

# Minnesota History and the Schools

## THE MOUNTAIN LAKE COMMUNITY: A RADIO SCRIPT<sup>1</sup>

*Roald Tweet*

**ANNOUNCER:** We are about to bring you a program entitled "The Development of the Mountain Lake Community." Names on this program do not refer to actual persons. Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The characters are William Mason, a trapper, who really founded the town; John Peter Bakus, a gentleman of eighty-five who tells the story; and Peter C. Brown, a newspaper reporter, who is interested in the history of the Mennonite settlement. Mr. Bakus relates the events in the community's history in some dramatically mysterious manner, so that the radio audience may actually hear the voices of those about whom he speaks, and the sounds of things that happen.

**P. C. BROWN:** I have often visited your prosperous little town down in the rich farming country of Cottonwood County. Now, Mr. Bakus, do you know how this city was founded, or how Mountain Lake was named?

**MR. BAKUS:** Yes, and I'll be glad to tell you all about it. We're proud of our community. (Pause.) Well—to begin my story—(clears his throat) a man by the name of William Mason, a trapper by trade, was out hunting. He came upon a large but shallow lake nearly hidden by a thick growth of cottonwood trees. (Sound of birds twittering in the trees, and of a man making his way through the thick rushes.)

<sup>1</sup>For the writing of this script, Roald Tweet of Mountain Lake received the first prize, a cash award of fifty dollars, in an essay contest conducted by the Minnesota Historical Society. It is printed herewith in order to familiarize members of the society with the aims and progress of the Junior Historian organization. The competition was open to members of Junior Historical societies in schools throughout the state. Members of other chapters who received prizes in the contest are named in the June issue of this magazine, *ante*, p. 146. *Ed.*

TRAPPER (exclaiming in surprise, and talking to himself): Why, this large lake with its three islands is new to me! How have I missed it on my treks in this southern Minnesota region? I didn't know it was here! Here's good hunting, good fishing, good soil! This would be just the place to live! I'll talk with my wife about this! (Sound as he walks around.) Well, it should have a name! (He mutters incoherently to himself.) Cottonwood Lake?—No! Fish Lake?—No! Let's see!—I have it! Mountain Lake! That's what I'll call it! Mountain Lake! (Very much excited.) And the biggest island can be Mountain Lake Island!

MR. BAKUS: And so, Mr. Brown, Mountain Lake was discovered and named. The trapper and his wife finally moved to the site. In their little cabin their daughter was born. Records indicate that she was the first white child born in the vicinity of Mountain Lake.

MR. BROWN: I'm wondering about something else, Mr. Bakus. Just how did the Russian Mennonites get here? Why did they leave Europe? Why did they select Minnesota for a colony?

MR. BAKUS: Well, that takes us back a long, long time. The Mennonites originally migrated from Holland to Germany to escape religious persecution. When Germany demanded military services contrary to their religious convictions, these disciples of Menno Simons accepted Russia's invitation to settle in the Ukraine to develop that territory agriculturally.

MR. BROWN: Very interesting, my friend. And if I remember my history correctly, Russia was much pleased with the Mennonites.

MR. BAKUS: Yes, but it didn't last long. Russia, too, required military service. Mennonites were true to their convictions. They looked toward America. That land of freedom beckoned, but oh, how far distant it seemed! I was just a little boy then. I still remember, though, that when we learned we had to leave Russia, it was a sorrowful day for us. What uncertainties lay ahead! How we prayed for guidance, for a safe journey, for a new home away over there!

MR. BROWN: Do you have any vivid memories of what happened during your last days in Russia? Were you well treated, or were you ridiculed?

MR. BAKUS: Some things stand out very clearly in my mind. We had to sell our house for a fourth of its value, and our household goods at auction prices. I remember when they auctioned our things they smashed a heavy Bible with a silver clasp on it. It was our dearest possession. (Pause.) What a time we had to get ready! Our mother was calling to us all the time, it seemed.

MOTHER: Now, John Peter, come here with that sack. The other is already filled. Hold it still while I put in the zwieback. (Sounds of zwieback being put into sack.) Susan, oh Susan, where are you?

SUSAN: Here, mother, I have the things packed. The big chest is now ready to lock. Maybe you'd better check the things in it to be sure nothing has been left out. (Faint sounds of packing, and slamming bags shut.) What shall I do next?

MOTHER: Better go see if the hams are done. (Sound of squeaky oven door, and sizzling hams.) Are they all right?

SUSAN (slamming oven door): Yes, they're all right! And how delicious they smell! They'll taste mighty good during our long journey. (A knock at the door.)

JOHN PETER: I'll answer it. (Pause, and sound of walking to the door.) Mother, is it all right to let the auction man begin?

MOTHER: Yes, (sighing), I suppose so. Oh, how I wish we didn't have to go. (Sobbing.)

MR. BAKUS: And so it was. We went to the railroad station the next day, a sorrowful group of wanderers. After we got onto the train we didn't have much trouble crossing the border. Guards checked us and our baggage across. We were off on a brand new adventure, 218 of us. We had thousands of miles of uncertainties ahead. We prayed, oh how we prayed!

MR. BROWN: Then I'd like to hear about the trip across the Atlantic.

MR. BAKUS: At the seacoast we boarded a slow freight boat. Then trouble really started. Most of the passengers were sick. I was among the fortunate few to escape illness. Zwieback and ham no longer tasted good. One day the cook invited us to the ship's kitchen to cook a good meal for ourselves. We were all pretty sick and tired of

the whole thing after weeks on the ocean. One day someone shouted, "Land!" We docked at New York weary, yet looking forward with anticipation. That's the story up to the shores of the "promised land."

MR. BROWN: Did you have any particular place in mind? How did you decide upon your next step?

MR. BAKUS: In New York we were met by a Mr. John Reimer who, together with a few others, had served as an "advance agent" or scout in the United States. He and his companions had investigated Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Minnesota, and had decided that southern Minnesota was best suited to agriculture.

MR. BROWN: Well, what was your first impression of Mountain Lake when you stepped off the train that day in 1873? (Sound of stopping of train.)

MR. BAKUS: Honestly, we were so confused we hardly knew what to think. Here was a small pioneer settlement of ten homes and three business places. It wasn't much to look at. With foresight the Mennonite "scouts" had already established an "immigrant house" where the new arrivals might have temporary shelter until they could arrange for family dwellings. (Sound of general conversation.)

MR. BROWN: Now, Mr. Bakus, what about this Mountain Lake? How did it progress? How successful were these Mennonites in establishing themselves in the community?

MR. BAKUS: Well, it was this way, Mr. Brown. Many of these Mennonites had money to purchase small farms. As a result, several of the English-speaking settlers sold out to the newcomers. Thus the Mennonites gradually replaced other pioneers. More of the brethren came, so the population of Cottonwood County grew from 534 in 1870 to 2,870 in 1875.

MR. BROWN: For how long a time was this good land available?

MR. BAKUS: W-e-e-l, let's see. (Pause.) By 1880 most of the better farming land was occupied by Mennonites. And in the group of immigrants were wheelwrights, carpenters, blacksmiths, and other tradesmen who did much in the way of building homesteads and making tools. (Sound of hammering, sawing, etc.)

MR. BROWN: But was all so "rosy"—this getting settled on the rough prairie?

MR. BAKUS: Indeed it wasn't "rosy"! During the first two decades in Minnesota, the Mennonites experienced many difficulties. Grasshoppers came in swarms, destroying the crops. Each season they laid their eggs in the ground. I remember one time my little sister came running to father.

MARTHA: Oh, papa, the grasshoppers! They're here again! They're getting into the well and into our food! What shall we do?

PAPA: Let's hurry, Martha! Get some boards to cover the well and the food barrel! (Sound of grasshoppers as door opens, and Martha hurries out.) Oh, those pests! That's the second time they've ruined our crops. They've made me so poor I can't even—

MARTHA (bursting in): Papa, oh papa, where are you?

PAPA: Here, Martha! Here I am! What now?

MARTHA (sobbing): Oh, papa, the grasshoppers—they got into the well before I got there, and now they're in the storage bin, too. Oh, we won't have any grain left for planting.

PAPA (gasping): Oh, Martha, do you realize what that means? We won't have a crop next year. We must pray—pray hard.

MR. BAKUS: Well, Mr. Brown, it was about a month later that many of the settlers were gathered at our cabin to discuss the grasshopper situation. Martha came dashing in very much excited.

MARTHA: There are some strangers out here. They say they came from Dakota Territory.

PAPA: Ask them in, Martha.

FIRST DAKOTAN: Well, gentlemen, we trust we aren't interrupting a meeting or something. We—

PAPA (interrupting): We were talking about our crop prospects.

SECOND DAKOTAN: Well, mister, we come from Dakota. We have heard of your plight out here in Minnesota. We have come to ask you to move to Dakota. There's plenty of good land, and no grasshoppers.

PAPA: We would gladly move, but we're so poor; well, you see we just can't. (Neighbors join in, agreeing with Mr. Bakus.)

THIRD DAKOTAN: But surely you can't be that poor.

FIRST NEIGHBOR: Listen, stranger, we wish we weren't, but we are.

SECOND NEIGHBOR: Yes, maybe you never were that poor. Just wait, sir; someday the grasshoppers may come your way.

FIRST NEIGHBOR: Then maybe you'll change your mind. We'll just stick here, and the Lord willin', we'll lick this thing yet. (Others are emphatic in this idea, too.)

MR. BAKUS: Well, Mr. Brown, those men from Dakota just walked out of the cabin without saying more. That was 1877. We still had faith in spite of the grasshoppers. One afternoon we got together and prayed earnestly. In answer to our prayers, the grasshoppers disappeared. Little termites came and laid their eggs on the grasshoppers, killing them as they clung to the stalks. You see now, Mr. Brown, how the Lord preserved us?

MR. BROWN: Mr. Bakus, after such hardships, just how did Mountain Lake manage?

MR. BAKUS: Well, it was like this. (Pause.) The nineties marked a turning point. Until then the farmers had experienced hardships. They had struggled against great odds to maintain their existence and secure the necessities of life; at times it seemed hopeless. But during the nineties farmers' crops were better than ever. The farmer was making enough money to buy a horse, even though the price of grain was low.

MR. BROWN: What about the village itself? I suppose that grew and prospered with the farmers.

MR. BAKUS: Yes, you're right. Abram Penner was the first Mennonite to go into business. He built his first store in 1875. Just three years later the village consisted of sixty houses, five stores, two flour and grist mills, two lumberyards, two blacksmith shops, two large grain elevators, a hotel, an implement shop, and a saloon. By 1886 Mountain Lake became an incorporated municipality. By 1890 the population was about 750. Today the census reports about 1,800.

MR. BROWN: We know that the Mennonites have a strong religious faith. Do you have something to say about their churches?

MR. BAKUS: We have ten churches in the town and its immediate

vicinity. One is a German Lutheran, one, a Missionary Alliance church. The rest are Mennonite churches, representing various branches of that faith. The local Bible school is a community project. Children receive instruction from the first through the sixth grades; and there is a senior department in which those beyond high school age enroll. We also have a community hospital and an old people's home, both of which are sponsored by the churches. And don't forget, Mr. Brown, we have A-1 public schools, too.

MR. BROWN: Really, I've learned much from this interview, Mr. Bakus. Now I shall turn in my report to the newspaper office so that others may learn of this very interesting little city and its background.

MR. BAKUS: And please, Mr. Brown, when you visit Mountain Lake, drop in at my home on Boxelder Street; I'll treat you to *plume mose* and zwieback!

ANNOUNCER: Thank you, gentlemen, for all the valuable information about the history of Mountain Lake. At some future date we hope to present another Minnesota community. Maybe it will be yours, so be sure to listen in. Thanks!



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