

Memories on a Monday: The Story Behind the Gadget

Monday 27 April 2020

Welcome to Memories on a Monday: The Story Behind the Gadget - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

With many of us doing more home-cooking and baking whilst we stay at home, we thought we would look at some of the gadgets that have helped us in preparing our meals in the past (and maybe some people still use them?). We will also be revealing how our particular focus on what became an everyday food gadget made in Tottenham connects with some remarkable women in Muswell Hill and the Votes for Women campaign in the years leading up to 1918....

So, here's our gadget that might be familiar.



Spong bean slicer, 1930s. From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

It's a bean slicer. This is [how it works](#). Did your family have one?

This bean slicer along with food mincers, knife grinders, coffee grinders, trivets and many, many other gadgets besides were all made by Spong & Co Ltd, operating from 1856 and founded by James Osborn Spong when he was only 16 years old. Spong & Co later had a factory in South Tottenham at Woodville Grove from 1925. The son of James Osborn (also called James) had moved to Tottenham in 1923 to Braemar Road. Up until then, the main base was in Holborn. Spong & Co's business went from strength to strength. The unusual name was one to remember, an Ad maker's dream ('*You can't go wrong with a Spong*' said the adverts in the 1950s), making it a brand name still known to many people today.



SPONG & COMPANY LIMITED

27, BRAEMAR ROAD & WOODVILLE GROVE,
SOUTH TOTTENHAM, LONDON, N.15.

DOMESTIC  UTILITIES



TELEPHONE : TOTTENHAM 1272.

TELEGRAMS : SPONGOLIA SOUTHTOT LONDON.

ESTABLISHED 1856.

Dear Sir,

Now that "Summer Time" has gone small portable Gas Fires are selling well.

Enclosed are details of well designed and beautifully finished models. They are efficient; they burn little gas; and they are very reasonably priced. The selling prices are given in the enclosed sheets. They are subject to a trade discount of 33%.

Put a few in stock and let us help you to sell them. A distribution now of the leaflet, bearing your name and address, will bring customers into your shop for the models shown.

Both the leaflet, in good numbers, and an attractive showcard are free with all orders.

They will start your sales at once.

Sincerely yours,
P.P. SPONG & CO. LTD.

P.S. The "A-Justit" Trivet is a good selling cold weather line, too.

ORDER FORM

Delivery.
Free on orders of
£5 and upwards.

DOMESTIC SPONG UTILITIES

Terms.
2½% strict
monthly a/c

Please accept this as an official order for the following :—

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| GAS FIRES | | |
| No. 444a _____ Black] _____ Grey] | No. 575 _____ Grey] _____ Green] | |
| No. 500 _____ Black] _____ Grey] | _____ Brown] _____ Maroon] | |
| _____ Green] _____ Brown] _____ Maroon] | No. 777 _____ Black] | |
| No. 444 _____ Black] _____ Grey] | _____ Grey] _____ Green] | |
| | _____ Brown] _____ Maroon] | |
| "OCTAGON" KNIFE SHARPENERS | The "A-JUSTIT" Trivet Black _____ dz. | |
| _____ doz. | Ox. Copper _____ dz. Ox. Silver _____ dz. | |
| | KNIFE CLEANERS | |
| FOOD CHOPPERS | "Red Seal" _____ dz. "Great Seal" _____ dz. | |
| No. 90 _____ doz. No. 80 _____ doz. | | |
| No. 91 _____ " No. 81 _____ " | | |
| No. 92 _____ " No. 82 _____ " | | |
| No. 98 _____ doz. No. 5 _____ doz. | | |
| No. 99 _____ " No. 24 _____ " | | |
| 'No Name' 1 _____ doz. 'No Name' 2 _____ doz. | | |
| | Name _____ | |
| | Address _____ | |

Spong documents, 1930s. From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

James Osborn Spong (1839 - 1925) - was a prolific inventor. He patented and manufactured the famous Spong food mincer and bean slicer. The range of Spong labour-saving gadgets and utensils graced many Victorian and Edwardian households, with more and more gadgets coming onto the market (well into the 20th century), including a 'Portable Shampoo' in 1890 – a forerunner of the shower! Spong revolutionised the domestic economy amongst the emerging middle-class families, who were unable to afford numerous household servants like the upper classes. All household chores, often in the kitchen – and mostly carried out by women - were laborious, time-consuming and done by hand. A Spong device became an obligatory piece of kitchenware until the development of electrical equipment. You can read the history of the company, with its long list of gadgets and equipment [here](#).

The Spong family lived in Princes Avenue in Muswell Hill from 1906 to 1909.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

James and his wife Frances had seven children, including five daughters - Minnie Frances, Annea, Florence, Dora and Irene. They enjoyed a progressive liberal upbringing and education. From a comfortably well-off family, they each earned their own living. Minnie Frances was a teacher, Annea a portrait artist of some repute, Florence was a weaver, "artistic dress maker" and lace-maker, Dora trained as a sanitary inspector and midwife in Tottenham, and Irene became a soprano singer.

The Spong fortunes soared with the highly successful sales of the Spong meat mincer and – later - a sausage-making machine. The story passed down the family suggests this surge in sales happened to coincide with the conversion of all the Spong women to vegetarianism, pacifism and their joining of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1908. The Spong family divided their household in two – those meat-eating or those vegetarian – with the women grinding nuts in their own Spong mincer.

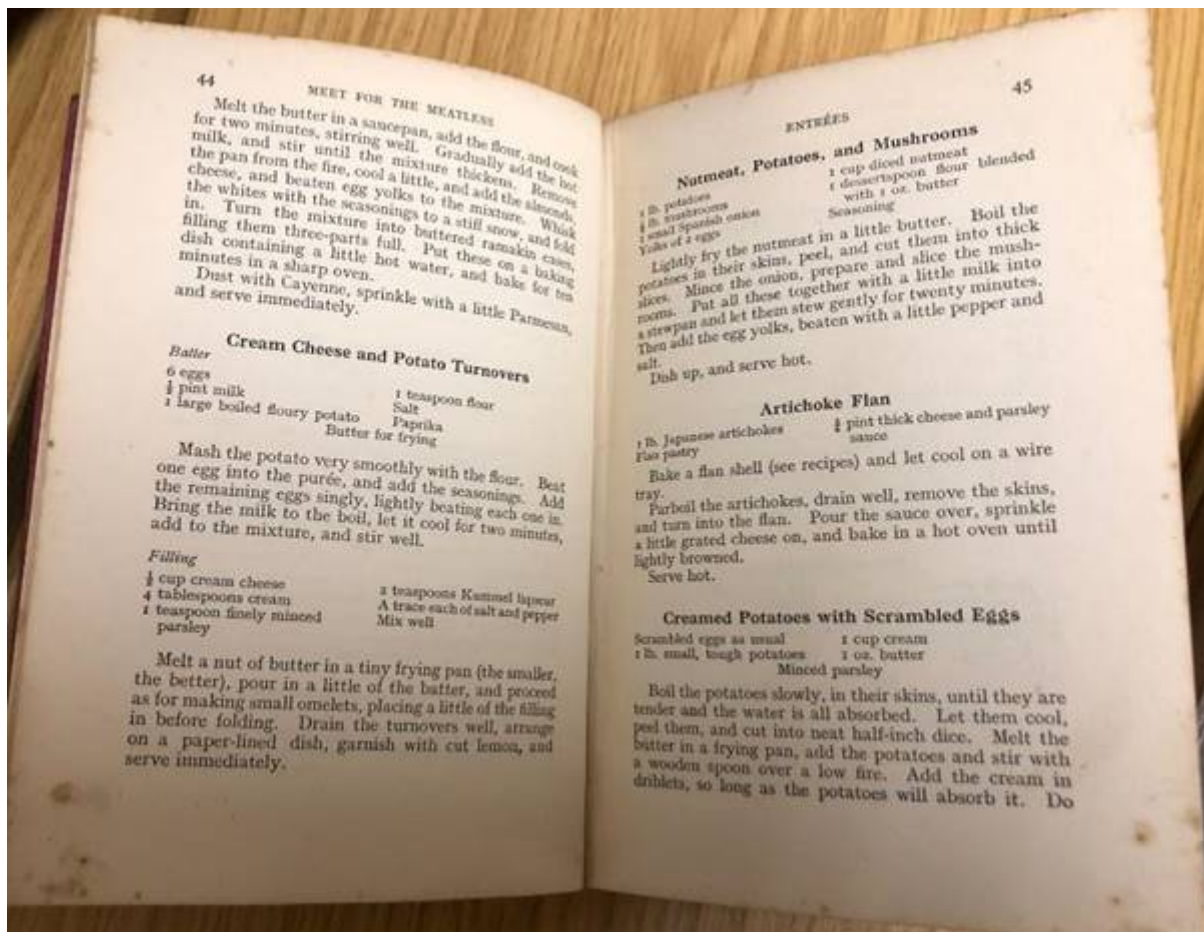
Unfortunately, James Spong had affectionately named a range of Spong meat mincers 'The Minnie', after his eldest daughter. On becoming a vegetarian, the principled Minnie announced she preferred to be known as Frances from then on.

This photograph shows one of the Spong family's mincers, which they used for grinding nuts for meals. It was well used and the descendants of Dora Spong (who still live in Muswell Hill today) even keep the little wooden wedge used (in the photograph) that was placed between the table and the clamp on the mincer to stop any marks on the wood.



Courtesy the Spong family

Here are some recipes taken from Florence's vegetarian cookery book '*Meet for the Meatless*', with nutmeat making an appearance.



Courtesy the Spong family

The Spong Sisters

Joining the WSPU in 1908 to fight for the vote, the Spong sisters were a remarkable group of women. All the Spong women attended WSPU demonstrations. Three sisters were imprisoned in Holloway for their activism – Dora, Florence and Irene. Their names are recorded on [The Roll of Honour of Suffragette Prisoners 1905-1914 in The National Archives](#). In the 1911 Census, with the exception of Annea, none of the women's names are recorded. Like

other women around the country, and in our local area, this was a silent protest for the votes for women campaign.

Dora Spong (1879-1969)

Dora Spong was arrested a total of five times. She was the first of the sisters to be jailed for obstruction in June 1908. Whilst Dora was in prison, Annea's portrait of Dora was hanging on the walls of the Royal Academy! A contemporary photograph shows [*Dora holding the Votes for Women newspaper in the protest*](#) that caused her to be jailed. In the issue of 18 June 1908, there was this dedication:

"The Finsbury Branch of the Independent Labour Party have written to Miss Dora Spong, ... and now a prisoner in Holloway, to express their admiration of the courage and determination displayed in submitting to the onus of the prison cell in the women's cause. They send hearty greetings across the prison wall."

Following other arrests, Dora was imprisoned a second time (under the name of Mrs Dora Beedham this time - two years earlier she had married Ralph Beedham, an engraver, sympathetic to all the same ideals). Her sentence was two months with hard labour after taking part in the WSPU window-smashing campaign in March 1912. Dora's WSPU certificate signed by Emmeline Pankhurst survives, lovingly restored by her family, commemorating Dora's dedication to the cause "ever ready to obey the call of duty".



Dora was a sanitary inspector and midwife in Tottenham, c.1905 - 1910
Courtesy and © The Spong family

Frances, Irene and Annea

Frances (Minnie, 1869 -1954), was a committed vegetarian and fruit and vegetable grower, growing enough to support the Spong food consumption as well as supplying an open-air vegetable market. Although Frances was also

involved in the women's Suffragette movement she was not as active as her other sisters. Like her sisters, **Irene (1882-1960)** served time in Holloway Prison. Outside prison, she gave concerts supporting the campaign, and advertised in the *Votes for Women* as a singing teacher. It is said fledgling WSPU speakers could learn from Irene how to project their voices over a restless audience.

Annea (1870-1957), was an accomplished artist, like numerous WSPU campaigners. But it was whilst taking dancing classes with Isadora Duncan's brother, that she became a 'physical culture' expert. Her exercises, designed to benefit body and mind, were performed and shared, accompanied musically by Irene. Annea later started the Spong Rhythmic Dancing, later known as Natural Movement Dancing.



Photographs of the Spong sisters. Courtesy and © The Spong family

Florence Spong (1873-1944)

Dora and Florence were the most militant of the sisters. Charged with stone-throwing at the WSPU deputation of 29 June 1909, Florence was sentenced to a

month's imprisonment. She went on hunger strike. Forcibly fed in prison, we can only imagine the horrific conditions and terrible pain and suffering from this dangerous procedure. This did not stop Florence protesting again at how suffragettes were treated, in Parliament Square on '[Black Friday](#)', [November 1910](#). This got her another two months' imprisonment. Whilst in Holloway, Florence embroidered her signature on the WSPU banner made by fellow prisoners (the banner is displayed at the Museum of London – you can see the banner in this online article [here](#)).

A delightful miniature portrait painting by Annea of Florence survives. The family story handed down says whilst sitting for a portrait painted by Annea, Vezey Strong (an Alderman of the City of London) fell in love with Florence. They became engaged. But the romance ended abruptly because Vezey was the magistrate that Florence was called to appear before, following her arrest.



Miss Florence Spong.
I have come out of Holloway feeling more keenly than ever that we must win the vote. We must win it as soon as possible. It is only the key to open the door behind which are numberless matters waiting for our united efforts to put right. Holloway seems to be a kind of whirlpool which drags ruthlessly, remorselessly, old women and young girls down into its depths, and drags the heart out of them. I found that the solitude and the bad air were the worst evils. These things seemed to me the most terrible. One was shut up in a badly-ventilated cell for 22 hours out of the 24.

Portrait of Florence by her sister Annea, along with a news-clipping showing what Florence had said on her release from Holloway. © The Spong family

Florence never married. Two of her sisters were also unmarried. By the [1918 Representation of the People Act](#) – which gave only 'women of property over the age of 30' the right to vote – James Spong ensured his three unmarried suffragette daughters were property owners. Not many families could have done

this of course. For these women at least, they could now comply with the new regulations, allowing them to vote for the first time.

We are very grateful to the Spong family in Muswell Hill for coming forward with their extraordinary story in 2018 about these amazing women in their family. For those of you who remember, we commemorated the centenary of (some) women getting the vote in 1918 with an exhibition at Bruce Castle in 2018, working with [Collective Exchange](#). We asked local women and politicians today to reflect on the Votes for Women campaign and to add their contributions to the exhibition. The Spong family kindly lent their treasured objects and photographs for our exhibition, some of which are shown in this post.

We uncovered other stories as well of suffragettes from Haringey for that exhibition - and we are still researching some more. We would have updated our history of local women and the Campaign for Votes for Women on 18 March 2020 at a special event organised for Women's History Month (WHM) at the Green Rooms in Wood Green. It was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the start of the [Women's Liberation Movement](#). Although that WHM event could not happen, we can at least tell here the incredible story of local suffragettes who, earlier on in the 20th century, most certainly helped pave the way for future changes to take equalities further forward in shaping our world.

Every object tells a story – behind the Spong bean slicer or food mincer on display in the museum, we have too an important invention and a significant industrial heritage of a company, not only to our area, but nationally. Maybe you can tell us some local stories that we can add to our collections about the Spong company? Did you or someone you know work there? Did your family use Spong gadgets at home? We would love to hear your memories.

Stay safe, stay well and stay indoors.

And in advance of tomorrow – Tuesday 28 April - The Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives will be leading a minute's silence at 11am. The minute's silence will be held on International Workers' Memorial Day. It will allow the nation to pay respect to those whose work involved caring, saving lives, and keeping key services running and the rest of the country safe, while showing support for families who have lost a loved one.

Let us remember, reflect and observe the silence.

Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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