

Frontenac

Frontenac is now 105 years old. It all started, as you know, in 1886, when the Cherokee and Pittsburg Mining Company leased land underlaid with coal and sank Santa Fe Mine No. 1. At first the community was called simply Santa Fe No. 1, but in December 1886, Robert Craig became superintendent of the mine and started calling it Craigsville in honor of himself. When he went to Topeka to list the name with the Secretary of State, he was astounded to learn, according to the Girard Press, Dec. 16, 1886, that the name "Frontenac" had already been given to the community. "Persons living there should practice on the above [name]," the Press advised, "and procure the proper pronunciation. Hereafter our readers will look for news items from Frontenac, Crawford County, Kansas." A month later, on Jan. 20, 1887, the Press stated "As we have before published, the above name [of Frontenac] is attached to the new town in Washington township, the terminus of the Southern Kansas Railroad. The name is French. De Frontenac was a French general who was born in 1621; served in the French army in Italy, Flanders, Germany and Canada. In 1672 he was appointed governor general of Canada by Louis XIV, and he built Fort Frontenac, now Kingston, Ontario. . . . So much for the name; it is an historic one. We do not contemplate that its inhabitants will take any great interest in the origin of the name, but while many are laughing at it, we want to mention that if there is any good to come from a name, why Frontenac has good history."

Frontenac prospered and by the turn of the twentieth century was producing a fifth of the state's coal. As the principal ship-

ping point from this district for the Santa Fe Railroad, between one million and one and a quarter million tons of coal left the Frontenac yards annually.

But I am not here to give you a history lesson this evening. Karen Quendet asked for a funny talk, so I thought I would share with you Vance Randolph's view of the town as he saw it some fifty-five years ago. In 1935, Vance Randolph published a novel called Hedwig. It was named after the heroine, a German girl who immigrates from the Volga to Oklahoma and from there, when her husband dies, to Frontenac, which Randolph calls Frontaldo. After the burial of her husband, Hedwig thinks, "I better get somewhere out of Lingfeld Oklahoma, because it is in this town where Jim has kill himself and everything, so I would feel better in some other place away off. Well pretty soon my brother-in-law says he knows where a fellow is getting rich. And I says how can anybody get rich these days? So then he says this fellow just goes to a town in Kansas somewhere to get him some corn whiskey.

"Well, I says I don't see how a fellow can get rich just buying some whiskey, as he will probably go busted if he keep it up. But my brother-in-law he says you fool, that fellow he buys the whiskey for two dollars and a half by the gallon in Frontenac Kansas, and then he sell it for ten dollars in Lingfeld Oklahoma, so that is how he makes big money.

"And then I say my Gosh, that is seven dollars and fifty cents he make for one gallon of whiskey just to haul it, and then I says how many gallon would go in the car? So my brother-in-law he says maybe fifty gallon, and I figure out he could make three

hunderd and seventy-five dollars every trip! Ach du liebe Zeit, and it is not no wonder that fellow should get rich, I says. So I says to my brother-in-law maybe I better get acquainted with this fellow, and is he married or not? And my brother-in-law says he will fix everything up all right.

"So finally we went to a place where this fellow eats and we got a chance to talk to him, and his name was Oscar Fleming. Me and him danced a couple times and he seen my new clothes and he likes me pretty good. And then he says he would want to take me car-riding, and so we went. The car was a big Buick and it sure was a dandy, and we went three or four time car-riding, and sometimes we would eat in a fine chicken-dinner place out in the country.

"And that was the way things went on for more as two week, and Oscar was very nice to me always, and he spend his money like he had find it in the road. He try to get me drunk but I did not take only two or three drinks before dinner, and he want me to stay all night at the chicken-dinner place, but I would not do it yet. So then one time he says how would you like to go on a long ride, maybe to stay three or four days? And this was just what I was waiting for, so I says it is all right by me, only if nobody don't find it out. Well baby, he says, you just leave it to me and I will fix everything.

"So then one day we started out . . . and Oscar he says we better take a few drinks on the road to Frontenac Kansas, and have a good time, because coming back we must tend to our busi-

ness and cannot drink nothing. He never did tell me what was his job in Frontenac Kansas, but I knew he was going to haul some whiskey, on account my brother-in-law told me all about it before I ever seen Oscar yet. And that is why I went with Oscar, just to see how he could fix it to make the three hunderd and seventy-five dollars, like my brother-in-law told me.

"Well, after while we stop at a big river to go fishing, but we did not catch only some little ones that is not any good. . . . And we drink some beer too, and then Oscar throwed the bottle in the water. And all of a sudden he pull out his big long gun under his coat and shoot it off, and he busted the bottle way out in the big river! Oscar sure was a good shooter with that big pistol. He says it is a Luger from the war, and there is a big round can of leather to fix on the handle with more as three hunderd cartridge in it, so he could shoot very quick bam-bam-bam-bam-bam like that for three hunderd times yet!

"So then I says to Oscar what do you want such a big war-gun like that for? And he says baby, if some son-of-a-bitches would monkey with me, I will out with this here shooter and ruin them, he says! And it kind of scared me, as I thought what if the other fellow would have a big gun like this too, and me setting right close to Oscar, and then maybe the other fellow he would shoot at Oscar, and he might miss Oscar and hit me yet! And it makes lots of difference who is going to be ruined, and so I thought to myself maybe I better ditch Oscar anyhow, no matter if he makes the big money or not.

"Well, finally we come to Frontenac Kansas and it was a big town of little houses all alike in rows, and it was called a miner camp because the men they worked in the mines mostly. And we seen some of the mines too, and it is a great big high wooden steeple on top which is called the tipple, and a hole way down deep in the ground. And they have got a little elevator in the hole, and the bell rings first and then the big engine goes chuck-chuck-chuck and then up comes the elevator with the miners inside of it.

"The miners was all black like niggers and their teeth big and white, as they was laughing I guess because their work is done. And every one of the miners has got a little lamp on his head, so they can see to work in the dark. I wanted to go down in the mine myself to see how it is, but they would not let me go. A man says there is a law, so if anybody would go down in the hole and they would get hurt some way, why then the people what own the mine they got to pay big money for the doctor and the hospital and everything, and if he gets killed why then the company has got to pay anyhow ten thousand dollars! And I says to myself it is no wonder they will not let people go down there, neither.

"And then I seen where all the miners have got their dinner in buckets, as they eat their dinner down in the hole too. Soon as they come out of the mine they go in the wash-house and they got a shower-bath in there and their clean clothes, too, so then they come out of the wash-house all clean up and dressed the same as anybody else.

"When they was all clean again I could see they was all foreigner people, and some was Germans but mostly they was Italian people and some Frenchmens and maybe Belgiums. And there was some other people too, but the Herr_Gvott_selbst could not make out what kind of people they was, and when they talk it was all like dogs barking, and no regular words in it! And mostly the German people was not regular good Germans either, but some kind of Austrian, so that they talk very funny, but still you could understand what they say all right. And I talked to some of them fellows myself, but they all laughed how I say everything. It sure is funny them people should not know to talk their own language right, as I told Oscar.

"Oscar he says the miner get about five dollars every day they work, and only eight hours, too, but if I was a man I would not work in that hole for no money! And then sometimes the rock will fall down on their back, or else it gives bad air, or the gas will catch on fire or maybe blow up to kill everybody, so it looks like a bad job anyhow you look at it. But a fellow was there and he says they got a man named Haut, and this Haut he is going to fix things so they get more money or else they will quit work, so he says everything will turn out all right.

"But in some places the coal is not deep down in the ground, so then they just have what is called a strip-pit. With a big steam-shovel they dig the dirt off of the top, and then they bust up the coal and haul it away in cars on the railroad. And in the

strip pit they don't have no big hole or no elevator or nothing, and the miner don't need no light on his head neither.

"For suppertime we went to a house where all was Italian people, and they had good beer and sour wine and the best whiskey ever I tasted in my whole life. And the supper it was very fine, too, with a big noodle-soup and grated cheese on it, and a big dish of good greens fixed in olive oil with garlicks, and there was a regular good bread. I never did eat so good a meal since I was in Lingfield Oklahoma as a little girl yet. And I never did know before how the Italian people had such good things to eat, as I thought they was more like the American people.

"And there was a young fellow with a big rose stuck behind his ear as the Italians do, and he says to me what is your first name? And so I says to him Hedwig. Well, he says, we are now good friends so I will call you Hedwig and you can call me Ricko. And I says it is funny a man would be name Ricko like that, and he says it is what you call Heinrich. Well, I says, if a fellow is named Heinrich, why don't he say Heinrich like a man, and not go around to call himself Ricko, which it is too comical anyhow? Then he says God damn it, my name is not Heinrich, my name is Ricko, but I tell you if I was a Dutchman my name would be Heinrich!

"But I says to him if you was a Dutchman your folks would be all different, so how do you know what they would name you? Maybe your grandfather would be named Wilhelm, and so they name you Wilhelm after your grandfather! Or maybe they would call you

Friederich or maybe Ludwig or maybe Lothar or maybe Johann or maybe Schnickelfritz for all I know! And anyhow you are not no Dutchman as anybody can see to look at you, as your head is not shape right for a Dutchman! So Ricko he shut up then as he seen I had got the best of him, but it sure is funny how the Italian people are not smart to figure out things like that. Weak head and strong back, I guess it is in the Italian people.

"But Oscar he says to me don't you never make fun at these Italian people, and don't you never call them dago or wop or ginney or grease-ball or nothing like that, as these Italian people are different to them flop-ear Dutch you seen in Arkansas. They will haul off and knock you cock-eyed, he says, and they are good people anyhow, and besides I am trying to do business with these Italian people.

"Pretty soon Oscar he got in his big Buick and went in the town to see about his business, but I says I would wait here as I did not feel very rested yet. And soon as Oscar was gone, Ricko says he don't see how a nice girl like me and refined would run around with that big sausage! Well, I says I never did go with him only to come here, as I want to see how he make the big money out of Frontenac Kansas, and I never did stay nowheres with Oscar. Ricko he says Oscar does not make much money, and he is broke pretty near always, and I bet you right this minute he is trying to stand off my Uncle Bartolmo to get some whiskey on credit, so he can take a load back to Oklahoma. And he says Oscar

gets drunk always and lays up with some women too, and the American girls mostly get his money off him.

"And then Ricko he says to me Hedwig, you better give this bird the air, and stay right here in Frontenac where there is nice people for you to be with, as you sure don't want to mix up with them American rough-neck like they got in Oklahoma, which is the worst I ever seen.

"Well, I says, that is all right by me, but what for a job could I get here in Frontenac Kansas, and what would I use for money? So he says I will fix it so you could work for Romeo's old man, as you could help him cook the dinner and make the beer to sell in the house. He will give you six dollars a week easy, and you got your nice room and good Italian things to eat always. And soon as things open up, me and you will go in the business ourselves, and anyhow I will see you through all right.

"It come in my mind I would stay in Frontenac Kansas and do like what Ricko says, so I thought I better see Oscar and tell him about it. But Ricko he says wait, that bozo will maybe raise some kind of hell, so we should have trouble here. If I was you I would just kind of hide out till Oscar is gone, which he will start back tonight on account his money is all gone.

"Well, I says, where will I go till Oscar is left? And Ricko says I will take you to my sister's house. It is two miles out from town and they ain't selling and Oscar he don't know them. And anyhow, if the big cheese was to go out there, Lena's man

will bust him wide open soon as he come home from the steam-shovel where he is working at.

"So me and Ricko we went in his little Ford to Lena's house, and it sure was a nice place, very clean and shiny. And when I seen everything so clean I says to Lena how it is funny the Italian people are so much like the German people! Well, she says their family is named Fernetti but they used to live in Austria. The farm was before the war in Austria, but now it is in Italia as the grenze was moved in the war. So she says that before the war they was Austrian people, but now they are Italian people! It sound mighty funny to me, but that is what she says.

"And I found out how Lena and her folks was in the German school too, and they could talk German good as anybody pretty near. But I sure did feel funny when she says they was all Catholic, because I did not know that such nice people could be Katolischers ever, as it looked like they would be Lutherans or else Evangelicals anyhow. But you can't never tell, and I sure did learn a lot in Frontenac Kansas already.

"Anyhow me and Lena we got along with each other fine, and she says we do not keep no whiskey in the house but we got good cold beer always and some red wine, so I drink a bottle beer with her and it sure was good. And we drink it out of a can like the malt come in, and they got a new kind of can-opener with a little wheel on it, to fix the top smooth so it don't cut your mouth or nothing.

Then she told me how things was in Frontenac Kansas, and it seem like the coal was mostly gone now, and the price has fell away down anyhow, and that is why so many people have not got no job nowadays. And then when the prohibition law come why everybody got to making whiskey and wine and beer, to sell it so they could make their living. And Lena she says the stuff they make in Frontenac Kansas is better as any in the whole United States pretty near, and people come to buy it from away off all over the country. And that is how it come that fellows like Oscar Fleming is always hanging around.

"And then it is only a few miles off to a big town of American people called Petersburg, and they come always by Frontenac to spend their money. So everybody sell booze to these American people, and fix a good dinner and have a dance and parties, and that is the way they get the money off of the American people. And Lena she says there is not one house hardly where you could not buy a drink if they know you, but if they don't know you why then you can't buy nothing, on account they are scared of the law always and the detective that sneak around, so you got to pay all the time and look out too, as otherwise they will put you in the jail.

"But Lena she don't sell nothing only for just a few rich fellows in the big town, and they would come out and sit in the front room to drink a couple bottle beer maybe, or something. It is just enough to pay the rent and make Lena a little money extra once in while.

"And then if one of the rich fellows want to bring his girl out it is all right by Lena, and everything quiet and nobody will never know nothing about it. They just get their drinks in the nice room, and Lena would fix a little lunch maybe with good bread and cheese and salami or something if they want it. And then the fellow will give Lena two dollars besides the money for the drinks and the lunch too, and all Lena got to do is just make up the bed again.

"So I thought in my mind it sure would be a nice place for me to live at Lena's, but there is not no work for two women here. So Lena she said you just stick around here a few days and Ricko he will get you a good job somewheres. And she says I am mighty glad your are here, just for company anyhow.

"And then when Lena's man come home he was a fine fellow by the name of Angelo, and he says for me not to worry about nothing but just eat my supper, because there is plenty more where that come from. And he says for me to stay right here with Lena as long as I want, and it don't cost me nothing, because Lena is lonesome all by herself since the Herr-Gott never give them no kids yet.

"And late after in the night comes Ricko when I was in bed already, so he says Oscar is pretty mad, but he got his load some way off of Uncle Bartolmo, and he has went back to Lingfeld Okla-homa again. And I thought maybe I better maybe get up to go with Ricko but he says no, you stay here tonight and sleep good. I will see you tomorrow, he says, as I have got some business to

fix tonight yet. So I was no more worried then, and I feel like I have got a pretty good start in Frontenac Kansas, and so I went to sleep and slept fine.