

King Coke & Little Pictures

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The Literary Club

June 3rd, 2019

The King of Coke Henry Clay Frick operated at the center of the enormous industrial growth of the United States between the Civil War and the Great War. Born into poverty in Connellsville, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh, quitting school after 10 weeks at Otterbein College and a couple of courses at a local business school, he borrowed money and entered the coke business, vowing to become a millionaire by the time he was thirty.

He supplied all the coke he produced from what were called "beehive" ovens to Pittsburgh's actively growing Bessemer steel mills. Steel was rapidly replacing cast iron which up to that time was a key component in the booming construction of railroads and its ancillary equipment such as bridges, rails and so forth.

And ... with growing financial success, he was able to pursue his lifelong hobby of amassing ever increasingly important and expensive works of art – his "little pictures" he called them.

His collection was what he liked and he didn't cotton to counsel from experts about what he should or should not include.

Strong-willed, focused and self-disciplined, he was aggressive and, frankly, a fighter and often mean spirited, capable of exhibiting conduct intended to seek revenge for some past slight, like the time he built his own Frick Office Building right next to Andrew Carnegie's ... and built it 4 stories taller to cut off all sunlight on Carnegie's building.

He was his own man and took responsibility for his actions, never seeking to shift responsibility to others. Frick was fortunate to have lived in the age of free competition, where Acts of God and the sanctity of private property governed.

But ... why did I select Frick as the subject of my contribution to the Literary Club's inventory of papers?

Simple: I see him as an interesting guy ... probably much to his chagrin. And, indeed, he had his faults. But he can be recognized as being at the epitome of that class of Robber Barons whose millions gave us incredible public cultural riches in museums, art collections, their palatial show homes, all sorts of college dormitories, libraries, classrooms and research facilities, medical research laboratories, hospitals, and city, county, state and national parks and monuments, all manner of think tanks and general charitable foundations.

We all probably knew a bit about his life but perhaps because he never gave interviews to the press or wrote anything, he is not as well-known as others of his ilk.

So, let's see what Mr. Frick was all about.

In the Beginning ...

Born in 1849, he was the grandson of the owner of the "Old Overholt Whiskey" distillery. Like so many of his kind, he had the will to do better than his boyhood poverty and eschewed formal education as a means to do so.

Ever interested in growing his coke business, one day in 1871 needing more cash to do so, Frick simply put on his rumpled suit, got on the train and went to Pittsburgh and, unannounced, and never having met the banker, walked into his office. The banker's name was Tom Mellon, patriarch of the Mellon banking family.

Mellon was intrigued by Frick's organized presentation and was inclined to loan the money so sent his due diligence man to check-out Frick's operation. His report was glowing and the money duly loaned. In the report, the inspector did report that maybe Frick spent too much time "with his pictures but not enough to cause any problem."

Using that first and subsequent loans, Frick bought more and more coal fields and built more and more Beehive ovens, especially during and after the 1873 Financial Panic. Frick soon accumulated about 80% of the available coke, 2,000 acres of coal fields, one-thousand ovens.

He was selling coke every day for \$30,000 in 1873 dollars, keeping \$20,000 as profit. He was soon being hailed as "The coke king."

The Carnegie Steel Company was Frick's primary customer ... and Frick kept his eye on Carnegie ... and, as it turned out, Carnegie was watching Frick.

He reached his goal and so, a millionaire by the time he was 30, he felt it time to get married and in 1881, he married and he and his bride, Adelaide, left on their European honeymoon with a stop in New York City. There, to the surprise of Frick, he and his bride were entertained by Andrew Carnegie at a formal banquet and during his toast to the bride and groom, Carnegie referred to Frick as "his new partner", an arrangement Frick didn't know anything about.

But by Frick's return from the Grand Tour, the partnership papers and agreements had been drawn-up and were ready for signatures, and in 1881, Frick became Andrew Carnegie's partner operating Carnegie's steel mills.

And consistent with most well-prepared business partnership papers, a buyout clause was included, the price being set at "book," not "going concern."

Each document was labeled at the top of the page as an "Iron Clad Agreement."

Gradually, the relationship between the two blossomed. Frick was an outstanding manager and Carnegie loved playing golf at his Scottish castle, Skibo, so he freely gave more and more authority and responsibility to Frick and Frick gained more ownership interest in Carnegie Steel. Ultimately, in 1887, he was named Chairman of the Board.

Profits grew, but in spite of all this success, the business harmony between the two started to exhibit a dissident wavering voice, and periods of quiet were followed by growing tensions between these two industrialists.

Carnegie was spending a lot of time at his castle, communicating by cable and letters so misunderstandings and ambiguities inevitably became a problem. Difficulties also arose when Carnegie sent communications quibbling with Frick's operations, arguing about penny-ante matters or over-ruling Frick's business plans after the fact.

As an aside, it's no surprise Carnegie wished to spend time at his castle which first appeared in the land records in 1211. When he purchased the Castle, it was a mere 16,000 square feet ... but apparently suffering from claustrophobia, Carnegie expanded the castle itself to a more comfortable 60,000 square feet. If interested, see www.carniegeclub.com for a few remarkable photographs.

And, it's no wonder Pittsburgh's rich wished to get out of town as much as they could ... Pittsburgh was a place of heavy industries, blast furnaces operating 24 hours a day, seemingly perpetual hazes, noise and pollutants. At night, when air was shot into the molten iron and steel, the furnaces blasted forth with a sound and fury people likened to the fires of hell itself.

While the government tried to put some restrictions on air emissions, the efforts were dropped after protests by the Pittsburgh industries.

“Use any means you see fit”

As noted, relations between Frick and Carnegie seemed to be fragile and contributed to a major public tragedy. Earning millions in profits, in the Spring of 1892, Carnegie left for his normal several months at Skibo Castle. The steel workers walked off the job at the Company's largest mill, the J. Edgar Thompson Works on the Monongahela River. The workers were of course seeking better wages and working conditions. From his castle, Carnegie wrote Frick to break the strike "...by any means he saw fit...", meaning no negotiations, lock the striking workers out, hire scabs and Pinkertons to protect the by-then almost vacant mills. Frick regularly kept Carnegie advised of all steps he was taking to implement this directive, among which was the construction of a fence topped by three rolls of barbed wire, all 3 miles around the Thompson Works, prompting of course the Works to be called "Fort Frick."

Labor associations were becoming increasingly aggressive promoting their rights to associate and bargain for better wages and working conditions. Carnegie's explicit instruction and Frick's adherence to that instruction, plus the increased aggressiveness of labor associations, presaged a most destructive confrontation in labor relations, the Homestead Strike, an armed conflict killing and injuring several.

The National Guard was called in to restore and maintain peace. Gradually, workers hired as scabs finally entered the plant, the furnaces were reactivated, steel production renewed. The striking workers began to return to work and the strike was "broken."

A note about the lot of steel workers back then: Often hired in Eastern Europe for the specific purpose of working in Carnegie's mills or Frick's coke operations, they were subjected to "grueling, twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week" with no breaks during the working day - and their wages? ... ten bucks a week, just above the then Five-hundred-dollar annual income poverty line. Most lived in small company houses harnessed to the usual "company stores." Little or no safety measures were included. To an outsider, the mill looked like chaos ...thunderous pounding working the steel, overhead cranes lugging and ferrying around huge cauldrons of liquid iron and steel. "Workers' protective gear" consisted of two layers of wool long-johns: as a worker said, "A chain breaks and a ladle tips over and the iron explodes ... sometimes the slag falls on the workmen."

And Carnegie stayed in his Castle until the Homestead Strike was all over, perhaps trying to set up Frick as the fall guy to take the blame ... Frick believed that was true and held that belief the rest of his life.

Public reaction was quick and predictable ... Frick was blamed and severely criticized for his unwavering attitude toward the strikers, while Carnegie's continued absence at his Castle had the look of the coward. Frick followed his usual hard line, saying, "They have no right to close the mill and prevent workers from entering to keep it running; they are a threat to private property interests."

Carnegie seemingly played both sides of the street, wavering in his support of Frick and taking a weasel-like middle ground, a "not my fault- his fault" approach; but the feeling was general that the riots would not have occurred had Carnegie been there. The media had a field day. And remember, this was the age of the threats of the "anarchists" ... the time of the violent Chicago Haymarket riots and brutal strikes at the Pullman Palace Car Works on the city's South Side.

Soon after the activity around Homestead calmed down, Frick cut the wages of the strikers and never expressed a word of doubt about what happened at Homestead.

The strikers' cause was ill-served by an incident a few days after the riots. Frick was in his office. Suddenly, a man burst in, gun in hand and opened fire, hitting Frick 4 times, twice in the neck. But in the process of being shot, all five feet six of Frick leaped across his desk, jumped the assailant. Both tumbled to the floor, and by then out of ammunition, the assailant now with a knife in hand, began stabbing Frick. Guards appeared and joined the struggle, hollering, "Shoot him, shoot him." The chaos finally ended just as the shooter was biting down on an explosive fulminate of mercury capsule which if the said "bite" had been effective would have destroyed the office.

The assailant was Alexander Berkman an avowed anarchist, a Russian refugee, and partner of Emma Goldman also of similar persuasion who founded the publication "Mother Earth". At the jail shake-down, police said they also found a nitroglycerin capsule in Berkman's mouth (his "mouth"?).

...and Frick had gone back to work thirteen days after the assault.

... of “Iron Clads”, lawyers and the public

Time passed and seemingly normal relations gradually prevailed between Frick and Carnegie. But this normality was shattered by an act producing seismic unintended consequences. In 1887, Carnegie ordered Frick to cancel agreements Frick had made during a strike at the coke furnace operations. Perhaps seeing this as the “last straw”, Frick was so angered he resigned as president of the coke operations retaining his position at the Steel Company. He then sought to exercise the partnership buy-out agreements but to Carnegie’s shock, at market, not book. Lawyers were hired, lawsuits filed, newspaper reporters saw an exciting fight coming, the public was enthralled ... on the trial date, the Allegany County Court of Common Pleas was going to be packed.

In the middle of this legal tussle, Carnegie paid an unannounced visit to Frick, interrupting Frick’s conversation with one of his managers. Frick kept Carnegie waiting until he finished. Then Carnegie entered and launched into a rant, a screed, against Frick for “daring,” Carnegie’s word, “daring” to challenge the Iron Clad Agreements and urging him to take book value for his interest. Frick lost his temper, and “with fists clinched,” chased Carnegie from his office, running down the hallways and down three flights of stairs all the while screaming at Carnegie calling him a “thief” who didn’t “have an honest bone in [his] body.”

This was the last time these two multimillionaires either met or spoke.

But, noting the likely public courtroom circus, occasioned by the fact that the financial interests of the steel and coke companies would be laid out for all to see, a development which would reveal the profits of the companies to be many many times what the public ... and the steel workers ... thought they were. So, Carnegie and Frick settled, essentially splitting the difference. Frick agreed not to return but retained an 11% ownership interest in the steel Company and continued to earn millions and millions of dollars.

But their seismic split remained.

A Private Club plus an Act of God equals a Disaster

A couple years later, our story takes another tragic twist. To ease their own discomfort with Pittsburgh's dismal pollution, owners of these polluting factories constructed hunting and fishing clubs east of Pittsburgh.

So, Frick lead the organization and purchase of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club complete with an artificial lake, promptly modifying the dam to improve the hunting and fishing. Fifty of the core of Pittsburgh's top industrialists were members two of which were Carnegie's and Frick's lawyers, Philander Knox, who later became United States Attorney General, Secretary of State and a Senator from Pennsylvania, and James Reed, a co-founder with Knox of the present-day law firm of Reed Smith, a firm now of 1800 lawyers.

The spring rains of 1889 were abnormally heavy, really heavy. The dam leaked and there was growing criticism of the Club's maintenance of the dam for by then the spillways were essentially useless. Finally, on May 31, the dam broke releasing 20 million tons of water down into the valley of the Little Conemaugh River. Downstream, sat Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Engineers estimated that the water's speed and volume as it hit the town was equal to Niagara Falls running into the valley for 35 minutes. Houses, trees, 50 miles of railroad track, rocks and boulders, two eighty-ton locomotives, two or three small bridges, all seemingly bound together by 200,000 pounds of barbed wire swept up from a Johnstown wire factory. The wall of water was sixty feet tall, and in places, some said it was a hundred feet tall and, "Looked like a mountain coming." Trees fifty feet above the valley floor were stripped bare. The water slammed into Johnstown at fifteen or so miles an hour. 2,209 people were killed about third of which were never identified. Property damages were estimated at \$4.4 billion dollars in today's dollars.

There seems to be a "Ripley's Believe It or Not" story in many public catastrophes. In this case, it was the discovery of a baby 80 miles downstream who was still riding the flood's waters in its crib without sustaining a bruise, and was soon united with his mother.

Rescue operations went on for months led by Clara Barton, founder of the newly organized Red Cross, \$3.7 million in donations were collected. Frick donated five thousand and Carnegie built the town an impressive new library.

Ah, the lawsuits ... but, not to worry. Knox and Reed successful defended the Club and its members, the court reasoning that since the flood was caused by abnormal excessive Spring rains, the Court deemed the dam's failure an "Act of God." Consequentially, no legal compensation ... not a nickel ... was awarded any injured party.

Frick had long ago followed a policy of never granting an interview by the press for any reason. He never said a word publicly, nor did he ever comment in later years.

Carnegie just continued to obfuscate his feelings never admitting he was even a member of the Club.

“.... Here comes Pierpont”

We're now moving to the time of important change in the history of American industry. Back then, when money was to be made, competitors would emerge working for a share of the wealth. But when it came to steel, Carnegie dominated the market by the usual predatory competitive conduct, and his mills were so efficient thanks to Frink's management, the Company could charge the lowest prices and still make a profit to drive away any competition ...

... except in one case ... one person ... one individual who aggressively pursued his vision of creating a viable competitor to Carnegie Steel ...

... enter ... the one ... the only ... J. Pierpont Morgan, he with his blue scabby nose, well-known philandering (one time seven mistresses at once), a fearsome physical demeanor, and broad shoulders and strong presence. He simply scared most folks. Like Frick, a man of few words, Morgan saw an opportunity and put together Federal Steel Company, hardly any competition to Carnegie Steel. But, being the business operator he was, he didn't want to waste his time and money simply working the old fashioned way to grow its business and, besides, he wanted Frick who was still running the Steel Company to run Morgan's new venture.

He'd heard rumors that after the Homestead riots, Carnegie wanted to retire to his Scottish Castle. So, what would any aggressive financial baron like Morgan do about this?

Simple. He'd buy Carnegie Steel and save all that risk, hassle, time and money of growing Federal Steel into a viable competitor.

Morgan just up and asked Carnegie what he wanted for the whole she-bang, then the largest steel company in the world. Andrew said he'd respond the next day and went off to the golf course. He reappeared the next day and handed Morgan a piece of paper on which he'd written in pencil “\$480,000,000”, so much in bonds. \$80 million in cash, plus stock in the “new venture”. Morgan accepted on the spot and they shook hands. The resulting company, The United States Steel Corporation, was capitalized at One Billion Dollars the largest company in the world ... and Andrew Carnegie did in fact retire to Skibo Castle.

A couple words about the public's reaction to these two gentlemen at this point. Frick's great-granddaughter has written that her review of the papers and archives convinces her that Carnegie had been forgiven whatever faults he had. No so with Frick, and summarizing her thoughts, she states he reflected "bitterness and hatred." He was abrupt, without pretense. His humor, when seen, was "bitter and dark" and he was happiest when alone. Public opinion was of "no importance" to him, nor was he liked or admired, he never wrote anything and when he gave to charity during his life, his "gifts were anonymous."

Then, what happened?

Known as “the little Scotsman” (he and Frick were both about 5’6” or so), it’s well-known after Carnegie provided for the comfort of his wife and daughter, he did work vigorously to give away his money, but he failed and the remainder went into his general-purpose charitable foundations. Among many other bequests, he also funded a number of annuities for some of his long-time supporters, service persons and close friends, including an annuity for our own Literary Club member William Howard Taft.

Mr. Frick? Well, he took his money for his ownership interests in Carnegie Steel and became an officer and shareholder of U.S. Steel and made more millions, retired in 1910 and continued to buy his “little pictures.” After he retired, he traveled a great deal with his daughter Helen and spent time expanding his collection and was always looking for ways to keep his collection together for the public’s enjoyment.

On his death in 1919, Frick left \$150,000,000 in 1919 money given to charities, various colleges (primarily Princeton and MIT), a consortium formed to improve grade schools in Connellsville, his native home, an endowment for his museum, 150 acres of real estate and a maintenance endowment for what ultimately became a 600-acre park in the middle of Pittsburgh, and funding for various homes for newsboys, cripples, the friendless, the blind, incurables, women, coal mine sufferers and others at society’s most at risk.

The Kids ... Grand and Great

Before turning to some details of his collection of “little pictures”, what about his kids and grandkids?

The children and grandchildren of these grandee' Barons of the Gilded Age – such as the Astors, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, the Guggenheims - are in-and-of-themselves interesting: how did they spend their inherited wealth; did they have real jobs? What kind of people did they become? Did they organize charitable medical research foundations or seek to eradicate some of society's health and social ills? Did they simply spend their inherited fortunes traveling the world, or as one did, building the largest house in America exhausting his vast fortune doing so?

Take a look at Frick's kids. Frick had four children, 2 of whom died in infancy, one of which, Martha, her death so devastated him, that on his death bed, he was carried downstairs to the main gallery in his 5th Avenue home so he could have a last look at his “little pictures” ... but many believed he really wanted one last view of one painting in particular which reminded him of his Martha.

Two children survived him, Helen Clay Frick and her brother Childs Frick.

Childs Frick lived on an estate his father bought for him in Roslyn Park, Long Island, now the Nassau County Art Museum. A graduate of Princeton, Childs was a renowned paleontologist and a major benefactor of the American Museum of Natural History. He undertook several expeditions to the American West and all his exploration reports and recovered artifacts were made part of the Museum's collections.

Child's life was adversely shaped by his perception that his sister Helen had been heavily favored by his father's bequests; consequently, following the reading of the will, they never spoke again.

Child's son, Henry Clay Frick II, also graduated from Princeton plus the Columbia Medical School becoming a renowned professor of obstetrics at Columbia and an oncologist at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. He also volunteered for two tours of duty in Viet Nam in a field hospital, one in Hue' during the height of the Tet offensive.

Helen Frick, Frick's surviving daughter, never married, and on the death of her father, inherited millions of dollars at the age of 31, which, according to some, made her the richest single woman in the country.

She also inherited many of her father's business habits. She was good at it and today may have become an early breaker of the glass ceiling.

After her father's retirement as President of U. S. Steel, she spent several years traveling with her father visiting European art galleries, renown private collections, museums and dealers and participating in several of her father's purchases as well as those for her own account.

An aside ... and, it's another "Ripley's Believe or Not:" During one of these travels abroad, Frick and his wife, Adelaide, along with J. P. Morgan, booked tickets on the inaugural voyage of ... you guessed it ... the "Titanic" but cancelled when Adelaide fell and sprained her ankle.

When the Great War broke out, Helen volunteered to establish a Red Cross field unit, arriving in France before the Armistice. She took on the preparation of 150,000 Christmas packages sent to the front and took responsibility for refugees in 70 villages, her father providing funds for the construction of an orphanage.

Frick's little pictures

There are four Frick museums holding his art, other collections and antiquities. The main one of course is in New York, a few blocks from the Met and was built as his home and endowed by him specifically as a museum for the public. Created by his last will and testament, he appointed Helen as chair of the trustees who were also named in the will, which included John D. Rockefeller Jr., Helen was not surprisingly headstrong and struggled to control her temper and became regularly embroiled with the trustees about the management and direction of the museum.

She organized an art history library cataloguing 300,000 books and catalogues and over a million works of art. It has been called "one of the most important art libraries in the world". She started to make purchases with her own funds but in 1961, "in a fury", abruptly resigned after yet another tussle with the junior Rockefeller. She returned to Pittsburgh where she restored "Clayton", Frick's first substantial home, and created a Frick Art Museum on the home's grounds.

At the end, she was virtually a recluse and when she died in 1984 at the age of 96, left her estate to charities, the museums she created in Pittsburgh and for Clayton's upkeep. To the utter surprise of the New York Frick Museum, she left nothing to that facility, no cash for general expenses and no additional "little pictures."

Just a few personal observations of Frick's "little pictures" found in the New York City museum. Frick worried about what he was going to do with his collection. It's said that he must have remembered his visit to The Wallace Collection in London several years previously, a collection in the Hertford family home. You will recall the amusing paper describing the family presented by Steve Schweller to the Literary Club April 30, 2018.

As a result, Frick decided to construct a similar home on 5th Avenue for himself and his museum, tearing down one of the Vanderbilt mansions on Fifth Avenue to do so. He also wished to expand his collection. Remember; he had plenty of money to do so, for as noted, his 1919 estate value was \$150 million or \$2.3 billion today.

As he traveled the collections in Europe, his daughter said he moved through the galleries “like a “streak of lightning”, remembering “more of the collection’s details” than those visiting with him, but then he was always interested in speed: at one time he had retained a French race car driver to race him through the roadways of the time at illegal but supposedly “safe” speeds.

A mere listing gives one an idea of the collection’s breath: eleven Rembrandts including a self-portrait, a Gilbert “George Washington”, three Turners, two Constable’s, works by Monet, Reynolds, Gainsborough, El Greco, Titian, Hals, Van Dyke, Goya, Holbein, Hogarth, Durer, Rousseau, Romney, Millet, Rubens, and my personal favorites, *three* of Vermeer’s known 34 works ... in fact, the last painting he purchased was Vermeer’s “Mistress and Maid”.

It’s not possible to envision this collection accumulated over a lifetime. Some experts have opined that his collection “was a masterpiece ... of the world’s greatest artists.” Many were emotional purchases reminiscent of his deep grief over the loss of two of his children at very young ages. For example, a painting in the dining room of Clayton, the family’s Pittsburgh home, so reminded him of Martha that he ordered his customary chair at the dining table moved so he could readily view the painting throughout dinner.

In Conclusion, ... “But wait ...

“There’s more! ... one more ‘Frick-story’

...

In 1919, seems as though Carnegie was in bed at his 60-room mini-castle at 91st and 5th which still stands. He was near the end and decided to make the effort for one of those end of life “live and let-live” reconciliations. So, he sent a note to Frick’s home at 70th and 5th, one of Frick’s 6 homes.

“Please come up and see me”, Carnegie plaintively wrote his old partner, that old striker-breaker, surely hoping for a death bed friendly right hand of healing forgiving fellowship, letting bygones be bygones.

The note was delivered, handed to Frick, also in bed and nearing his end.

A pall of silence descended, only a tick-tock, tick-tock was heard. The messenger, reluctantly, quietly, asked the old strike-breaker,

“Sir, are you going to reply ...

“To reply?”

“Yes, to reply”?

And angrily throwing the note in the face of the messenger, Frick certainly did as requested exclaiming,

“My response is this. Tell him I’ll see him in hell, where both of us are going!
... see ‘im in hell where we’re both going!”

I’ll leave it up to you to decide the veracity of that opinion.

Thank you.

4826 words

