


WILLIAM INGE · EDYTHE SQUIER DRAPER · HELEN RHODA HOOPES  
 *Six Kansas Writers - In Place*  JOSEPH STANLEY PENNELL · PAUL T. WEILMAN · JULIA FERGUSON SIEBEL

*Funded in part through a grant from the Kansas Committee for the Humanities*

**Joseph Stanley Pennell**

**George Smith  
Public Library  
Junction City**

**Thursday**

**January 17, 1980**

**7:30 p.m.**



But what sort of people squatted in Fork City anyway? They all sold each other wheat and bacon and corn and beef and farm machinery and squeaky shoes; they all talked in the same Goddamned flat, nasal voice about the same Goddamned trivial things day-in-day-out year-after-year—eating sleeping and growing more rustic and pompous and proverbial (as if the secrets of Life with a capital L were to be found in the saws mouthed over a corner rail or a gutter: You kin ketch more flies with molasses than you kin with vinegar. Where there's that much smoke, there must be some far. First ketch your rabbit. Time is money.) They begat their kind, hating each other because of the no-privacy of the place, stunned because of the dullness of the virtues they felt obliged to wear, beckoned at and tempted by the rich vices that each kept each from enjoying except in deep, painful secret.

#### --THE HISTORY OF ROME HANKS AND KINDRED MATTERS

This is Joseph Stanley Pennell's Fork City, Kansas, his personal version of his home town Junction City, where he was born on July 4, 1903. The only child of photographer Joseph Judd Pennell and Elizabeth Stanley (Pennell), Stan, as he was known in his family, had a congenital weakness in his lungs which made him sickly as a child. His aunt, Beulah Pennell, reports that he had a childhood marked by almost yearly bouts with pneumonia. He was also, according to her, one of the few children of the times to be photographed "practically every twenty-four hours."

Pennell describes his birth, and reveals his disposition, in his first novel, *ROME HANKS*, published by Scribner's in 1944:

Thus Robert Lee Harrington (Joseph Stanley Pennell) came into the world, but he was not so well-fitted up. ... He had in him a pair of weak lungs perhaps from some North Carolinian, whose father had been kidnapped in London and sold in Virginia, the seeds of various dermoid cysts, a slight lateral curvature of the spine ... and the small tics and hitches of a thousand year's gifts from a thousand careless, idle, wretched people. He was the same as the storeroom of dubious items in a museum.

\* \* \* \* \*

But there were enough of halt, blind, lame, warped, fey, incestuous, mad, howling, ignorant ancestors to saddle the boy with a carcass and cranium full of a hundred weaknesses, doubts, fears, little quirks and troublesome tricks, thirsts, fears, hungers, obsessions-- a mind dark and obtuse, melancholy and curious.

*ROME HANKS* is Pennell's tracing of his ancestry from the Civil War to his own birth, with contemporary scenes scattered in the narrative. In it, he is examining himself by examining his roots. The roots he finds are gnarled, tangled, twisted, but wonderful and dramatic. Their power almost belittles him, which is finally what he takes as a theme for the novel: that the history of civilization since the Civil War is a history of decay, both social and, in his case, personal. That personal vision of his world may have come from his own poor health and a sense of his own decay. It may have come from the place he lived. It may have come from a personal unhappiness that is difficult to trace. But in Pennell's books, decay is the truth about the world, and a convincing, dramatic truth at that.

One of writer John Barth's characters says: "Fiction isn't a lie at all, but a true representation of the distortion that everyone makes of life."

Pennell's true representation of the distortion he made of life consists of two novels: *ROME HANKS*, and *THE HISTORY OF NORA BECKHAM, A MUSEUM OF HOME LIFE* (1948); and a collection of poems, *DARKSOME HOUSE*. *ROME HANKS* is a brilliant account of the Civil War, a book that the renowned Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins immediately recognized as the work of a genius. He said: "An editor does not come across such talent more than five or six times in his life. And when he does, he is bound to do what he can for it." Perkins maintained that the contemporary characters and scenes were not compelling, but of the Civil War episodes, especially the one describing Pickett's Charge, he wrote Pennell: "I really do not believe I ever saw a war piece that excelled it, not forgetting Tolstoi." Perkins worked hard with Pennell's manuscript, and together they agreed on the book which would be published as *ROME HANKS*.

It was an immediate blockbuster, running through its entire first printing overnight. It sold 100,000 copies in its first six months of publication.



Pennell's second novel, NORA BECKHAM, followed ROME HANKS four years later, in 1948. It was not reviewed, and not hailed. In fact, it is a weak book by comparison to ROME HANKS. Subtitled "A Museum of Home Life," it is too much like a museum storehouse, a collection of scenes, too disconnected, too unexplained. Again, the theme is one of decay and despair, with sourness about life. Pennell's aunt wrote to a Junction Citian interested in writing a piece on her nephew:

He had more than talent. He had the spark of genius and it drove him mercilessly. I think if Max Perkins had lived Stan's second book would not have been published. Perkins would have guided him through the shoals that seem to overpower such writers as he, after an outstanding first book. The bitterness that made that second book an acrimonious hitting back at persons he thought had judged him unfairly was not a normal characteristic. I hope ... that you can present the complex person he was, actually the mixture he was.

Joseph Stanly Pennell's books are the best testimonial to his complexity; they show the mixture of attraction to and repulsion from what he would call "Life with a capital L." His own life contained tensions as well. An only child, he was, according to his aunt, "pampered beyond all belief, but also protected and restricted beyond belief." His early sicknesses gave him a lifelong fear of illness. Though loved greatly by his mother, and continuously photographed by his proud father, he lived with a tension caused by relatives. The Stanleys did not approve of the Pennells. In NORA BECKHAM, wife thinks of husband: "He had won a lot of those old picture prizes and one with her picture—a bust picture and not even quite decent—but he really didn't have much backbone or gumption." The Stanleys told the Pennell kin to leave Stan to them, they, the Pennells had plenty of young ones to fuss over in their own family while the Stanleys had only Stan. As a result, says Beulah Pennell, Stan was turned against his father, and other Pennell relatives.

As a student, he did only fair work. He created some trouble in public school and attended the Catholic school for a time. At the University of Kansas, where he was much interested in writing and drama, and where he was a popular student, he had only a 1.008 grade point average, a straight C, when he gradu-

ated. Yet that same year, 1926, he travelled to Oxford, England, and announced to Pembroke College that he wanted to be admitted to study. They refused, and he cabled his KU English professor R.D. O'Leary, imploring him to intercede. His cablegram concluded his story with the complaint: "And by God, sir, do you know, they wouldn't have me." Somehow, though, he was admitted, and he studied there until 1929, an ambitious task for a straight C student.

After his studies, he odd-jobbed all over the United States, working in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, St. Louis and elsewhere as a newspaperman, a teacher, a radio announcer and a radio studio writer. But in the mid-1930s he returned home to Junction City to live and write. He did so unobtrusively, spending most of his time at the library where Junction City librarian Thelma Baker assisted him greatly in his researching of the Civil War. He described this period in his life for a Kansas City newspaperman:

Not so long ago I had a job as a reporter on a newspaper in California. I made \$70 a week and worked my head off doing it. At the end of each month I would find that I had nothing left, that I had spent all I earned, and even owed money. I wasn't getting anywhere that way, and besides I was working myself sick. So I went back to Junction City. There I live in rooms that belong to me, so I don't pay rent. I get a little income from some property I own, not \$70 a week, of course, but enough so that I can live. Besides, right now I have \$200 in the bank instead of a monthly deficit. And what is most important of all, I don't have to work.

Of course Pennell was working hard on the one novel which would make him a known writer, and which would give Junction City a close look at what this native son thought. He left in 1941 to join the army anti-aircraft artillery in World War II. His mother had died in 1940 (his father much earlier in 1922) and he left his manuscript with librarian Thelma Baker. She was the one who sent it to Scribner's, thus putting it in the hands of Maxwell Perkins. After the war, and the publication of ROME HANKS, Pennell returned to Junction City. He was no longer unobtrusive. He had said what he had about the town, and the town began to say what it could about him. According to Beulah



Pennell, they were furious, and they hit back. All of the things he had done and they had disapproved of (he had gone dancing on the evening his father was buried, for example) became openly condemned.

But Pennell stayed and wrote. NORA BECKHAM may consist of excised parts of ROME HANKS, but surely some of it was written between 1944 and 1947, in Junction City. The incident that broke his relationship with Junction City was the installation by Clinton Swan, a Junction City jeweler, of a merry-go-round with a brass organ which played "Sidewalks of New York" and other tunes for four evening hours Monday through Friday and for eight hours on Saturdays and Sundays. Swan bragged that the organ could be heard from five miles away when the wind was right. The merry-go-round, only 300 feet from Pennell's building, robbed him of the peace and quiet he needed to write. After being ignored by the city fathers when he complained, he declared: "I'm just going to pull out of here. I don't like the climate, and then, of course, there is nothing in the village to interest a writer."

He had sold the movie rights to ROME HANKS in 1945 for \$50,000, and so he was financially equipped for life outside of Kansas. Also in 1947, he married Elizabeth Horton, a non-practicing M.D. whom he had met in San Francisco. Surprised and disappointed, Thelma Baker, who had been his closest companion for over ten years, called Pennell's aunt. "But he loved me," she declared. The aunt replied, "As much as he could love anyone."

His new wife and he moved to Seaside, Oregon, where they lived in a cliffside home perched 200 feet above the Pacific Ocean. Beulah Pennell insists that much of his motivation to marry came from increasing worries about his health. When he wasn't writing, he drank heavily, and his congenital lung problem was plaguing him again. He had had one lung removed by this time. Within two years of the marriage, Elizabeth died of an overdose of sleeping pills. She was said to have been worried about cancer. Three months later, Pennell married her sister, Virginia F. Horton, who was a registered nurse.

After the comparative failure of NORA BECKHAM, Pennell began writing a third Fork City book. He also started a book on his father's days as a photographer around Ft. Riley, to be

illustrated with photographs from his father's collection. No publisher was interested in such a work, though, and he stopped writing on the manuscript. In 1959, a collection of Pennell's poems, DARKSOME HOUSE, was hand-printed by a Coffeyville, Kansas, printer in an edition of only 30. The workmanship of the book won a prize, but otherwise it received little notice. Pennell seemed to be a writer who needed a concerned editor like Perkins to help him make sense of his own creative efforts.

On September 27, 1963, Joseph Stanley Pennell died in the Veteran's hospital in Portland, Oregon. He left no offspring, his only heritage being the novels set in his home town, Junction City. It is not uncommon for people to have a love-hate relationship with their parents, the towns of their youths, sometimes even with themselves. And it is not uncommon for a town used fictionally by a writer to take offense. But if the last word can be given to Pennell, it might be this passage from ROME HANKS:

... I would have had it happen as it did happen. It is well that she married the boy who came from Gadkin County, North Carolina, to look at the bleakness of Kansas on a Century camera ground glass.

It is well that she knew the Spanish cannon in the park, and the saloons on Pawnee street all her life, for, God help me, I should not have wished to have been born anywhere else but there....