



## Peter Jansen: A Nebraska Pioneer

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See also the article "[Jansen, Nebraska: A Story of Community Adjustment.](#)"

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## PETER JANSEN: A NEBRASKA PIONEER

BY D. PAUL MILLER

PETER Jansen was a politician, colonizer, farmer, diplomat, traveler, and founder of a town named in his honor. He was born in the town of Berdjansk, South Russia, March 21, 1852, and died in 1923. He was the person who was perhaps most responsible for the early Mennonite colonists settling in Nebraska. In the early days he was a capable representative of his people—the Mennonites—to the railroad companies and also to the government. He became prominent in local, state, and national affairs, yet always remained a true friend to people in the common walks of life.

He lived on his ranch home located three miles east and one mile north of the present site of Jansen village. Jansen is six miles east of Fairbury, the county seat of Jefferson County, Nebraska. Peter Jansen purchased a section and a half of land with the savings he accumulated while managing his father's farm. On his newly acquired land he erected buildings and planted trees; he had a good orchard, a large front yard, and an artificial pond. In late summer, 1882, he, with his newly acquired wife, occupied this place which was later to become popularly known as the "Jansen Ranch."

On the ranch Mr. Jansen specialized in sheep-raising. In the beginning, the sheep were herded on the open prairies. With this open prairie grazing method feed was abundant and cheap, and sheep raising was a prosperous enterprise. As settlers continued to move into the area, fences

*D. Paul Miller, an instructor in sociology at Nebraska State Teachers College, Wayne, published an article on the town of Jansen in the June issue of this magazine.*

were set up; by 1890 grazing in the open prairies became almost impossible. Jansen then changed from "raising" to "fattening" sheep.

Sheep were brought from the West, sometimes from as far west as Oregon, in the fall of the year. They were fed corn, oats, and hay in the winter, were shorn in the spring, and then were shipped to Chicago. In their big years the Jansen ranch handled from twenty to twenty-five thousand sheep. In the record season they fattened 25,800 head.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Jansen summarizes the extent of his sheep business in a letter to the editor of the *Fairbury Journal*. This letter is headed by the editor's title, "Peter's Valedictory." In the letter he states:

During the 35 years since I came to Jefferson County and started raising and fattening sheep I have handled over 350,000 head, shipping a great many as far west as Oregon. I have shipped into my feed lots at Jansen and on the home place as high as a hundred double-deck cars in the fall, shipping out a hundred and twenty in the spring, the increase being caused by the gain weight and the wool.

The sheep consumed over a million bushels of corn, about 35,000 tons of rough feed, besides oil cake and bran.

In all of these shipping operations I have been lucky enough not to lose a single man nor even had a bad accident.

I have produced and shipped during this period over a million pounds of wool. . .

When I look back over my 35 years career in Jefferson County, I have abundant reasons to feel thankful. I have made a good many mistakes, like all mortals, but I hope they were mistakes of the head and not the heart. . .<sup>2</sup>

Peter Jansen became a staunch Republican early in his experiences in Nebraska and remained a Republican to the end. He was an advocate of the "gold standard," and

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<sup>1</sup>*Memoirs of Peter Jansen, The Record of a Busy Life, An Autobiography* (Published by the author, Beatrice, Nebraska, 1921), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>*The Fairbury Journal*, a newspaper published weekly in Fairbury, Jefferson County, Nebraska, from the year 1895 to the present time. The exact issue in which this appeared is not certain. The letter is dated February 5, 1909, and is addressed to Bill Cramb who was at that time editor of the *Journal*. This clipping is in the "Jansen Collection," Bethel College Historical Library, North Newton, Kansas.

a supporter and personal friend of President William McKinley. A statement from his *Memoirs* indicates his political views quite clearly. It was made in regard to the Cleveland Administration which came into power in 1893.

For over a year we have had genuine democratic times; banks failing right and left; business failures doubled; money scarce, high and hard to get on the best of collateral; factories shut down; freight cars idle... and the worst is yet to come.<sup>3</sup>

His first experiences in political activity began shortly after his arrival in America. He and his father arrived in Canada in 1873 where they immediately devoted themselves to the task of preparing for the arrival of more immigrants from Russia. In 1874, he and his father had an interview with President Grant regarding public lands that might be available to large bodies of Mennonites. They were cordially received by the President and in turn were introduced to General Custer, who told them of the Indians and unsettled conditions in the West. In 1884 Jansen was chosen as alternate delegate to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, at which time James G. Blaine was nominated on the fourth ballot. In 1888 his neighbors in Jefferson County elected him, without his knowledge, to the office of justice of the peace. In 1896 he was delegate-at-large to the Republican National Convention which nominated William McKinley. Jansen was elected to the state legislature, representing the Thirty-Fourth District, in 1898. In 1899 President McKinley appointed him United States Commissioner to the Paris Exposition to be held in 1900. When McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Mr. Jansen was delegated by Governor Mickey to represent Nebraska at his funeral. In 1904 he represented Nebraska at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis and in 1910 was elected to the state senate.<sup>4</sup> Jansen assumed the responsibilities of these

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<sup>3</sup>Jansen, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>This information was compiled from various sources including newspapers, magazines, and Jansen's *Memoirs*. See in particular *The Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, August 2, 1936, Sections C and D, p. 3; and, *Mennonite Life*, an illustrated quarterly magazine published by Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, October, 1947 issue, p. 41, ff.

various roles and performed them in a very capable and determined manner. In controversial issues he stood by what he believed, even if that required standing alone.

While in the senate Jansen made a blistering attack on the liquor interests when a "county option" bill came up for consideration in 1911. He favored county option and wished to eliminate the liquor interests from state politics. Excerpts from his speech are as follows:

I want to eliminate the pernicious influence of the brewers in our state politics; they are becoming more obnoxious than the railroads ever were.

We had a strong man in the governor's chair; a man, although a democrat, who had the courage of his convictions, and who, in spite of the threats of my friends from Omaha placed his signature under the eight o'clock closing act. What was the result? The liquor interests got his scalp, as they said they would, and (I blush to say it) by the aid of the republicans, nominated Dahlman and would have elected him if he had been sober enough to stay at home.

What did they do to that former idol of democracy, William Jennings Bryan, when he saw the need of delivering the democratic party from the demon of rum? Why, they simply eliminated him from politics and relegated him to Texas.

They claim county option is a step toward state-wide prohibition, and I hope to God it is. But in the same breath they tell us that prohibition does not prohibit and that more liquor is sold in prohibition states than in those that have not this law. Mark their convincing logic!

Before God and this honorable body, I impeach the saloon. I charge it with the murder of the bodies and souls of innumerable thousands. I charge it with being the cause of almost all crime, almost all poverty, and almost all the ignorance afflicting our land.

Gentlemen: I implore you for the sake of the fair name of our glorious state; for the sake of the thousands of wives and children whose husbands and fathers squander their hard-earned wages in squalid, reeking saloons; for the sake of generations still unborn—yes on behalf of the sacred memory of your mothers, vote for this bill. I VOTE "AYE."<sup>5</sup>

In the election of 1912, Jansen lost the senatorial race to his Democratic opponent. His reactions to the loss are well expressed in an open letter to the paper. Parts of this letter are quoted below.

<sup>5</sup>This speech was printed in the *Beatrice Daily Sun*, February 9, 1911. (The "option bill" was defeated by a vote of 17 to 16.)



Peter Jansen

It seems fashionable at this season for defeated candidates to issue what you might call "post-mortem" statements, giving the why and wherefore of their defeat. The only real reason I attribute mine to, is that I lacked a few votes. But after all, I find myself in very distinguished company.

However, I desire to thank my many friends for their loyal support and to assure them that I deeply appreciate their efforts on my behalf; their friendship is worth more to me than any paltry honor I might have obtained.

As is generally known, sickness in my family prevented me from making an aggressive personal campaign. I did not attend a single political meeting, nor did I attempt to make a single political speech, and under these circumstances, to be beaten by a few votes out of some 7,500 in the district is certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

... As I never expect to run for office again but hope to fight in the ranks of the Republican party for many years to come, it may be permissible to shortly analyze the recent campaign from my viewpoint.

My own defeat is of no importance whatever as it matters little to the country at large who represents this district in the Nebraska senate. However, the same conditions which caused it, were obtained in an aggravated degree throughout the country.

Well has it been said of the new party that it was conceived in personal ambition, born in malice and nourished on misrepresentation. The selfish ambition of one man to whom the republican party had vouchsafed all the honors any mortal can desire and prompted by his hatred towards an erstwhile friend who would not be dictated to, will cause a revolution of the economic policy of this country and may bring about nation-wide commercial disaster.

He was ably seconded by a lot of ambitious demagogues and politicians, who hoodwinked the American people under a mask of religious rant and stood at Armageddon until the prospective offices faded away November 5th. [Jansen here refers to Theodore Roosevelt and his third party in the election of 1912.]

In reading Governor Aldrich's "statement of defeat," I find a grain of truth in what he says about the church people and their spasmodic efforts to do good at the polls. Two years ago they gave me their support because I stood for a certain moral issue; I have not changed one whit as far as this issue is concerned, but because I would not take orders from a few local "2x4 scant" politicians, while in the senate, these demagogues, who called themselves "Christians," but in truth care not a rap for principles of any kind, succeeded in alienating a portion of this vote from me. At the primary last spring these saints (?) brought out a candidate for senator who both in practice and theory is diametrically opposed to the issue which they declared paramount two years ago.

It will be mighty interesting to watch the future antics of these local statesmen, who, according to their own story, played so important a part in shaping the destinies of this nation at the Chicago convention. If they are sincere and consistent they will remain at Armageddon and battle for the Lord, but according to last reports the prospects for a pie counter in that locality have disappeared since November 5th, and it is my guess that we will see them crawling back under the republican tent flap looking perfectly innocent.

Thanking my friends again, I am very sincerely,  
Peter Jansen.<sup>6</sup>

Peter Jansen was antagonistic toward Theodore Roosevelt, particularly during the campaign and after the 1912 election. In his *Memoirs* he states: "Theodore Roosevelt delivered the Republican party bodily into the hands of the Democrats, and I was defeated for a re-election by thirty votes out of a total of seventy-five hundred in the two counties of Gage and Pawnee."<sup>7</sup>

A rather humorous incident occurred to Jansen during one of his political campaigns. When he was campaigning for the office of state legislator in 1898, he went around in the community making speeches in school houses. At the close of the meeting he would shake hands and pass out cigars to the people as they filed out. On one such occasion a stout old lady was in line, and as she approached Jansen she lowered her hand and with a forceful swing slapped the bottom of the box of cigars, knocking it from Jansen's hand and scattering cigars in every direction, shouting angrily, "That much for your dirty Republican cigars." Later, Jansen would jokingly comment on the assistance he had received on one occasion when distributing his cigars.<sup>8</sup>

During his prosperous years, Jansen was compared by some writers with "James J. Hill and other great North Western business luminaries." This was indicated in a news story reprinted from *The Daily Providence* of Vancouver, British Columbia and reprinted in one of the local papers. It stated that Peter Jansen was vice-president of the Frazer Lumber Company in Canada and that a steamship was

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<sup>6</sup>Taken from the *Beatrice Daily Sun*. The news story was dated November 11, 1912.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Jansen, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.



named "Senator Jansen" in his honor. The news article was entitled, "GEE WHIZ—SOMEBODY HOLD PETER."<sup>9</sup>

In 1921, sixty-two young Russian refugees were detained at Ellis Island, New York, and it seemed almost certain that they would be deported. Jansen intervened, and through his political connections and influence he was able to contact the President and numerous senators and representatives, some of whom were his personal friends. It is said that largely through the influence and negotiations of Jansen the young men were granted permission to stay.<sup>10</sup>

Jansen was urged at various times by his political friends to become a candidate for state governor. Because of his pronounced opposition to the state militia, he refused to seek this honor. There was also the factor that he was opposed to the death penalty which the governor was required at times to execute. Thus, Jansen's personal scruples prevented him from submitting to the wish of his party so far as becoming a candidate for governor was concerned.

When Jansen was at the International Exposition in Europe, he visited his homeland in Russia. As a special envoy of the United States he visited Moscow. When he presented his credentials to DeWitte, the Premier of Russia, the Premier remained standing, intimating thus that the interview was to be brief. When Mr. Jansen approached him with a dignified salutation in the Russian language, the Premier was surprised and asked him how he had learned the language. Jansen replied that he was a native of Russia and was exiled when twenty years old. DeWitte then said, "How can a Russian exile come back to this country as a special representative of the great government of the United States?" Jansen, knowing DeWitte to be liberal, replied, "Because of our free institutions under which any man may

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<sup>9</sup>This is taken from a newspaper clipping in the "Jansen Collection," Bethel College Historical Library, North Newton, Kansas. There is no identification or clue as to the source or date it appeared in the local paper. It appeared in the above-mentioned Canadian paper Saturday, June 19, year not indicated.

<sup>10</sup>From *The Mennonite* (Berne, Indiana: The Mennonite Book Concern), June 12, 1923, p. 4.

become whatever he has the power to become." DeWitte pointed to a chair, and the interview lasted two hours.<sup>11</sup>

Jansen never lost the "common touch," as the following description attests:

"He walked with men in the high places in America and with the nobility of Europe; yet was always one with the people in the common walks of life and true to his faith."<sup>12</sup>

In the College of Agriculture Hall of Fame farm meeting in 1937, tribute was paid to Peter Jansen. In the speech made in his behalf the closing words were: "I find that his life and works are summed up best perhaps in a critical sentence contained in an article written by a member of his church. . . The writer said 'For his soul's salvation he had little time.'"<sup>13</sup>

In an editorial comment in the Fairbury paper, the editor summarized the activities of Peter Jansen, pointing out that he preferred to give credit to a man while he was still living and could appreciate it, and stated:

When Peter dies others may pronounce fulsome eulogies, but not yours truly. . .

There is a great moral in Peter Jansen's life. It is a simple moral and has been couched in rather profane language by no less person than Robert Louis Stevenson: "Anyway, I did my damndest."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>This interview was described by E. S. Bayard in the column entitled "Down the Pike" which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Farmer* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Capper-Harman-Slocum, Inc.), February 12, 1944.

<sup>12</sup>A description of Peter Jansen taken from *The Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, August 2, 1936, Sections C and D, p. 3. This article features the Golden Anniversary Celebration of Jansen, Nebraska.

<sup>13</sup>*The Lincoln Star*, January 5, 1937. This was a front page article which included a picture of Peter Jansen.

<sup>14</sup>*The Fairbury Journal*. This is part of W. F. Cramb's editorial in the February 1, 1897 issue.