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## Article Title: Tragedy at Peru State College: The Murders of William Nicholas and Paul Maxwell

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Article Summary: At Peru State College, on Tuesday morning, April 25, 1950, Professor Barney K Baker shot to death the college president, Dr William L Nicholas, and the head of the education division, Dr Paul Ammon Maxwell. He then went home and killed himself. The tragedy followed Dr Baker's being notified of his future dismissal from the college. This article investigates the circumstances surrounding his dismissal.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Barney Kinley Baker, William Nicholas, Paul A Maxwell, Harold Smith, Harvey H Kuenning, Dorothy Stepan, Mrs William Nicholas, Reinhardt Albert Quelle, Alma Ashley, Rosemary Milkovitch, Rex Floyd, Lillian Christ, John Christ, J Hyde Sweet, E Albin Larson, Wesley D Sweetser, C A Huck, Austin Bond, Robert Moore, C M Brown, A G Wheeler, Gus LaMontain, James Kirk, Mary Louse Smith, L M Samples, G E Wiggins, Art Hays, Horace McAdams, Dale Fahrnbruch, Ralph Fox, Corinne Adams, Wayne Reed, Paul Clark, Joy Catherine Seabourn Baker, O M Olsen, Edythe Nicholas, Alice Maxwell, William T Gleeson

Photographs / Images: Lieutenant Harold Smith of the Nebraska State Patrol and Nemaha County Sheriff Harvey H Kuenning examining the .32 caliber automatic weapon; Dr Barney Baker; Dr William Nicholas and secretary Dorothy Stepan; Dr and Mrs Nicholas; Peru State College educational division; students gathered outside the administration building; Dr Paul Maxwell's desk; Dr Baker's home in Peru; C A Huck;

# TRAGEDY AT PERU STATE COLLEGE THE MURDERS OF WILLIAM NICHOLAS AND PAUL MAXWELL

*By Nancy Handy Moran*

Nestled in a belt of hills along the Missouri River in southeastern Nebraska, the state teachers college at Peru is known as "The Campus of a Thousand Oaks." By 1950 a village of 1,000 people surrounded the oldest college in the state, founded as a private school in 1867. A seven-member board governed Peru (enrollment 387) along with other state teachers colleges at Chadron, Wayne, and Kearney.<sup>1</sup> The colleges trained students to be teachers or administrators in elementary and secondary schools.

On Tuesday morning, April 25, 1950, Professor Barney K. Baker taught his psychology class as usual. No one questioned him for giving assignments for the next three weeks or for remarking to some students that on this day they would "have a half holiday."<sup>2</sup> During his free period, which began at 11:00 a.m., Dr. Baker walked into the offices of the college president, Dr. William Nicholas, and the head of the education division, Dr. Paul Maxwell, and shot both men to death. He then went home and killed himself. Classes were dismissed for the afternoon in a "half holiday" of the gravest nature.

The incident shocked and bewil-

dered people in the college and the town. Long after reporters and police had left Peru, many questions remained. People in the community still talk about the events of April 25. Baker's suicide made impossible a complete investigation of his motive for

the murders. However, the evidence indicates that the crimes were directly related to Baker's dismissal from the Peru faculty where he had taught for twenty-four years.

In 1926 thirty-year-old Barney Kinley Baker came to Peru Teachers

*Lieutenant Harold Smith (left) of the Nebraska State Patrol and Nemaha County Sheriff Harvey H. Kuenning examine the .32 caliber automatic found with Dr. Barney Baker's body at his Peru home. Baker committed suicide after shooting Dr. William Nicholas, Peru State College president, and Dr. Paul Maxwell, head of the college educational division. Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star.*



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College as a part-time associate professor of science and education. Before joining the Peru faculty, he had served as principal and superintendent of secondary schools in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas, and as assistant professor of education at Kansas State Teachers College at Pittsburg from 1922 to 1924.<sup>3</sup> Baker took a leave of absence from teaching to earn his doctorate at the University of Kansas, becoming a full professor of psychology at Peru in 1933.<sup>4</sup> In 1949 Baker learned of his pending dismissal from the Peru faculty.

The two men responsible for Baker's planned dismissal were Dr. Paul Ammon Maxwell, Baker's superior as head of the division of education since 1929, and Dr. William L. Nicholas, president. Dr. Maxwell, fifty-three, had taught high school math and science in the east before coming to Peru.<sup>5</sup> A member of many professional and community organizations, he had written a book and several articles about education.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Nicholas, forty-eight, was born in a sod house at Mason City, Custer County, Nebraska. He had served as a principal and superintendent at schools in Tryon, Nebraska, and at Oshkosh, Wisconsin; as dean of men at Kearney State Teachers College; and as Director of Occupational Information and Guidance in the Nebraska Department of Vocational Education. He was elected to the presidency of Peru State Teachers College in 1946.<sup>7</sup>

When Nicholas came to Peru he wanted to revitalize the college; rumors were circulating that the state wished to close the school. Both the physical plant and morale had deteriorated.<sup>8</sup> In May 1949 Nicholas informed division heads that classes should be combined to require a smaller faculty and to eliminate classes with only a few students.<sup>9</sup> He requested that division heads recommend which teachers should be retained.<sup>10</sup> On May 19, 1949, Dr. Maxwell wrote to Nicholas reporting that some elective and low-enrollment courses were being dropped from the education division,



Dr. Barney Baker. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.

thereby making it possible to cut one professor's position from the nine previously required. The position recommended for elimination was the one occupied by Dr. Barney Baker.<sup>11</sup>

On June 23 Maxwell and Nicholas met with Baker to discuss the possibility of his dismissal, mentioning that he was the only professor in his division who did not have duties other than teaching.<sup>12</sup> Baker, however, had the only Ph.D. in the education division besides Maxwell and had seniority over three other professors who had been hired by Nicholas after 1946.<sup>13</sup> Baker surprisingly earned a salary of only \$3,540 annually, less than any other holder of the Ph.D. on campus and less than many of the college's teachers with master's degrees (Peru employed thirty-seven professors).<sup>14</sup> He usually taught fifteen hours each semester, while other professors averaged from seventeen to twenty-six hours of course

work. Baker served on a single committee, while other faculty members generally participated in three or more committees or group sponsorships.<sup>15</sup> Baker reportedly took little part in campus activities and often resisted accepting new class assignments or extra-curricular duties such as timing at sports events.<sup>16</sup>

Some students reported that Baker did not update his notes and that many of them were faded and yellowed with age.<sup>17</sup> But one student, Lillian Christ, the wife of Peru professor John Christ, told her husband that Baker was a brilliant teacher. Professor Christ recalled her comment in a statement he signed after the murders.<sup>18</sup> After 1948 Baker allegedly became uncooperative at meetings of the education division, remaining silent or giving only negative comments, behavior that apparently irritated Dr. Maxwell.<sup>19</sup>

Though Baker perhaps seemed less productive than other Peru faculty members, long-term professors at the college had not been dismissed without serious reasons, reasons which in Baker's case were never revealed.<sup>20</sup> Baker's personnel file contained only transcripts, tax and salary records, and teaching assignments; there was nothing referring to his dismissal.<sup>21</sup>

Following the murders, there was speculation about why Baker was asked to leave. Nemaha County Attorney Fred C. Kiechel called it part of a reorganization program at the college.<sup>22</sup> The *Omaha Morning World-Herald* quoted the president of the Board of Education of State Normal Schools, J. Hyde Sweet, as saying Baker had been "unable to hold the attention of his classes."<sup>23</sup> In his own "Kick Kolumn" of the *Nebraska City News-Press*, the newspaper he edited, Sweet stated that "there were good and sufficient reasons for the decision which had been mulled over for a long time. It is not necessary to go into their details, except to say that the integrity of the school, any school, depends on giving students the very best service . . . the facts deny that any injustice had been

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done [to Baker]."<sup>24</sup> There were unsubstantiated rumors that Baker had committed some sexual impropriety, although they may have stemmed from the fact that he included information about sexuality in some of his psychology classes.

President Nicholas had a reputation for tact and skill in handling people. When he assumed the presidency of the college, he had given retiring president W. R. Pate an office on campus as a courtesy. Known for his benevolent nature, Nicholas had proved adept at resolving the concerns of former service men who had entered college on government loans or grants after World War II. Students often came to Nicholas's home or office for counseling.<sup>25</sup>

At the June 23, 1949, conference, Nicholas and Maxwell advised Baker to secure another position, telling him that they would take no dismissal action immediately, but that they did not plan to employ him after the summer of 1950.<sup>26</sup> Nicholas offered to assist Baker in finding another job and later expressed concern to his secretary, Dorothy Stepan, that Baker had never asked him for a letter of recommendation or other help.<sup>27</sup> Although County Attorney Kiechel declared that several conferences were held to consider Baker's reinstatement, Stepan recalled no such meetings.<sup>28</sup> Because Nicholas and Maxwell kept the dismissal confidential, only a few faculty members knew of it, and they were sworn to secrecy unless Baker himself chose to reveal it.<sup>29</sup>

There was considerable ambiguity in Nebraska law in the 1950s regarding the status of faculty at the state teachers colleges. The statutes empowered the Board of Education of State Normal Schools to appoint or remove the president, faculty, and other employees of the colleges. The presidents were authorized to manage and control college employees, but the statutes were not specific about the presidents' power to appoint or dismiss them.<sup>30</sup> Customarily the president

made personnel recommendations to the board and had them accepted without question.<sup>31</sup>

The board maintained in a workmen's compensation case after the murders that no vote by the body was needed to terminate a teacher at the end of any academic or calendar year, because it judged teaching jobs to be one-year, renewable appointments of public officials.<sup>32</sup> A 1923 court case involving the dismissal of the head of the Peru English department had resulted in a Nebraska Supreme Court decision that a teacher was considered an employee rather than a public official.<sup>33</sup> Although state statutes mentioned no protection such as tenure, the college at Peru may have had an informal tenure policy.<sup>34</sup> However, formal employee grievance procedures did not exist.

In October 1949 Baker asked Board President J. Hyde Sweet to intercede

on his behalf in light of Baker's twenty-four years of teaching at Peru.<sup>35</sup> Apparently Sweet never brought the matter before the board. E. Albin Larson, secretary to the board, told reporters investigating the murders that Nicholas had authority as president to release a staff member in arranging teaching assignments for the coming year. Then, said Larson, the board would take formal action on the release at a later date. But Larson noted that his office had received no notification of Baker's dismissal.<sup>36</sup> The official minutes of the board from May 1949 to April 1950 show only one recommendation for the termination of an employee at Peru, a campus gardener. In that case the board endorsed Nicholas's recommendation that the employee be terminated on a specified date.<sup>37</sup> The minutes included no reference to the dismissal of Dr. Baker.

One other professor at Peru, Wesley

*Dr. William Nicholas, Peru State College president, and secretary Dorothy Stepan. Courtesy of James D. Levitt.*



D. Sweetser, M.A., was released in 1950 and replaced by a professor who held the Ph.D. This dismissal was public, acceptable to Sweetser, but also not recorded in the official minutes of the college board. Sweetser's name appeared for the last time in the summer 1950 college directory.<sup>38</sup>

Although Baker's chances of finding a new job were limited by his age and the fact of his dismissal from a long-time position, he sent out many job applications to schools in Oklahoma and Kansas during the autumn and winter of 1949-50.<sup>39</sup> When he received only rejections, he apparently became deeply discouraged though he had not taken advantage of the president's offer to help him relocate.<sup>40</sup>

Some people considered Baker sullen and aloof because he seldom spoke to people on campus and had few close friends.<sup>41</sup> His neighbor, Professor Wesley Sweetser, walked back and forth to school with him. When Sweet-

ser mentioned that he was being replaced by a Ph.D., Baker responded that Sweetser was lucky to leave while young, because he could find another job easily. Baker never mentioned his own dismissal to Sweetser; Sweetser did not know of it until the morning of the murders. In a statement signed that afternoon, Sweetser described Baker as a "taciturn individual."<sup>42</sup> Baker's business agent, C. A. Huck, later reported that Baker "was insanely jealous of his job and felt he wasn't given credit for his ability."<sup>43</sup>

Professor John Christ once heard Baker make some bitter remarks about the administration. Christ and another professor, Austin Bond, met Baker in a grocery store in nearby Auburn. When Christ mentioned the dismissal of Sweetser, Baker remarked that Sweetser was young enough to get a new job, but "an old fud like you and I could not do that. That is typical of Dr. Nicholas."<sup>44</sup>

Like most of the faculty, Christ and Bond knew nothing of Baker's dismissal until the new college catalog came out on the evening of April 24, 1950.<sup>45</sup> The catalog was widely circulated on campus the following morning. Barney Baker's name, usually at the top of the alphabetical list of professors, was absent. The dismissal was public, final, and three months earlier than the deadline Nicholas had originally mentioned.<sup>46</sup>

On the morning of Tuesday, April 25, 1950, Baker, a bird watcher, wrote in his diary, "Today I saw my first Jenny wren."<sup>47</sup> For others, a flooding Missouri River was the main topic of conversation on campus.<sup>48</sup> Tuesday was the day for the weekly policy committee meeting in the administration building. This was the most powerful committee at the college, responsible for policy, budget, and curriculum within board guidelines. Its members were the president, the deans of men and women, Rex Floyd of special services, and the division heads: Paul Maxwell, education; Robert Moore, language; A. V. Larson, practical arts; A. G. Wheeler, physical education; Austin Bond, math and science; and C. M. Brown, social science.<sup>49</sup> On this particular Tuesday the committee lacked a quorum and did not meet for the first time in nearly a year. One member, Bond, had suffered a mild heart attack; Floyd had taken the college choir to Falls City. Baker reportedly looked into the committee room that morning, then stopped nearby at the mail room, asking an employee, "Have you seen any of the president's white haired [sic] boys?"<sup>50</sup> This comment led to speculation later that Baker wanted to address the meeting or possibly to harm the members of the committee.

In the president's office, secretary Dorothy Stepan responded to Professor Christ's comment that Baker's name had inadvertently been left out of the college catalog. "It's not a mistake," she told him.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly after 11:00 a.m., Stepan took some papers into the president's office

*Dr. and Mrs. Nicholas. Courtesy of James D. Levitt.*





*The Peru State College educational division at the time of the murders consisted of Reinhardt Albert Quelle (left), Dr. Paul A. Maxwell, Dr. Barney K. Baker, Alma Ashley, Rosemary Milkovitch, and Rex Floyd. Courtesy of James D. Levitt.*

and asked him if he had time to see Gus LaMontain and James Kirk of the Kirk Typewriter Company of Omaha.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, the two salesmen visited with Professor Baker in the outer office. Baker, who appeared calm, asked them about a trade-in price on his portable typewriter.<sup>53</sup> They were not aware that Baker carried a .32 Colt semi-automatic pistol under his coat.<sup>54</sup>

The secretary returned to her desk and motioned the salesmen to enter Dr. Nicholas's office. But Baker protested that he had been there first and said that his business would take only a minute. When Stepan told the president that Baker wished to see him, Nicholas nodded his approval.<sup>55</sup>

Dr. Baker went into the office, closed the door as was usual when discussing confidential matters, then drew his gun. He fired at Dr. Nicholas from close range, striking him twice in the head and twice in the chest. Nicholas died leaning back in his chair with his head resting against the radiator.<sup>56</sup> Although the salesmen and secretary heard five explosions and a sound LaMontain later described as someone falling over

a chair, they thought the sounds were from construction work going on in the building.

As Baker emerged from the inner office, all three saw the gun half-hidden under his coat.<sup>57</sup> He faced Stepan and kept the gun trained on her while he backed out into the hallway. Though Stepan hoped the salesmen might overpower Baker, they followed him out the door and disappeared. Once Baker had gone, Stepan rushed into Nicholas's office to find the president's body sliding down in the chair. She shouted for help, then phoned the doctor, police, and the superintendent of the elementary school on the campus to warn him to keep the children inside.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, Baker walked deliberately the few steps to Maxwell's office downstairs, passing Wesley Sweetser and John Christ on the way.<sup>59</sup> To avoid Maxwell's secretary, Mary Louise Smith, Baker entered the office by a side door. Smith looked up from her work to see Baker's gun near Maxwell's head and heard three shots, one of which struck Maxwell with fatal effect.<sup>60</sup> Maxwell had a habit of not

looking up from his reading unless addressed.<sup>61</sup> He never saw Dr. Baker.

While Smith ran screaming from the office, Baker walked across the hall to his own office, where he put the gun's empty magazine on his desk and picked up his hat and coat.<sup>62</sup> On his way out he again passed Sweetser and Christ, who had started downstairs after hearing the secretary's cries. When Sweetser saw the gun, he ran back to the hall and ducked into the personnel office "just in case he [Baker] was running amuck."<sup>63</sup> From a window, Sweetser watched Baker walk towards his white, two-story house at the edge of the campus. Professor Baker had once told his psychology students that during a sudden catastrophe, most people respond ineffectually. His theory proved correct for no one tried to stop him once the killing began.<sup>64</sup>

Professor Sweetser and building superintendent L. M. Samples were the first to check Maxwell, finding no pulse. Dr. G. E. Wiggins, college physician, arrived within ten minutes of the shootings and pronounced both men dead about 11:40 a.m.<sup>65</sup> Samples, a close friend of Mrs. Nicholas, went to



*Students gathered outside the administration building after news of the murders spread to await details and instructions. This picture was taken from a window in the office of the college's slain president. Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star... (below) Dr. Paul Maxwell was seated at his desk when shot by Dr. Baker, whose office is across the hall. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.*



her home to tell her what had happened.<sup>66</sup>

Many students joined the crowd near the administration building, while those more timid or sensible locked the doors to their dormitory rooms and watched the activity from the windows. Others foolishly rushed to Baker's house. In a survey done after the killings, most students expressed a common theme about their actions: "I followed the crowd around." One student, a veteran, grabbed his gun and headed for the elementary school to protect his children. Rumors spread: Baker had wounded some children; he was hiding in the hills; he was barricaded in his house; he had tried to kill other teachers, especially members of the policy committee.<sup>67</sup>

City Marshal Art Hays and local policeman Horace McAdams had set up a guard by Baker's house. When two highway patrol cars and County Attorney Kiechel arrived shortly after noon, the men walked to the front door, to which was pinned an envelope with a message: "Mr. Huck, Walk in and take over." "Then," said Kiechel, "I knew he had committed suicide."<sup>68</sup> Baker's body was found on a Persian rug, a suicide note and pen several feet away, and the gun where he had dropped it after shooting himself in the mouth.<sup>69</sup>

Rex Floyd, who had taken the college choir to Falls City that morning, was a captain in the army reserve and a recent college graduate with a master's degree. As director of special services, he did public relations and student recruitment, directed off-campus studies and activities, and assisted President Nicholas. Having known of Baker's pending dismissal since 1949, he once warned the president not to see Baker alone, fearing that Baker might become verbally abusive. He never suspected, however, that Baker might become violent.<sup>70</sup>

Near noon on his way back to the college, Floyd heard KFAB radio of Omaha announcing shootings at the campus. At Peru, after verifying the killings, Floyd hurried to Baker's house

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where male students, many of them with guns, had converged. Floyd assisted the sheriff in getting the students to disarm. After Baker's body was found, he returned to the administration building and set up a command post to handle inquiries from the press and assist law enforcement officials.<sup>71</sup>

Floyd met with Dean Reinhardt Quelle, the ranking administrator on campus. While secretary Stepan began taking witnesses' statements, Floyd had local operators transfer all calls to the switchboard in the administration building.<sup>72</sup> Despite his efforts the *Lincoln Evening Journal* was unable to get through by telephone and flew police reporter Dale Fahrbruch and photographer Ralph Fox to the Peru area.<sup>73</sup> For forty-eight hours Floyd answered media calls from the surrounding states. During the night he took calls at home from correspondents representing newspapers in London, Paris, and Tokyo.<sup>74</sup>

On Wednesday morning the follow-up calls began: What were Baker's motives? When are the funerals? Who will become president? Floyd handled affairs with finesse, drawing praise from reporter Fahrbruch, who wrote Floyd that "it is seldom that we receive the type of cooperation that you gave us in covering stories of this type."<sup>75</sup>

The media attention upset the residents of Peru. Corinne Adams wrote in her "West Side Items" column of the *Peru Pointer*: "One of the hardest parts [of the week] was the way the reporters and newscasters handled the affair, having a field day. Their methods seem[ed] harsh and their product sensational."<sup>76</sup>

J. Hyde Sweet, president of the Board of Education of State Normal Schools, arrived on campus the afternoon of the murders to name Dean Reinhardt Quelle acting president. Dean Quelle decided to resume classes Wednesday morning, hoping the routine would calm the students. He reassigned other professors to teach Baker's and Maxwell's classes. Social activities were postponed until after

the funerals.<sup>77</sup> Quelle coordinated a memorial convocation on campus Thursday morning for the two slain men. Although the administration and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Wayne Reed initiated plans to honor Nicholas and Maxwell by making April 25 an annual date for campus observances honoring the two educators, the plans were soon forgotten. The college administration had no desire to perpetuate memories of the violence.<sup>78</sup> Nicholas was honored during the college's centennial convocation in 1967.

On Friday, April 28, the church choir Maxwell had directed sang for his funeral at the Peru Methodist Church.<sup>79</sup> The next day the board of education met in special session on the campus. It voted to have Reinhardt Quelle continue as acting president and thanked state superintendent Wayne Reed for assisting Quelle. (On June 17 the board unanimously elected Reed to the presidency of Peru Teachers College).

The board also heard investigative reports from Wayne Reed, J. Hyde Sweet, and County Attorney Kiechel, although no minutes were recorded. The board sent resolutions to Mrs. Nicholas and Mrs. Maxwell recognizing their husbands' service and sent a letter of condolence to Baker's widow. At 4:00 p.m. the board adjourned to the crowded First Christian Church in Peru for Nicholas's funeral.<sup>80</sup>

In the hours following Baker's suicide, police established the premeditation of his deed. He had made elaborate plans. The day before the murders Baker had endorsed three checks and had written one for the balance of his checking account. In the steel box with the checks he had clipped a note to an insurance policy, "still good."<sup>81</sup> He had labeled his keys and had executed an informal bill of sale transferring ownership of his 1937 Chevrolet to his wife.<sup>82</sup> Although Baker had not made out a will, perhaps he realized that a court might overrule it, viewing his suicide as evidence of men-

tal illness.<sup>83</sup> Baker had typed his suicide note on an old portable typewriter in his office. He had addressed it to C. A. Huck, a professor in the physical science division, who acted as Baker's business agent.<sup>84</sup> The note was never disclosed in full to the media, but a copy was later placed in the college archives:

Mr. Huck,  
Please take charge. Use Casey of Auburn as director. Services about \$400.00. Cremate and scatter ashes at night on the south side of the road about eight (8) telephone poles east of the Peru corner. Let only one person know what you have done.

Funeral services at chapel with Presbyterian procedure. No relatives are to be notified except Joy who is at 910 Lidsay [sic] Street, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, or Grove, Oklahoma.

Stay in my house at night or get someone to until things quiet down. P. C. might try to cause trouble. You are to be paid for your services.

P.S. Take charge of my office and bring everything down to the house.

[signed] B. K. Baker  
[handwritten in ink] Willie tried to fire the wrong person.<sup>85</sup>

Initially County Attorney Kiechel assumed "P. C." to be Paul Maxwell's first and middle initials and thought Baker might not have planned to kill Maxwell when he had written the note.<sup>86</sup> Since Maxwell's middle initial was "A.," the note most likely referred to Maxwell's adopted son, Paul Clark, who was commonly called "P. C."<sup>87</sup> About twenty at the time and noted for his hot temper, Paul was married and had an infant son. When he heard about the murders, the younger Maxwell went to Baker's house with a gun and joined the crowd there.<sup>88</sup> The investigators decided that "Willie" in the note referred to president William Nicholas.

Baker's wife of thirty-three years, Joy Catherine Seabourn Baker, had to face the burden of her husband's deed. A small, red-haired woman, Joy was proud of her Cherokee Indian heritage.<sup>89</sup> She worked part-time as a freelance writer and sold nonfiction articles and poetry to magazines under the name "J. S. Baker."<sup>90</sup> Trained as a teacher, she had once applied to teach at the training school in Peru.<sup>91</sup>

On April 25 Mrs. Baker was in



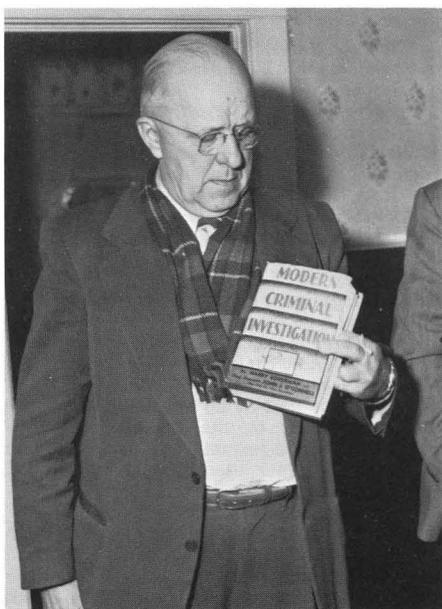
*Dr. Baker's home in Peru. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.*

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Oklahoma visiting a sick brother. There she received the news of the murders from her friends, Professor Robert Moore and his wife, Bess. The Moores had sometimes dined with the Bakers, and Robert Moore had hunted pheasants with Barney Baker. Moore had known of Baker's dismissal since 1949 but had never mentioned it to Baker. Nor had Moore ever heard Baker criticize anyone at the college.<sup>92</sup>

Joy Baker arrived in Peru the day after the murders, calm in her outward appearance. Though surprised by the violence, she had known of her husband's deep anger. The Moores received some criticism for helping Joy Baker during this time, but most people were charitable and pitied her.<sup>93</sup> They regarded Barney Baker as a man who had lost his mind, rather than as a cold-blooded killer. Many people from the college and town attended Baker's funeral at the funeral home in

*C.A. Huck, part-time mathematics instructor at the college, was Baker's business agent and the person to whom Baker addressed a note left on his front door. Huck holds the book *Modern Criminal Investigation*, which was found near Baker's body. Courtesy of Lincoln Journal-Star.*



Auburn.<sup>94</sup> Although Baker had taught Sunday school years earlier at the Peru Methodist Church, he had no active church affiliation at the time of his death.<sup>95</sup> However, his wishes for a Presbyterian service were carried out. In a display of charity toward Baker's widow, responsibility for the service was shared by three ministers, including those from the Methodist and Christian churches attended by Maxwell and Nicholas.<sup>96</sup>

A survey taken after the killings, in which the respondents remained anonymous, asked how the violence might affect the college. Half of the students and parents who completed the survey thought the school's enrollment would suffer; the others did not. Some felt that since the state had discussed closing the college anyway, now would be an opportune time.<sup>97</sup>

Enrollment at Peru did decline from 397 students in 1950 to 269 in 1951.<sup>98</sup> However, the main reason was likely the graduation of many of the World War II veterans. The murders actually seemed to spark some temporary interest in the college. During student recruitment trips in the two months following the incident, Rex Floyd had more inquiries than usual about enrollment. In addition, he received the first inquiries from foreign students.<sup>99</sup>

Administrative instability affected the college somewhat in the aftermath of the murders. Reinhardt Quelle was acting president for only two months, then Wayne Reed was president for less than a year before resigning. Afterwards the college began a more stable period under the long presidency of Neal Gomon.<sup>100</sup>

Far more affected by the killings were the three widows. At a hearing of the Nebraska Workmen's Compensation Court on August 9, 1950, Judge O. M. Olsen awarded Edythe Nicholas and Alice Maxwell each the sum of twenty-two dollars a week for 325 weeks (just over six years), burial expenses of \$250, and attorneys' fees of \$350, to be paid by the Board of Education of State Normal Schools. The board,

however, twice contested the awards despite the belief by Assistant Attorney General William T. Gleeson that there was liability on the part of the state.<sup>101</sup> The board tried to show in court that Nicholas and Maxwell should not have been covered by workmen's compensation, because they were elected or appointed officials of the state rather than employees, and that their deaths were due to personal malice and were not a result of their employment. The board presented nine pages of evidence based on former court cases in Nebraska and elsewhere.<sup>102</sup>

On December 14 a rehearing was held before three judges of the Workmen's Compensation Court, who found in favor of the widows on January 18, 1951. The board lost a final appeal to the district court and then began proceedings to collect an amount of \$14,800 due the widows from Barney Baker's estate. In the end, the board paid the widows when Baker's estate was declared insolvent in August 1956.<sup>103</sup>

The Nicholas marriage had been a happy one, and the loss of her husband was particularly severe for Mrs. Nicholas. Although her religious faith enabled her to forgive the killer, she grieved that so much of her husband's life and talents had been cut short at age forty-eight.

Edythe Nicholas suffered financially as well as emotionally. She had been accustomed to her husband's salary of \$7,000 a year in addition to free campus housing and needed the meager award of the district court (\$1,144 yearly for about six years) as supplemental income. In September 1950 Mrs. Nicholas moved into an apartment in the Delzell Dormitory and began to work as a housemother and counselor at a monthly salary of \$100. When her health began to fail, Mrs. Nicholas moved to York, Nebraska, to be near her daughter and worked part-time until her death on October 26, 1974.<sup>104</sup>

Alice Maxwell fared better finan-

cially than Edythe Nicholas, because she owned farm land in Nebraska and Minnesota. When her husband died intestate, the court divided the \$16,876 estate evenly between herself and her two adopted sons. Later the sons assigned their share of the estate to Alice Maxwell.<sup>105</sup>

During the summer of 1950 Joy Baker went to live in Oklahoma, where she owned some land (part of an allotment to Indians). As Barney Baker had put most of his money into a scholarship fund at a Kansas college, Mrs. Baker had only a paltry estate of \$1,165 and her work as a librarian to support herself. She completed a library degree and lived near Dallas for a time. She died in 1973 in Lindsey, Oklahoma.<sup>106</sup>

The exact reasons why Baker murdered Nicholas and Maxwell can never be determined. It seems clear that his dismissal from the Peru faculty was the major factor. According to C. A. Huck, Baker "was of an insane temperament" and "had been displeased with the previous administration of the college and was subversive to this administration."<sup>107</sup> Of course, Huck's conclusions about Baker's "insane temperament" were much easier to reach after the events of April 25.

Baker's own withdrawn personality worked against his being able to resolve anger and frustration over his dismissal. He had few close friends. Except for his wife and one or two colleagues, the only people who knew of the dismissal were those Baker blamed for planning it. Of more significance was the lack of specified procedures by which Baker could appeal his case to college administrators or to the board of education.<sup>108</sup> Though Baker did appeal to the president of the board of education, there is no evidence that a hearing was held. President Nicholas gave Baker ample notice of his pending dismissal and evidently offered to assist him in finding other employment, but it appears that no formal counseling or other assistance was available to discharged

employees. The moody and reserved Baker had several months in which to brood about what he felt to be the injustice of his situation. When he finally released his emotions, bloodshed resulted.

Barney Baker requested in his suicide note that his cremated remains be scattered eight telephone poles east of the Peru Corner. Some thought this meant he intended to have his ashes put on the campus, and a few people were outraged.<sup>109</sup> The outcry resulted from a misunderstanding. The location Baker had chosen was not on the college grounds at all. His widow and the Moores thought the suicide note referred to the intersection of Highways 75 and 67, where a huge billboard pointed the way to the college. The eighth pole from the corner stood at the crest of a hill where the Bakers had often stopped to look at the sunset or countryside.<sup>110</sup>

Because Nebraska law prohibits disposing of human ashes as Baker had requested, his ashes remain in the Casey-Witzenburg Funeral Home in Auburn. In January 1952 Joy Baker wrote the funeral home for the last time: "I regret I can't tell you what disposition to make of the ashes. I'll let you know when I can." Although not legally bound to do so, the funeral home has kept the small box of ashes in case a family member should ever request them.<sup>111</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"General Fund Appropriation," Minutes of the Board of Education of State Normal Schools, July 8, 1950, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as Board Minutes).

<sup>2</sup>Dorothy Stepan, telephone interview with author, December 3, 1986; "Baker Forecast Tragedy at Peru," *Nebraska City News-Press*, April 27, 1950.

<sup>3</sup>"Notes and News," *School and Society* 71(May 6, 1950):285.

<sup>4</sup>J. Harold Cowan, "Peru Slayer's Life Scanned," *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 28, 1950.

<sup>5</sup>*School and Society*, 285.

<sup>6</sup>"Campus Mourns Passing of Two Educators," *Peru (Nebraska) Pedagogian* XLV(May 4, 1950):1.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Stepan, telephone interview; J. Hyde Sweet,

"Kick Kolumn," *Nebraska City News-Press*, April 27, 1950. Sweet was the president of the Board of Education of State Normal Schools and editor of the *Nebraska City News-Press*.

<sup>9</sup>Memorandum by William L. Nicholas, ca. June 1949, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>10</sup>Wanda Brown, interview with author, October 18, 1986.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas, memorandum.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Bulletin*, Peru State Teachers College, 1945-50.

<sup>14</sup>"Report of Faculty from Teacher's College at Peru," Board Minutes, February 18, 1950, 77-82.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>"Ousted Professor Slays," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 26, 1950, sec. 1; Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>17</sup>Cowan, "Peru Slayer's Life Scanned"; Dorothy Rieke, telephone interview with author, October 15, 1986; Ralph and Maxine Chatelain, telephone interview with author, October 4, 1986.

<sup>18</sup>Statement of John Christ, April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>19</sup>Rex Floyd, telephone interview with author, November 1, 1986.

<sup>20</sup>Robert and Bess Moore, telephone interview with author, December 6, 1986.

<sup>21</sup>Dr. Jerry Gallentine, interview with author, Peru, Nebraska, October 8, 1986.

<sup>22</sup>"Shootings Claim Three on Peru Campus," *Falls City Journal*, April 25, 1950.

<sup>23</sup>"Loss of Job Motive for Peru College's Two Murders, Suicide," *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>24</sup>Sweet, "Kick Kolumn."

<sup>25</sup>Brown, interview.

<sup>26</sup>Nicholas, memorandum.

<sup>27</sup>*Lincoln Star*, home edition, April 26, 1950; Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>28</sup>"Ousted Professor Slays Two Superiors, Self," *Portland Oregonian*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>29</sup>"Professor Kills College President," *New York Times*, April 26, 1950; Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>30</sup>Revised Statutes of Nebraska 1943, reissue of 1950, Chapters 77-89: 1,016-19.

<sup>31</sup>Stepan, telephone interview; Moore, telephone interview, December 6, 1986.

<sup>32</sup>Clarence Beck, Attorney General, and William T. Gleeson, Assistant Attorney General, legal brief, Alice Maxwell and Edythe Nicholas v. the State Normal School Board, August 1950.

<sup>33</sup>Eason v. Majors, *Nebraska Reports*, Stoddard, III (October 20, 1923 to April 9, 1924):228-94.

<sup>34</sup>Moore, telephone interview, December 6, 1986. No policy manuals of the college were found. None of those interviewed recalled any action by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in regard to Baker's dismissal either before or after the murders. AAUP periodicals of 1950-51 do not mention the incident. According to the organization's 1951 publication, there was only one AAUP member on the Peru campus, identity unknown.

<sup>35</sup>*Lincoln Star*, home edition, April 26, 1950.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>"Employment of Ernest Pierce," Board Minutes, October 14, 1949. Interestingly, Pierce was still the campus gardener in September 1950 according to the September 23, 1950 Board Minutes.

## Tragedy at Peru State College

<sup>38</sup>Statement of Wesley Sweetser, April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives; Board Minutes, June 1949 to October 1950.

<sup>39</sup>Floyd, telephone interview; Robert and Bess Moore, telephone interview with author, November 1, 1986.

<sup>40</sup>Moore, telephone interview, November 1, 1986.

<sup>41</sup>Cowan, "Peru Slayer's Life Scanned."

<sup>42</sup>Sweetser, statement.

<sup>43</sup>"Brooded a Year," *Falls City Journal*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>44</sup>Christ, statement.

<sup>45</sup>James Burnett, telephone interview with author, October 17, 1986. "Retirement Fear," *Lincoln Star*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>46</sup>Nicholas, memorandum.

<sup>47</sup>Moore, telephone interview, November 1, 1986.

<sup>48</sup>*Lincoln Star*, home edition, April 26, 1950.

<sup>49</sup>Stepan, telephone interview; Robert Moore to author, letter dated only November 1986; Board Minutes, June 27, 1949.

<sup>50</sup>Moore, telephone interview, November 1, 1986; Robert Moore to author, November 1986. Informant Moore no doubt was thinking of the expression, "fair-haired boys" or favored ones.

<sup>51</sup>Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>52</sup>Statement of Dorothy Stepan, April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>53</sup>Statements of James Kirk and Gus LaMontain, April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>54</sup>"Two Peru College Officials Slain," *Nebraska State Journal*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>55</sup>Stepan, statement.

<sup>56</sup>Statement of G.E. Wiggins, M.D., April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>57</sup>Stepan, Kirk, and LaMontain statements.

<sup>58</sup>Stepan, statement and telephone interview.

<sup>59</sup>Sweetser, statement.

<sup>60</sup>Statement of Mary Louise Smith, April 25, 1950, Peru State College Archives; Wiggins, statement.

<sup>61</sup>Floyd, telephone interview; Art Majors, interview with author, Peru, Nebraska, October 14, 1986.

<sup>62</sup>"Shootings Terrible," *Lincoln Journal*, April 26, 1950; "Retirement Fear," *Lincoln Star*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>63</sup>Sweetser, statement.

<sup>64</sup>Source wishes to remain anonymous.

<sup>65</sup>Wiggins, statement.

<sup>66</sup>Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>67</sup>Survey of Peru College students, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>68</sup>*Peru Pointer*, April 27, 1950; "Brooded a Year," *Falls City Journal*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>69</sup>"Professor Kills College President," *New York Times*, April 26, 1950, 1; police photo, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>70</sup>Floyd, telephone interview.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup>Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>73</sup>"Two Peru College Professors Slain," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, April 25, 1950.

<sup>74</sup>Floyd, telephone interview. "Three Shot at U.S. College," *London Times*, April 26, 1950, Foreign News Section, 5:5.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*; Dale E. Fahrbruch to Rex Floyd, April 25, 1950, copy in author's possession.

<sup>76</sup>Corinne Adams, "West Side Items," *Peru Pointer*, April 27, 1950.

<sup>77</sup>"Dean Quelle is Put in Charge," *Nebraska City News-Press*, April 26, 1950; *Peru Pedagogian* XLV:1.

<sup>78</sup>"Last Respects," *Lincoln Journal*, April 29, 1950; Stepan, telephone interview.

<sup>79</sup>"Last Respects," *Lincoln Journal*, April 29, 1950.

<sup>80</sup>Board Minutes, June 17, 1950. The son of Tom Furneau, County Attorney Fred Kiechel's partner, informed the author that Kiechel's investigative report probably burned in an office fire in 1966. Nemaha County court employees and former county attorneys have no knowledge of its whereabouts.

<sup>81</sup>"Brooded a Year," *Falls City Journal*, April 26, 1950; "Double Murder," *Nemaha County Herald*, April 27, 1950.

<sup>82</sup>"Professor Kills College President," *New York Times*, April 26, 1950; Probate Case 4601 (Barney Baker), Probate Record 59: 673, County Court, Nemaha County Courthouse.

<sup>83</sup>Lowell Hahn, telephone interview with author, October 8, 1986.

<sup>84</sup>"Brooded a Year," *Falls City Journal*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>85</sup>Barney Baker suicide note, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>86</sup>"Two Peru College Professors Slain," *Lincoln Evening Journal*, April 25, 1950; "Shootings Claim Three on Peru Campus," *Falls City Journal*, April 25, 1950.

<sup>87</sup>Clay Kennedy, interview with author, Brownville, Nebraska, October 12, 1986, Chatelain, interview.

<sup>88</sup>Kennedy, interview.

<sup>89</sup>Moore, telephone interview, November 1, 1986.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup>Gallentine, interview.

<sup>92</sup>Moore, telephone interview, December 6, 1986.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, November 1, 1986.

<sup>94</sup>Lee Casey, interview with author, Auburn, Nebraska, September 30, 1986; Moore, telephone interview, November 1, 1986; Chatelain, interview.

<sup>95</sup>Cowan, "Peru Slayer's Life Scanned."

<sup>96</sup>Casey, interview; "Set Services for Peru Men," *Nebraska City News-Press*, April 27, 1950.

<sup>97</sup>Survey of Peru State Teachers College Students, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>98</sup>Ernest Longfellow, *The Normal on the Hill; One Hundred Years of Peru State College* (Grand Island, Nebraska: Augustine Co., 1967), 53.

<sup>99</sup>Floyd, telephone interview.

<sup>100</sup>Longfellow, *Normal on the Hill*, 53.

<sup>101</sup>"Compensation Claims," Board Minutes, July 8, 1950.

<sup>102</sup>Case 7438, Docket P:126, Nemaha County District Court; Docket 19:294, Nebraska Workmen's Compensation Court, copies in office of Clerk of the District Court, Nemaha County Courthouse, Auburn, Nebraska.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*; Probate Case 4601 (Barney Baker Estate, Probate Record 59:673, County Court, Nemaha County Courthouse.

<sup>104</sup>Board Minutes, September 23, 1950; Wanda Brown, telephone interview with author, April 25, 1988.

<sup>105</sup>Probate Case 4607 (Paul Ammon Maxwell Estate), Probate Record 60:11, County Court, Nemaha County Courthouse.

<sup>106</sup>Baker Estate case, Robert Moore to author, November 1986.

<sup>107</sup>"Two Peru College Officials Slain," *Nebraska State Journal*, April 26, 1950.

<sup>108</sup>Under present policies established by the Board of Trustees of Nebraska State Colleges, a professor's dismissal would be considered in one of two ways. Under a reduction-in-force plan, employees having tenure, higher rank or degrees, and more service years would be given preference. The administration would be required to make an effort to place a person dismissed under this plan in another position at the college. The person would also be considered for re-employment (within a year) before any new staff was hired at any of the state colleges.

For dismissals for reasons of incompetence, neglect of duty, insubordination, unprofessional conduct, immorality, or violation of academic freedom, the dismissed person would be entitled to a hearing before a faculty senate committee, where he or she could be represented by legal counsel, present evidence, and have the proceedings made a matter of record. Decisions of the faculty senate could be appealed to the Board of Trustees of Nebraska State Colleges, whose decision would be final. Professional organizations such as the State College Education Association or the American Association of University Professors are available to provide advice or assistance to faculty members in cases of dismissals alleged to be arbitrary or discriminatory.

<sup>109</sup>Anonymous letter from Hamburg, Iowa, to Peru College Y.M.C.A., April 26, 1950, Peru State College Archives.

<sup>110</sup>Moore, telephone interview, December 6, 1986.

<sup>111</sup>Casey, interview.