

SIDELIGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE SWEDES IN THE ST. CROIX VALLEY¹

In a letter written to the editor of a Swedish newspaper published in Illinois, in 1859, a Swedish Lutheran pastor who had resided in Minnesota for four years prophesied that no other state in the Union would become so thickly populated with Swedes and their descendants as Minnesota. He extended a cordial invitation to his countrymen in Illinois to move themselves and their belongings to the North Star State; and he offered the following inducements: first, a climate like that of Sweden and the most healthful in the United States; second, an abundance of good land; third, the opportunity for the Swedes to concentrate in a single state, thus enabling them to preserve their own language and to establish and maintain their own churches and schools.²

In 1854, 1855, and 1857 another Swedish Lutheran clergyman—Eric Norelius, who spent the greater part of his long and useful life in Minnesota—visited the St. Croix Valley, and he recorded his experiences and observations in letters to newspapers, in his diary, and in his historical writings. On his first visit, in 1854, he traveled up the Mississippi River from Rock Island to St. Paul, where he arrived on a Sunday afternoon in May. At the boat landing he talked with a number of Swedish immigrants. They told him that they were expecting another Swedish Lutheran clergyman, Erland Carlsson of Chicago, who at the time was on a preaching tour in the St. Croix Valley. On the following afternoon Norelius left for Stillwater. He found this thriving town alive with lumberjacks wearing flaming

¹ This article embodies the substance of an address presented on June 27, 1936, at the Marine session of the fourteenth state historical convention under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

² P. A. Cederstam, in *Hemlandet*, April 12, 1859.

red woolen shirts, but no Swedes were to be seen there. In 1854, according to Norelius, the young blades of the St. Croix Valley who wanted to be "in style" wore red woolen shirts, leather belts, and "plug" hats; and they displayed their finery by loitering on the streets of Stillwater and whittling sticks from timber which they had cut and logged down the river.

From Stillwater the young theological student traveled by the mail stage to Taylor's Falls, and thence on foot through nine miles of dense woods to Chisago Lake. If one may judge by certain of his statements, during his sojourn in the valley, which extended from May to September, Norelius was engaged in a standing contest with mosquitoes. He found that it was the exceptional Swedish pioneer who had more than eight acres of land cleared and under cultivation. During the first years of the Chisago Lake settlement the chief article of diet was fish; crude buildings were constructed out of rough logs; and household utensils, furniture, and even shoes were made from the wood that was cut on the claims of the pioneers. The Yankees called their strange neighbors from the Land of the Midnight Sun the "wooden shoe people." The settlers bore the impress of their wild and primitive surroundings and were contentious and hard to handle, as the pastors who ministered to them learned on more than one occasion.

At the first religious service arranged by Norelius, he was confronted by a stately, venerable man, who introduced himself by offering the information that he had functioned as a parish pastor in Sweden, but was at the time in the service of the Methodist church. Courtesy perhaps demanded that the young theological student invite the experienced clergyman to preach the sermon; but, knowing the doctrinal instability of the man, Norelius essayed the task himself. The Methodist was not to be denied, however, and, at the conclusion of Norelius' sermon, he launched out on a discourse as extended as and more varied in content than the sermon

that had just been delivered. The persistent competitor was Carl Petter Agrelius, who in 1848 had emigrated from Pelarne, a parish in the province of Småland, from which many residents of Chisago Lake were recruited. After an abortive effort to organize a Lutheran congregation in New York City, Agrelius steered his course westward. For many years he was a well-known character in the Swedish settlements, where he persistently exhorted his countrymen to hear him expound the gospel; but his harvest was meager, in spite of his unique inducement: "If you want a service cut according to the Methodist pattern, I can accommodate you; if you prefer a Lutheran service, you may have that. I know how to officiate because I was a pastor in Sweden for twenty-six years."

Two weeks after the Agrelius episode, at the conclusion of a service conducted by Norelius, a stranger arose to announce another service in the afternoon. This competitor was Fredrik Olaus Nilsson, who, in 1850, had been banished from Sweden for the offense of having violated the conventicle act by preaching the doctrine of adult baptism. Nilsson, however, very shortly deserted the St. Croix Valley in favor of Houston County, in southeastern Minnesota.

On his second visit to the St. Croix Valley, in 1855, Norelius estimated that there were about two thousand Swedes in Minnesota, of whom thirty lived at Stillwater, three hundred at Marine, and five hundred at Chisago Lake—the latter being the largest Swedish settlement in the territory. After his third visit, in 1857, Norelius wrote that he had found many changes. Practically all government land at Chisago Lake and Marine had been taken, but good land could still be purchased for ten dollars an acre. He estimated the number of Swedes in the St. Croix Valley at fifteen hundred, one thousand of whom were at Chisago Lake and three hundred at Marine.³

³ Letters from Norelius, in *Hemlandet*, December 1, 22, 1855, and in *Minnesota posten*, October 13, 1857; Norelius, "Några hägkomster från

It appears that before 1860 there were three types of Swedish settlements in Minnesota — in the St. Croix Valley, where the pioneers chose timbered land; in Nicollet County, where the log cabins were raised on the prairie; and in Goodhue County, which furnished a combination of wooded land and prairie. Why did the Swedes settle in the St. Croix Valley? Why was the first Swedish settlement in the territory established in 1850 near the present site of Marine? Why did the second settlement, which was founded in 1851, become the nucleus of the largest Swedish settlement in the state? Why did the census of 1920 report that the Swedes in Chisago County constituted eighty-five per cent of the entire foreign-born population and one-fourth of the entire population? Let the Swedes themselves furnish the answers to these questions.

The first witness is the writer of a letter that was published in a Swedish newspaper in Illinois. If a Swede traveled via the St. Paul and Duluth Railroad from St. Paul to North Branch or Wyoming and thence by stage ten or fifteen miles to Chisago Lake, he could easily imagine himself transported to a Swedish province, he wrote. He would find creeks of clear running water, and lakes with sandy shores and romantic bays and islands; and he would have difficulty in resisting the impulse to make the region his abiding place.⁴ Three generations after the first Swedes

året 1854" and "Hågkomster från 1855," in *Korsbaneret*, 1888, p. 106-152, 1889, p. 107-155 (Rock Island, Illinois); Emeroy Johnson, translator, *Early Life of Eric Norelius 1833-1862: Journal of a Swedish Immigrant in the Middle West* (Rock Island, 1934); Norelius, *De svenska luterska församlingarnas och svenskarnes historia i Amerika* (Rock Island, 1890); Robert Gronberger, *Svenskarne i St. Croix-dalen, Minnesota* (Minneapolis, 1879); Gronberger, "Historical Account of the Swedish Settlement Marine in Washington County, Minnesota," in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Year-books*, 10: 49-87 (St. Paul, 1925); George M. Stephenson, translator and compiler, "Hemlandet Letters," in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Year-books*, 8: 56-152 (St. Paul, 1923); Stephenson, *Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration* (Minneapolis, 1932).

⁴"Svenska landskap i Amerika," in *Zions Bäner* (Knoxville), July 25, 1879.

invaded the St. Croix Valley, armed with axes and crude agricultural implements, two distinguished scholars from Sweden, carrying the equipment of the geographer and of the student of social problems, visited the same region and found the topography, soil, and flora strongly suggestive of southern Sweden. Chisago County they found to be a "rich and stoneless Småland."⁵

In a long and informing article published in 1867 in a Chicago Swedish newspaper, a resident of Chisago Lake discoursed on the history of the Swedes. According to this writer, the St. Croix River and the pine woods furnished year-round employment, and the lumber camps paid higher prices for the products of the farms than could be obtained by shipping them to St. Paul. Lumberjacks received from thirty to forty dollars a month, including board and lodging; and in the spring loggers were paid from two and a half to three dollars a day, which also included board and lodging. In the first years of the settlement the main crop was potatoes, which together with game and fish furnished the subsistence of the pioneer families.⁶

Most vigorous and positive testimony about the superiority of the St. Croix Valley as a home for land-hungry Swedes is recorded in the files of a newspaper published in Sweden. The writer was A. M. Dahlhjelm, who saw Chisago Lake in the fullness of its primeval beauty and who knew at first hand the inspiration, the dangers, the hardships, and the rewards that came to the men whose footsteps startled the game that had lived unmolested and whose industry aroused the curiosity of the Indians. A letter that he wrote in 1853 was sent to relatives in Sweden in care of Gustaf Unonius, an Episcopal minister in Chicago who went to Chisago Lake in 1852 and who visited his native land in 1853.

⁵ Helge Nelson, *Nordamerika: Natur, bygd och svenskbygd*, 356-363 (Stockholm, 1926); G. H. von Koch, *Emigranternas land: Studier i amerikanskt samhällslif*, 325 (Stockholm, 1910).

⁶ J. von Kull, "Chisago Lake, Minnesota," in *Svenska Amerikanaren* (Chicago), April 10, 1857.

The letter saw the light of day in print in *Östgötha Correspondenten* of Linköping for July 27 and 30, 1857.

After an ocean voyage of twenty weeks, Dahlhjelm arrived at New Orleans in April, 1851. From the Gulf City he journeyed up the Mississippi to St. Louis, thence to Burlington, Iowa, and from that point up the valley of the Skunk River to the Swedish settlement in Jefferson County, Iowa. Dahlhjelm was one of hundreds of peasants in Östergötland and Småland who made the heroic decision to "find Peter Cassel" — founder of this settlement in 1845 — after having read or heard about Cassel's glowing letters portraying the wonders and fabulous opportunities in Iowa. Dahlhjelm found what many before and after him found, namely, that Cassel had neither the means nor the house to make good the promise in his letters to shelter the immigrants who sought him out. Dahlhjelm and his family were eventually lodged in a house without windows, almost roofless, and with a door that creaked on its insecure hinges. Cats and dogs entered and departed from the house through the generous spaces between the timbers of the walls. Cassel, he said, was in poorer circumstances than anyone in the settlement; and he had been the object of millions of curses from his disillusioned countrymen.

But it was not only Cassel who was castigated by the embittered writer. His pen was even more prolific in recording dissatisfaction with Iowa's climate. Rain was invariably accompanied by such blinding flashes of lightning and deafening peals of thunder that one might think the day of judgment was at hand. After a rain it was impossible to visit neighbors on account of mud and water; the fleet in the Stockholm skerries would have been able to maneuver without difficulty.

In the midst of despair, Dahlhjelm obtained the address of E. U. Nordberg, a resident of Chisago Lake. Nordberg was one of the large number of Eric-Jansonists who had migrated to Illinois to found a New Jerusalem, where they

would be unmolested by the authorities in Sweden, who broke up their conventicles and haled them before the magistrates. Nordberg, however, did not thrive in the regimented Bishop Hill colony, where the word of the prophet Eric Janson was law and gospel, and in 1851 he found his way to Minnesota. From Chisago Lake he preached the gospel of Minnesota through the medium of letters to acquaintances in Illinois, and with some of his epistles he enclosed maps of the Chisago Lake region. Nordberg replied to Dahlhjelm's inquiries about Minnesota's climate and soil, and in November, 1851, the dissatisfied immigrant deserted Iowa and set out on the long journey to his correspondent.

From November to February, Dahlhjelm and his son were occupied in the construction of a house built according to Swedish style, in the meantime living as best they could in a cave. "I thought we would freeze to death before our house was ready," he wrote. Having disposed of this necessary preliminary, the two men set their hands to clearing their land and burning the timber. The week after the anniversary of the ascension of Christ found them ready to put in their crops, which included spring rye and peas brought with them from Sweden and other varieties of grain.

Readers of Dahlhjelm's letter in Sweden were informed about the fabulous draughts of fishes from Chisago Lake, the killing of five deer and innumerable prairie chickens and other kinds of game. Many varieties of wild fruit were mentioned, including cherries, gooseberries, currants, and plums. "One species of berry has a flavor like that of the finest liquor," he wrote. The springs were not long-drawn-out, as in Sweden, and crops were not damaged by early and late frosts. All in all, Dahlhjelm found that Nordberg was a truthful man.

Among the individuals who were instrumental in advertising the St. Croix Valley as a suitable place for immigrants from Sweden were Unonius, Fredrik O. Nilsson, and P. A. Cederstam. Unonius was enthusiastic about Minnesota,

and his duties as pastor in Chicago afforded him the opportunity to recommend Chisago Lake as a suitable place to settle. In letters to Anders Wiberg, the pre-eminent leader among the Swedish Baptists who was stationed in the East, Nilsson stated that he was safe in advising his countrymen to steer their course to Minnesota.⁷ Cederstam, who from 1856 to 1858 served as pastor at Chisago Lake, in several letters to *Hemlandet* told of his experiences, as well as of the progress of his countrymen. In 1856 he related proudly that the Swedes had elected their own township officers and could transact official business through the medium of the Swedish language.

Another Swedish newspaper published in Illinois also contributed to the migration of Swedes to the St. Croix Valley. This was *Den svenske republikanen i Norra Amerika*. In the summer of 1857 Svante Cronsjoe, the editor and publisher of this paper, made a five-week trip to Minnesota Territory. Upon his return to Illinois he published a series of articles giving information with reference to the location of land, the terms on which it could be purchased, and the progress of settlements. A map of Minnesota was published as a supplement to the paper. In the margin of the map appeared advertisements of railway companies, land companies, and other firms interested in stimulating immigration.

After the termination of the American Civil War, Sweden became a fertile field for the operations of agents of organizations interested in recruiting immigrants. Several newspapers in Sweden were owned or subsidized by these corporations. In order to facilitate the sale of steamship and railway tickets, the agents organized emigration societies. These societies required initiation fees and monthly dues from their members. When sufficient funds had accumulated in the treasury of a society, lots were drawn, and

⁷ The manuscript correspondence between Wiberg and Nilsson is in the Bethel Seminary library in Stockholm.

the members fortunate enough to draw the lucky numbers were furnished transportation to America.

A company bearing the formidable name of the Great European-American Emigration Land Company was incorporated in New York in 1868 with a capital stock of "one million dollars in gold." Among the prominent men whose names appeared on the roster of officials of this corporation was Caleb Cushing; and according to the prospectus of the company, it had banking connections with the firm of August Belmont and Company. A network of agencies was spread over Sweden, directed by Count Henning A. Taube, who was also listed as general superintendent of the corporation. Its advertisements offered for sale large tracts of land in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Minnesota, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Texas, Tennessee, and Louisiana, including about twenty thousand acres of land on both sides of the St. Croix River in Chisago County, Minnesota, and Polk County, Wisconsin. Count Taube visited the United States and gave lectures in Sweden to large audiences of farmers and working people.

In 1869 and 1870 this company received considerable unfavorable advertising in the newspapers of Sweden and in the Swedish papers published in the United States in the form of letters from defrauded and dissatisfied immigrants and affidavits presented to the Swedish minister in Washington. Four different parties of immigrants were recruited in Dalarna by agents of the corporation. Some had purchased orders for railway tickets from New York to St. Croix Falls. When the orders were presented at the office of the Great European-American Emigration Land Company in New York, the immigrants were told that since no remittances had arrived, the orders could not be made good. Moreover, it was given out that the agents in Sweden were not authorized to sell orders on the company for railway tickets. The defrauded Swedes appealed in vain to the company and to the Swedish consul at New York.

Another group of prospective immigrants complained that an agent had retained the money remitted by an emigration society and had refused to furnish tickets to members who held lottery tickets entitling them to transportation. Two immigrants belonging to another group wrote to a newspaper in Sweden that when they arrived at New York they were informed that the tickets from New York to St. Croix Falls would not be honored beyond Hastings. Some members of the party obtained employment at Hastings; and those who paid the extra fare to St. Croix Falls learned to their sorrow that the company could not make good the promise to furnish employment and that it could not guarantee title to the land it had advertised for sale. Hundreds of emigrants from many countries of Europe could have related experiences similar to those of the Swedish emigrants who trusted the agents of the Great European-American Emigration Land Company.⁸

The study of the history of the Swedish settlements in the St. Croix Valley would well repay the student of American history. He would study the Swedes as pioneer farmers and as lumberjacks, the establishment of foreign language churches and schools, the clash of religions, and the process of assimilation in a region unusually favorable to the preservation and cultivation of an Old World culture.

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⁸ Among the references to this episode, the following may be cited: *Svenska Amerikanaren* (Chicago), September 30, December 23, 1868; *Nya dagligt allehanda* (Stockholm), February 13, 1869; *Helsingborgs tidning*, March 25, 1869; *Jönköpings-bladet*, April 17, 1869; *Norrlands-posten* (Gävle), September 2, 1869; *Hwad nytt* (Eksjö), December 29, 1868, November 4, 1869; *Tidning för falu län och stad* (Falun), November 10, 1869; *Amerika-bladet* (Örebro), November 9, December 21, 1869, February 22, 1870; *Minnesota tidning* (St. Paul), July 14, 21, 1870; E. F. Taube to Wetterstedt, June 2, 1868; Lewenhaupt to Swedish Foreign Office, October 14, 1870. The manuscripts are in "Beskickningen i Washington arkiv," in Riksarkivet, Stockholm.



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