
Kanas Historical Society Presidential Address 2009

ROY EDWARD FRENCH: Pioneer Oil Man, Philanthropist, and Dog Breeder

by James K. Logan

Sometimes the most important and most interesting Kansans are not well known outside of their local area or a specific interest group. Such a person is R. E. French, of Gridley, Kansas—a pioneer oilman, philanthropist, and dog breeder, who continued to participate in those activities every day until a week before his death at age 106. Roy Edward French was born October 18, 1897, on a farm in Doniphan County, Kansas. He was seven years old when his father died of tuberculosis. In those days before any public relief, his mother kept the family together by doing housework, washing, and ironing for others. As the oldest of four children Roy helped by trapping in season and hunting—many rabbits, he said.¹

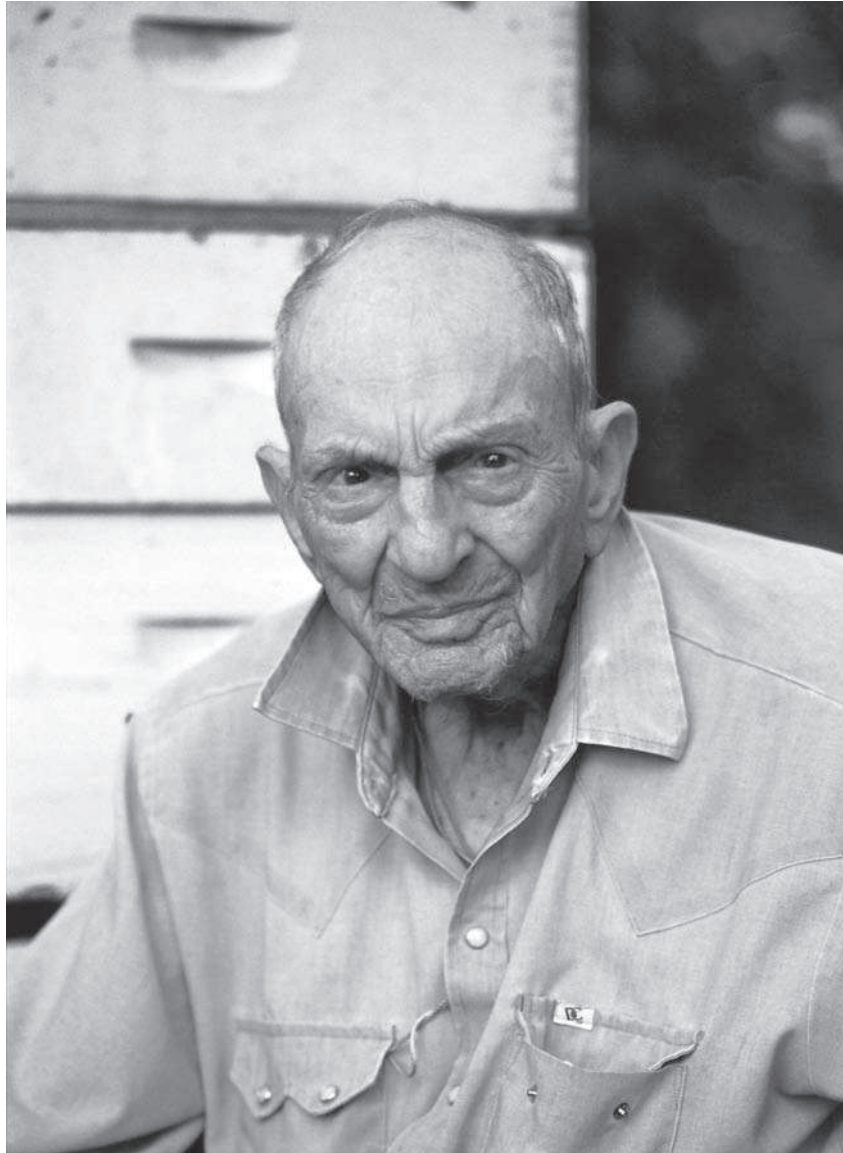
At the semester break, when he was in the sixth grade, Roy dropped out of school to take a job for a salary of \$13 per month plus lunch with a local truck farmer. After three years of this Roy happened by a crew drilling an oil well, and they asked him to pump water for them. Three days later one of the tool dressers on the job quit and Roy was asked to take that man's place. Thus, at age fourteen French became an oil man, working twelve-hour shifts—midnight to noon or noon to midnight—with “yellow dog” cast iron wicked pots filled with kerosene for illumination after dark.²

Approximately a year later Roy became a driller. He worked at that until early 1926 when he was hired by the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railway (controlled by W. T. Kemper of Kansas City's Commerce Trust Bank) to take a drilling crew to Topolobampo, Mexico, to explore for oil. There, with a Mexican crew and rudimentary equipment, he drilled a well to a 2,800-foot depth, but it was a dry hole. His employer then decided to abandon further exploration attempts in Mexico and transferred Roy to Wichita for a couple of months before sending him to McCamey, Texas, where he drilled four successful wells for his employer on the railroad right-of-way near the giant Yates Field in Pecos County.

James K. Logan, retired judge of the Tenth Circuit United States Court of Appeals and a former dean of the University of Kansas Law School, was president of the Kansas Historical Society in 2008–2009 and was attorney for R. E. French during the later stages of Mr. French's life. Some content in this article is based on his personal knowledge and conversations with his client.

1. R. E. French to Kansas Oil Museum, March 20, 2002, Kansas Oil Museum, El Dorado, Kansas.

2. French to Kansas Oil Museum, March 20, 2002; pamphlet honoring R. E. French's 100th Birthday, containing text provided by Roy French, R. E. French Family Educational Foundation, Gridley, Kansas; John Schlageck, “Investing in the Next Generation,” *Kansas Living* 13 (Fall 2002): 11.



Oil man, philanthropist, and dog breeder R. E. French beside one of his bee hives. Photo by John Schlageck courtesy of Kansas Farm Bureau.

After a few months Roy was transferred to Chandler, Oklahoma, as a district superintendent over oil operations for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, which had purchased his employer. Three years later the general manager to whom Roy reported was replaced by another who, upon finding that Roy had less than a sixth-grade education, demoted him to gang pusher.³ This was a major turning point in Roy's life.

While keeping for a time his job as gang pusher, Roy bought his first oil lease after noticing a "for sale" ad in a newspaper. The lease was in Coffey County, Kansas, and had three wells making ten barrels a day—salable at about \$1 per barrel. To finance the purchase he had to mortgage his automobile, his insurance policy, and sign a note for the balance.

Soon thereafter he borrowed more and purchased another small lease making two barrels a day. Two or three years later he purchased two much larger leases, again with borrowed funds. After those acquisitions he quit his gang pusher

3. French to Kansas Oil Museum, March 20, 2002; pamphlet honoring R. E. French's 100th Birthday; Schlageck, "Investing in the Next Generation," 11–12.

job and moved back to Kansas. From this beginning he built an empire of stripper and low-production wells, which at its peak had twenty-eight employees, all the wells being in three Kansas counties: Coffey, Woodson, and Greenwood.⁴

R. E. French stated that his years working in the oil fields for the railroad gave him all the training he needed to operate and run his own oil business. But he was always engaged in self-education. He taught himself geometry, trigonometry, and calculus that helped him succeed in the oil business. As an employer he inspired loyalty in his employees: his secretary, Sarah Grimm, worked for French for forty-one years before his death and now serves as a trustee of his educational foundation. Robert Winterscheid, his business partner for more than fifty years, is quoted as saying, “he’s fair and a good man. Treats everyone with respect. Done a lot of good for the community. People like him and he has a tremendous memory. He knows his business and when he goes after something, he knows how to get it.”⁵

R. E. French’s self-made career from an impoverished childhood to an oil business that made him rich is a great success story, but other things make him worthy of our attention. French met and married Blanche Mundy, another Kansan, in 1919. They had three children: Charlotte, Bernice, and Doris, each of whom married, had children, and have lived most of their lives in Kansas. Roy and Blanche lived in Woodson County for seventeen years before buying a farm in 1951 south of Gridley, in Coffey County, where they built a home and connecting office and lived out their lives. Blanche died in 1976.⁶

I became acquainted with R. E. French when I was asked to help with tax and probate matters arising upon Blanche’s death. Roy disclaimed the interest he could have taken in Blanche’s share of the oil business properties and allowed it to pass to their three daughters. He also made periodic gifts, including shares of his oil business, to these daughters.

Ultimately Mr. French amassed approximately 1,930 acres of land in Coffey and Woodson Counties. He was a conservationist who systematically pursued improvements by reseeding, planting windbreaks, correcting erosion problems, maintaining a balanced habitat for wildlife, and engaging in aggressive pond building (eventually nine ponds, all of which he stocked with a variety of fish he fed daily—seven and one half tons of fish food one season). He worked with the wildlife authorities, including helping to establish Canadian geese populations in Southeast Kansas. He loved to fish and permitted many others to fish his ponds.

During the sugar shortage in World War II he developed a beekeeping hobby that he pursued throughout the rest of his life. He robbed the hives each year and gave away significant amounts of honey. In his very old age, almost to the date of his death at age 106, he would sit on a bench very close to a hive or hives, enjoying observing the bees—even after his eyesight and hearing were nearly gone. He was a woodworker also, and used the wood from walnut trees on his properties to make a large table for his home and many objects, which he gave away to friends.⁷

All of the above is worthy of mention, but R. E. French’s principal claims as one worthy of inclusion among a panel of great Kansans are his work as a breeder and trainer of English Springer Spaniels and his establishment of the R. E. French Family Educational Foundation. In 1950 Mr. French became interested in English Springer Spaniels, a noted breed of field dogs. He later started his wholly owned Denalisunflo Kennels to breed, raise, and train these dogs, and he devoted much time, energy, and money to this hobby. He became nationally famous for his work with dogs. His dogs won literally hundreds of ribbons and trophies. Three of them became United States National Field Champions: Kansan in 1962, Bandita in 1988, and Ring in 1992. One became Canadian National Field Champion: Tisa in 1995. In 1987 the Kansas legislature honored him for bringing “significant recognition” to the state as a nationally known dog breeder. R. E. French was inducted into the Spaniel Field Trial Hall of Fame in Grand Junction, Tennessee, in 2002.⁸ Mr. French loved the animals and walked all of them nearly every day, and in his very old age credited his time with them

4. Zeldia Varner, “Education Important to R. E. French Family,” *Coffey County Today*, June 15, 1992; Susan Hess, “Self-Educated Oilman Helps Others Learn,” *Emporia Gazette*, August 10 and 11, 1991, weekend edition.

5. Schlageck, “Investing in the Next Generation,” 12.

6. Sarah Grimm, interview with author, October 13, 2009, R. E. French Family Educational Foundation.

7. Bernice French Williamson, “Some Information for Mark Petterson,” undated memorandum prepared by the daughter of R. E. French; Hess, “Self-Educated Oilman Helps Others Learn.”

8. Schlageck, “Investing in the Next Generation”; Grimm interview.

as giving him a reason for living. He had a favorite dog with him at almost all times he was out of doors. He had an exercise program he followed religiously.

The most lasting contribution R. E. French made to the benefit of his native state and those raised within it, is his establishment of the R. E. French Family Educational Foundation. He formed this entity as a private educational and charitable foundation in 1981. It came about because of his interest in education and his wish to do something to benefit the young people in the three counties where he conducted his oil business. He started the foundation with \$200,000 of high-interest United States Treasury Bonds. The first year the foundation awarded college scholarships to a student from one high school in each of the three counties. He continued to add significant amounts to the foundation throughout the rest of his life, and to expand the number of scholarships awarded.⁹

Years after its creation the charitable and educational uses to which the foundation contributed were broadened, and the foundation has provided through the years not only a great many college scholarships, but also donated to schools for computers and air conditioning and funded community events and services. Mr. French made major gifts to Emporia State University to help it establish a four-year degree in nursing. In turn that university made him an honorary alumnus.

R. E. French died on November 10, 2003, after a one-week illness, at age 106 years and 23 days. He left surviving a second wife, Thurnelda Williams French, a widow he married in 1983, some seven years after Blanche died. One daughter, Bernice, predeceased him. He had provided for his descendants through earlier gifts and interests in the oil business. So after taking care of his widow, making other charitable gifts, and giving relatively small amounts to his surviving children and grandchildren, he gave the great bulk of his estate, nearly \$10 million, to his R. E. French Family Educational Foundation.¹⁰

Three trustees currently manage the foundation: French's long-time accountant Max Snodgrass, his long-time secretary Sarah Grimm, and one of his grandsons, Gregory Arnold. It operates from a recently constructed building in Gridley, Kansas, where the trustees carry out the educational and charitable purposes of the Foundation. At latest count, 250 graduates of Kansas high schools are currently receiving university scholarships, renewable every semester they maintain a 3.0 (B) grade point average in their studies. In addition, in the past year the foundation has made technology grants to area schools and a cultural grant to the Coffey County Historical Museum.

By all counts R. E. French was a remarkable man and a memorable Kansan. The gift of an educational foundation—made by a man who dropped out of school in the middle of the sixth grade to work because of his family's poverty—will significantly benefit Kansas students and Kansas institutions for the indefinite future. [KH]



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9. French to Kansas Oil Museum, March 20, 2002; Grimm interview.

10. Grimm interview.