



MOOSE RIVER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

– Richard Paul Jones

In February, Hans Berman showed up at the Village Council meeting and proposed that Moose River build an airport on the outskirts of town. Hans and his wife, Helga, own the Big Squaw Resort on Wild Winnie Lake and Hans thought it would bring a lot more big spenders to the resorts in the area.

“We got plenty of people coming up here now ya know but what we need is some of them high rollers,” Hans pleaded with the Council members. “Hell, you know how them farmers from Iowa are – they come up here with a pair of striped overalls and a fifty dollar bill and they don’t change either one the whole time they’re here.”

Everybody laughed and nodded knowingly at each other except Councilman Arlie Stangland who owned the Moose River Savings Bank. When the laughter died down, Arlie put in his two cents worth. “I don’t see how a little town like ours can possibly afford to build an airport. And besides, how would those people get out there to the resorts? Some of them have to be at least twenty-five or thirty miles from town.” Everybody looked confused. Arlie had more money than anybody in town except the Heinrich brothers, and they figured he knew about money. Mayor Vern Johansson thought it was time to cut to the chase. “I think it’s the best thing we could do for the future of Moose River,” he declared. “Looks to me like it would help our town grow; next thing you know one of them car rental companies will want to open an office next to the airport, and before you know it, Wal-Mart will be out there snooping around. I’ll bet we could get Ole Olson to sell us a few acres off his farm out there on Highway six, and we could just raise the price of beer at the municipal liquor store to pay for it.” They argued for another hour, until the Mayor got thirsty and appointed a committee to talk to Ole about selling some land and figure out how much they would have to raise the price of beer. The meeting promptly adjourned and the Council members all headed over to the liquor store to hoist a few brewskies before the price went up.

At the March meeting the committee reported that Ole would sell the town enough land for the airport for five thousand dollars, and the manager of the municipal liquor store said they would only have to raise the price of beer ten cents a can to pay for it. Arlie Stangland said his bank would float a loan for the land and construction costs and set it up so the town could re-pay the loan over time. Mayor Johansson closed the discussion with one of his windy political

observations. “The town might even come out ahead, because as much beer as Ole drinks, he’ll pay us back for the land in a couple of years.” They all enjoyed a laugh at Ole’s expense and voted in favor of the new airport. The Mayor said construction would start as soon as the ground thawed in the spring.

Moose River had its last blizzard in mid-April and the ice broke up on most of the lakes the first week in May, just in time for the start of fishing season. Later that month, construction got underway on the Moose River International Airport. Mayor Johansson came up with the idea of adding the word, “International,” because he thought it would add a lot of class and attract more fly-in business. “We’re less than a hundred miles from the Canadian border, so why not take advantage of that,” he explained.

The first step in building the airport was to assemble a Quonset style hangar that would hold one or two small planes. The whole thing came from a prefab company in Chicago and Ole Olson pulled his hay wagon over to the train depot to pick it up. After about a week’s work assembling the hangar, they hung a big windsock on top of the building, and Bert Gustafson came over with his hay mower and cut a landing strip about thirty feet wide from up by the road all the way down to the tree line. The next day they nailed up a sign to announce Moose River’s new airport, and right on schedule Mayor Johansson showed up with a photographer from the Moose River Gazette.

The following Wednesday the Gazette weekly issue came out featuring the Mayor’s smiling face with a lead story about the new airport and promised that the inaugural take-off and landing would take place at ten o’clock Saturday morning, with free coffee for the spectators and a bake sale put on by the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League. The only person in town that had a plane was Buzz Ericson. Buzz didn’t know much about flying, but he was one hell of a poker player. He had dreamed for years about flying out to Las Vegas and wiping up the floor with all those big city hot shots who thought they knew something about playing poker. So the year before, Buzz had sent away for a build-it-yourself airplane kit and spent the whole winter out in his barn putting it together.

On Friday Buzz hauled his new plane out to the airport on his logging truck and spent the better part of the day attaching the wing so he’d be ready the next morning when the crowd showed up. He intended to take her up for a trial run, but it got dark on him and with no runway lights he wasn’t sure he’d be able to find the airport when it was time to land. The idea was for Buzz to take off when the spectators started gathering; then circle around a few times and make a dramatic landing while he waved proudly to the crowd. Two local businessmen, Lonnie Marsh and Bill Hardy, had even rigged up a paper banner they were going to stretch across the runway after Buzz was airborne, so that when he touched down and broke through the banner everybody could record the magic moment with their cameras.

The only problem was that the runway sloped up-hill a little from east to west, and a pretty stiff wind was blowing in from the west that morning. Buzz had counted on taxiing up by the road and then gunning his engine as he raced down the slope toward the tree line but his card-playing luck didn’t carry over to flying. Taking off up hill was not what Buzz had anticipated for his

maiden flight. But it was too late now for second guessing. After the first dozen or so curious onlookers arrived and dug into the caramel rolls and coffee, Buzz wheeled his plane into position and waved to the crowd as he gunned her a few times. Then he got her up to full throttle and cut loose the brakes. But Buzz's smile went south pretty quick when his plane chugged slowly up the grassy slope. And just when Buzz was sure things couldn't get any worse, he looked out the window and saw Ole Olson, about three sheets in the wind, passing him on his tractor and laughing hysterically.

Buzz got out and started tinkering with his engine but you could tell he wasn't in a good mood. He was throwing tools around like there was no tomorrow and hauled off and kicked one of the tires – which didn't help much and made him limp around like old Mr. Swanson over at the co-op. And he didn't seem to appreciate all the helpful suggestions from the crowd either. Bill Hardy cupped both hands around his mouth and shouted, "Hey Buzz, try blowing on the windshield," and the restless onlookers burst into laughter. "Maybe you can get Ole to give you a push with his tractor," a woman yelled from the back, and the crowd hooted.

Buzz made a couple more futile tries before he threw a wrench through the side of his plane and headed for home in his truck, without even so much as a wave. The crowd was really disappointed and was about to give up, when Lonnie Marsh said he thought he heard the sound of an airplane that seemed to be coming closer. The crowd got real quiet, and Bill Hardy was the first to spot the plane circling around as if it might be going to land. Hardy picked up the banner, Lonnie Marsh grabbed the other end, and the two of them ran out and stretched the banner across the runway.

Everybody got their cameras ready, and sure enough, a few minutes later, a blue and white Piper Cub came in over the tree line and touched down smooth as silk on the soft, green grass of the runway. When it broke through Bill and Lonnie's banner a loud cheer went up from the crowd and cameras went off like Fourth of July fireworks. Then everybody started wondering out loud who the pilot was and they watched expectantly as the plane taxied around and came to a stop right in front of the crowd.

Curiosity mounted when the pilot cut off the engine and the door started to open. Just as the pilot started to step out of the plane, Mayor Johansson burst from the crowd and ran toward the plane, waving and smiling from ear to ear. "This is my cousin from up near Winnipeg," the Mayor announced proudly. "Who says we're not an international airport." The crowd laughed and cheered as the Mayor and his pilot-cousin raised their clasped hands high in the air and the Gazette photographer recorded the historic moment for posterity. Mayor Johansson always was good at getting his picture in the newspaper; I guess that had a lot to do with why he was mayor in the first place.

The pilot spoke up and said,

"Nice airport you folks got here but how come the sign on top of that barn over there says 'Welcome to Milwaukee'?"

Everybody looked at each other hoping for an answer, until Ole Olson started laughing so hard he nearly fell off his tractor.

Mayor Johansson confronted the town prankster. “Ole, you son-of-a-gun, that’s your barn, why did you go and do a darn fool thing like that?” The crowd started closing in on Ole and he nearly dropped his half-full beer bottle hurrying to get his tractor started. Some of the men ran alongside Ole’s tractor shaking their fists at him as he headed for home, but after about thirty yards they gave up the chase and broke out laughing. It looked as if Ole’s sense of humor had stolen the day.

“What the hell,” Mayor Johansson said, “I guess if anybody has a complaint coming, it’d be Milwaukee.” Everybody laughed and cheered the Mayor, then started congratulating each other and hugging all the women. It’s not every day that a town the size of Moose River gets a new thing like an international airport, and they all seemed to know that.

Author’s Note: Moose River sits about ninety miles NE of Lake Wobegone, up near the place where Paul Bunyan worked the woods with his blue ox.