

# FRITIOF COLLING

*Mary Towley Swanson*



*The year 1996 marks the Swedish immigration jubilee, the 150th anniversary of the beginning of mass migration to North America. Between 1845 and 1930, about 1.25 million Swedes left their homeland for new lives in a new country.\**

*Young Fritiof Colling arrived in Minneapolis at the beginning of a boom in the city's Swedish population. In 1880 Hennepin County was home to almost 5,000 immigrant and second-generation Swedes. A quarter-century later, when Colling decided to return to his homeland, more than 76,000 resided there. During his sojourn, Colling lived and worked in the midst of this bustling immigrant business community.*

*While only one of Colling's Swedish farmstead scenes is known to exist, more probably survive. Most were done in oil on canvases about 10 x 12 inches in size. Readers who think they might have a Colling painting in their living room or attic are encouraged to write to Minnesota History; the author is eager to document the work of the traveling artist. —EDITOR*

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*\*Here and below, John Rice, "The Swedes," in They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 248-51.*



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# *Artist for Homesick Swedes*



*Fritiof Colling, about 1899, and Mugholt, his only extant Swedish-farmstead painting, undated oil on board*

**F**ritiof Colling, the Swedish-born painter and author who lived in Minnesota from 1879 to 1904, later summarized his philosophy of life: “If you work for the love of the task, and not just to win, the prize will be within.”

Colling stubbornly heeded this dictum, working only at ventures he truly enjoyed: painting and writing. Although he led a financially precarious existence and had little professional training, he eked out a living in his new country

amid an immigrant community that had little practical use for an artist. An energetic entrepreneur, Colling revisited Sweden eight times to paint the childhood homes of Minnesota's Swedish immigrants. The "Traveling Artist," as he advertised himself, must have completed hundreds of oil sketches of Swedish cottages on commission. Today only one is known to remain: *Muggholt*, depicting a home in Småland. Two other extant paintings portray Minnesota scenes: a view of St. Anthony Falls (1883) and *The James J. Hill Home in North Oaks* (1886).<sup>1</sup>

While painting was Colling's primary career in America, the traveling artist also spent some of his time as a roving correspondent. He sporadically wrote for the Swedish-language papers *Hemlandet* in Chicago and *Vestkusten* in San Francisco, but most of his travelogues, essays on local history, and humorous pieces describing the immigrant acculturation process appeared in two of Minnesota's larger secular Swedish-language weeklies, *Svenska Folkets Tidning* and *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*.<sup>2</sup>

Colling's childhood predicted neither an artistic nor a literary future. His father, Carl Samuelson, managed a *brännvin* (whiskey) factory at the time of Colling's birth, March 24, 1863. Changing jobs intermittently, Samuelson moved his family from Bubbetorp, Rodeby parish, in Blekinge to Lässebo in the province of Småland, finally settling at Kollinge in Småland's Helleberg parish. Samuelson and his wife, Johanna Victor Samuelson, christened their only son Fritiof Gabriel Carlson, Gabriel for his name day and Fritiof after a character in the Viking story, *Fritiof's Saga*, first published in 1825. (His older sister Ingeborg was also named for a character in this tale.) After he emigrated, the young painter occasionally used the surname Carlson, but increasingly went by Colling, an anglicized version of Kollinge, the name of his family farm.<sup>3</sup> He

changed his name permanently after he moved back to Sweden in 1904.

Colling's education was minimal—he left school at 15 to haul timber and plow fields for neighboring farmers, although he had dreamed of becoming an engineer. His mother's death in 1872 and his father's remarriage and the subsequent arrival of half-siblings prompted 16-year-old Colling to emigrate in May 1879 to join Ingeborg and their cousin John Dalquist in Minneapolis. Acquainted at this point only with his fellow Swedes, the young immigrant observed that this was "the first time I met the people of the green island (Ireland)." From Buffalo he traveled by way of the Great Lakes to Cleveland and Chicago and then by rail to Minneapolis.<sup>4</sup>

Colling joined Dalquist to work on the crew of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad during his first six months in America. Then, settling down in Minneapolis, he took drawing lessons three days a week from Boston artist Ben Newman during the winter and spring of 1880. In a career decision unusual for a recently arrived and relatively uneducated immigrant from rural Sweden, Colling left Minneapolis for Chicago during the summer of 1882 to apprentice to William Phillipson and Company, fresco and decorative painters. Painting on ceilings and walls gave the talented youngster an acceptable and marketable vocation in the eyes of his ethnic community.<sup>5</sup>

The 19-year-old artist returned to Minneapolis that fall, apparently found a business partner, and opened a decorative- and portrait-painting studio at 415 Washington Avenue. Portraits, advertised as hand painted, were actually blown up from a photograph and hand colored with an air brush. "Only people with good taste," he later wrote, "would pay for hand-painted pictures." Inspired by the hues of the pigments he used, Colling wrote that he constantly dreamed of color, and "*kände jag också*

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<sup>1</sup> Fritiof Colling, *Skarabygden* (Hjo, Sweden: Hjo Tryckeri, 1933), 4:xi.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Nyberg, "Swedish Language Newspapers in Minnesota," in *Perspectives on Swedish Immigration*, ed. Nils Hasselmo (Chicago: Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 1978), 249. At the time approximately 105 Swedish-language weekly or monthly periodicals were published in Minnesota, most with religious affiliations.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Samuelson to Colling, Apr. 1, 1883, Fritiof Colling Collection, archives of the Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö; Ernst Skarstedt, *Pennfäktare, Svensk-Amerikanska Författare och Tidningsmän* (Stockholm: Åhlen och Åkerlands Förlag, 1930), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Fritiof Colling, diary, 1883, and "Nio Gångar Från Amerika till Sverige," unpublished manuscript, both in Colling collection, Swedish Emigrant Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Fritiof Colling, diary written in Sweden, 1904–30; business card, in scrapbook compiled by Colling, 1904–1930—both in possession of Jan Andersson (Colling's grandson), Skövde, Sweden. The company's address was Madison and LaSalle Avenues.



*Washington Avenue, Minneapolis, home to many Scandinavian-American businesses, about 1900*

*strax att jag var född till målare*” (I also knew immediately that I was born to paint). Years later he mused, “When I was younger I thought that I would become a capitalist, but capitalism as a profession was never enough for me. Then I thought I would become an artist. It was more pleasant for me than daily capitalism. In America, one is self-made.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps because his partner, a painter named Sjöberg, “drank up the profits,” Colling left his business in the late summer of 1883 to take a meandering rail trip to the West Coast. The aspiring artist brought along a small sketchbook and drew scenes from a boardinghouse in Portland, woods along the Columbia River, the governor’s mansion in Santa Fe, and a hotel sign in San Francisco. In letters (now lost) to his sister Ingeborg, Colling described visits to

Spokane, Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles, apparently comparing the sites to Minnesota. Ingeborg responded that she enjoyed his descriptions and concurred, “Minnesota is a paradise.” Reaching San Francisco in December, Colling enrolled at the School of Fine Arts but studied for only a month before learning of his sister’s unexpected death. He left San Francisco immediately for Minneapolis.<sup>7</sup>

**D**uring the following 13 years, Colling worked at his decorative-painting and portraiture business from his Washington Avenue studio in the heart of the Scandinavian immigrant business community. Listings in the Minneapolis city directories for the period show that he alternately called himself Frederick, Fritz, or Frithjof, spelled in a variety

<sup>6</sup> Colling, “Nio Gånger,” 2; Ernst Skarstedt, *Våra Pennfäktare* (San Francisco: Vestkustens Tryckeri, 1897), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Colling, 1904–30 diary; Ingeborg Dalberg to Colling, June 17, 1883, Colling collection, Swedish Emigrant Institute. Colling had calculated the distance he traveled on the back of a notebook page, proudly adding up 7,920 miles.



Colling's pencil sketch near the Falls of St. Anthony, showing the stone arch bridge and Pillsbury A Mill, with a footbridge, now gone, in the foreground

of ways. Intermittently, he apparently resided and worked at 413 Washington Avenue, next door to his usual address.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of his career, the businessman-artist compiled eight scrapbooks of newspaper articles, recording a selective collage of Minneapolis's Scandinavian cultural life. He clipped articles on the Swedish pavilion at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and small advertisements and stories about his own sketching trips in Sweden. His clipping from the September 7, 1887, *Svenska Folkets Tidning* listed Swedish artists in the 1887 Minneapolis Industrial Exposition, the first time that a collection of Swedish painting was shown in that city. He underlined the part of the article in which a disgruntled Swedish-American reporter explained that the exhibition of Norwegian painters was organized by a local group of prominent Norwegian-American educators and businessmen. The critical newspaperman observed, "For us less active Swedes, the exhibition organized by the Norsk Konstföreningen is a beautiful example of the energy and interest for artistic endeavors that is possible with such an organization." He asked, "Shall we next year have an exhibition of Scandinavian art here . . . a practical solution to raise our status in American eyes?"<sup>9</sup>

Remigrating to Sweden in 1904, Colling missed the chance to be included in the Swedish-American shows, first organized in 1905 in Chicago. While the first exhibition drew participants from both America and Sweden, subsequent shows included only the work of Swedish-American artists. Mounted almost annually after 1911 until the mid-1960s, the exhibitions attracted the best-respected amateur and professional artists between 1911 and 1930.<sup>10</sup>

Although the scrapbooks contain no reviews or records of Colling's exhibitions, the artist's extant drawings and paintings indicate his progress. Sketches of the stone arch bridge in Minneapolis, erected in 1883, display an engineer's exactitude. This quality extends to small sketches of homes in Minneapolis and its outly-

<sup>8</sup> *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1888–96, Special Collections, Minneapolis Public Library. Colling's name does not appear after 1896.

<sup>9</sup> Colling, scrapbook #2, ca. 1889–93, Colling collection. On the Norsk Konstföreningen, see Alfred Söderstrom, *Minneapolis Minnen, Kulturhistorisk Afplockning* (Minneapolis: the author, 1899), 266. It actually encompassed all Scandinavian groups and attempted to hold regular exhibitions from 1887 until its demise in 1893; see Mary Towley Swanson, "The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Artists, 1850–1950," in catalog by the same name (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Gallery, 1982), 10.

<sup>10</sup> On the impetus given Swedish-American artists throughout America by Chicago organizations, see Rolf H. Erickson, "Swedish-American Artists and Their Chicago Exhibitions," 161–77, and Mary T. Swanson, "Chicago and Swedish-American Artists," 150–60, both in *Swedish-American Life in Chicago*, ed. Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

ing areas, but Colling drew trees and fields surrounding the houses with facile spontaneity.<sup>11</sup>

The artist's surviving paintings of Minnesota scenes display an intuitive knowledge of composition and ease of brushwork. Although he had only four months of formal training, Colling painted and drew landscape with a fresh, impressionistic touch. The small oil sketch of St. Anthony Falls records hues impersonating early summer's light.

**A**true—but never wealthy—entrepreneur, Colling developed a schedule that dictated his painting business and provided material for his sporadic newspaper articles from 1885 to 1902. As an admiring news clipping told it, “F. Colling has lately returned from Kollinge, Smaaland, Sweden. Mr. Colling is an artist of great merit. His plan of work is quite unique. He spends the winters in this country traveling about getting commissions to paint Swedish landscapes. In the spring he departs for Sweden, traveling hither and thither executing his commissions.”<sup>12</sup> Returning to Minneapolis in the autumn, he completed the paintings in his studio. This homestead-painting venture supplemented his decorative paintings and portraiture business.

Although he barely made expenses that first year, by 1892 the “economic result was better than before.” Fully aware of the power of publicity, Colling apparently planted stories in the area's English- and Swedish-language newspapers. An 1889 example reads: “F. Colling, a Minneapolis artist, leaves New York tomorrow on the steamer Fulda for Sweden. He took with him over 200 orders for landscapes of different parts of Sweden which he will sketch and then paint on his return.” In order to reach a wider audience than his Swedish-American constituency, Colling soon broadened the geographical range of his views: “The well-known Swedish artist of Minneapolis, Mr. F. Colling, who has been spending the summer in Sweden and Germany, has returned to the city and is now inviting his numerous friends to call at his studio at 415 Wash. Ave. S. and examine his European landscape paintings.”<sup>13</sup>

The artist developed the idea to paint “the homes we left” during his first trip back to Sweden in 1885, possibly inspired by witnessing the work of Swedish *gåramålare* or farmstead painters. When he returned to Minneapolis, he took the idea to friends. A colleague assured Colling that he would be willing “to pay up to five dollars for a painting of his Swedish home

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<sup>11</sup> All sketches are in the Colling collection, Swedish Emigrant Institute.

<sup>12</sup> Undated clipping labeled “M. Tribune” (possibly from 1885 when Colling first returned to Kollinge), scrapbook #2.

<sup>13</sup> Colling, “Nio Gånger,” 2; undated clippings, scrapbook # 2.

*St. Anthony Falls, an undated oil on board*



district.” Colling wrote, however, that while his friends “knew that he was on the up and up, the people who didn’t know him thought that he was trying to lure the peasants [new immigrants] on.” With the support of friends, Colling collected orders and embarked on his second journey in 1887, followed by others in 1889, 1892, 1894, 1895, 1897, and 1902.<sup>14</sup>



Colling’s Washington Avenue studio, about 1899, sketched by the artist on a scrap of bank stationery

Swedish historians label Colling an atypical *gåramålare*. These folk artists, largely untrained and self-employed, emerged in the late-nineteenth century in the Swedish countryside. Most traveled from community to community by train, bicycle, or on foot, painting views of a patron’s home or decorating its interior. Others operated their business from their own home, usually during difficult economic periods when painting brought in extra income. *Gåramålare* often offered their works for sale in lotteries, a practice Colling later used in America.<sup>15</sup>

This folk art began during the national romantic period in Swedish history, literature, and painting. The own-your-own-home movement (*Egnahemsrörelsen*) emerged around the

turn of the century, a byproduct of a growing nationalism that opposed emigration and socialism. The government gave affordable loans, and architects began to draw blueprints for small dwellings, available at reasonable rates. *Gåramålare* painted homes proudly owned by Swedish workers who formerly had only been able to rent. Nordiska Museet curator Lena Anderson Palmqvist notes, however, that Colling was not a typical *gåramålare* because his painting was generally of higher quality and he made a successful living as a writer and newspaperman when he returned to live in Sweden.

Colling’s mode of operation changed little over the 17 years of his homestead-painting business. By 1896 the astute artist was wisely directing his advertisements to fellow Swedish Americans, “my intelligent and culturally informed countrymen,” declaring that he had traveled over the Atlantic 15 times and that “*flera hundra svensk-amerikanska hem prydas nu af minna arbeten*” (several hundred Swedish-American homes pride themselves by owning my work). In about 1902 an article from a West Coast paper referred to him painting homes in the Portland area, then offering to take orders for similar pictures in Sweden: “It is Mr. Colling’s intention to take a rough draft of orders here and then complete his work in Sweden. He is known to be very adept with the brush.”<sup>16</sup>

In his unpublished essay “*Nio Gånger Från Amerika till Sverige*” (Nine Times from America to Sweden), Colling wrote, “Many believe that I made a profit easily with sketches of my Swedish journeys inasmuch as I had no competitors. In the beginning I feared competition, but with years of experience I became convinced that no one else—after one try—would attempt the same business.”<sup>17</sup>

In his writings and scrapbooks, Colling left examples of two men who did try his business—only once. Olaf Grafström, an art professor at Augustana College in Rock Island who specialized in romanticized landscape views of Illinois and the Swedish province of Norrland, advertised his painting business in Swedish-language papers. Colling noted that Grafström “could charge more because of a professor’s academic

<sup>14</sup> Skarstedt, *Våra Pennfäktare*, 39; Colling, “Nio Gånger,” 3.

<sup>15</sup> Here and below, Lena Anderson Palmqvist and Inger Bonge-Bergugrou, curators, Nordiska Museet, interview by author, Stockholm, Apr. 25, 1994, notes in author’s possession.

<sup>16</sup> “Minneapolis, Minn., hösten 1896, Till landsmännen i Amerika,” flyer; undated clipping, scrapbook #7, ca. 1901–05—both Colling collection.

<sup>17</sup> Colling, “Nio Gånger,” 3.

credentials”; nevertheless, he never repeated his attempt. Similarly, a scrapbook clipping reported the work of a photographer, G. A. Johnson & Company, of Winburne, Pennsylvania, who advertised that he would take “*En Fotografisk Resa Genom Sveriges Bygder*” (a photographic journey through Sweden’s sections). One dollar bought a postcard of the patron’s childhood home or nearby scenery; six cards cost two dollars, and a stereograph view, three dollars. The advertisement instructed the would-be consumer to give his *landskap* (township), *län* (county), *socken* (parish), *jernväg* (railway line), as well as the name of the home (Swedish cottages normally had names) and neighbors.<sup>18</sup>

How could Colling continue where others failed? The difficulty of traveling by rail and then by foot to various areas of rural Sweden at the turn of the century precluded the organization necessary to make a profit or to break even with such a business. While Colling must have cleared enough money to make eight trips worthwhile, he also used these ventures to revisit his family—a luxury afforded few immigrants.<sup>19</sup>

Paintings of Swedish homes must have adorned the walls of many midwestern dwellings if Colling’s commissions funded eight trips overseas. Yet little of his work remains: *Muggholt*, the only extant Swedish-farmstead painting, and an 1883 view of St. Anthony Falls, both at the Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden; and *The James J. Hill Home in North Oaks* at the Minnesota Historical Society. Colling’s descendants in Sweden own several similar paintings of Mount Tacoma and its environs, slightly romanticized views of the mountain with a luminously painted lake in the foreground. *Muggholt* may have been typical of Colling’s commission work. Painted with an overlay of “brown sauce,” the dark coloring favored by midnineteenth-

century art academies, it also has a problem of scale between figure and small cottage.

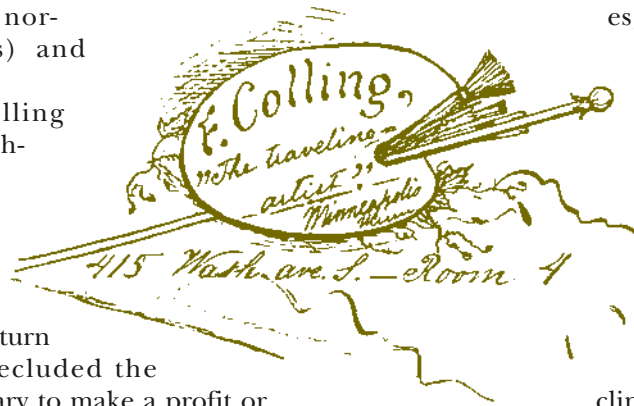
The energetic businessman had other schemes for making his living. Like the *gåram-ålar*, he sold chances on his canvases. In 1894, for example, he held a lottery for *A Swedish Country Market*, charging one dollar per ticket, an amount that also guaranteed a down payment on a portrait. By 1896 Colling had lowered his price to 50 cents a ticket for *A Country Girl*. He later advertised the merits of another painting, possibly for a lottery, to an audience that carried memories of red cottages from Sweden. It was one of his best canvases,

he wrote, displaying “a coastal motif with a small red cottage in the foreground, a man fishing in the sea and a passing sailboat against a purplish horizon.”<sup>20</sup>

The artist also encouraged his immigrant audience to buy portraits. One scrapbook holds an undated clipping from Minneapolis’s

*Svenska Folkets Tidning*, admonishing the public to see the remarkable, “elegant and tasteful” portrait Colling had painted of Carl Axel Dahlstrom, a Swedish-American businessman living in Minneapolis. Another unidentified Swedish-language news clipping reported that the portrait of “our well-known countryman” John Ericson (the engineer who designed the Union’s armored ship, *The Monitor*) had recently been purchased by the Norden Society.<sup>21</sup>

The Norden Society, founded in 1870 as a dramatic club, soon became a fraternal benefit organization for Scandinavian-American men and women. By the time Colling joined in 1885, it had only Swedish-American men as members, a mix of immigrant professionals, businessmen, and a few blue-collar workers. This society, which met in different rented halls on Broadway and Washington



<sup>18</sup> Colling, “Nio Gånger,” 3; scrapbook #7.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew M. Stenstrom (1880–1953), who emigrated to Mora, Minnesota, with his parents in 1888, traveled the state painting farmstead scenes. (He also supported his family as a carpenter.) The Minnesota Historical Society owns his painting, *Mickelson Farm*. His father, Louis S. Stenstrom, was a farmstead painter in Sweden; in Minnesota, he continued the practice, teaching his son the rudiments.

<sup>20</sup> Undated clipping, 1904–30 scrapbook; undated clipping, scrapbook #4, ca. 1894–98, Colling collection.

<sup>21</sup> Undated clippings, scrapbook #2.



Avenues, became not only an exhibition site but also a social club for Colling, a bachelor during his years in America. Members addressed each other as “good Brother” and apparently occasionally wore Viking gear in amateur theatricals. Tickets that Colling saved attest to invitations for day-long cruises of the Mississippi River, a Christmas fest, and his work on social committees. He was elected secretary-treasurer in December 1889, serving until March 1890.<sup>22</sup>

Inspired by the Norden Society’s emphasis on drama, Colling performed stand-up comic routines at the club, speaking in one of the provincial dialects of Sweden liberally laced with English. Newspaper stories reported that audiences enjoyed his *gubbar* (old man) routines, demanding an encore at one program. Colling wrote that when he mimicked the language of poorly educated Swedish immigrants, his listeners decided “I was a humorist.”

Colling’s wry humor surfaced not only in

skits but also in sketches of his studio, numerous articles, and three books he wrote in Swedish for the immigrant community: *Mister Colesons Sverigeresa* (Mister Coleson’s Swedish Journey, 1898, reissued in 1908), *Der Igen!* (There Again!, 1899?), and *I Sverige och Amerika* (In Sweden and America, 1906). Although the latter was not illustrated, many caricatures liberally spice the others, which he wrote under the pseudonym Gabriel Carlson. In *Mister Colesons Sverigeresa*, Colling told the story of an immigrant, not particularly successful in the New World, who returned home to play out the stereotype of the blundering boor attempting to impress his former countrymen with tales of wealth overseas. While visiting family in Sweden, the bumbling immigrant attempted to woo a young Swedish girl, who was dazzled by his gold watch and promising appearance. *Der Igen!* continues Coleson’s adventures as he reports on the Stockholm Exposition of 1897 and meets

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<sup>22</sup> Here and below, Skarstedt, *Våra Pennfåktare*, 39; “Nordens Protokoll bok fran den 14 de Jan. 1885 to Apr. 1897,” American Swedish Institute Archives, Minneapolis; scrapbook #2; Marita Karlish, “A Recent Society of Vikings,” *ASI Posten*, Sept. 1994, p. 11; William Beyer, lecture at the American Swedish Institute, Apr. 12, 1995. Norden Society minutes record events at Norden Hall on Broadway Ave.; the Christmas fest was held in Freya Hall, 505½ Washington Ave. So. Beyer reported that the group’s meeting rooms were always designated “Norden Hall” regardless of location.

The James J. Hill Home in North Oaks, *Colling’s 1886 oil on board*





“Precisely what we do in America,” and “Will they know how much my gold watch was?” from *Mister Colesons Sverigeresa*

the king, who invites him to visit when Coleson has an opportunity.<sup>23</sup>

Coleson, probably a play on Colling, began his first tale by justifying his return home: “Winter had been cold and my girl had also become cold and I began to long for home in Sweden.” Colling combined misspelled English words with Swedish endings to form gently humorous dialogue, probably typical of the language immigrants painfully used within their ethnic ghetto as they assimilated into American society. One immigrant in the short novel shouts to Coleson, “Du ar an bigg fool!” (You are a big fool) amidst a tirade in Swedish. In another chapter the hero observes that “det var an bjutifull natt” (that was a beautiful night) and later describes a “bjutifull lady.” Colling’s illustrations display sardonic wit, adeptly capturing stereotypes. In one, the Swedish-American hero crudely puts his feet on the table in an elegant Swedish cafe, declaring that this is the way it’s done in America. In another, the garishly

dressed Coleson parades his new clothing and gold watch to fellow parishioners in his home church, who smirk behind his back.

Sometime between 1895 and 1898 Colling penned an untitled novel, referring to the protagonist as “the wanderer,” a designation he often took for himself in the essays and poems he published in Swedish-American periodicals. Handwritten, the manuscript is edited in a shaky hand and more modern Swedish spelling, indicating that the author probably returned to the novel in his last years in Sweden, after he had suffered a debilitating stroke.<sup>24</sup>

The slowly paced narrative frequently alludes to landscapes its hero views while traveling the American countryside. Chapters begin with visual descriptions, perhaps an allusion to the poems employing landscape motifs, an outgrowth of landscape romanticism prevalent in late nineteenth-century Swedish literature. In an unusually reflective mood for Colling—more typical of the many pietistic Swedish immi-

<sup>23</sup> *Mister Colesons Sverigeresa* (Chicago: L. Lofstroms Co.); *Der Igen!* (Minneapolis: Grundlund Bros.); *I Sverige och Amerika* (Tidaholm, Sweden: Ivar Nybergs). Copies of *Mister Colesons Sverigeresa* are at the Swedish Emigrant Institute and the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); *Der Igen!* is at MHS; *I Sverige och Amerika* is in the Tell Dahloff collection at Wilson Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

<sup>24</sup> Untitled manuscript, Colling collection.

grants—the novel often interrupts rhapsodic descriptions of the countryside with biblical allusions to fate. In one chapter Colling paraphrases, “Of the earth you come, and to the earth you shall return.”<sup>25</sup>

The short chapters in *I Sverige och Amerika*, on the other hand, are a compilation of amusing incidents experienced during emigration, in the New World, and returning to the Old. At least one story, possibly more, was drawn from the essays Colling wrote, probably for Minneapolis weeklies *Svenska Folkets Tidning* and *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*. Headings break the chapters into self-contained anecdotes, which could have originated as newspaper columns. “Miss Molly and Her Lars,” “On So On,” “Room Number Thirteen,” and “A Promise in Småland” relate humorous and sometimes poignant stories of the immigrant’s attempt to adjust to American ways.

Colling also regularly published humorous and serious poetry in Swedish-language papers. One scrapbook clipping he identified as being from *Svenskavekobladet* (most likely *Minneapolis Veckoblad*), probably in the early 1890s. His poem “Mitt Första Husförhör” (My First Examination) describes confirmation classes through the eyes of a young and obstreperous child. Another, “Till Henne” (For Her, 1884), was a tribute to his recently deceased sister Ingeborg. “Vagabonder” plaintively notes at the end that he must go “forward to the unknown finishing line!” The unpublished poem “Väntan” (Waiting), subtitled “När Alma skulle till North Oaks” (When Alma Should Have Been at North Oaks) and dated 1893, drolly tells of the Sunday that Colling rode the train to North Oaks, only to be stood up by Alma, who worked as a maid in the area. Although the poem may not have any relationship to the painting *The James J. Hill Home in North Oaks*, finished seven years earlier, it is possible that the unknown Alma was a maid in Hill’s home or that of a neighbor.<sup>26</sup>

The artist supplemented his various enterprises with assignments as a roving reporter for several Swedish-language papers in Minnesota, *Hemlandet* in Chicago, and *Vestkusten* in California. Chronicling his 1889 journey to Sweden, he sent columns to Minneapolis’s *Svenska*

*Amerikanska Posten* describing a midsummer festival in Småland and a nostalgic trip to visit his father. He sent the *Posten* two stories on an 1897 visit to the Stockholm Exposition. In letters from Sweden in 1894, he signed himself as a special correspondent for the Minneapolis-based *Svenska Folkets Tidning*.

For the latter, Colling also wrote and illustrated a series, *Svenskarne i Nordvestern*, between September 25, 1901, and April 30, 1902. This may have been a subscription-history project, prevalent in the Midwest in the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. Freely sketched views of the Fish Lake Swedish Lutheran Church, Russell Beach in Lindstrom, and the Swedish Lutheran Church in Chisago City, for example, accompanied the historical stories and short biographies of noted Swedish-American settlers in Minnesota.<sup>27</sup>

**B**etween 1900 and 1902 Colling settled in San Francisco, then traveled along the Pacific Coast and inland to Idaho, where he attempted to stake a claim. Although restlessness must have motivated his moves, he repeatedly settled in areas with significant concentrations of Swedes. He placed notices in *Vestkusten* advertising himself as a painter and wrote a series of columns about his treks, signing himself “Colling from Idaho,” as well as “Calle Stenhuggare” (Carl Stone-cutter).<sup>28</sup>

Charles A. Victor, proprietor of a general store in Lindstrom, Minnesota, and publisher of the weekly paper *Medborgaren* (The Citizen), summoned Colling back to the state in mid-March 1903 to edit his paper. Victor, possibly a relative of Colling’s mother, said that he preferred Colling over other candidates because he knew him. The publisher promised, “You could probably finish your work here (which I suppose is painting). Your work here will be left to yourself and you will practically be your own boss, and the pay, we will agree on that I am sure.”<sup>29</sup>

Moving to Lindstrom, Colling immediately enrolled in a course in English grammar through the International Correspondence School in Pennsylvania, fearing that his Smålaning dialect would impinge on his writing for *Medborgaren*, where a percentage of the

<sup>25</sup> Untitled manuscript, 325.

<sup>26</sup> Here and below, scrapbook #2, #4.

<sup>27</sup> For the named illustrations, see *Svenska Folkets Tidning*, Jan. 1 and 15, Feb. 12, 1902—all p. 6, microfilm copies, MHS. Colling’s articles appeared weekly from Jan. 1 through Apr. 30. The original art is in the Swedish Emigrant Institute.

<sup>28</sup> Scrapbook #5, ca. 1900, #6, ca. 1902–03, Colling collection. Calle is a nickname for Carl.

<sup>29</sup> C. A. Victor to Colling, Mar. 21, 1903, Colling collection.

articles were in English. (He passed the exam with a score of 98 percent.) Colling's paper reached subscribers primarily in his local area. One, J. G. Princell, praised the editor, writing after moving to Chicago: "I wish the paper success for it *deserves* it. Considering its size, I find it one of the newsiest little weeklies of any I have had the pleasure to read."<sup>30</sup>

An unidentified newspaper article, hand-dated 1904, reported that Colling had resigned his position as editor and business manager of *Medborgaren* after 18 months to spend the winter in France studying painting, thence to return to Sweden. Colling's departure coincided with the American recession of 1904, a banner year for the remigration of Swedish males.<sup>31</sup>

Although he immediately took a job as a reporter on the newspaper *Västgöta Bladet* in Tidaholm, the real reason Colling returned was a young woman he had met when *Vestkusten* editor Alex Olsson hired him to paint his childhood homestead, Klämma, near Onsala, in 1902. Colling's future wife, Jenny, was living with her family in the cottage at the time. She was only 15 years old and Colling, 39. The two corresponded after he returned to America.<sup>32</sup>

When Colling traveled back in the spring of 1904 on his final journey to Sweden, he wrote to Olsson that he had kept in touch with the family in Klämma. He and the oldest daughter, he wrote, had often talked long hours, and he asked her to call him "Old Boy." The friendship ripened into love, but Jenny's family asked the couple to wait until she turned 20 to marry. They were married January 17, 1907, the bride's birthday. The 44-year-old Colling was still reporting for *Västgöta Bladet*.

By 1911 Colling had become the editor of the weekly paper *Hjo Tidning* and moved his family to that picturesque community on the



*Sketch of the Swedish Lutheran Church, Fish Lake, about 1901, from Colling's newspaper series on local history*

shores of Lake Vattern in Västergötland. He bicycled out to surrounding parishes and villages between 1917 and 1933, collecting oral histories of the area from parish ministers and teachers. Publishing these stories in his weekly paper, he later compiled them into the five-volume set, *Skarabygden*, describing sections of Skara in south-central Sweden. This undertaking was possibly inspired by his earlier *Svenskarne i Nordvästern* project for the Minneapolis *Svenska Folkets Tidning*. Colling never returned to America but continued a voluminous correspondence with friends made during his 25-year sojourn. He died in 1944 at the age of 81.

In the end, Colling's prize was not wealth in land or money. Instead, he reaped an artist's rewards of poems and essays chronicling the life of the Swedish immigrant, paintings recording views of the Swedish and American countryside, books about his region in Sweden, and respect from his family and the community of Hjo.

<sup>30</sup> J. G. Princell to Colling, Aug. 23, 1904, Colling collection.

<sup>31</sup> Scrapbook #7; Lars-Göran Tedebrand, "Those Who Returned: Remigration from America to Sweden," in *Perspectives on Swedish Immigration*, 94. Colling's papers at the Swedish Emigrant Institute contain a handwritten copy of a court summons to Victor, defendant, from the Swedish Printing Company of Minneapolis, publishers of *Svenska Folkets Tidning*. The summons stated that a *Medborgaren* story, June 4, 1903, incorrectly claimed that *Svenska Folkets Tidning* had appealed for funds to help drought victims in Sweden and Finland but had pocketed half of the donations. One of Colling's scrapbooks includes numerous newspaper articles on the drought and the names of relief-fund donors. Colling is not mentioned in this summons, however, and he did not leave for Sweden until a year later.

<sup>32</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, Ingrid Karlsson (Colling's daughter), interview by author, Floby, Sweden,

*The pictures on p. 79 and 84 are in the MHS collections; p. 85 from Mister Colesons Sverigeresa and p. 76, left, from A. Soderstrom's Minneapolis Minnen (copies in MHS collections). All other images are courtesy the Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö, Sweden.*



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