

SOKOLSKÝ VĚSTNÍK

Bulletin of
Gymnastic Association
Sokol San Francisco

P.O. BOX 4006
MENLO PARK, CA. 94026-4006

1998

MAY - KVĚTEN

Issue No: 3



FRANT. KORBEL - CZECH PIONEER OF CALIFORNIA

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The name "Korbel" is known in the United States and especially in California. Many are familiar with the name "Korbel" from the label on the bottles of wine and champagne, but very few know that Frantisek (Franz) Korbel was a Czech emigrant and pioneer, who settled in San Francisco one hundred and forty two years ago and was one of the first producers of California champagne.

The life and the adventures of F. Korbel are very interesting - beginning in Prague in his youth to his old age in California.

There were four brothers in the Korbel family: Frantisek, Josef, Antonin and Leos. Frantisek Korbel was born July 24, 1831 in Bechyne, near Tabor in south of Bohemia, now Czech Republic, as the oldest son of father Korbel, who was the foreman in the castle of Count Paar. His father sent him to Budejovice to get his education. Frantisek studied very well and after high school he was accepted on Karl's University in Prague, where he studied to be a public surveyor. His dream was to build the railroads and bridges. But the political atmosphere of French revolution in 1848 reached Prague and Fr. Korbel, with many others joined revolution in Prague and fought on the barricades.

When the emperor sent the soldiers, the revolution was defeated, the barricades abandoned and defenders disappeared back to their homes. When Frantisek learned that the policemen are searching the homes and looking for rebels, he left the home and escaped to Vienna, where he had the uncle. After several months he returned to Prague thinking that his name would be forgotten by the police, but a few days later he was arrested and imprisoned in the army caserne in Prague. One day the guard forgot to close the gate and after few seconds of hesitation, he walked quietly outside, saluting the guard. Outside he met a friend and they planned the escape to Germany by the river boat. He reached the harbor Bremen where he found one organization which would take care of European refugees to America. The voyage on the clipper-boat to New York lasted 64 days, fourteen of them consisted of sea-sickness.

In New York he worked very hard in the shipyard. One day an agent came to Fr. Korbelt and offered him a better job on the Panama railroad construction. Being tired of New York's city life, Fr. Korbelt accepted with great pleasure the new opportunity. Because of his knowledge of geometry, he was able to work in the office as a draftsman. Working there, he was the witness to the death of many thousand of his fellow workers dying of malaria in that Panamanian hell. After five years the first train reached the Pacific Ocean and Fr. Korbelt realized that he has enough of Panama and decided to leave for San Francisco. It was in 1856 and San Francisco was just a little city, where the gold fever already begun. Fr. Korbelt was tired of the new adventures and rather looked for more stable job. He started working in the lumber company making the cigar boxes. With his intelligence and knowledge he become foreman very soon.

After 10 years of work in San Francisco, the smell of fresh lumber caught his nostalgic feeling of his old country and it's forests. He went to the Austrian consulate and asked for repatriation. This was granted. But when he returned to his country, the trouble started again. After a long interrogation, the custom officer told him, that he can return to his village, but his orders were, "to stay in the same place and not to move without the permission". He realized that this sort of life would not be easy and he made immediately plan to return with his brothers Antonin and Josef to America.

Fr. Korbelt and his two brothers started a new life in San Francisco. Frantisek had enough money and experience to buy his own wood factory. He invited his youngest brother Leos and they bought a saw-mill in Sonoma county, couple of miles up-stream of Russian river from Rio Nido. The business went very well and Korbels bought acres and acres of redwoods forest for precious lumber.

One day Fr. Korbelt looked over the acres of harvested trees and was saddened that the empty lots are not productive any more. So he tried to grow the wheat on that land, but the harvest was small and the wheat was hard to sell due to the competition with the midwest farmers. He soon got the new idea - to grow the grape wine. This idea was a great success and changed the whole life of Korbels. They imported the best grape stems from France and Czechoslovakia, but his secret was in the natural fermentation and soon the Korbelt champagne was the most famous in United States.

In 1889 the original winery caught fire and for lack of water it burned down completely. With the strong courage they rebuilt the winery and the business prospered again. They built his own railroad from Sonoma to the north Pacific harbors. He owned a printing shop in San Francisco with modern machines and published a satirical magazine called "The Wasp". The name "Korbelt" was well known not only in America but also in Austria and eventually the Austrian government forgave him his political "crimes" and named him an honorary consul in San Francisco. He never forgot his origin and supported his countrymen and organizations very often. He helped financially to build "Sokol Hall" for Czechoslovak gymnastic and cultural association in San Francisco.

In the year 1903, he wanted to retire. He returned to Prague to enjoy the rest of his exciting life in his native country. Next 10 years were peaceful, but when the First World war started and the relations between Europe and United States were severed, he did not receive any more of American dollars. He suffered during this war and also discovered when he did not have money, he did not have friends either. Eventually the war was over and he was happy when in 1918 the Republic of Czechoslovakia was founded, but he did not enjoy it for long time. He died in 1920 of pneumonia. After his death, the American judges decided that his fortune would stay in the hands of his brothers and theirs families. Korbelt continued successfully till 1955 when it was sold to Adolf and Paul Heck, who keep the famous name "KORBEL" until now.