

# MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 29 • PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1948 • NUMBER 2

## A Swedish Immigrant Folk Figure: Ola Värmlänning<sup>1</sup>

*Roy Swanson*

OLA VÄRMLÄNNING is a name that belongs to Minnesota Swedish immigrant life of an earlier generation. It belongs to the high tide of the Swedish inwandering, to the era of the lumber camp and the great sawmills, the old-time saloon, and the teeming boardinghouses. With the passing of these nineteenth-century aspects of Swedish immigrant life in Minnesota, Ola, too, has passed, his memory green only in the hearts of the oldest Swedish-Americans.

Ola was a half-legendary big Swede who became a prominent folk figure among the Swedish working classes in Minnesota and the Northwest. The stories built around his name were numerous, varied, and widely recounted. Informants, who responded gratifyingly to my recent query in a Swedish-language newspaper, say he flourished in the 1880's and 1890's, chiefly in the Twin Cities. Ola is a Minnesota product. None of my informants mentions ever having heard of Ola in any other locale. "I first heard of Ola Värmlänning," writes one, "when I arrived in Minneapolis from Sweden in 1893."

Ola is usually described as big, strong, and blond. Though endowed with great physical strength, he was nevertheless gentle, good natured, and slow to anger. But when aroused, woe betide those who fell victim to his terrible fists. He had an aversion to work of all kinds and an overwhelming addiction to the bottle. Many of

<sup>1</sup> The Minnesota Historical Society offers the accompanying essay as its contribution to the Swedish Pioneer Centennial celebration of 1948, which is being marked in Minnesota from June 25 to 28. *Ed.*

my informants say outright that Ola was a "bum," that his career is the horrible example of a misspent life. Ola possessed a fine voice, could play the accordion, and was the perpetrator of astounding practical jokes which form the basis of many of the Ola stories.

The Ola legend has many versions. Some say he came to Minnesota from the province of Värmland, the son of a well-to-do family. At times he is described as the wayward son of a country parson. Some say he came to America because he was disappointed in love. Others say he was a sort of Swedish example of the "remittance man," the black sheep of a wealthy landed family who was packed off to the New World and was paid a periodic stipend to remain away from the proud home he had disgraced by his wild carryings on. Others have it that his father relented and sent him money and a return ticket to go home, but Ola always "drank it up" and never returned to Sweden.

He is supposed, in the first years of his life in this country, to have been an industrious and well-behaved workman and to have attained a place of trust as a boss of work crews on the railroads and in the harvest fields. But the demon rum was the cause of his downfall. He was reduced to cadging drinks in saloons, for which he played the role of barroom troubadour and merry-andrew, and he became a regular tenant of the Minneapolis (or St. Paul) city workhouse, which place he is supposed to have fondly referred to as his "farm." All informants agree that Ola died a drunken pauper and lies in some nameless grave. They do not know when he died, save that it was "a long time since."

Although none of my informants is able to furnish me with Ola's real name, some claim to have seen him plain. One, a pioneer St. Paul resident, deposes that when he was thirteen years of age, in 1884, he saw Ola Värmlänning in front of a saloon on Rosabel and Seventh streets engaged in an altercation with a curbstome vendor of penny whistles. Another old St. Paulite writes that one Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1882 he strolled down to Sibley and Third streets and there, before "Brown's saloon," he joined a good-humored sidewalk crowd that was being entertained by Ola's rendition of a

song. Its title, recalled after more than sixty years, was "Sandells Kanon." These are no doubt cherished memories, remembered in minutia, but they do not help the investigator to identify Ola.

The Ola stories are far from epic, as, for instance, the tales of Paul Bunyan are claimed by some to be. Their level is that of droll misadventure and the practical joke. When an old-timer is asked to relate an Ola Värmlänning story it is almost certain that he will oblige first with the one about Ola and his special train. This seems to be the best known of the Ola stories, and is, in fact, the opening yarn in the only printed collection of them I have been able to discover.

This collection is published in a cheaply made, pulp-paper volume, obviously manufactured to sell on newsstands in Swedish neighborhoods and to be hawked on local trains by the candy butcher. While it bears the title *Ola Värmlänning*, only 42 of its 158 pages are devoted to Ola and his adventures, the remaining two-thirds being given over to comic songs and sundry humorous pieces. There are nine crude drawings in which Ola is represented as a handsome, stately young giant with a cap perched high on his blond, curly head. The book was priced at fifty cents. Conspicuous on the backbone is the word "Swedish," for the convenience, no doubt, of non-Swedish vendors of such literature.

The publisher was J. Leachman and Son, a firm located at 1417 Washington Avenue South, in the heart of Swedish Minneapolis. This firm, which was in business from about 1890 to 1916, manufactured and sold Scandinavian joke books, song books, pocket dictionaries, robber tales, epistolary guides for the lovelorn, and the like. Its output seems to have been entirely secular, leaving to the religious press the publication of the tracts, hymn books, and homilies that supplied the immigrant's spiritual needs. Leachman's books are also found with the imprint of the Capital Publishing Company, the firm's St. Paul establishment at 9 East Sixth Street. I have seen copies of *Ola Värmlänning* with both imprints.

The title page is innocent of date and author, an omission which seems to characterize all Leachman's output. The little book

has defied all bibliographical detective work. Apparently a copy was never sent to the Library of Congress and the copy in the collections of the Swedish Historical Society of America has no accession date.<sup>2</sup> My guess is that it was printed about 1910, the year one of my informants purchased it on a train between Minneapolis and Melrose. A Minneapolis dealer in secondhand Scandinavian books, who occasionally receives a copy of *Ola Värmlänning* in his shop, ventures a similar opinion as to the date of publication.

My opinion as to the author is only a guess. I surmise that the compilation was made by some enterprising Swedish-language newspaper hack who was striving to make an extra dollar by capitalizing on a popular hero. Whoever this unknown compiler may have been, Minnesota folklorists have reason to be grateful to him for putting into book form some of the basic Ola stories that, according to my informants, were current long before 1910 or even 1900. Had he not done so, there is danger that this facet of Swedish immigrant cultural life might have been lost forever. Unlike Paul Bunyan, *Ola Värmlänning* had no exponents to carry him over into another generation or out of the bounds of the Swedish language.

The compiler, in his introductory remarks, makes no attempt to identify Ola, saying only that "a person of this name actually existed among the Swedish-Americans here in the Northwest, having his whereabouts in Minnesota and particularly in Minneapolis and St. Paul." He also regrets that he has been unsuccessful, "despite the most zealous efforts," in procuring a photograph of Ola! His attitude toward the Ola stories is realistic enough: "It would be difficult to determine to a certainty which of the stories connected with Ola actually have him as the sole source, and which have been told of others and thereafter tied to Ola's name." The compiler himself confesses to embroidering the tales, saying, "It would clearly afford the reader but small pleasure to be served only the bare bones." Included in the embroidery are three episodes in doggerel verse written by the compiler.

The compiler opens the story about Ola and his special train with

<sup>2</sup> The Swedish Historical Society's collections were placed on permanent deposit with the Minnesota Historical Society in 1921.

# Ola Värmlänning



PRIS 50 CTS.

CAPITAL PUBLISHING CO.

St. Paul, Minn.

THE COVER OF "OLA VÄRMLÄNNING"

[From a copy in the possession of the author.]

the warning, "If all that now follows did not occur literally as here related, nevertheless the kernel is true and actual." In this spirit we must accept the tales reported by him. The story, in translation, reads somewhat like this:

"Ola came down to the Twin Cities from the woods in the vicinity of Duluth, dressed in the usual lumberjack costume, wearing high snowpacks and a Mackinaw, and carrying a sack on his shoulders.

"Thus rigged out he entered a certain railroad office and inquired the cost of a special train from Minneapolis to St. Paul. When he had been told and had learned the shortest time in which such a train could be placed at his service, he tossed the required amount on the counter and demanded that a special train be held in readiness at a stated hour.

"All right!"<sup>3</sup> There followed a terrific hurry and bustle. Telegraph instruments began to clatter and one can easily imagine the excitement stirred up in St. Paul when it was learned that a special train was to arrive from Minneapolis at such and such a time. Naturally there was much speculation and inquiry as to who this person could be who had such weighty affairs to transact in the Capital City that he must needs hire a special train to get there from Minneapolis.

"At the appointed time, the special train steamed into the St. Paul Union Depot, where a large crowd had assembled. From the gaping servant girl to the highest state official, all were eager with expectation to catch a glimpse, perhaps, of the president of the United States or some other distinguished personage.

"One can imagine the crowd's surprise and chagrin when out of the coach stepped Ola Värmlänning — an ordinary lumberjack with his sack over his shoulder, ironically raising his cap to the disappointed gathering. It must, in truth, have been a 'sight for the gods' and well worth the price our fun-loving traveler paid for the pleasure."

Equal in popularity and generally as familiar to old-timers seems to be the tale called in the printed volume, "How Ola made the policeman carry the pig." It follows in translation:

<sup>3</sup> This expression is printed in English in the original text.

"One day in St. Paul Ola chanced to be passing a butcher shop before which hung a pig's carcass. A policeman of Ola's acquaintance also happened by. Ola asked if he would kindly lend a hand and help carry the pig to another shop. 'I have taken on the job of moving some of the butcher's wares for him and I would be mighty grateful for a lift.'

"No sooner said than done! Ola was regarded by St. Paul policemen as a harmless enough 'customer' of theirs and they had no objection to doing him an occasional favor. Thus the constable placed his broad shoulder at the service of Ola, who promptly loaded on the pig. The policeman then started to march off in the direction indicated by Ola.

"It should be said that a few moments before this took place Ola had observed the shop's owner slip into the saloon next door for a glass of beer. When the butcher came out he discovered at once that the pig was missing from its hook. He asked Ola, who had remained on the scene, what had become of the pig.

"Putting on a grave face, the incorrigible Ola turned and, pointing down the street where the policeman was staggering along with his burden, nodded meaningfully.

"In a few leaps the pig's rightful owner was at the policeman's side demanding the meaning of all this! Curtain!

"He who had a good laugh — that was Ola Värmlänning."

A few other stories in the collection are worth considering in bare outline. There is, for example, the one about Ola's sawmill. In this yarn Ola, in a scheme to get money from his stingy father in Sweden, wrote home and said he needed capital to run his sawmill. A younger brother came to America with the necessary funds. But Ola put off showing him his sawmill for several days while he drank and feasted, using his brother's money. When the latter called a halt and demanded to see the sawmill, Ola conducted him to the backyard and pointing to the sawbuck said, "There! This is my sawmill!"

Ola displayed his phenomenal strength in the story about his encounter with an Irish policeman. Ordinarily Ola came along quietly when picked up by an understanding policeman for his periodic

trips to the work farm. This time, however, Ola resented the impudent manner the rookie cop employed in placing him under arrest. Accordingly Ola relieved the officer of badge, club, and revolver, carried him under his arm to the police call box and locked his burden in. Then Ola reported to the police station, grandly handed over the rookie's accoutrements, and requested that hereafter he be arrested in a dignified and civil fashion.

In the story called "Ola rents out a room" Ola perpetrates a mild swindle on a pair of newcomers. He struck up an acquaintance with them in a St. Paul saloon and when they asked about a lodging for the night Ola graciously offered to house them, assuring them he had "ample room." After the newcomers had wine and dined him out of gratitude, he took them to the outskirts of the city, where he stopped under a bridge saying, "Here is where I live, and as I told you, there is ample room!" The greenhorns dragged themselves back to town in the darkness, saddened and chagrined.

The final story in the collection is the only one I have come upon in which Ola is represented as an actual lawbreaker. In it Ola operates a blind pig in the woods near the city, "bush number 44 to the left." The affair goes swimmingly until the police get wind of it and make a raid. Ola, ever the wag and perfect host to the last, meets the police with a bow and invites them to a "big drink and all that the house can provide."

Absent from the collection is the oft-encountered story about Ola as alderman, which all my informants seem to know. Ola meets in St. Paul a group of immigrants fresh from the train and, passing himself off as alderman, promptly puts them all to work tearing up Seventh Street, commandeering for the job the picks and shovels on display outside a hardware store. Ola hurries away and the newcomers, willing, but innocent of English, have all Seventh Street torn up before the police and the owner of the tools can stop them.

The compiler has also omitted the "unprintable" stories, which he declares to be legion. But the off-color Ola stories do not seem to have stood the test of time. Of their alleged numbers only two have reached my ears. My informants also tell me Ola possessed an in-

teresting and curious trait not mentioned in the book. He seems to have had an intense antipathy to cigar-store Indians. When in his cups, he would advance up the street roaring "*Inga trägubbar!*" ("No wooden men!"), wrenching the wooden images off their bases, and tossing them into the gutter. Old-timers recall other encounters with the police. Once Ola threw four members of the St. Paul police force into the Mississippi River at the foot of Jackson Street. At another time, before a butcher shop in the same city, he held a like number at bay by swinging a pig's carcass at arm's length. Ola also contributed to the folksay of the American Swedes. A common expression of positive assent was "'Correct,' said Ola Värmlänning, sentenced to ninety days!" This had more weight than merely saying "Correct!" There is also the little dialogue about the louse. "Ola, there is a louse on your shirt." To this Ola replies, "The poor wretch has gone astray," and picking it up thrusts it into his bosom saying, "Tis best thee come in where it's warm, otherwise thee'll catch a cold."

Ola Värmlänning has the attributes of a genuine folk figure. He is as much a legend as Hinky Dink of Chicago, built up of countless stories told in barrooms and lumber camps. While he lacks the epic quality of Paul Bunyan, it is indeed small risk to venture a guess that Ola was better known among Swedish workers in Minnesota than the great French-Canadian. The Swedes were undoubtedly exposed to the Bunyan yarns in camp, mill, and harvest field, but Ola, the man from Värmland, was their own flesh and blood.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).