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A BIOGRAPHY OF JONAS GEORGE BLANK

By his son Warren Moffatt Blank  
of Whitehall, Michigan.

(A paper read at the annual meeting  
of the Wayne Center Cemetery Associa-  
tion on June seventeenth, 1933)

Jonas George Blank was born in Niagara County, "York State" (as he called it) in 1838. He was one of a family of ten -- five girls and five boys. In those days to have less than six or eight children constituted a sort of cloud on one's title to good citizenship. The great open spaces were yet unpeopled.

The Blank family was of Pennsylvania-Dutch extraction. Jonas and Selma Blank, J. G.'s parents, had emigrated from Pennsylvania to New York a few years before the birth of the subject of this sketch. By hard labor they had cleared a forty acre farm in the woods near Lockport on the Erie Canal. The Canal had been opened only a few years previously and attracted settlers all along its route.

The older Jonas, lured by the West, made a trip to Illinois, saw the prairies and York State didn't look good any more. He sold out, loaded his little family, with a few goods and chattels, onto a canal boat bound for Buffalo, where transfer was made to a sailing vessel bound round-the-lakes to Chicago. Some trip! Worse than a round-the-world journey would be now. Little Jonas was nine years old, and his recollections of that memorable voyage were very vague. The last lap of the journey was made with horses and a decorated wagon out to Wayne Township, DuPage County; the railroad was still in the future. This was in 1844, when John Tyler was President of the United States.

When Jonas senior first came to Illinois, he bought 240 acres for fifteen hundred dollars, and afterwards, when his family came, he took enough land from the government to make a section. The deeds to the full section which were signed by James K. Polk, who was president in 1846 when the deeds were issued, are still in the possession of the family.

The older Jonas built a house on his section where Ed Kampmeyer now lives. ~~BLANKS~~ The old homestead stood there until a few years ago. This same Jonas was an enterprising man. No sooner was he established in his new home than he built a saw mill on the West Branch of the DuPage River on the present Schultz farm. You may see the remains of the old mill dam there to this day. Then, contracting pneumonia from working in the water and an attack of typhoid fever (from which two of his sons suffered also) he died and was laid away with Joel, his oldest son, also a victim of typhoid, leaving Selma with her three hundred and twenty acres, her unfinished saw mill, and her children to carry on with her pioneer life as best she might.

Young Jonas at eleven years was sheep herder for Luther Bartlett. With a pony and shepherd dog he cared for some nine hundred head of sheep

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on the unfenced prairies of the town of Wayne. As a young man he was fond of hunting and a roving life. He made a trip to Kansas at the time of the "Border Ruffian War" and stayed with the Indians in the wigwags. This roving tendency did not carry over into his later years, as he lived his whole life on one spot -- his sixty three acre farm in Wayne Township, where he settled down after his marriage to Mary F. Hoffatt in 1858. Mary's parents, Dolly Ann and Warren Hoffatt did everything in their power to thwart the marriage, because of Jonas' propensity for wandering, by sending Mary to New York to school, hoping that she would forget her roving lover. But it was all in vain, because she married him soon after she got back. However, after the deed was done, and their new son-in-law had settled down, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffatt became very fond of him, and they trusted and depended on him as long as they lived.

To this marriage were born four daughters: Mame, Emma, Bertha, and Anne; and two sons, Thomas and Warren. Emma died at sixteen and Thomas in early childhood. Mame Blank Carr, wife of George S. Carr of Aurora, Illinois, passed away in 1925. Bertha Hiser lives in San Diego, California, Anna Schultz on the old homestead, and Warren at Whitwell, Michigan.

Jonas Blank, who was universally known as "Jase" or "Jonas" to his friends and neighbors during his years on the farm, was identified with nearly all movements looking toward community uplift. He belonged to the Congregational Church at Wayne Center, assisted in moving the Church building to Bartlett, and was a Deacon and minister of the church until his death. He was one of the organizers of the Hanover and Wayne Mutual Insurance Company and acted as agent for many years. He usually held some township or school office, being Assessor, Collector, etc., at various times. A life-long Republican, during his later years he turned to the Prohibition Party and worked with almost religious zeal in the cause of national prohibition. He died without seeing it accomplished. One can but wonder what he would think about the darned thing now.

Such is the simple story of "the life which exhibited itself." Surely if we were to stop with this narrative of the mere outward facts, we should have wasted our time. Let us try to get a little closer view of his personality and character. Says Walt Whitman:

"Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons.  
It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with  
the earth."

Jonas Blank was an open air man. One couldn't imagine him in a city back ground. He just wouldn't fit in there. He loved animals -- especially sheep. To see him with his flock was suggestive of that incomparable parable of the "Good Shepherd". "The sheep knew his voice." He made no pretensions to scholarship, had had but little schooling. His spelling was highly original, yet he was an interesting talker and writer of engaging letters. He lamented the fact that he had never amounted to anything, but had been merely a jack of all trades, as he said. And indeed he was. He could turn his hand to almost any of the common trades, was a good carpenter and a fair blacksmith. He could fix your watch or build a wagon.

He never studied law but was so well versed in legal matters that he was frequently called in the settle differences between neighbors and prevented not a few law suits in that way.

He had faults too. One was a quick and explosive temper which would occasionally flare up in a way which moved the nearby inhabitants to flee to the mountains. But his failings were such as mostly "leaned to virtue's side. He was no money maker (if this be a fault) and such money as came his way, he had mostly given away at the time of his death in 1907 at the age of 72.

The founding of the Mayo Center Cemetery Association was largely his idea, and he and his faithful wife rest there side by side.

A TRIBUTE TO JONAS GEORGE BLANK

By Rev. J. C. Van Ross of  
Miami, Florida.

(Read at the annual meeting of  
the Wayne Center Cemetery Assoc-  
iation, on June seventeen 1933)

I am asked to pay a simple tribute to Mr. Jonas G. Blank as friends gather about his and other graves and say their kindly, generous things. I find it a bit difficult to do this and do it adequately. I am handicapped by limited ability and limited close acquaintanceship. Mr. Blank and I had an acquaintance of many years but we did not often meet and yet, so unmasked was his life, so transparent his manhood, one with limited acquaintanceship could see his nobility. My general picture of him is greatly cherished. His friends who had the privilege of daily fellowship can tell the rarer virtues he possessed.

I am reminded of that popular couplet,  
"Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree."

Permit me to paraphrase this a bit and apply it to our good friend.  
Tributes are made by folks like me,  
Only God could make a man like thee.

It seems to me that Mr. Blank's life was beautiful in its symmetry, not greatly great in any one thing but beautiful in many:

- Honest- but never from policy, honest because honesty is satisfying and right.
- Clean- But never to simply save a reputation, but because of the right of it and the joy of it.
- Modest- in his ambitions for money, not because he could not make it, but because its possession could mean less manhood, less happiness.
- Generous-not because visible need was known, but because sympathy bubbled from his heart and enriched his life.
- Faithful to his home - not because it was a duty but because his home and dear ones were his earthly heaven.
- Stalwart in his Christian faith - for this he deserves little praise, for his soul-life turned as naturally toward God as flowers toward the sun.

Shall I tell you what trait of character impressed me most in Mr. Blank? Well, it was,

His brotherliness - Some one says, "A friend is he who comes in when all others have gone out." When all others had gone out, it was then that Jonas Blank with his gentle charity, and kindly judgment came in. His smile had in it a glint of heavenly sunshine and his speech, courage. His half suppressed chuckle was good medicine from a sour heart. In an everyday, neighborly way he gave "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for heaviness." Graciously tolerant he was anytime and anywhere somebody's brother. I do not know such about heaven, but it would not be unlike Mr. Blank to be off in some corner trying to make some heavenly stranger feel at home. Such was and in your friend and