

Legendary Lawman:: Johannes F. Spreen

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Legendary Lawman:

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This book is dedicated to Elizabeth Diane Spreen, also known as “Princess Running Late,” who urged the author to write a book about her father.

Princess Running Late

[Preface :](#)

My Dad is my hero. He is an extraordinary human being who has accomplished so many amazing things in his life, and who continues at age 89 to contribute and live a fulfilling life with my wonderful stepmom Sallie.

Dad is a man of vision, integrity, courage, faith, compassion, silliness, strength, gentleness, justice, and is the best man I will ever know.

He's also “just my Dad”, in the sense that beyond all of his triumphs and accomplishments, he's always been my Dad. I have always known I was loved, protected, and safe and cherished by both my Dad and my Mom. I came from good stock and I know it deeply. I cherish my heritage, my ancestors, my immediate family of the three of us—Dad, Mom and I—that was my world, my life, and my little universe no matter what.

No, it was not easy, but it was always blessed. Dad has walked through the fire so many times, has wrestled with heartache, betrayal, death of beloved family and dear friends, political turmoil, and even self-doubt. I know because I was there!

He has also had to wrestle with me about the choices I have made in my life, which were

sometimes far less than he had hoped for me. But through my mistakes and failures, he has always been there for me, assuring me that no matter what, he loves me and will help me and still believe in me. He cherished me.

That is my foundation...my Mom and Dad are my foundation along with God, my family and friends...and my little world of three, and now Sallie as the fourth person in my little universe. She is amazing, just like Mom was. The best compliment I can give her is this: "If I couldn't have Mom for my whole life, I am glad you are here for me, too." Sallie has enriched Dad's life so much. They will be married twenty years in December. And she is such an important person, part of my life, too. My Godmother, Aunt Doris (Doris Corrigan) is also a major influence in my life, my Mom's sister. She and Sallie have become dear friends. How cool is that? Life is good.

Dad says he's not sure about God, but let me assure you, my Dad lives a more Christian life than most anyone I know! That's the funny part—he lives God's precepts, keeps His commandments, is one of God's best ambassadors on earth, and still Dad says he's not quite sure. Let me tell you a little secret. God is sure! Ha-ha!

Dad is one of God's secret weapons, fighting for justice, keeping strong in his integrity no matter what, always loving and giving and kind to those he loves, and funny and playful like a little kid, too. Dad has no idea of what I will write for my part in this book...so I get to surprise and honor him as he did for me when he dedicated his first book to me and actually wrote it as a series of letters to me.

He laughed when I cried upon receiving my autographed copy...What a legacy to me... He laughed and said, "Honey, everyone knew but you that I was writing it this way. Ha-ha.!"

My Dad is a complex person. That's what happens when you are brilliant, inspired, capable and passionate about what you believe in. He came from humble, difficult, courageous and adventurous beginnings.

Born September 28, 1919, in Osterholz-Sharmbech, Germany, to Fredrick and Meta Spreen, Johannes Fredrick Spreen came into the world unaware of the startling adventures he would experience. He had two older siblings, big brother Henry and big sister Johanna "Hanny". The funny part of this name is in German—"Johannes" means "little John." Well, my father is 6'4 ½ inches and averages 250 pounds or so in his adult years.

When he was four, the family came to America to begin a new life. He came across the water on the S.S. Seydlitz and came in through Ellis Island. His name is now engraved on the Wall of Honor there. That was one of my better birthday gifts to him. He and Sallie have visited Ellis Island and have seen his name there.

I could write Dad's life history as best I know it. However, that is what this book is about! Dad's dear friend, Diane Holloway, called me for my thoughts on Dad, his life, our life, as a family, so I'll return to that here. She also said to mention the tough stuff, too, the times when things were not fun or easy. Well, every life has pain, difficulty, trouble... Everyone walks through those things in different experiences. We all hurt deeply; we all question and challenge and rebel and forgive and hopefully, eventually find our peace and heal.

The hard part for me with Dad was he was always busy, and he was gone a lot. When I was really little, I remember there was a time I didn't see him all that much. He'd be gone before I got up and I'd be in bed before he got home. However, he did always try to make time for me whenever he could.

He taught me all the sports: baseball, football, swimming, tennis, ice skating, skiing... (remember, I'm the only kid) so I was the oldest, middle, youngest, the twin, and the boy. So I got to learn everything.

Dad was my coach and my playmate. The toughest part about being an only child is that there is no one else to blame things on.

Mom knew when Dad and I were "being bad." One of my favorite memories is as follows:

Dad likes beer and would have one or two during dinner. Sometimes he had cans of beer (poured into a pilsner glass or cold beer mug) with the metal "pop tops". Remember those? Well, one night after we finished eating, Dad rolled up a little piece of napkin into a ball and used the pop-top to "fire" it at me...Of course, he was laughing, too. Well, being his kid, I had to "shoot" back. Well, you can imagine as the "battle" continued with us laughing so hard and shooting little napkin balls across the dining room table at each other... My mom was not amused. She finally said, "I give up, you two," and left the table, while we continued until we couldn't laugh any harder. Mom was a great sport. She knew she had two kids on her hands.

My Mom. Mom was Dad's partner, and biggest support. Her belief in him was the fuel to his fire. Her constant faith and encouragement enabled him to do amazing things. She was an amazing woman in her own right. She was beautiful, intelligent, brave, loving, feisty, mischievous, elegant, and faithful beyond words. She was Dad's strength. And she would also challenge him if she felt we was wrong.

They did fight (verbally only) and that scared me. They had some "knock down drag out" fights...but they always made up, perhaps better and stronger than before. I firmly believe good, honest arguments "fights" are an essential part of a healthy relationship. You have to love someone enough to tell them the truth, to disagree, to discuss, to argue (even loudly) and to reach resolution together.

It's rare to find someone you can fight/argue with and you know will love you enough to finish it. They had a good marriage, but it was not always easy for either one of them. But they loved each other deeply, and were always faithful to each other, and to me.

I am fortunate to say I never have seen my father drunk. I only saw him "tipsy" once. That was at home, the last night as police commissioner of Detroit...one of the hardest things for him. He loved that city. He made a huge difference for the better in only 17 months. (People still remember Commissioner Spreen in a positive way.) And he wanted to do more. I remember Mom playing Dad's song, "My Way" by Frank Sinatra for him on the record player, and putting her arms around him to embrace him as he shed a few tears. It was a poignant moment. It was also one of the few times I'd ever seen my Dad cry. And Mom was there to be his strength and to comfort him with her strongest love. I will never forget that moment...and my whole life is filled with unforgettable, amazing moments because of my Dad and Mom and the people who have filled our lives with friendship and love.

It's really hard to write about Dad in a short form. I could write volumes...heartaches Dad has known...from having lost so many beloved family members and friends of the years. Joys Dad has known, too. Accomplishments too numerous to mention here. Challenges. Adventures. Struggles. Doubt. Fear. Vision. Courage. Deep love. Humor. Creativity. Strength—spiritual, mental and physical. Beauty. All of these describe things precious to Dad that have been and are hallmarks of his most amazing journey. And he's not done yet.

He has always been an amazing athlete—always from a young man as star pitcher to hundreds of

medals for the Senior Olympics. Dad always believed in the mantra “sound mind, sound body.” Dad is also a great philosopher and student of life. He has studied all of his life to learn as much as he can about how to achieve his goals. Whether it be hanging wallpaper, playing tennis, or studying to rise higher in the ranks of the New York City Police Department. Dad is a perennial student, even to this day. Always searching all new answers. Always posing new questions. He is a student of Life! And he is a great teacher as well.

Of course, he had expectations for me. But he has always made me feel loved and safe. And now he tells me how very proud he is of me...and that continues to astonish me. Dad and Mom left me some big footsteps to follow (Mom might not say she did, but let me assure you, she did!) And all I have ever wanted to do was to honor them for all they have done for me. (My first love and deepest commitment is to God, my Lord and good shepherd and Savior, next to my folks, just to be clear, then to all the rest of my family like my grandparents (both sides) and my Godmother and now Sallie, too. But to find now, at age 50, that Dad is proud of the woman I have become, well, it just doesn't get any better or deeper in my heart than that, because it's like hearing Mom say it, too. And that's all I've ever wanted; truly!

I love my Dad with all my heart and soul, and all that I am. His wisdom and example led me every day. Quotes he has shared with me over the years live in my memory and into my work. Quotes like “Nulle carborundum bastardos” which means, “Never let the bastards wear you down.” He wouldn't tell me what that translated as until I was old enough to hear it, ha ha! And another favorite, “Success is where preparation meets opportunity at the crossroads.” Another, “It's a challenge, and opportunity, and an adventure,” regarding Detroit and other new adventures. And each “Gun, shield, fountain pen, comb, wallet, key?” every day before going to work as a cop in the New York Police Department. Or this favorite tongue twister, which we still laugh over when we practice it: “A box of biscuits—a box of mixed biscuits—and a biscuit mixer.” Three times fast, of course! And the one that always makes him laugh and blush, “One smart fellow, he felt smart” “two smart fellows...three smart fellows...up to ten smart fellows” fast. You try it, and picture Dad laughing and blushing like a little kid!

Elizabeth Diane Spreen

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[Introduction](#)

I met Johannes F. Spreen in the twilight of his life when he was 84 years old. He was a colossus of 6'5", a superb tennis player, an eloquent speechmaker in the Toastmasters' Club, memory teacher and exercise guru for seniors, and a spellbinding raconteur. He could hold an audience with his dynamic personality even then. He introduced himself remarking that he had been the police commissioner of Detroit at its worst crisis and followed that by being sheriff of a Michigan county

for twelve years. He astonished me when this articulate gentleman said that he had never written a book but wanted to commence and needed a little assistance since he didn't have a computer.

I checked him out on Google. The man was famous. Politicians, press, police, and criminal justice authorities sought his opinions. Who was this person and what did he have to say, I wondered. Thus began an adventure into the intellect of undoubtedly the most brilliant man I have ever known.

I have been honored to assist Johannes (friends call him John) in writing several books about his career, his thoughts, and his predictions. As his energy declines, it is now my privilege to elucidate the contributions of this remarkable legendary lawman.

Dr. Diane Holloway

Chapter One:

Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

On July 23rd, 1967, baseball fans turned on their television to see the Detroit Tigers play the New York Yankees at the Tiger Stadium. Johannes Spreen, a retired New York cop, couldn't miss the game as the Tigers played his team, the New York Yankees.

Willie Horton and Earl Wilson were black Detroit Tiger players, but generally, black baseball players were not altogether welcome. There was a 30% unemployment rate for blacks in Detroit and it was not Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society."

Little did he know then that he, as new police commissioner of Detroit, would soon participate in a game with Willie Horton.

As people tuned in, it soon became clear that three miles away from the stadium, there was much unrest. As the game progressed, black clouds of smoke and fire appeared on the horizon, obvious to television viewers. That night, buildings and homes began burning over a 25-square mile area. Baseball concession stands closed early. Airlines cancelled flights. The Mayor appealed to the governor for help. As the upheaval multiplied, Governor George Romney sent in state troopers and then President Johnson approved sending paratroopers. Riots raged on and on creating the largest negative image for a city ever televised live.

The Detroit Riot of 1967 was the most destructive of the urban riots of the 1960s. It had important consequences for the city of Detroit, in fact, for the entire state of Michigan, which are still ongoing. Some writers have described it as the greatest tragedy of all the long succession of Negro ghetto outbursts.

Because 1967 witnessed 164 eruptions in 128 cities across the United States, much recent scholarship has suggested that it was precisely this sort of urban uprising that sounded the death knell for America's inner cities.

The Detroit tragedy was not just the deaths, injuries, looted and burned property, but also the loss of its prominent reputation as a model city in the area of race relations.

Johannes awoke on the morning of July 24, 1967, to find every television station reporting on the riot that was enveloping Detroit. The morning newspapers did not have the story yet but the evening newspapers did. Over the next four days, the horror of death and destruction in this major

American city captured everyone's attention.

The riot emerged on Twelfth Street, where an after-hours club run by a group without a license, United Community League for Civic Action, was selling alcohol (even to minors) to celebrate the return of a black veteran from Viet Nam. A tip led a Detroit police sergeant to the site on Sunday morning, and officers were surprised to find over 80 people there. During the next hour, squad cars and a paddy wagon ferried the arrested to the police station but not fast enough, as a crowd began to gather.

The first day of the rebellion, Hubert Locke, then a black administrative assistant to Detroit's police commissioner, summoned several of the city's responsible black leaders. In pairs, they spread across the Tenth Precinct to implore crowds to disperse. One pair was Deputy School Superintendent Arthur Johnson and U.S. Representative John Conyers, Jr., the latter being quite popular in his district.

Authorities allowed Conyers to stand on a car with a bullhorn to beseech the crowd to dissipate. He was the wrong man. He shouted exhortations like, "We're with you but please, this is not the way to do things. Please go back to your homes."

The crowd chanted retorts such as "No, no, no! Do not want to hear it! Uncle Tom!" One man in the crowd hollered, "Why are you defending the cops and the establishment? You're just as bad as they are!" Rocks and bottles flew toward the car, one of them hitting a policeman nearby. The crowd became uglier and Johnson urged Conyers, "Let's get out of here."

Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh requested Michigan State Troopers the first afternoon. Some 360 State Police Troopers arrived in the late afternoon and the National Guard committed to send troops. The Mayor issued a proclamation for a curfew from 9:00 p.m. to 5:50 a.m. Bars and theaters were ordered to be closed across the city. *

Michigan Sheriff Johannes Spreen went to jail today to defend his beliefs and actions saying I'd rather be right than free. Walter Cronkite, CBS News, May 7, 1977.

Im inspired by legendary police commissioner and former sheriff Johannes Spreen, whose community-partnership approach encouraged people to work together, and it was successful. Arizona Police Chief Dan Saban.

Johannes Spreen was a police officer extraordinary; a man who helped restructure and develop New York City Police Academy training leading to a college program, a West Point for police officers now John Jay College for Criminal Justice. Johannes Spreen is a man of enthusiasm, indeed a prophet; always ahead of his time. Rudolph P. Blaum, retired NYPD and co-developer of John Jay College courses.

This intimate portrait of former Detroit Police Commissioner and Michigan Sheriff Johannes F. Spreen, forming his attitudes against the rugged tides of experience and events, is a delight to read. The revealing rise of a German immigrant through New York and Michigan police hierarchies adds to our understanding of policing, competitive police turf battles and the criminal forces that drive our nation to the brink in attempting to maintain freedom and peace. Spreen's innovations re-shaped American law enforcement thinking.

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