

Helen Nelson

HELENA CHRISTINA NILSSON, now Helen Nelson, sat on a bench in the afternoon shade on September 17, 1852, smelling the fragrance of the sun-warmed pine logs in her family's new house at Hay Lake. Blackbirds chattered across the harvested field, eating scattered bits of grain. They were probably getting ready to go south for the winter, as far as Moline where she and her family had lived, or even farther south to St. Louis or New Orleans, where her fiancé Frederick had traveled after he left Germany.¹

Beyond the field and the birds she could see clusters of yellow flowers and beyond them, by Hay Lake, clumps of blue. Miss Stevenson, the niece of Taylors Falls businessman W. H. C. Folsom, had told her the names of the flowers—the yellow ones were sunflowers and goldenrod, the blue ones, fringed gentians, and the plants with the little whisks of white feathers scattering in the breeze were milkweeds. The colors were those of the comforter she had finished making only last week.²

Miss Stevenson had showed her the sticky “milk” in the milkweed, and it reminded her of their cow, happily wandering around in her wood-fenced enclosure near the barn. How good it was to have their own milk, and how clever her father had been to buy the cow at Moline and bring her all the way to Minnesota on the steamboat. Her father had split fifteen hundred fence rails to pay for that cow. Today her younger sister would do the milking. Her mother and sisters could do the housework, the cooking and cleaning, and everything else that needed to be done for



Helen Nelson Lammers,
later in life

tomorrow. She, Helen Nelson, was finished working for other people, even her family. Beginning tomorrow she would be Mrs. Frederick Lammers and would work only for herself and her husband.³

She could hear her father beyond the barn, cutting logs on the edge of their pine woods and talking to Oscar Roos. When her family had come to Minnesota not much more than a year ago, her father had earned enough money carpentering in Marine Mills to pay for their land. He and a hired man had cut down the trees and built their new house and barn. Now he was starting another building, maybe a workshop with a room for Oscar when he came to see them. Oscar was the last of the Swede

boys who had made them welcome when they arrived in Hay Lake last spring. None of the three young men were any good as farmers, and they had been glad to sell their land and little log house to her family. Carl Fernstrom and August Sandahl had gone south, but Oscar liked to be with her family and stayed in Minnesota. He called her mother, Margreta, “Mor Greta,” and she treated him like a son. Frederick liked Oscar, too, and was going to help him find work in the woods. Oscar was nice enough but not at all interesting compared to Frederick.⁴

Helen let herself remember when Oscar was in Taylors Falls and she met Frederick with him at Mr. Folsom's store. It was soon after she went to work for the Folsoms and was living in the family's maid's room upstairs over the store. The Pioneer Store building was next to the St. Croix River, and from her window she could see the landing where the steamboats docked and the logs came tumbling down from the logging camps as soon as the ice was gone in the spring.⁵

There was always excitement in and around Mr. Folsom's store. Everyone shopped there and found almost anything one would want. And everyone called for mail at the little post office in a corner of the store. Oscar got a letter from Sweden, and Frederick had one from Germany the day she first met him. She had finished her housework for Mrs. Folsom and gone downstairs to wander through the store, trying to decide what she would buy with her pay. After their first meeting,

Frederick stopped to see her whenever he came into town from his logging camp. At first they didn't talk much. Her English wasn't very good—she only knew what she needed to understand Mrs. Folsom—but Frederick had been in America for 10 years and his English was excellent. Oscar's was good, too, and he translated for them. Soon Frederick picked up more Swedish and they didn't have any trouble talking together. He didn't say much about himself, but Oscar told her he had been well educated in Germany and had even studied Greek and Latin. Mrs. Folsom said he came from a good family and his name was really Von Lammers, whatever that meant.⁶

Whenever she had a day off work, Oscar and Frederick drove her to Hay Lake to see her family. Another time Frederick went hunting and brought her family some venison and pigeons. The Nelsons all seemed to like him. By midsummer she and Frederick had decided to be married, but she planned to stay on with the Folsoms until she had the clothes she wanted. She bought a beautiful woolen shawl with her first month's wages. Another month she got wristlets, gloves, shoes, a pretty brooch, a back comb, and some whalebones to wear for a more fashionable figure. Then she chose calico, buttons, and ribbons for one dress and gingham for an everyday house-dress, the one she was wearing this September day. Later, when she began to plan for her marriage, she

chose nicer materials, and her mother's friend, who was a very good dressmaker, told her what she should buy for her wedding dress.⁷

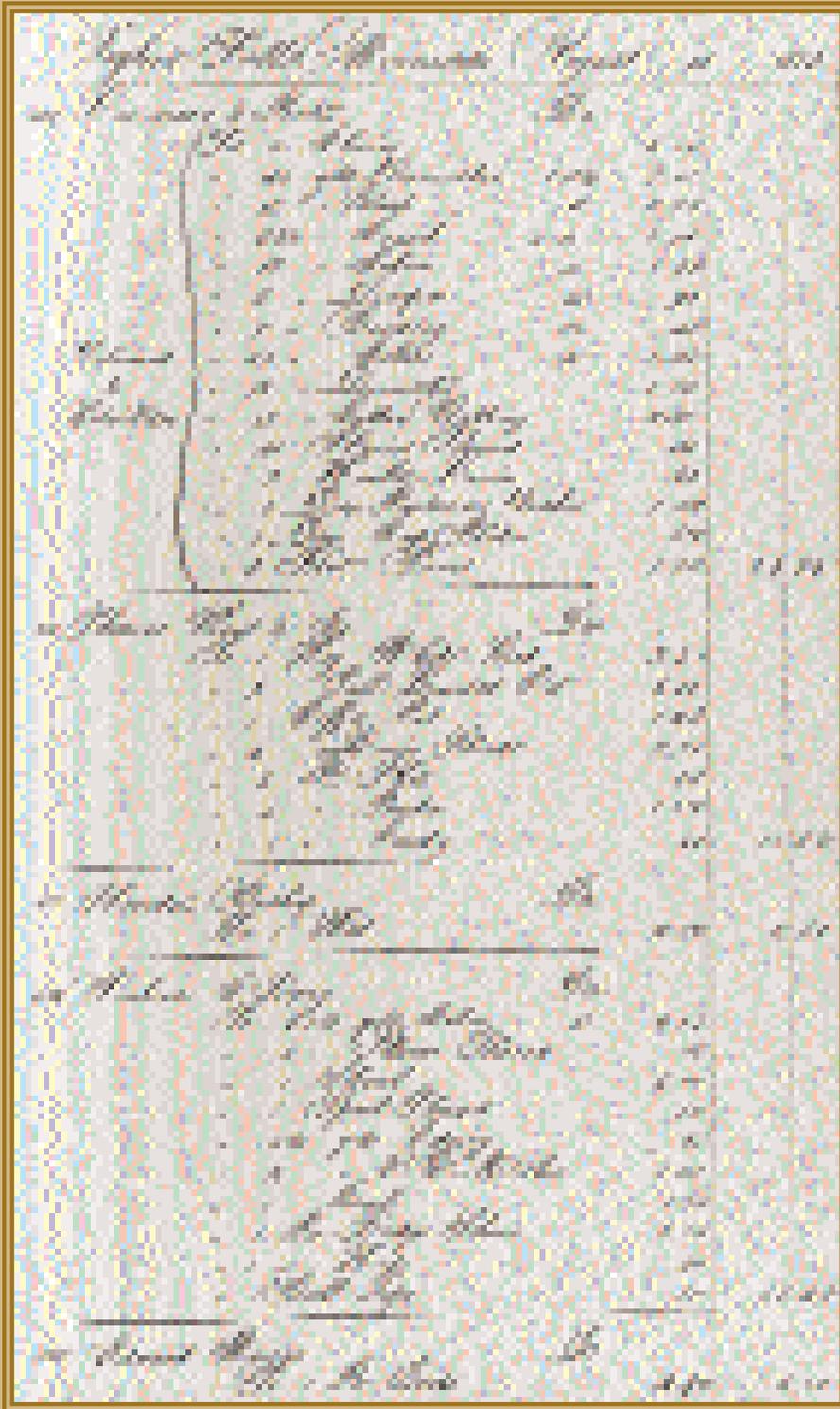
After Frederick took her out to see the house near the Marine Mills road where he and Mr. Porter, his American partner, were living when they came in from the logging camp, she couldn't imagine how the two men could keep house with so little of what she considered necessary. She began to buy what she would need for housekeeping: sheets, towels, flat irons, a laundry tub and washboard, a tea canister, plates, cups, spoons, preserve dishes, yard goods for curtains, a comforter. She and Frederick chose six straight chairs, a rocking chair, and a big mirror; she also selected a poker, shovel, and tongs for their new stove. Mr. Folsom's clerk noted in his journal that Frederick would pay for the goods but delivery would be made to Helen Nelson.⁸

The house would be a satisfactory home, although she and Frederick agreed that it needed to be cleaned and repaired. Frederick promised that Mr. Porter would soon move out so that they could do the work. Finally, she was pleased to see him at Folsom's store buying a trunk and carpetbag.⁹ Soon after he moved out of the house, and she and Frederick had time to clean and paint, repair the broken windows, and arrange the furniture. Her mother and sisters helped make the window curtains and put the new dishes in the cupboard. Frederick bought new locks for the doors.

When her friends at Moline heard about her wedding plans, they wrote: "From all we can learn of Mr. Lammers we feel assured that you will have a good husband." She could have answered their letter in English, but it was really too much work. There would be plenty of time to learn English after she was married.

Calico dress from the 1860s





Page from the Folsom store's ledger book detailing some of Helen Nelson's purchases, 1852

Frederick had ordered two McGuffey readers to teach her, but since he understood so much Swedish now, why bother? Her friends in Moline understood. They hoped she would continue her studies, but if she had no time, they wrote, "We shall be much obliged to your new husband to do it for you." Frederick wrote easily and seemed to enjoy doing it. After all the cleaning and washing and cooking she had done for Mrs. Folsom and the cleaning and painting and sewing for their house, she didn't feel at all guilty about sitting in the shade doing nothing and thinking only in Swedish.¹⁰

She had left the Folsoms at the end of August, only a few weeks ago. On August 28, she persuaded Frederick to buy some new clothes for himself. The clothes he wore every day were right for the lumber camp and the woods—and even for daily life in Taylors Falls—but he certainly could afford something better for his wedding. Their Swedish neighbors would be much impressed. She helped him choose a new wardrobe: a dress coat and pants, a silk vest, a silk cravat and handkerchief, a hat, socks, a white shirt, and a new carpet-bag for traveling.¹¹

At first they talked of going to Stillwater or St. Paul to be married and then taking a wedding trip somewhere by steamboat. Her parents did not like that plan; they wanted her to be married at home at a time when Pastor Gustaf Unonius would be visiting the Swedes at Chisago Lakes. He could as well come to Hay Lake and stay at their house, so she and Frederick needn't go running off to the city to find a pastor. Frederick was willing. She would have liked having the wedding day only for themselves, but the neighbors insisted that the pastor should christen their children at the same time. He would be the first pastor they had seen since they left Moline. Her mother liked the

new plan because the families of the children would bring food for the celebration. So the wedding and christenings were set for the day after Pastor Unonius visited Chisago Lakes.¹²

One other decision needed to be made: where to go for the wedding trip. Helen wasn't excited about going anywhere. She and her family had done a lot of traveling in the last two years since sailing from Sweden on the *Sofie*.¹³ They had traveled across half of America to Moline and then come up the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers to Marine Mills. Why not travel to Taylors Falls, to their own house, all freshly cleaned and painted with new curtains on new windows? Frederick was agreeable. It was good to have all the decisions made.

She could hear her mother and her elder sister bustling around in the house getting supper. Her younger sister had come out with a pail on the way to milk the cow. Her father had stopped his work. He and Oscar had washed and combed their hair at the basin by the back door and were coming to sit by her on the bench, waiting for the guests. Any time now a neighbor would drive in from Chisago Lakes bringing Pastor Unonius, and Frederick would be coming down the Marine road from Taylors Falls. There were no clouds in the sky. September 18 would be a sunny wedding day for Frederick Lammers and Helen Nelson, the first Swedish bride in territorial Minnesota.¹⁴ ❁

—Helen McCann White

NOTES

¹ Daniel Nilsson and his family emigrated from Norrbo in Helsingland, Sweden, in 1850, settling first in Moline, Illinois; Conrad Bergendoff, trans., *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America, 1845–1860*, selected chapters of vol. 1 of Eric Norelius, *De Svenska Luterska Församlingarnas*

och Svenskarnes Historia I Amerika (1890) (Rock Island, Ill.: Augustana Historical Society, 1984), 295. Frederick Lammers emigrated to America in 1843, stopping first at New Orleans and then St. Louis; Louis F. Lammers, “Lammers Family History” (1910), with later research notes by Stanley Selin, a Nelson relative, copies in Selin's possession.

² A transaction between Harriet Stevenson and Helen Nelson is recorded in ledger, vol. 23, Aug. 20, 1852, W. H. C. Folsom and Family Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1888), 341–42.

³ Bergendoff, *Pioneer Swedish Settlements*, 295.

⁴ On Roos, Fernstrom, and Sandahl, see “Swedish Pioneer Remembered,” *Dalles Visitor* (Taylors Falls), 1975, p. 16; John Larson, “Oscar Roos' Origins: Conflicting Tales,” based on additional research in Sweden, corrects errors in the *Dalles Visitor* story, manuscript in Larson's possession; Charles Fernstrom to Oscar Roos, Sept. 11, 1892, and Roos to Frederick Lammers, Nov. 22, Dec. 4, 1892, copies in Selin's possession.

⁵ Folsom built the first frame building in Taylors Falls as a combined residence and store and opened for business in Sept. 1850; he and his family later moved to a new home, today an MHS historic site, in what is now the Angel Hill Historic District.

⁶ Lammers, “Lammers Family History.” The Taylors Falls Post Office opened in the Folsom store in Mar. 1851; Folsom, *Fifty Years*, 332.

⁷ Helen Nelson's “settlement” is entered on Aug. 14, 1852, W. H. C. Folsom blotters, vols. 3 and 4, Taylors Falls Historical Society (TFHS). This is a different group of volumes from the series at MHS.

⁸ Beginning in May 1849, Lammers traded at the Dexter and Harrington general store in St. Croix Falls; journal, p. 64 and following, Dexter, Harrington and Co. Papers, MHS. On Aug. 18, 1851, he and his partner James Porter purchased outfitting supplies from Folsom; ledger, vol. 37, TFHS. Numerous household items purchased on Aug. 14, 1852, were charged to Lammers and Porter but marked “Delivered to Helen Nelson”; see

also Aug. 28, 1852—both ledger, vol. 23, Folsom papers, MHS.

⁹ Porter bought a trunk on Sept. 11, 1852; Folsom blotter, vol. 5, TFHS.

¹⁰ E. K. Babbitt to Helen Lammers, Jan. 26, 1853, copy in Selin's possession. Lammers was charged for two McGuffey readers and a geography and a spelling book on Oct. 12, 1852; Folsom blotter, vol. 5, TFHS. In the Lammers family papers, Selin has found no letters written in English by Helen Nelson Lammers; Selin to the author, Dec. 20, 1997.

¹¹ Ledger, vol. 23, Aug. 18, 1852, Folsom papers, MHS.

¹² The Rev. Gustaf Unonius, then an Episcopalian minister in Chicago, encouraged early immigrant Swedes to move to Minnesota; for his visit to the Chisago Lakes settlement and Hay Lake, see Bergendoff, *Pioneer Swedish Settlements*, 261–62; “*The Heritage of a Century*”: *The History of the Elim Lutheran Church, Scandia, Minnesota* (1954), n.p.

¹³ Bergendoff, *Pioneer Swedish Settlements*, 295.

¹⁴ For more on the Lammers couple, see Helen M. White, “The Occurrence on Lammers Farm,” *Dalles Visitor* 30 (Summer 1998): 9–10.



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