

## THE HISTORY OF BALKAN TOWNSHIP

To the north of Chisholm stretched vast acres of dense virgin forests. In summer, the towering birches cast their shadows over wild rose bushes and carpets of strawberries; every autumn its woods were aflame with red and golden maple leaves. In winter sturdy pine and cedar trees were silhouetted across the snowy white wilderness and every spring the air was fragrant with pussywillows, blueflags, and buttercups.

To this rugged, often desolate, township of Balkan, journeyed pioneers, eager for new frontiers, for the chance to fulfill the dreams they'd brought with them....freedom to make a way of life for themselves and their children.

On the site occupied by the Balkan General Store for half a century, the first pioneer family settled in 1908. Their name was **Shank** and they'd moved here from the East. Soon other newcomers arrived, mostly from the Old World, Finland, and the Balkan countries—Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia. A few of them had other ethnic origins: Sweden and Norway, England and Germany, Poland and Italy.

Whatever their background, they spoke mostly in their mother tongue and tenaciously kept alive their European culture and customs. Yet in the strength and ideals and focus of their lives, they were completely American. Together they merged the best of their separate heritages into something stonger, more vital, as they faced the rigors and challenges of pioneer life in this vital wilderness, felling the timber to build their modest homes, clearing the forests to make a living from the land.

To honor their predominantly Balkan heritage, these early settlers named their township **Balkan**. On an autumn day in 1911, **Mike Baich** (who suggested the new township's name) travelled to Duluth with **John Shank** and his neighbors **John Russ** and **Joe Smoltz**. With *Mr. Woods*, a local attorney, they organized Balkan Township "located on Range 20, townships 58 and 59". (Today they're divided by the *Latick-Ahonen Road*). Already the population was fifty.

Though births were not recorded until 1914, it is believed that the first baby in Balkan was **Antonia Koshere** (*Mrs. Dan Tolonen*) in 1911. About the same time a **Baby Girl Lake** died in infancy. In 1912 **Frances Pogorelc** and **Jennie Pozar** were born, in 1913 **Albin Kmett** and **Louis Tanko**.

Balkan's first school house was built in 1911 by **Gust Anderson** at a cost of \$2,694. Heating, plumbing, and ventilation were \$276 extra. It was a two room structure which nine years later was expanded and remodeled by **August Johnson**.

The first school teacher was **Theodore Oefstedal** who received \$75 a month with \$15 more for his janitorial duties. There were 19 pupils in Grades I, II, and III. The next year's teacher, **Agnes Gary**, also taught Grade IV. When the Chisholm District annexed the Balkan School in 1914, **Mr. and Mrs. A.T. Haley** were the teachers. Balkan's first graduates from Chisholm High School were **George Hudy** and **Ellen Haveri** (*Mrs. Arthur Latick*).

For those hardy pioneers, it was a constant struggle to overcome the handicaps of the rocky land, the hardships of a frontier wilderness. With few, if any comforts, they cleared the land...planted potatoes, grains and hardy vegetables...raised cows and pigs and chickens.... quietly nurtured in their offspring the ideals of good citizenship, pride in their country, and a sense of community spirit.

Early in the century, farming and lumbering were the only means of livelihood. Many of the old logging roads still exist. The large operations north of Balkan supplied most of the lumber for rebuilding Chisholm after the Chisholm fire and also much of the timber for the mines. The largest lumbering firm was the Swan River Logging Company.

Despite the long, hard hours needed to extract a living from the land, the men eagerly participated in township government, a privilege for those immigrants who'd come here from autocratic European countries.

The first Balkan Township meeting was held March 30, 1912. A resolution was passed, permitting cattle to run at large for the next five years, "*subject to laws of the state*". Officers elected were Supervisors **Gust Lake**, **William Cooper**, **W.C.Ramsey**, **Dan McCleinen**, Clerk **John Shank**, Treasurer **John Pozar**, Assessor **F.O. Stark**, Justices of the Peace **Otto Lake** and **Dan Tolonen**, Constables **Joe Smoltz** and **Oscar Salmi**, and Road Overseer **John Russ**.

Road problems were often on the agenda of later town meetings. A petition in 1912 authorized a \$1,000 bond issue for laying out new roads. Later a \$300 appropriation was made for repairing the Sturgeon River Road (*Highway 73*). Laborers were paid \$2.50 a day and many families augmented their income by sending their older sons to work on the roads. Materials requisitioned were: "6 shovels, 4 picks, 4 handles, 2 grub hoes, 2 handles, 1 double bit axe, 2 bars, 1 brush scythe, 1 scythe."

When the pioneers arrived, Highway 73 was nothing but a dirt road, difficult and slow to travel on. Transportation was by horses, buggies, and wagons. **Mrs. Tilda Maki** moved to Balkan, wheeling her baby, **Leona**, in a buggy from town while her son, **Eino**, walked beside her.

In 1916 **Matt Latick**, **Frank Harris**, and **John Pozar** purchased the first automobiles, Ford Model T four door touring cars. A year later they added bus bodies for carrying students. The **Laticks** had the contract for the Chisholm School, **John Pozar** and **Matt Boriin** for the Balkan School. **Paul Amistadi** had the first truck for hauling milk and produce into town. Much later a popular conveyance were the jokers that were made from old Model A frames.

Telephone and electricity were brought in about 1921 and each family was responsible for furnishing ten poles for the lines. Mail was delivered three times a week, first by **Clifford Gandsey** and then **Philip Johnson**. The Balkan mail carrier from 1921 to 1959 was the late **Arne Sampson**.

Before 1917, all of these pioneer families had already settled in Balkan: **Matt Latick**, **Louis Haveri**, **Gust Lake**, **Otto Lake**, **Frank Harris**, **John Ovaska**, **John Maki #1 (later John Maki #2)**, **John Russ**, **John Pozar**, **John Shank**, **Paul Amistadi**, **Joe Smoltz**, **Dan Tolonen**, **Matt Boriin**, **Tony Tanko**, **John**

**Tanko, George Briski, Emil Solonen, John Luomala, John Laurich, John Koshere, Andrew Gerzina, Philip Johnson, Paul Leustek, William Hakala, William Cooper, Louis Kmett, Martin Gornick, A.T. Haley, Charles Gradisher, Tony Gradisher, William Mattson, Joe Novak, Richard Kallio, Joe Verant, Frank Verant, Frank Pozar, F.O. Stark, Christ Nelson, Hiski Kananen, John Franti, Paul Hudy, Jacob Seppala, John Salo.**

After 1917 there was another influx of new families: **Dan Montgomery, Ed Heino, Oscar Jokinen, John Pucelj, R.E. Carr, William Huhtamaki, Fred DuChamp, Solomon Maki, Simon Hakala, Jacob Lukkarila, Eric Heikkinen, Tony Briski, Ed Elto, Ida Maki, Frank Pavlovich, Taino Hyvarinen, Bob Hurliman, Frank Sever, Jerry Nucech, Mary Petrich, William Laitala, Oscar Holm, John Aho, Lizzie Korpi, Vincent Brus, Art Dahl, Victor Mannisto, James Tomsich, Andrew Tianen, George Bicanich, Peter LaMusga, John Pogorelc, Edwin Dickson, Jon Tomsich, and the Centa's.**

The Finns were one of Balkan's two predominant ethnic groups and banded closely together like relatives. Quietly without fanfare they saw to the needs of those less fortunate both on the farm and in town. In 1931, they formed a **Finnish Dairy Club** headed by **Jack Rautio**.

Many families had small bath houses and Saturday night sauna became tradition for both family and friends. Afterward there was always coffee and biscuit, large rounds of yellow Finnish cheese and orange cake.

Both of my grandmothers, **Mrs. Matt Latick** and **Mrs. Louis Haveri**, taught Methodist Sunday School in their homes. Lutheran Sunday School was held in the **Ed Ahonen** home. Often the children attended both.

Social events were celebrated by the entire family: picnics, Christmas programs, dances and parties. I still remember watching the excitement of a New Year's Eve celebration at the **Haveri's** in 1929 when fortunes for the New Year were cast in tin.

My paternal and maternal grandparents' homesteads were across the road from each other. For all of them there was a profound respect for land in America, and whenever possible, additional acreage was added. For over 50 years the **Latick** homestead remained in the family; and the **Haveri** property (purchased in 1912) is still occupied by my **Aunt Bertha (Mrs. Richard Braski)**.

**Aiti** (my **Grandmother Haveri**), is now 92, a great lady, cherished by all of us grandchildren. She has instilled in us old-fashioned Finnish virtues of hard work, thrift and sissu (determination). As a young girl she journeyed alone from Finland to Chisholm and was a cook in the **Pyrinto Boarding House** until she married my grandfather.

Over the years, the old world traditions were gradually giving way to American customs and values. With better roads and cars, it was now possible to drive from Balkan to work in the mines.

Never-the-less, the economy remained agriculture and logging oriented. Dairymen in Balkan have included: **Matt Latick, Ed Heino, Paul Amistadi, Werner Latick, Richard Kallio, Art Salo, John Salo,**

**Richard Braski, and Arthur Cappel.** Poultry farmers have included: **Elmer Lake,** and **Robert Lake.** Lumbermen over the years have included **Gust Lake, Louis Haveri, Matt Latick, John Luomala, Rodney Rautiola, and Leo Ebert.** Balkan has had mink farms, sheep farms, and sawmills.

The landmark Balkan General Store was begun in 1918 by **Samuel McHenry** on the present site of the Balkan Community Center. In 1925, its new owner, **John Kling,** moved it to its permanent location at the intersection of Highway 73 and the Cooper Road. **John and Tina Jussila** had the store from 1929 to 1936, and **Herman and Laura Heldt** until 1937.

For the next 35 years it was owned and operated by **Arthur and Ellen Latick,** a way of life that somehow can never again be emulated....groceries and garden seed, clothing and dry goods, patent medicines and hardware, gasoline and feed.

At the south end of Balkan is **Stanley's** store, built about 1934 by **Stanley and Lucy Rupar** and run by them until they died. For a while their son-in-law and daughter, **Tony and Charlotte Laurich,** ran it; and today it is **Bowser Smilanich's** tavern and dance hall.

Nearby is the Balkan Township Garage, built in 1934 to house the township office and to store road equipment. Prior to 1918, the road work had all been done by horses and hand labor. Then mechanized equipment and a stone crusher were purchased.

A commendable township project has been the hiring of widows several days each month for maintaining the Community Center. In addition, each summer the township recreation board sponsors a busy, well rounded summer program for the young people.

From the very first, Balkan has had a community center, originally an old warehouse moved in 1914 to the **Pozar** homestead (which since then has been in the **Jance** family for several generations). The present Balkan Community Center (once the Balkan School) was bought in 1942 from the Chisholm School District.

Just as there has almost always been a community meeting place, Balkan has had numerous clubs over the years. Already in 1919, a Boosters Club was formed for politics and community service.

The **Balkan Agricultural Club** (later called the **Balkan Community Club**) was organized in 1936 after County Agent, **August Neubauer** recommended such a group to implement the government's new soil conservation program. The first president was **William Ebert** and the first Committeemen **Arnold Ahonen** and **Uste Rupar** received 50¢ an hour.

Projects that first included organizing a bull ring, a recreational institute for the women at Lake Esquagama, demonstrations on livestock slaughtering and a community Christmas party (which quickly became tradition).

In later years there were more ambitious programs: County Fair booths, safety sessions, pioneer banquets, child care and gardening courses. Many of the speakers were affiliated with the University's

Extension Service. Notes from 1940 describe the purchase of hawk bark, high bush cranberries and wild dandelion roots for 35¢ a pound.

In 1950, there was a special visit and address by Governor Luther Youngdahl and the same year many of the members presented the play "Rich Man Poor Man" to other community clubs throughout the county. About the same time, Memorial trees were planted on Arbor Day at the Community Center in tribute to Balkan's pioneers; and during Minnesota's Statehood Centennial, a plaque in their honor was presented to the community.

Another township tradition has been the Balkan Community Fair. It had its origin in 1949 when **Arthur Latick** called a special meeting to decide whether to accept the county's proposal of \$100 in prize money. Very soon the **Balkan Fair Association** was formed and the first officers were appointed: **John Ball, Mrs. Sam Arabonas, Mrs. Paul Amistadi, and Mrs. Arthur Latick.**

Committees were named for invitations, vegetables, poultry, women's department, and judges. That first year's program included a 4-H Welcome Song, a pine cone demonstration, music by the **Kelly** sisters, a speech by Senator Elmer Peterson, and Greek Fork dances.

While the adults were involved in community club activities, the youth of Balkan were kept busy with 4-H Club work. They have pursued many worthwhile projects such as agriculture and homemaking and also enjoyed fun events like dances and winter carnivals.

The Balkan Garden Club was organized in 1941 to study flowers and vegetables; also they have been busy with County Fair Booths, vegetable hat contests and community roadside clearance programs.

Other active groups over the years have been the Bocce Ball Club, the Saddle Club, and the Dance Club. In the late thirties and early forties, **Hemming Hautala** directed a fine young group of musicians in the Balkan Band. Shortly before the war, there was a young bachelors' club who staged a winter frolic at Long Lake where **Lillian Haanpaa** was chosen queen.

Politically the United Units have been a strong force in township politics, and for a while there was an active chapter of the League of Women Voters.

During these busy years while the people built their homes, raised their families and worked hard in the forests, farms and mines, their lives were all affected by the two World Wars. Balkan sent **John Tolonen, Charles Gradisher, Tony Gradisher, Frank Sever** and **Art Dahl** to World War I.

During World War II there was selective service registration and soon numerous Balkan boys were drafted into their country's service. Some of them did not return. Balkan's casualties include **Harry Nelson, Edward Tomsich, and Pogorelc.**

About the same time, the rigors of pioneer life, the chaotic years of depression, the make-work programs of the WPA and CCC were ending. The war had generated employment and prosperity as America needed the iron ore of the Mesabi and the products of her farms and forests. At the **Balkan General**

*Store* it was an era of ration stamps for gasoline, sugar, meat and shoes and long Sunday afternoons spent on all the paperwork involved.

When the war was over, many of the veterans returned to their farms and studied special GI agriculture courses from **A.T. Haley**. For others there was now the possibility of a higher education. Until now, College degrees for Balkan's sons and daughters had seldom been a reality.

The years have passed. As our nation now observes a Bicentennial, Balkan's history spans a third of those years.

Now when I come back, the vast acres of farmlands are planted high in summer with fragrant alfalfa and backgrounded sometimes by groves of trees. Highway 73 is a straight wide freeway north into Canada and beside it on the early homesteads are numerous new houses with comforts the early pioneers could never have envisioned.

**Written by Betty Jean Knudson Latick**