba Canada, where he was to work as a farm labourer to earn his keep. Barnardo's felt that life on a farm in Canada learning agricultural skills was much better than the life these destitute children faced on the streets of London with no one to guide and support them. In December 1901 Frederick had moved to a Mr. Munro in Manitoba. He returned to England on 12 November 1904 aboard the SS Canada because he was unfit for farm work due to weak condition of the knees caused by congenital weakness and lengthening of the internal lateral ligaments of the knee joint and growth at the upper end of the tibia. This was the onset of the uncontrolled growth that would lead to his life as a "giant".

Once back in England he had an operation at Her Majesty's Hospital in Stepney which was Barnardo's own hospital for children, and on 7 April 1905 at age 16 he was able to return to work at Barnardo's Youth Labour House at Commercial Road, East London where he worked as a basket maker. In 1911, at age 22, he was living at their Boy's Garden City at Woodford Bridge, Essex. Then in June of 1911 he got a job with Astley and Company's American Circus at Chigwell. Life with the circus involves much travelling, but Frederick would live near his older sisters Ruth and Susan whenever he was in England until the end of his short life. Susan Woods and their mother Jane Kempster lived at Tendring in Essex. Frederick lived for a time at Landmere near Thorpe-le-Soken. Publicity photographs taken in front of the King's Head pub there prove that Frederick spent time in that area. A story tells that he lived in a cottage partly constructed from an upturned boat. No picture has (yet) been found that would support this story.

Frederick's connection with Wiltshire begins when shortly before 1913 his sister Ruth, now Ruth Rayner, and her family move first to Bath, (where James worked as a gardener), (records show daughter Edith was born in Bath in 1913), and then to Worton before 1916 (records show daughter Ruth was born in Melksham in 1918). The Rayners lived at "The Lodge" a house on the main street of Worton now known as the "Grange Lodge". It is reported that the "Rose and Crown" pub in Worton has a photograph of Frederick from one of his early tours in Germany.

When The Great War (World War I as it was later known) began in September 1914, Frederick was on tour in Germany with the circus. Postcards printed in German and French showing Frederick and his stage name "Teddy Bobs" can be found even today. It was only in December of that year that British citizens in Germany were placed under arrest and put in detention camps. Frederick's health was never strong, and after only two weeks he had to be hospitalized. He remained in hospital until his release could be arranged by the American ambassador in Germany. The United States had not yet declared war on Germany, so other countries requested their aid in cases such as this. Frederick was examined by a Dr. Gigon at a hospital in Basle, Switzerland in 1916. The resulting report contains detailed measurements and records of his condition at the time. Germany and Great Britain had an agreement concerning trading prisoners who were severely hurt. Prisoners who qualified were sent to Switzerland where they were examined before being sent home. Sometime in late 1916, Frederick arrived back in England, and spent a period in hospital recovering. At this time he met his younger

brother, my grandfather George who had joined the Canadian Mounted Rifles and been seriously wounded in the fighting in Europe. Grandpa said that Frederick searched the wards to find him by looking in through the transom lights above the doors. A New Zealand newspaper carried a brief story that related that on his first morning in a hospital ward Frederick accidentally ate the food that was to have been shared by all those in the ward, thinking it was his personal breakfast. Big men need big breakfasts.

On being released from hospital, he went to convalesce at the home of his sister Ruth Rayner who now owned and operated "The Barge Inn" on the Kennet & Avon canal at Seend Cleeve. Again, brief reports about Frederick found their way to newspapers around the world. A New Zealand paper reported that army recruitment officers were very unsure of what to do when they found the 8 foot pub keeper in Wiltshire. They must have decided he was not soldier material, for he stayed at his inn. When his health was sufficiently improved, he again went on the road to exhibit himself at town fairs in the north of England. While in Blackburn in 1918, he developed pneumonia and died. The Blackburn website contains full details of this event, so anyone interested in Frederick's last days can read about it there. He was buried in the Blackburn Cemetery.

His obituary read " In a coffin 9 feet long, Frederick Kempster was buried in a 10-foot grave at Blackburn. Kempster, whose health had been ruined by a long internment in Germany, was 8ft. 4in in height and 29 years of age. The coffin had to be removed through the window of the hotel where he had been staying. "

Frederick's height is to this day a topic of hot debate among those interested in giants. All men exhibiting themselves for a living exaggerated their height to gain attention. Although many photographs of Frederick exist, most are undated, and accurate calculations of his height are difficult.

It seems that Frederick is remembered by most of the villages and towns in which he spent a part of his short life, and is claimed as a local celebrity by each of them. Thus he is sometimes called "The Essex Giant", "The Avebury Giant", "The Worton Giant", "The Seend Giant", or "The Blackburn Giant" .

A large collection of photographs, newspaper articles and medical reports can be viewed at the website www.thetallestman.com . Just click on Frederick's name in the left column to find his entry on the site.

If any readers of this site have photographs of Frederick or other descendants of the Rayner family that they would be willing to share, please contact me through Teresa Lewis via the Contact an OPC link on the front page. I would particularly like to find a picture of Frederick's sister Ruth Kempster Rayner, or his parents Joseph and Jane Kempster.