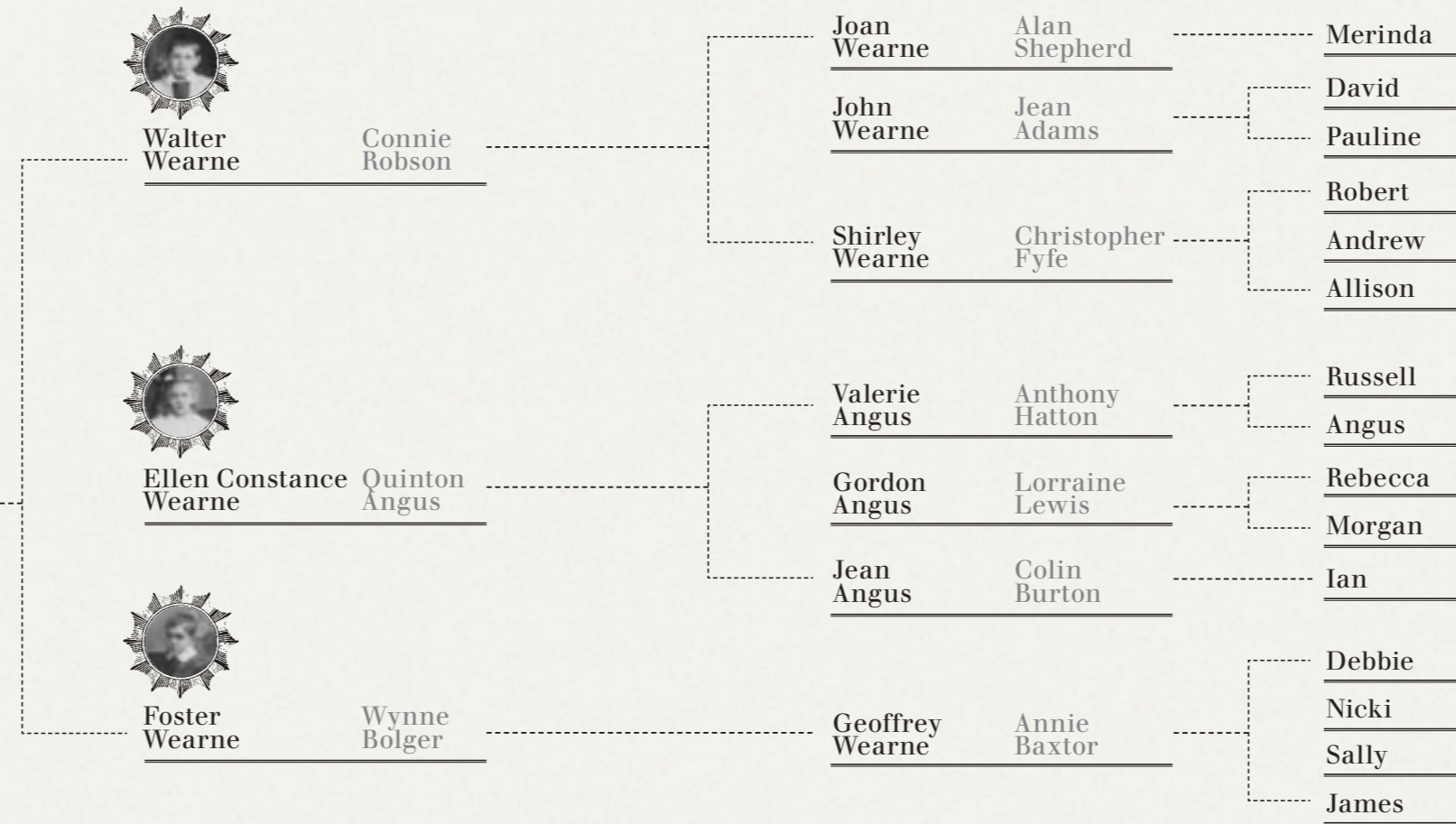


Charlie's Angels STORY 14



Ella Dorothy Wearne

A hundred years on and the Wearne clan have remained in Perth. Although they now do not have any interest in the company, having sold all their shares, their links with Singapore remain through association, memories and affection for the company their ancestors founded.

Most of the family are Charlie's descendants through his three children Walter, Foster and Connie. Currently, there are seven grandchildren, 15 great grandchildren and 17 great-great grandchildren.

Theo had only one daughter, Ella Dorothy, who died in childhood. When a cemetery in Singapore was shut and the graves exhumed, the family had her ashes brought back to Perth for a quiet re-burial in a Fremantle cemetery, where Charlie, other family members and some former Wearne Brothers employees are also buried.

In a restaurant on the banks of the Swan River – a small gathering of family members met for lunch. Present was Charlie's grandson, John, whom everyone says looks like Charlie and has his temperament and mannerisms. John is quiet, gentle, gracious and has a genial smile. He is known for his generosity and good nature. But there are more similarities. John is

an engineer like his grandfather, loves sailing and fishing and does not get seasick easily even in rough weather. Charlie for all his good nature could not abide with anyone who was seasick on a ship.

John remembers happy childhood days spent at Charlie's house in Mandurah. His grandpa taught him fishing on the *Selamat* and they "caught lots of big fish". He had great regard for the old man. "If he had said John, jump, I would have jumped." He also recalls how, during the war years, Charlie would sit in a corner listening to the news on the radio. Charlie died a year before the war ended and never got to see his sons after they were interned by the Japanese as prisoners of war.

John's father, Walter, was based in Singapore throughout John's youth and John and his sisters Shirley (who died in 1996) and Joan (who now lives on the Australian east coast) did not see much of him. Even when Walter was in Perth on holiday, John remembers him being anxious to return to Singapore. The siblings used to make the seven-day sea voyage, often on rough seas, from Perth to Singapore during school holidays. After the war, John's mother settled in Perth, their parents divorced and Walter remarried. Walter returned to Perth in 1974

for an operation but died without regaining consciousness.

Charlie's other grandson is Geoff, Foster's only child and John's first cousin. Everyone says Geoff is like his uncle Walter – jovial, fun and with a ready joke. He is a Cambridge-educated doctor, now retired and doing volunteer work. He does not recall his grandfather at all, as he was very young when his grandfather passed away. He was also in boarding school in Australia and used to make those long sea journeys to Singapore to see his parents, Foster and Wynne.

Geoff's memories of Singapore are somewhat warm and fuzzy, holidays in the big bungalows at Cornwall Gardens, houses with arches and long driveways, his Chinese *amah* (housemaid), shopping at Cold Storage, swimming, parties and the Tanglin Club.

He wishes he had asked his parents more questions. "I remember some things but not the details. Dad was always quiet. Mum did most of the talking and I gathered it was quite a pampered existence for women then. I wasn't very interested in things then, but now, there's so much I want to know. Ah well!"

People have told him about how good his father Foster was to other POWs during the war, always helping them, giving them food. "It is nice

to have someone say that." One incident he was related regarded how Foster managed to lay his hands on an egg and wanting to share with the others, saved it for a special occasion. When he finally broke it open, there was a terrible smell as the egg had gone rotten.

When his father returned to Perth to recuperate after the war, Geoff says: "I saw this small yellow man in a big overcoat stepping off the plane and asked mum if that was him. She said: 'I think it is'. He was seven stone and an anti-malarial drug had turned his skin bright yellow."

When Foster retired at 55, he returned to Perth and spent his retirement "playing bridge with mum and me and gardening, which was his special hobby. But by that time, I was already about to go off to college." Foster died at 80.

John married Jean, a kindergarten teacher whose father was a missionary in Penang. She was born in Singapore and spent much of her childhood in Penang and in Singapore. They met in Singapore and have been married for 46 years and have two children; David, a businessman and Pauline, a business development manager with a financial consultancy. Jean too used to make the sea voyages and like the others recalls that although it was awful and choppy, it was fun

sometimes as the kids used to hide in the lifeboats and played games on deck.

Geoff the doctor, married Annie, a British nurse, in London. They have four children, three girls in the medical line and a son, James, who is in banking. Shirley is survived by her husband Christopher Fyfe, author of *Wheels in Malaya – The Wearne Brothers and Their Company* and their three children; Andrew, a surveyor in Brisbane, Robert a photographer and Allison, a librarian, both living in Perth.

Charlie's daughter Connie Angus had three children; her daughter Valerie Lefebre, lives in Wyoming and has two sons in Australia whom she visits regularly. Gordon Angus lives in Perth and has a son and a daughter and Jean lives in Sydney and has one son. Joan's daughter, Merinda, now lives in Narooma in New South Wales.

Some things have changed although Charlie's spirit, it would appear, is very much alive in his descendants. The holiday house in Mandurah was donated to charity and is now a nursing home. Theo's house too was donated to the church.

All the family's shares in Wearnes were sold on the advice of a relative who said they needed to get out of Singapore and diversify.

Now the fourth generation of the family, who are mostly professionals in their 30s, led by

David and James, are attempting a reconnection with the company through their own investment in a high-tech Radio Frequency Identification company in Australia. James is particularly keen to get in touch with his roots. When he lived in Fremantle, he used to visit Foster's and Charlie's graves and put flowers there, says mum Annie.

Allison and Pauline are proud of their association with the company and Singapore and love all things Asian as a result of their connection. "My grandma and ma brought the cuisine down. My grandma was not like the other memsahibs. She used to go into the kitchen and learn how to cook. So we grew up on curries, stir-fries, rice and noodles and were using chopsticks long before our friends," says Allison.

It was the same for Pauline because of her parents' long association with Penang and Singapore. She says her generation does not want to lose the connection with their heritage. "It's not just about the money."

Allison says the family has kept alive Charlie's generous spirit by anonymously making huge donations of money to various charities. "Like aunt Joan always says, we have a responsibility. We are caretakers of a legacy, of someone's vision 100 years ago."