

“Ottawa Inspired 1939 Novel
From Franklin’s Past...”
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Ottawa history sometimes shows up in the most unexpected places.

One such example is a novel entitled “Mrs. Pennington,” which is set in the early 1890s in the quiet town of Onawanna, Kan. The town is noted for its beautiful Forest Park on the Marais des Cygnes River, where the famous Chautauqua is held every June.

Sound familiar?

Written in 1939 by Katherine Carson, the book focuses on the family of Capt. And Mrs. Henry Pennington at the time of the annual Chautauqua. The principal plot follows the turmoil wrought by the romances and growing pains of the Penningtons’ four children.

The Pennington’s are based by Miss Carson’s actual grandparents, Capt. And Mrs. Edmund Boltwood, who lived in Ottawa in the 1880s and 1890s.

Pretty Kate Boltwood was a town favorite, and active in civic and church musical events. Her husband was an honest and gallant Civil War hero, but his meager financial circumstances and fierce pride made him irritable and hot-tempered.

“The two things he carried away from the army had been a bullet and vocabulary, and both had stuck by him,” Carson wrote of the fictitious Pennington.

Various other characters appear to be based on other Ottawa residents of the period, although most names have been changed.

One of the novel’s characters is a girl called “Onawanna Kansas Molesworth,” known as “Onie” to her friends. The name was probably inspired by the real-life Ottawa Kansas Pickerell, “Otie,” who later married Dr. John Davis.

“Mrs. Pennington” is especially interesting for its description of the fictitious Onawanna (Ottawa) in the 1890s. The novel begins:

“Although it was only the first week in June, lush summer had taken possession of Onawanna, Kansas. The annual overflow of the Marais des Cygnes River which each year left a choice deposit of alluvial mud on the fields of farmers and the floors of half the housewives had long since receded, and now the dust lay thick on the unpaved streets and powdered the weeds which grew along board sidewalks.

“The heat, which was of that still, oppressive variety known in Kansas as ‘good corn weather,’ had slowed the tempo of every living thing except the whirring grasshoppers and the voices of the Band of Hope...”

The “Band of Hope,” the reader soon discovers, was the children’s choir “which assaulted the ears of those citizens who were unfortunate enough to live near the Congregational Church.”

The church building survived those shrill choir practices, however, and today stands next to Municipal Auditorium.

The themes of social respectability, town gossip, and Onawanna's subtle class divisions are alluded to throughout the book.

The Penningtons (Boltwoods), for example, lived in a modest house on the outskirts of town on Beech Street. In contrast, the town's residents of substance lived on Willow and Maple streets where "the houses were large and sat serenely in well-kept lawns."

"They had iron dogs on the lawns, and ornamental hitching posts at the curb, where the family surrey was hitched to the statue of a Negro boy with trousers hanging sculptured tatters.

"The houses were adorned with scroll work, and an occasional colored glass window; they bulged with bay windows and pointed their aspirations with cupolas. There was an air of elegance, of gentility, even about the grounds; the croquet wickets were prettily wrapped in white tape, and the neat outhouses chastely hid behind screens of hollyhocks."

"Mrs. Pennington" also is notable for its detailed and accurate description of the "Beautiful Forest Park" of yesterday, and captures the excitement and activity which the Chautauqua brought to town. While it may be only a fictional story about "Onawanna," the book adds delightful bits of insight to the story of Ottawa.