



Jansen, Nebraska: A Story of Community Adjustment

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Article Summary: The author analyzes the commercial success of Jansen over many years. He concludes that the town's viability has resulted from its willingness to replace obsolete businesses with new ones and from its role as a "functional suburb" for the larger nearby towns of Fairbury and Beatrice.

See also an article about Jansen's founder, ["Peter Jansen: A Nebraska Pioneer."](#)

Cataloging Information:

Names: Peter Jansen

Nebraska Place Names: Jansen and Fairbury (Jefferson County), Beatrice (Gage County)

Russian Settlements in Jansen: Rosenhof, Rosenort, Rosenfeld, Rosental, Heuboden, Nieranlag, Blumenort

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Photographs / Images: maps of Jansen, Nebraska: Cub Creek Precinct; township map; "Russian Lane," c. 1890; town of Jansen, 1900

Table: Jansen businesses operating (as of 1953); businesses discontinued

JANSEN, NEBRASKA: A STORY OF COMMUNITY ADJUSTMENT

BY D. PAUL MILLER

SMALL communities are becoming increasingly important as a laboratory for social research. In the community, human behavior may be observed in its normal activity, and social facts may thus be established. It is recognized at the outset that present conditions are rooted in the past and that in order to better understand the present we must be aware of what has gone before. For this reason it is necessary to understand the early history of a community before present conditions may be analyzed to any satisfactory extent. In order to do this, some of the questions which must be answered are: Who were the early settlers? What unique patterns of behavior did they establish? What important changes have evolved since the early period? What caused these changes? And, what is the nature of the Jansen community activity today? These and other related questions will be discussed in the following pages.

THE SETTING

As the traveler speeds along on State Highway No. 3 between Beatrice and Fairbury, he nips the edge of three villages, none of which is large enough or sufficiently congested to cause him to break his speed, and he will very

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likely pass through without paying any particular attention to the villages.

The alert observer, however, will note certain distinctive features about Jansen. As the traveler drives west, he approaches the village over a large viaduct, which immediately suggests that advanced technology has been applied even to the Plains in the Midwest. The viaduct channels automobile traffic over the main line of the Rock Island Railroad and down through the village edge. Broad, black letters on the tall, silver-painted water tower identify the village to all passers, and the road sign at the corporation boundary reads: "Jansen, Pop. 255."

The highway runs diagonally along the south edge of the village. Two "dine and dance" places are conspicuously located along the highway, one on each side of the main street of the village; a third one is located about one-half block from the highway. If the traveler observes further, he will note that main street is wide, "black-topped," and lined on both sides with some almost new, and other well-kept, business places.

The Jansen village is located three miles east of the geographical center of Jefferson County. Fairbury, the county seat and a city of some six thousand population, is six miles southwest of Jansen, while Beatrice with twelve thousand population and county seat of adjacent Gage County is on Highway No. 3, twenty miles east of Jansen.

EARLY SETTLERS

With the exception of several scattered earliest settlers, the community was first settled by immigrants from Russia, most of whom were Mennonites. They usually arrived in groups. In keeping with their tradition, they desired to live in compact bodies and be isolated from the "outside world." It was for this reason that they selected the large and only available solid tract of land, which was owned by the Burlington and Missouri Railroad Company in Jefferson County. Most of this land, which was sold by the Burlington Railroad to the Mennonites, was situated on the "great divide" between the Big Blue and Little Blue Rivers. It included the major share of what is today Cub Creek Precinct in Jefferson County.

The press commonly referred to these immigrants as "Russians." This reference is incorrect so far as ethnic and cultural background is concerned. The early settlers were of Holland Dutch descent, having left Holland in 1556. In the period of three and one-half centuries which followed they migrated as a body from Holland to Prussia, from Prussia to Russia, and from Russia to America. There was practically no intermixture of the Mennonites with native blood in the various countries in which they made their abode after leaving Holland. They had adopted a considerable amount of German culture while in Prussia. They resided in Russia for approximately one century before migrating to America, and while in Russia they had maintained conditions of extreme isolation; consequently, they brought along to America a culture which was predominantly German.

They purchased approximately twenty-five thousand acres of land at the average price of three dollars seventy-five cents per acre in 1874 and 1875. According to tradition, they settled upon their newly acquired land, not indiscriminately, but in small, organized, well-planned clusters within the larger settlement. This was in line with their tradition of isolation. They tended to isolate not only from the "large outside world" but also into segments within their own group. The bases for differentiation in these smaller settlements were chiefly minor religious differences, or, in some instances, family ties.

"LINE VILLAGE" SETTLEMENTS

Each of the small settlements was well defined geographically and had a particular name which was, in each case, a German term carried over from the name of a village or settlement in the old country. Even though these settlements have disappeared today, the older residents make frequent reference to them, when discussing the early community. There were seven of these distinct settlements. With the assistance of older residents in the community, the writer has made a map on which these settlements are plotted.¹

¹See diagram, Fig. I.

The names of the settlements with the English translations are as follows: (1) "Rosenhof" (Village of Roses); (2) "Rosenort" (Spot of Roses); (3) "Rosenfeld" (Field of Roses); (4) "Rosental" (Valley of Roses); (5) "Heuboden" (Hay-loft or Hay Ground); (6) "Nieanlag" (New Settlement or New Layout); (7) "Blumenort" (Spot of Flowers).

In these settlements residences were established close together usually along both sides of the section lines. The farm for each family extended in a long narrow strip back of the residence usually to the next section line. Thus, in general, the farms were one mile long and varied in width from perhaps a few hundred feet to one-fourth mile or occasionally a greater width. The one-fourth mile wide farm would contain 160 acres, and many of the narrow farms were eighty, and some sixty acres, but in mile-long strips. Thus, one can easily visualize the unusual pattern made by the large number of narrow-strip farms.²

The largest settlement was along the section lines running east and west at the north edge of present-day Jansen. This settlement extended four and one-half miles in length, two miles east and one and a half miles west of the section on which Jansen is located today. This settlement included both *Rosenort* and *Rosenhof*. The section lines along which these residences were established were popularly referred to as "Russian Lane." This settlement was also frequently referred to as "Russian Settlement," or sometimes simply as "The Settlement." These terms are still used today by some of the older residents in the Jansen community.

Along this four and one-half miles of "Russian Lane" there had been erected at sometime since 1874, a total of thirty-seven dwellings, three church buildings, two schools, and three cemeteries. Thirty-six of the thirty-seven dwelling houses were standing at one time. Also, at this time two of the churches, one school, and three cemeteries were serving their various functions. At the peak of this "Russian Settlement," there was a total of forty-two dwellings,

²See map, Fig. II. Notice, e.g., Sec. 26.

churches, schools, and cemeteries in use simultaneously along a road four and one-half miles long. According to the opinions of the older residents in the community, this peak occurred in the years between 1890 and 1900.³ Since then, there has been a gradual decline in the number of dwellings along the "Lane." However, today there are twenty-four dwellings, one church, and three cemeteries remaining.

Remnants of the long-farm pattern may still be seen today. This pattern, however, has gradually been replaced by the conventional pattern until at present the long-strip farms have largely disappeared. This change can be attributed primarily to two factors. One is the fact that the immigrants have gradually abandoned the old traditional ways of their forefathers and have adopted the ways of the new American culture. The second factor is that of large-scale Mennonite migrations from the Jansen community. In the years just prior to, and the decade following the turn of the century, several groups of the early settlers sold their farms and migrated from the community. They were attracted by cheaper land in the sparsely settled areas in western Kansas and other states. When the Mennonites transferred the land ownership to non-Mennonites, the long farms were changed to the conventional pattern.

PIONEER ENTERPRISES

Sheep-raising was one of the early enterprises. Grazing areas for sheep were easily available and cheap. Sheep-herding became a common occupation. In addition to sheep-raising, there were flocks of geese, ducks, and chickens in the settlements. The *Ganse Junge* (young goose herd) was a cultural carry-over from the former homelands and became a well established institution in the "Russian Settlement." He was the young boy of the neighborhood who early in the morning collected a large flock of geese from the neighbors in the settlement and herded them into the open prairie during the day. In the evening around sunset he returned with the flock, herding them down the "Lane," distributing them to their various owners, each of whom could well recognize his own birds by brands, natural marks,

³See diagram, Fig. III.

or other distinctions which were clearly defined beforehand. The geese would be put in small pens for the night, and the same routine would be followed the next day. The responsibility of being the *Ganse Junge* would shift from one boy to another in the settlement in order to divide the work more or less equally among the families who had advantage of the service. Similarly, there was the *Kuh Junge* (young cow herd) who took the cows out to the open prairies after milking in the morning and returned again with the herd in the evening.

The silk industry was another enterprise of the early Jansen community which proved to be nothing more than a noble experiment in the early economic activities. In anticipation of this enterprise, large groves of mulberry trees were planted, leaves from which were to be used as food for the silkworms. In describing this enterprise in 1882, *The History of the State of Nebraska* states, "The Colony has over fifty acres of mulberry trees, which are doing well, and they have imported silk worms, with the design of making an industry of silk production.⁴ There are several trees growing today in the Jansen community which were planted in the 1870's. One of these is an old rugged tree just a few feet north of the home of Peter E. Friesen at the north edge but within the city limits of Jansen.

Silk production never became a successful economic venture at Jansen. The reason for this is that silk from Japan was imported and put on the market in this country at a price lower than that for which local producers could afford to sell. In an area of vast unexploited resources such as was found by the early settlers on the Plains, the amount of work and time required for silk production could reap much greater results when channeled into other areas. Consequently, silk production proved to be impractical.

THE TOWN OF JANSEN

The town of Jansen was founded by Peter Jansen, early pioneer and settler in the community. He purchased eighty

⁴*History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, A. T. Andreas, Proprietor, 1882), p. 995.

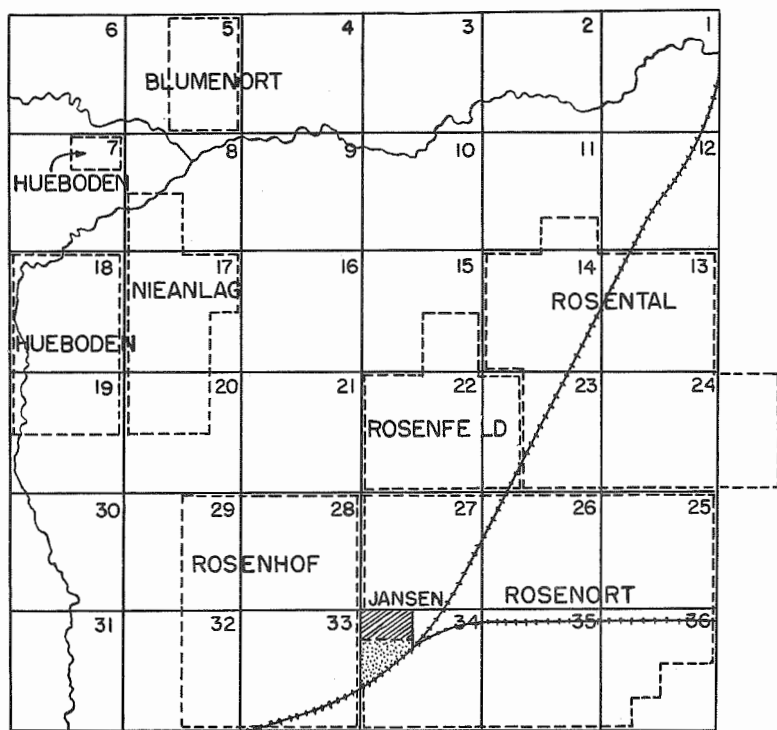


Fig. 1. Cub Creek Precinct showing the seven settlements as established by the first Mennonite emigrants, 1874-75. This map was worked out by Peter J. Thiessen of Jansen who was born in Russia and migrated to Jefferson County in 1874 with the first settlers.

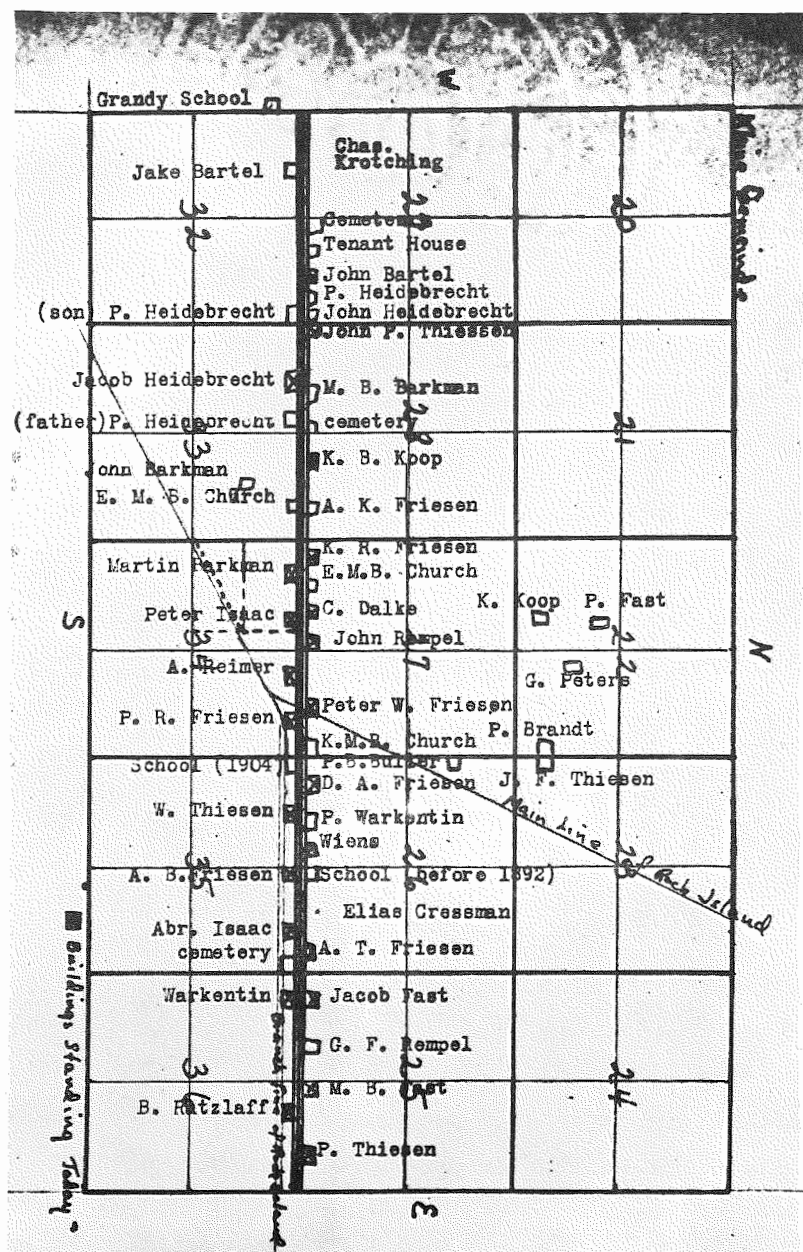


Fig. 3.
 "Russian Lane" (Approximately 1890)
 Prepared by A. B. and Peter E. Friesen (brothers) who live here.

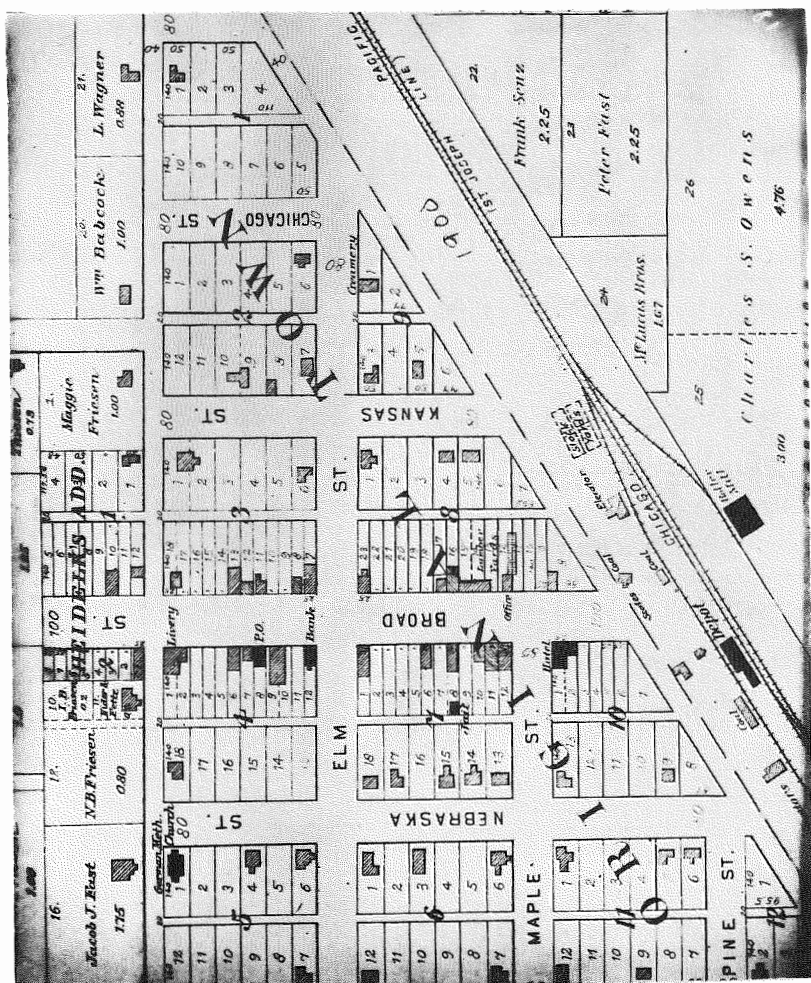


Fig. 4. Town of Jansen, 1900. From *Plat of Jefferson County, Nebraska* (Philadelphia: Northwest Publishing Co., 1900).

acres of land⁵ on August 28, 1886, planned the town, and the railroad officials named it "Jansen" in his honor. On October 1, 1886, the tract was deeded to the "Town of Jansen." Immediately thereafter, lots were sold, and the erection of buildings was begun. The railroad ran diagonally almost directly through the middle of Jansen's eighty acre plot of land. The land to the north of the track was considered the town of Jansen and is labeled on maps today as "Original Town."⁶

The history of Jansen is quite a contrast to the history of other towns in Jefferson County. Several towns began fifteen to eighteen years earlier and were well under way when Jansen began. Jansen, however, mushroomed and was very soon established as one of the leading small villages of the county. Within less than a year after the town was platted, there were thirteen distinct businesses operating in Jansen, and within the first decade there were approximately thirty businesses established in the town.⁷ Various methods were used to attract prospective businessmen to the town. Peter Jansen had circulars printed which mapped the layout of the town with the streets and lot numbers. This circular indicated the location of Jansen in relation to Fairbury and stated that "lots for improvement are offered at low prices and on favorable terms."⁸

Peter Jansen intended that liquor would never be sold in Jansen. He had a "prohibitive clause" included in the original deed of each lot as it was sold. This clause read as follows:

It is expressly agreed between the parties hereto that

⁵5½ of NW¼ of Section 34. See *Numerical Index*, Section 34, Register of Deeds, Fairbury, Nebraska.

⁶See map, Fig. IV.

⁷The information on the businesses in Jansen was taken from the "Jansen News Items," which appeared in the *Fairbury Gazette*, a weekly newspaper published in Fairbury, Nebraska, beginning in 1870. This information has been checked and verified by older residents in the community. For further detail, see D. Paul Miller, "An Analysis of Community Adjustment" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1953), Chapter V.

⁸A copy of one of the original circulars used by Peter Jansen for his personal markings of lots sold, lots available, names of parties buying, and so forth is in the "Jansen Collection," Bethel College Historical Library, North Newton, Kansas.

intoxicating liquor shall not be manufactured, sold or given away in any place of public resort as a beverage on said premises and in case this condition be broken or violated this conveyance shall be null and void.⁹

In spite of the precaution taken to prevent the sale of liquor, the town of Jansen has, in effect, never been without a saloon (or tavern) except in the days of prohibition. In 1888, a saloon was operating at a very convenient location on main street just north of the village boundary line. In 1892, the second saloon was erected, and the paper reports "two saloons are more hilarity than one."¹⁰

The first saloons were on main street just outside the village limits. Later a saloon was opened within the town. It had been discovered that one lot in town did not have the prohibitive clause in the deed. The reason for the omission of the prohibitive clause, as explained by the older residents, is that Peter Jansen, while in Fairbury, had an opportunity to sell a lot to a prospective shoemaker. He did not have one of the special forms which he ordinarily used and which included the clause prohibiting sale of liquor, but, rather than to lose the sale, he sold the lot and wrote up the deed on a standard form which did not include the clause. Since this had been discovered and since this saloon was operating legally in the town, other liquor businesses have also been opened on other lots even though the deeds contained prohibitive clauses. The legality of the clause has never been contested, and today it is ineffective. A "Quiet Title to Real Estate" action was taken for one lot in 1950. This renders the prohibitive clause legally ineffective on this one particular lot and makes the selling of alcoholic beverages legally permissible on this lot.

The town has always had a relatively large volume of business. Jansen's only bank has operated continuously from 1887 to the present time. Two other businesses, the Jansen Lumber and Implement and the Jansen Hotel and Restaurant, have also served since the very early days of the town's existence. These three establishments are still doing business today and may well be considered pillars of

⁹*Numerical Index*, loc. cit. See the original deed for lots sold within the boundaries of the "Original Town."

¹⁰The *Fairbury Gazette*, May 28, 1892.

Jansen's business. The residents of the town boast that "during the depression years, not a single business was forced to close down."

Jansen today is a thriving business town. Two electrical appliance stores and the hardware and implement store do a great volume of business over a wide area. The local bank is patronized by 100 per cent of the Jansen businessmen, and, according to local estimates, at least 90 per cent of the farmers in the trade area do their banking in Jansen.

The following table portrays a picture of Jansen's business developments. It indicates those business firms which were started before 1900 and also those starting after 1900. These are broken into categories of (1) "businesses operating today" and (2) "businesses discontinued."

TABLE I
BUSINESS FIRMS

Operating, 1953		Discontinued	
Started before 1900	Started after 1900	Started before 1900	Started after 1900
bank barber shop blacksmith drayage** elevator general store groceries hardware & implement hotel lumber yard	auto repair & service station bulldozing** creamery (or produce) dine & dance taverns (3) electric & household ap- pliance (2) feed mill painting** pool hall tank wagon service** trucking ser- vice**	blacksmith butcher shop carpenter shop drug store flour mill furniture & undertaking general store (2) harness shop implements jeweler & watchmaker livery barn lumber medical doctor newspaper & printing nursery pump & wind- mill saloon (2) shoe shop soap factory veterinarian	auto sales (used) creamery broom making electrical con- tractor newspaper & printing shoe repair telephone* windmill & pump
Total 10	13	22	8

*Taken over by non-local enterprise.

**Do not have a business building other than the home.

As indicated in the above table, we find that Jansen has twenty-three businesses operating today, ten of which were begun before 1900 and continued to the present time. Thirty have been discontinued.

The reasons for Jansen's vigorous economic condition may be summarized in the following points: (1) in its business activity the town has always been ready to replace obsolete businesses and services with new businesses and services in order to satisfy better the new demands of a changing world; (2) Jansen has served in the role of the "functional suburb" of the neighboring cities. Much of Jansen's business comes from neighboring Fairbury or Beatrice. Jansen is within reasonable driving distance and offers certain advantages to the residents of these cities which are not provided locally. From the city to Jansen, the motorist might enjoy a peaceful ride on a smooth highway; there are no parking problems; there is popular recreation in the "dine and dance" places, and good retail stores where you "do business with the boss" welcome the out-of-town guests. Small rural towns like Jansen are not disappearing today, as is oftentimes believed. Instead, the role of the small rural town is changing and this role is becoming increasingly important in the activities of the larger community today.