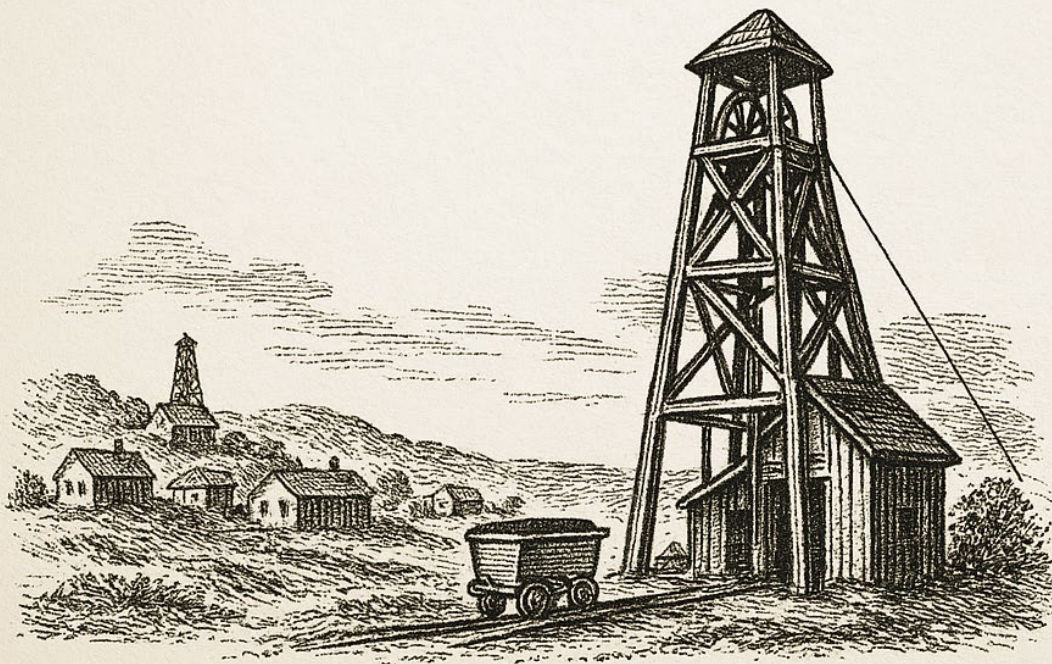


Revisionist History of the Frontenac Kansas Public Library (2025)

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FRONTENAC KANSAS PUBLIC LIBRARY



REVISIONIST HISTORY

Figure 1. Where the radium wasn't the end, and two old boys cracked open something meant to stay sealed.

Preface

The establishment of the Frontenac Public Library marks a significant milestone in the civic and cultural development of Frontenac, Kansas. Funded by a generous \$4.5 million bequest from Richard and Jeanette Tavella, the library represents both a material and symbolic investment in the preservation and advancement of knowledge for future generations. Jeanette Tavella (née Ricci), a 1955 graduate of Frontenac High School, and her husband Richard, a 1956 graduate of Pittsburg High School, shared a lifelong appreciation for education, literacy, and public service. Their legacy is now permanently enshrined in the institution that bears witness to their vision.

Among the most active and committed volunteers in this effort were Doug and Mark, lifelong Frontenac residents and childhood neighbors. Though not related by blood, the two septuagenarians shared an abiding interest in the area's rich mining heritage and civic memory. Over several months, they worked closely with the library team, processing donated materials from attics, garages, church basements, and city storage rooms. Their meticulous cataloging and personal familiarity with the names and places of Frontenac's past proved invaluable in assembling what is now considered the foundational archive of the library's historical collection.

What they found, however, was not part of any intended archival collection.

Chapter 1 – Dust and Cardboard and the Smell of 1957

I swear the smell hit me before we even pried the lid off the crate.
It was the smell of dead paper. Damp wood. Coal dust trapped in time.
And maybe—just maybe—the kind of air that hadn't been exhaled since Eisenhower was president.

Mark grunted like he always does before doing something reckless and stupid.
He wedged the crowbar under the nailed lid with the ease of a man who's opened more feed sacks than emails.

“If this one’s just high school yearbooks again,” he said, “I’m throwing it in the mine.”

The lid popped. Dust danced in the shaft of sun slicing through the library’s unfinished rafters.

And I swear, for one second, we both just... froze.

Not because of what we saw, but because of what we *didn’t*.

No photos. No yearbooks. No predictable stack of PTA newsletters with 1963 mimeograph ink still clinging to them.

Just a large, rolled blueprint tied with brittle twine.

A folder. Manila, wide-brimmed. Thick as a Bible.

On the blueprint, a simple title scrawled in black grease pencil:

ALT-CONTAINMENT PROPOSAL – Shaft No. 2

Mark stared at it, then at me, like a man who just found his grandfather’s last name on a nuclear bomb.

“Doug,” he said, “What the hell is this?”

I didn’t answer. Not because I didn’t have words. But because suddenly, I saw the initials in the corner of the document.

Just two letters. Slanted and faint, but clear.

Z

D

I felt like the floorboards shifted beneath me, just slightly. Maybe they did. I’ve been off-balance since childhood, and Frontenac’s always been the kind of place where reality runs just thin enough to peel.

Mark carefully untied the twine. We unrolled the blueprint on top of an old card catalog.

The diagrams weren’t architectural. They were defensive.

Rerouted tunnels. Reinforced bulkheads.

Secondary dump corridors marked: *"Deny Entry – Federal Only"*

One was redacted completely except for the word "PLUTONIUM." Another read, in handwritten ink:

"Move target west. Risk of breach too high. Locals too alert. See Z/D memo."

And just like that, we weren't just two bored old farts cleaning out the past.

We were archaeologists of a cover-up.

The kind people die for. Or disappear for. Or drink themselves to death trying to forget.

And we had just opened the wrong box.

Chapter 2 – Good Men Who Broke the Law

There's a certain way old men tell stories in southeast Kansas—half truth, half threat, and never once written down.

I remember hearing the phrase "the night the train jumped the track" more than once growing up. Always in backyards. Always late. Always after too much Four Roses and too few teeth.

But no one ever told it straight. They'd get quiet. Real quiet. And say something like,

"That's just what happens when steel forgets what it's carrying."

I never thought it meant anything. Not until the folder from the crate.

It wasn't just maps. It was journals. Field notes. Inter-office correspondence that was never filed, stamped, or destroyed. And two small ledgers, each handwritten. One labeled "Z." One labeled "D."

Z's Ledger: April 1945

"Rail manifest has been altered again. Codeword changed from 'Glassware' to 'Ivy Package.' They think we can't read a clock just because we dig. Fools.

They say it's coming in from the west—Colorado maybe. No escort yet. That's their mistake."

D's Ledger: April 30, 1945

"Talked with Z again. We agreed: if it makes it past Girard, we'll never get another shot.

The new boxcars are magnet-sealed. But they're using the old brake system. We can hit it at the junction north of the Y curve. The derail will look accidental. We'll disappear for a while after. Let the mine take the blame."

I stopped reading.

"Mark," I said, holding the brittle paper like it might catch fire, "do you realize what this is?"

He looked at me the way he did back in '74 when we thought we saw a funnel cloud form above the mine pit—pure dread mixed with wonder.

"They derailed a federal transport," he said. "In wartime. That's treason."

"No," I said, "That's patriotism with a shovel."

It wasn't long before we realized the truth behind the town's dirtiest secret.

The radium was real.

It was dumped into Shaft No. 2 in barrels marked "Paint & Industrial" by a private contractor tied to the U.S. Radium Corporation.

But the uranium and the plutonium—that never made it. Because two miners—our great-grandfathers, we now knew—saw something the government didn't:

A town that wasn't going to be a graveyard for other people's sins.

They took an oath. Outside the law. Outside even the union.

They let the shaft explosion in 1888 become the great lie that protected the greater truth.

As the generations passed, nobody asked why the shaft stayed sealed. Nobody asked why Frontenac was never on the Manhattan Project's map.

Because two men made sure the question would never come up.

They saved the town.

They buried the story.

And we just unearthed it.

Chapter 3 – Mr. Pallucca and the Archivist's Burden

Mr. Pallucca had the kind of smile that made kids behave and grandmas trust him with recipes.

He wasn't born into legacy or secrets—he was born into the comforting hum of microfilm machines and paperback spines. A man raised by books, tempered by silence, and drawn to order.

He had one goal for the new Frontenac Public Library: make it warm, make it useful, make it safe.

So when we handed him the crate—not the one with the yearbooks or county fair posters, but the one with ledgers signed Z and D—he looked at us like we were playing a joke. A weird one.

Then we opened it.

He read silently for almost an hour. Didn't say a word.

Then he asked for coffee. Strong.

“I just wanted a room for kids to read Dr. Seuss,” he finally said, setting down a hand-drawn map of the shaft’s tertiary tunnels.

I laughed, but it wasn’t funny. Neither of us smiled.

“This can’t go on the shelves, Doug. If we publish it wrong, it turns into a circus. Or worse, a conspiracy theory.”

I nodded. “And if we bury it again, we’re no better than the ones who tried to turn this town into a nuclear trash can.”

That night, he took it home.

Two days later, he came back looking older.

Not tired. Weathered. Like the documents had scrubbed his soul a little raw.

He called a staff meeting. Just him, us, and the newly installed archival cabinet in the local history wing.

Mr. Pallucca placed one glass case near the back wall—out of the way, but not invisible.

It was crafted like a shrine: acid-free paper lining, secure UV glass, low light, and a velvet label in serified brass letters:

RESTRICTED ACCESS

Community Discretion Advised

The contents of this case contain unverified historical materials, personal accounts, and artifacts of disputed origin.

Readers are encouraged to consider context, corroboration, and the weight of memory before forming conclusions.

He stood back and exhaled like he’d just buried someone.

“This is the compromise,” he said. “Truth doesn’t belong in the dark. But neither does it belong in a headline.”

And that's how sweet, mild, just-wants-people-to-read Mr. Pallucca became the reluctant gatekeeper of Frontenac's buried apocalypse.

Not with a stamp. Not with a red pen.

But with a sign that said:

Enter only if you're ready.

Chapter 4 – Night Sounds from Shaft No. 2

It started the night after Mr. Pallucca sealed the case.

I woke up around 3:17 a.m.—the kind of waking that doesn't come with reason. Just cold air on your skin and the feeling that *someone else had been breathing in your room before you opened your eyes.*

I got up, made coffee I didn't want, and sat on the porch, watching the old sycamore lean into the moonlight like it had secrets.

That's when I heard it.

Not in the air. Not in my ears.

In my skull.

A voice. Gravelly. Old. Too familiar.

"Don't let 'em dig, boy. Not now. Not again."

And I *knew*.

It was him.

Zimmerman. My great-grandfather. The ghost I never met but whose handwriting I now recognized better than my own.

Next morning, I called Mark.

"You sleep?"

He didn't say anything for a moment.

“Doug,” he said, “I think I heard water.”

“You got a leak?”

“No. Not like that. It wasn’t in the house. It was *outside*.”

Dittman.

We went out to the shaft.

Technically, it’s off-limits. But this is Kansas. The locks are ceremonial.

It was colder there than it should’ve been—like the ground had never let go of the winter it first tasted in 1888.

We stood in silence.

Then Mark held up a hand.

There it was: trickling.

Faint. Inconsistent. Not pipewater. Not runoff.

Something deeper. Ancient. Moving.

The shaft’s been sealed for decades. Poured concrete, rebar, the whole ritual. But that sound didn’t care about barriers.

I leaned over the rail and said it—not loudly, not boldly.

Just:

“You still down there?”

I don’t know what I expected. Maybe silence. Maybe echo.

What I got was *nothing*—a kind of *anti-sound*, a pressure, like the air had become denser for just a breath, like the shaft exhaled and then went still again.

Mark looked at me. “Maybe we shouldn’t have opened that box.”

“Too late,” I said.

We haven’t told Mr. Pallucca. Not yet.

He’s got enough on his shoulders.

But something’s still *moving* down there.

Not alive.

Not dead.

Just... pacing.

Like a memory that hasn’t accepted it’s supposed to stay put.

Like the past didn’t consent to be archived.

Chapter 5 – Public Opening, Private Earthquake

The sun showed up right on time for the ribbon-cutting—bright, sharp, almost ceremonial. Like it had RSVP’d.

The mayor wore a red sash like we were christening a cruise ship. Kids squirmed in metal chairs, parents took pictures, and an entire row of Frontenac’s remaining WWII veterans got free donuts and a front-row seat to something they’d helped make possible.

Mr. Pallucca stood at the podium, his hands shaking just enough to make his note cards shuffle like playing cards. He welcomed everyone with his usual warmth.

You wouldn’t know, looking at him, that the man had cried two weeks ago over a blueprint.

The ribbon was cut at 11:00 a.m. sharp. Cameras clicked. The crowd clapped.

That’s when I saw her.

A little girl—couldn’t have been more than nine—wearing a sash labeled “*Radium Girl*” over a vintage-style dress.

She was part of the local history project: kids dressed as miners, nurses, factory workers, even one posing as a librarian from 1938.

But the sash. That name. It hit me like a crowbar to the chest.

Radium Girl.

They'd turned it into a costume.

Mark nudged me. "Ready?"

We carried the box through the side door. It wasn't heavy. Not in pounds.

Just in *consequence*.

On top of the contents we'd arranged a single laminated label:

Notes on a Failed Apocalypse

Recovered personal accounts, proposed containment schematics, and first-hand reports regarding non-standard waste diversion measures (1945–1947).

Compiled by local residents Doug & Mark for restricted archival review.

History does not always seek permission to return.

We placed it in the restricted case Mr. Pallucca had set aside. He watched us the whole time, then nodded once.

That was all.

And that's when the ground shook.

It wasn't violent. Not even dramatic.

Just a low *shudder*, like the land had exhaled.

Half a second. Maybe less.

You could feel it in your ankles.

One of the folding chairs fell over. People looked around. Someone joked about the pizza delivery truck hitting a pothole on Cayuga.

Nervous laughter. Dismissal.

But I locked eyes with Mark. He wasn't laughing.

Neither was I.

Because the tremor didn't feel like movement.

It felt like a warning.

Like the past adjusting its position.

Like something that had been sealed moved slightly closer to the surface.

And that's the thing no one tells you about libraries:

They don't just store stories.

Sometimes, they *wake them up*.

Epilogue – Marginalia

It was a copy of *Tom Sawyer*.

Nothing unusual about it. Just one of a dozen well-loved titles donated by the Tavella estate—first edition reprints, bound in blue cloth, pages yellowed just enough to feel honest.

Mr. Pallucca found it a few days after the grand opening, while reorganizing the fiction shelf with a volunteer named Rosa. She was twelve and had a librarian's spirit already: careful hands, serious eyes.

"Mr. Pallucca," she said, holding the book like it might dissolve, "someone wrote in this one."

He almost scolded her, out of instinct. But then he saw her face—pale, eyes wide, not afraid exactly, just... *still*.

He took the book. Opened to the inside back cover.

There, in faded pencil—slanted, careful, not a child's hand—were ten words:

Z + D stopped them. But the price wasn't zero.

You're reading this because they paid it.

No date. No name. No context.

Just a fragment of knowing. Tucked where no one would look unless they loved the book enough to finish it.

Mr. Pallucca called us that night. He didn't speak for the first few seconds. Just let the line hold the weight.

When he finally did speak, it wasn't to ask who wrote it. We all knew it wasn't us.

"I think," he said, "that someone else wanted it remembered. Quietly."

We didn't move the book to the Restricted Case.

We left it right where it was, in Fiction, under "Twain."

Because sometimes the truth wears the clothes of a story.

And sometimes the only way history survives
...is in the margin.

References

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