

MINNESOTA HISTORY

'King Jake' reigned in Lac qui Parle

CURT BROWN

Of all the cool old photographs in all the small-town Minnesota history museums, I have a new favorite. That is, if you can call a 131-year-old, black-and-white image "new."

The picture hangs in a simple frame on the "Timeline Wall" of the Lac qui Parle County History Center in Madison — 165 miles west of Minneapolis. It's also on the cover of a book titled: "Norwegians on the Prairie" (tinyurl.com/MadisonMinn).

Snapped in November 1886, the photo shows work horses interspersed with a few dozen Norwegian immigrants, bundled in thick coats and hats by a white wooden frame building.

High above the crowd, Jacob F. Jacobson straddles the steep roof's apex — holding an American flag.

Born on a Norwegian fjord in 1849, Jacobson was a 37-year-old farm implement dealer when he climbed the rooftop. He would go on to a prominent career in the Legislature, forcing powerful railroad companies to pay more taxes.

In 1908, he won the Republican nomination for governor but failed to unseat John A. Johnson in a campaign that pitted a Norwegian challenger against a son of Swedes. Jacobson's anti-alcohol stance might have cost him the race when the so-called "wets" backed Johnson.

By the time Jacobson died in 1938, at 89, the Minneapolis Star called him "one of the most colorful figures in Minnesota public life." And his hometown newspaper, the Madison Independent Press, said: " 'Jake,' as he was known to his friends, was a fighter ... and was called the Lac qui Parle County 'war horse' during his political life."

The rooftop photo taken 52 years before his death captured one of Jacobson's first climbs into the public fray. When Lac qui Parle County formed in



Lac qui Parle County History Center (above); Minnesota Historical Society (right)
JACOB JACOBSON 1849-1938

Jacobson stood on the roof of the courthouse he helped move in Lac qui Parle County in 1886. He was known for advocating for railroad taxes at the Capitol in his loud, high-pitched voice.

1871, a village by the same name served as the county seat. But when the railroad bypassed the village, nearby Dawson and Madison tangled over where to move the county seat along the new rail line.

Jacobson led a group of 150 men and 40 horse-drawn wagons, hauling the courthouse 15 miles through a November blizzard from Lac qui Parle Village to Madison.

"In Lac qui Parle County, people refer to Jacob F. Jacobson as 'King Jake,'" the St. Paul Dispatch said in 1926. "On the day that citizens dragged the old courthouse 15 miles cross

country to Madison it was 'King Jake' astride the ridge pole of the kidnapped building, who had charge of the abduction."

Dr. Kristin Benson, a recently retired pediatrician from Minnetonka, is Jacobson's great-great niece. Her family research took her to Norway in 2001, and she rode a fishing boat through the steep-cliff fjords of Jacobson's childhood.

According to that research, Jacob Jacobson was 8 years old — the seventh of nine children — when the family emigrated in 1857 to Dover, Iowa. After some schooling there, he joined three brothers in a

caravan of 22 covered wagons heading for western Minnesota in 1867.

They settled in Lac qui Parle Village — a French translation of what the Dakota called "the lake that speaks." The area housed a fur-trading post created in 1826 and a mission that converted Dakota people to Christianity before it closed in 1854.

Jacobson and his brother spent months living in a covered wagon while building their first shelter. By 1872, Jacobson was serving as county auditor and he would spend the next 64 years on the county's fair board. He was



Jacob F. Jacobson

JAKE'S ROADSIDE PARK

Along Hwy. 75 in the western Minnesota town of Madison, you'll find a fiberglass cod fish named Lou T. Fisk in a park named after J.F. (Jake) Jacobson. In 1972, town elders re-christened Wayside Park to honor Jacobson, a Norwegian émigré who founded the town, sold farm implements, served as auditor and fair commissioner and represented the area at the Legislature for 14 years beginning in 1888.

The park is adjacent to the Lac qui Parle County History Center, open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays through October.

first elected to the Legislature in 1888 and spent 14 years representing western Minnesota at the Capitol.

"This stalwart native of Norway was self-educated, crude in manner and speech. Yet he had a genius for legislative leadership," his contemporary, political reporter Charles B. Cheney, wrote in the Minneapolis Tribune, looking back in 1946.

Jacobson's voice was legendary in the old state Capitol, where the Senate and House chambers were close together.

"Jacobson had a high-

pitched, strident voice, and when he got going in debate it woke the neighborhood," Cheney wrote. "Over in the senate chamber they would say: 'There goes the alarm clock! There would be a rush across the little corridor to the house side, to hear the burning words of the man from Lac qui Parle.'"

Jacobson's biggest fights came against the powerful railroad men. As chairman of the appropriations committee in the state House, he pushed through many tax measures and "fought vainly to stem the craze of drainage of muskeg swamps," Cheney said.

His personal life mirrored his political struggles. He was married three times. His first two wives and first two children died before he did.

When he died in 1938 in Madison, the Minneapolis Star said he was known as "the Commoner" in the Legislature and "led progressives in the fight for railroad taxation."

He was survived by his third wife, a daughter from the second marriage and a son and daughter from his third wife. Making it to 89 meant he outlived by 27 years the average U.S. male in 1938.

"Up until a year or two ago, he had been in good health" and carried his years in a manner that would have been a credit to a much younger man," his hometown newspaper said.

"During his years of life in this county he made a host of friends whom he won by his honest, courageous manner."

After all, it takes courage to climb up on the roof of a courthouse you just moved 15 miles through November snow.



Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each

Sunday. Readers can send him ideas at mnhistory@startribune.com. A collection of his columns is available as the e-book "Frozen in History" at startribune.com/ebooks.