

A consummate been-there-done-that public servant—The Honorable George Letourneau

by Vic Johnson

One of Kankakee County's most notable public figures, George R. Letourneau, whose ancestral home lay in the French province of Normandy, was born on Feb. 28, 1833, in St. Thomas, Quebec. In his lifetime Letourneau was a miner, politician, agriculturist, grain merchant, wholesale grocery man and historian. Letourneau lived a life that when the record is laid end to end becomes a virtual tapestry of the nineteenth century American experience.

A short biography published in 1893 in the Portrait and Biographical Record of Kankakee County, Illinois, notes that Letourneau left Canada in the spring of 1847 (at the age of 14) and arrived in Chicago on May 10.

The young Letourneau did not come alone. He was in the company of John B. Letourneau, Captain Fortin and Alexander Boucher. According to historian Burt E. Burroughs, the party of inquiry had been sent from St. Thomas "to investigate and report on conditions as they found them in the vicinity of Bourbonnais."

The three men soon returned to Canada; George Letourneau would remain in Chicago, staying with a fellow Canadian, Godfrey Mathieu.

After being employed for two years, first as a clerk at a Chicago grocery house and later in a bookstore, the young Letourneau removed to the small settlement of Bourbonnais Grove during the year 1849. He found work as a clerk in a business operated by a Mr. Osborn and remained at the job until March of 1850.

Noel LeVasseur, an employee of the American Fur Company, had established a trading post at Bourbonnais Grove before 1834. He named this location La Pointe, apparently because the trading post stood at a "point" of timber reaching up along the course of a creek. Also it was a point where the Tyanokee Trail split off from the main Danville to Chicago Rd.

The creek, Bourbonnais Creek, and the grove of timber, Bourbonnais Grove, bore the name of an earlier French-Canadian occupant of the area, François Bourbonnais.

Once LeVasseur's trading post was open for business, he returned to Canada and persuaded a few families to leave and settle at La Pointe. This small community would soon become known unofficially as Vasseurville.

A post office was removed from south of the Kankakee River to La Pointe at about the same time the first immigrants arrived. The post office was to be called, "Kankakee Post Office". However, another post office with the same name had been assigned to a village platted at the confluence of the Kankakee and Desplaines rivers. The post office at La Pointe then was renamed Bourbonnais Grove Post Office.

"Bourbonnais", in the dialect of the neighboring Yankee pioneers became "Bulbonus." It seems plausible that the name Bulbonus had its origin in the language of the resident Potawatomes, which apparently had no "r" sound. It appears the French pronunciation of Bourbonnais as

"Burr-bone-nay" seemed too big a stretch for the Yankee tongue.

At that time Bourbonnais Grove was in the Rock Village precinct of Will County. Kankakee County did not exist before 1853.

In 1848 gold had been discovered at Sutter's Mill on the American River in the Sacramento Valley of California. The following year, thousands of fortune seekers from all over the world known as "forty-niners" or "Argonauts" rushed to the gold fields.

In March 1850, several men from the Bourbonnais Grove area, Joseph Legris, Henry S. Bloom, Byron McKinstry, George R. Letourneau, Michael Lavalley and others, went to California by way of Council Bluffs. They made the difficult five month trek across the Great Plains, over the Rocky Mountains, through the Great Salt Lake Desert of Utah and into the Sacramento Valley west of the Sierra Nevada.

Letourneau found it more profitable to haul supplies for the miners and prospect for quartz deposits than pan for gold. He remained in California for a year and a half. The return journey home was by ship to the Isthmus of Panama, overland to the Atlantic side and by ship to New Orleans, then to Illinois by steamboat on the Mississippi River.

George R. Letourneau and Elodie Langlois were married in July 1852. A small farmstead alongside the Danville to Chicago Rd. became their new home. Over the years Letourneau added to the property until he owned more than 200 acres of crop land. The old farm house was remodeled several times and rooms added to accommodate the growing Letourneau family of six girls and five boys.

The farmhouse, as Kenaga and Letourneau recalled in their history of Kankakee County, had an interesting history of its own. It was the original Bourbonnais Grove post office, established in November of 1837, with Samuel Russell as postmaster. During Russell's tenure the name of the post office was changed from Kankakee to "Bulbonus Grove". The property at that time belonged to Noel LeVasseur. In 1848, LeVasseur sold the house and three acres to Samuel's brother, Jacob Russell, who was the receiver for the Port of Chicago. Jacob sold the house and land to Letourneau in 1854. Letourneau claimed that even though the house had been rebuilt "it is in part the same, and stands on the identical spot of the original building." (Note: In 1976 the house was removed to its present location on Stratford Dr. E. by the village of Bourbonnais.)

Once settled in his new home, Letourneau soon became involved in local politics. He assisted François Sequin and Noel LeVasseur in organizing the Republican Party in Kankakee County. He also engaged in general merchandising for a couple of years in partnership with Alexander Testu, who was one of his companions in the overland trip to California.

In 1855 Letourneau sold his interest in the business to Testu and commenced farming. He was in the grain business

with Noel Brosseau in 1869; in 1875 he bought out Brosseau and contracted a partnership with Hiram Kenaga continuing until 1880, selling out to Charles Johnson.

Letourneau was elected Bourbonnais Township supervisor in 1858, 1867 and 1876; served as county coroner from 1860 to 1863 (his name appears on the 1860 "Republican Ticket" along with that of Abraham Lincoln); became clerk of the circuit court in 1872; mayor of Bourbonnais, 1875; was elected sheriff in 1882; county treasurer, 1886, and mayor of Kankakee, 1891.

In the 1880s, the sheriff was required to move into quarters at the county jail. Later, and for the rest of their lives the Letourneaus remained in Kankakee. Oliver Frazer bought Letourneau's Bourbonnais farm in 1886. Letourneau's wife, Elodie, died in 1887.

In the fall of 1891, Letourneau ran for state senator of the 16th district. As a member of the 38th (1892-1894) and the 39th (1894-1896) general assemblies, Letourneau served as chairman of the Labor and Manufacturing Committee and as a member of nine other committees. His last public office was as deputy Kankakee County treasurer under N. G. Halsey, Jr.

Bourbonnais historian Adrien M. Richard has made a good argument for recognizing Letourneau as Bourbonnais' first mayor.

In 1879, the citizens of Bourbonnais voted to incorporate their village. Village board members were elected in May. George R. Letourneau received 50 votes.

In *The Village: A History of Bourbonnais*, Richard writes that although previously published histories do not say who was chosen board president, and in effect village mayor, Letourneau probably got the job.

"After much research, interviews with 'senior' citizens of the village and some personal deductions, it was generally agreed that the logical choice for president made by the new board was George R. Letourneau."

It appears by this evidence that Letourneau is the only person to serve as mayor of both Kankakee and Bourbonnais, and to have been elected to just about every other public office.

We cannot overlook the fact that not only was Letourneau a dedicated public servant, he also was a dedicated American patriot. On July 4, 1879, the resident French-Canadians and their descendants led by George R. Letourneau declared publicly that they were no longer French-Canadian citizens of Quebec; they now were American citizens. To make sure his French speaking constituents would not be uneducated about the founding principles of the U.S., he translated the American Constitution into French. If anyone deserves a memorial on the Kankakee County Courthouse square it is George R. Letourneau.

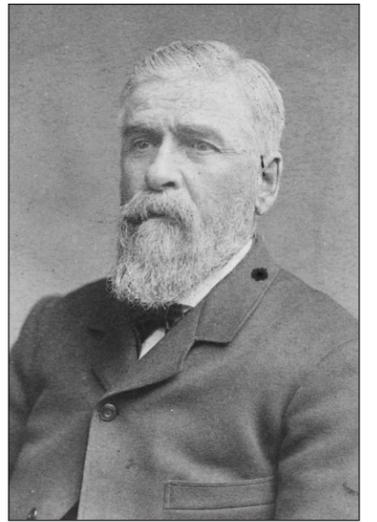
A few words from George R. Letourneau, compiled by Vic Johnson

One Saturday night in April 1899, the west side Republicans presented their slate of



Photos courtesy of Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society

The George R. Letourneau home was moved to its present location on Stratford Dr. E. in Bourbonnais in 1976. Letourneau was a Bourbonnais postmaster, businessman and the first mayor.



candidates to the public at Surprenant's hall. Letourneau was asked to say a few words on behalf of Col. Clarke, who was running for mayor of Kankakee at that time. He did so and afterward gave the audience, mostly workingmen, a reminder of their duties as citizens of one of the finest countries in the world. The Kankakee Daily Gazette printed his short talk.

This is what he said that Saturday evening back in 1899:

"I have lived within two miles of this hall since I was 15 years of age, and have lived in Kankakee 16 years. I moved there in 1881, at the time I was elected Kankakee County sheriff. I have worked on the farm; I have been through the mill. I want to say to you that the right of suffrage is the most sacred privilege conferred upon an American citizen. It is you who make the laws.

"By your votes you choose the men to carry out your principles. If there is any complaint against the laws or the manner in which they are administered you have yourselves to blame. You can, under the primary system, vote for any man you choose and no one can find out how you vote; your ballot is sacred, and it counts just as much as the vote of the millionaire. Having, therefore, this high privilege, this sacred duty, this great power, you ought to consider it an insult if any man comes to you with the offer of a cigar or a glass of beer to influence your vote.

It is equivalent to telling you in so many words that he has no confidence in your honesty and intelligence or ability to determine for yourself what is right.

Another thing: Don't wait for a carriage to be sent to you to drag you to the polls. The value of the franchise is so great, so important, that you ought to make it the first duty of the day,

after kissing your wife—if you have one—to go to the polls with a free step and your head erect and cast your ballot."

In 1879 Letourneau and the citizens of Bourbonnais came together to celebrate Independence Day. They resolved to put aside the bonds that held them to Canada and rekindle their patriotism in memory of the great deeds of their fathers. It would not be forgotten, Letourneau told them, they had found a new country strong and great, which held out its arms to them, and which accepted and loved them as its own children. They chose the Fourth of July, the national holiday of a great American people, to unite with them in the same patriotic spirit and love they had had for their mother country, and with the recognition that they now were devoted to America, a nation that so generously had accepted them.

George R. Letourneau died in 1906 at the age of 75, shortly after coauthoring, with William Kenaga, a History of Kankakee County.

The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting local history. Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month March through December. Museum hours are 1 to 4 p.m. first and third Sundays of each month, March through December or by appointment.

Do you have a topic or story related to local or French Canadian history?

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