

LIFE IN OSCEOLA - Osceola's HISTORY

P.A. Vans Agnew helps Nelson Fell develop Florida, Russia

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In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Kissimmee was very much a frontier town, but folks still needed a lawyer from time to time. Many of them turned to P.A. Vans Agnew.

Patrick Alexander Vans Agnew, just Alec to friends and clients and sometimes Minor to his family, enjoyed a time in Florida that might never be matched.

Vans Agnew, a Scot, helped birth two Florida towns, Narcoossee in Osceola County and Fellsmere in what now is Indian River County. He helped negotiate a sale for his future father-in-law that helped a London-based company buy silver and copper mines in Russia's frontier of the early 1900s, then he helped run the mines. He also was the attorney for the Kissimmee-founded Friends of the Seminoles, which persuaded the state and federal governments to set up Florida's first reservations for the Seminoles. He then negotiated private land sales that made it possible, putting up his own money when necessary.

Oh, and as a joke many thought was serious, he was the Kissimmee city attorney who wrote the world's first ordinance to regulate aviation in 1908.

The son-in-law/father-in-law partnership between Vans Agnew and E. Nelson Fell began in Narcoossee, the English colony on East Lake Tohopekaliga started with Fell family investments during the land-draining boom of the 1880s.

Nelson Fell, for whom Fell's Point on East Lake Toho and Fellsmere take their names, was the New Zealand-born youngest son of a successful British wholesaler who moved his family to London in 1857. Nelson, educated as an engineer in Britain and Germany, went to work for his oldest brother, Arthur.

Arthur Fell sent his youngest brother to Brazil and Colorado to set up family-owned mines, Gordon Patterson, a humanities professor at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, writes in a 1997 article, "Ditches and Dreams: Nelson Fell and the Rise of Fellsmere," for The Florida Historical Quarterly.

Nelson Fell was 27 when his brother sent him to Central Florida to take charge of a family partnership that owned 12,000 acres of raw frontier land, including 2,000 acres at what became the English colony of Narcoossee.

Fell was a new Osceola County commissioner in 1890 when he brought the oldest son of another Narcoossee family into his enterprise. P.A. Vans Agnew and his younger brother, Frank, had grown up as friends of Fell's daughters, Marian and Olivia.

The Fell family's homestead at The Point, land jutting out from the northeast shoreline of East Lake Tohopekaliga, was a frequent gathering place for British holidays and other community celebrations. The guests included the Vans Agnews, whose children also rowed in the lake with the Fell girls.

Vans Agnew would become one of Nelson Fell's business partners.

"Alec Vans Agnew was known as a charming, intelligent man with a fine sense of humor," writes Teresa Rushworth in a February 2005 article for Vero Beach Magazine, "From Orange Groves to the Cherry Orchard."

When Florida's land boom of the late 1880s went bust and the nation fell into a depression, Nelson Fell tapped P.A. Vans Agnew, then a young lawyer in Kissimmee, to travel to London, then across Europe to Central Asia to negotiate silver- and copper-mine investments. The pair then ran the family-owned mines on the Russian frontier.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

After several years in Russia, Vans Agnew would be reunited with his future bride when Nelson Fell sent for his wife and children to join him. Marian Fell was 16 at the time. Their courtship would last until after her 22nd birthday and the Fell family's return to Florida.

Marian Fell and Vans Agnew, who had reopened his law office in Kissimmee, were married in 1914. His younger brother, Frank, would later marry Olivia Fell. Marian and P.A. Vans Agnew built a home on Paradise Island in Lake Tohopekaliga for their four children: Anne, born in 1916, Patricia in 1919, Alec in 1924 and Marian in 1927.

Vans Agnew "plunged into local politics and became the city's attorney," Patterson writes. His wife, drawing on her knowledge of the Russian language and culture, translated many of the stories and plays of Russian writer Anton Chekhov, who had died while the Fells were living in Russia.

Nelson Fell had bought a Virginia estate with plans to retire on the riches he had made in Russia. Vans Agnew, still enthused by his business success in Russia, persuaded his father-in-law to undertake a second Florida challenge, draining thousands of acres of the Everglades and building the town of Fellsmere from scratch.