

WHEN AMERICA WAS THE LAND OF CANAAN¹

Volumes have been written on the causes of emigration from the various countries of Europe to the United States, and it may appear superfluous to add to the numerous articles that have appeared in print. A plethora of emigration statistics is available; monographs have appeared by the score; and it would seem that the subject has been attacked from every conceivable angle. But the historical profession still awaits the man with the magic touch, who by a process known only to the master can convert this tremendous mass of material into a masterpiece of historical synthesis. This master must sound the depths of the human soul and he must analyze the noblest as well as the basest emotions that play on the human heart. He will not concern himself with the people on whom fortune has smiled graciously, nor will he relate the exploits of the battlefield and portray the lives of kings and nobles; he will study the documents that betray the spirit, hopes, and aspirations of the humble folk who tilled the soil, felled the forest, and tended the loom — in short, who followed the occupations that fall to the lot of the less favored majority in every land.

Emigration from Sweden was a class movement that spread from the rural districts to the cities and towns. The fever sought its victims among those who were not inoculated with the virus of social distinction and economic prosperity; and when the epidemic was transported three thousand miles across the water, it took a more virulent form. In fact, it was transmitted most effectively by the thousands of letters that found

¹ This paper, read on June 14, 1929, at the first Hutchinson session of the eighth state historical convention, is based mainly upon documentary materials discovered in Sweden by the author as a fellow in 1927-1928 of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation of New York. *Ed.*

their way from America to the small red cottages hidden among the pine-clad, rocky hills of Sweden.

It has become a commonplace that emigration from Sweden began in earnest after the close of the American Civil War, when, according to a newspaper account published in 1869, "the emigrants, as if by agreement, gathered from the various communities on certain days, like migratory swallows, to leave, without apparent regret, the homes and associations of their native land, in order to begin a new life on another continent."² Statistically this statement is accurate enough, but historically it is entirely misleading. Emigration from Sweden began in earnest in the decade of the forties, when the first "America letters" found their way back to the old country. These letters made a tremendous impression on certain persons at a time when a new world — a new and ideal world — was dawning in literature and in the press.³ Into this realm of the idealist the "America letters" fell like leaves from the land of Canaan. They were not only read and pondered by the simple and credulous individuals to whom they were addressed, and discussed in larger groups in homes and at markets and fairs and in crowds assembled at parish churches, but they were also broadcast through the newspapers, which, unwittingly or not, infected parish after parish with the "America fever." The contents of these documents from another world were so thrilling and fabulous that many editors were as glad to publish them as were the recipients to have them published. The result was that the most fanciful stories were circulated about the wonderful country across the Atlantic — a land of milk and honey.

A correspondent from Linköping wrote to a Jönköping paper in May, 1846, as follows:

² *Nya Vexjö-Bladet* (Växjö), May 22, 1869.

³ Papers like *Aftonbladet* (Stockholm), *Östgötha Correspondenten* (Linköping), *Norrlands-Posten* (Gävle), and *Jönköpings-Bladet* and writers like Karl J. L. Almqvist and Pehr Thomasson foreshadowed a new day in religion, politics, society, and economics.

The desire to emigrate to America in the country around Kisa is increasing and is said to have spread to neighboring communities. A beggar girl from Kisa, who has gone up into the more level country to ply her trade, is said to have painted America in far more attractive colors than Joshua's returned spies portrayed the promised land to the children of Israel. "In America," the girl is reported to have said, "the hogs eat their fill of raisins and dates that everywhere grow wild, and when they are thirsty, they drink from ditches flowing with wine." Naturally the gullible *bondfolk* draw the conclusion from such stories that it is far better to be a hog in America than to be a human being in Sweden. The emigration fever seizes upon them, and the officials are so busy making out emigration permits that they cannot even get a night's rest.⁴

One cannot escape the suspicion that this beggar girl from Kisa had read or had heard discussed a letter written at Jefferson County, Iowa, on February 9, 1846, by Peter Cassel, who the previous year had led a party of twenty-one emigrants — men, women, and children — from this parish. The departure of this man in his fifty-sixth year at the head of a large company of emigrants — large for that time — created a sensation in his parish and in neighboring parishes; and information about his adventure was eagerly awaited by his large circle of friends and relatives. And they were not disappointed. In describing the wonders of America, Cassel's pen vied with Marco Polo's. Iowa's corn, pumpkins, and hogs, seen through the medium of his letters, appeared as monstrous to the peasants of Sweden as Gulliver to the inhabitants of Lilliputia; and in contrast with the earnings of the American farmer the income of the Swedish husbandman shrank to insignificance. Even the thunder in Sweden sounded like the report of a toy pistol, compared with the heavy artillery of the heavens in America.⁵ In his first letter Cassel wrote thus:

⁴ *Jönköpings-Bladet*, May 26, 1846.

⁵ For a sketch of Cassel and a reprint of his letters, see George M. Stephenson, "Documents Relating to Peter Cassel and the Settlement at New Sweden, Iowa," in the *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 2: 1-82 (February, 1929).

The ease of making a living here and the increasing prosperity of the farmers . . . exceeds anything we anticipated. If only half of the work expended on the soil in the fatherland were utilized here, the yield would reach the wildest imagination. . . . Barns and cattle sheds are seldom, if ever, seen in this vicinity; livestock is allowed to roam the year around, and since pasturage is common property, extending from one end of the land to the other, a person can own as much livestock as he desires or can take care of, without the least trouble or expense. . . . One of our neighbors . . . has one hundred head of hogs. . . . Their food consists largely of acorns, a product that is so abundant that as late as February the ground is covered in places. . . . Corn fields are more like woods than grain fields.

This *bonde* (land-owning farmer) not only was impressed with America's rich soil, its forests, its abundance of coal and metals, its rivers and lakes swarming with fish, but also wanted his friends at home to know that in other respects he had found a better world:

Freedom and equality are the fundamental principles of the constitution of the United States. There is no such thing as class distinction here, no counts, barons, lords or lordly estates. . . .⁶ Everyone lives in the unrestricted enjoyment of personal liberty. A Swedish *bonde*, raised under oppression and accustomed to poverty and want, here finds himself elevated to a new world, as it were, where all his former hazy ideas of a society conforming more closely to nature's laws are suddenly made real and he enjoys a satisfaction in life that he has never before experienced. There are no beggars here and there never can be so long as the people are ruled by the spirit that prevails now. I have yet to see a lock on a door in this neighborhood. . . . I have never heard of theft. . . . At this time of the year the sap of the sugar maple is running and we have made much sugar and syrup.⁷

⁶ "There is peace and prosperity here. I have come in contact with millions of people of all sorts and conditions, but I have never heard of dissension, and we have never been snubbed. There are black and brown people, but all are friendly and agreeable." Letter from Samuel Jönsson, Buffalo, New York, November 22, 1846, in *Östgötha Correspondenten*, May 26, 1847.

⁷ This letter, dated February 9, 1846, was published in *Östgötha Correspondenten* on May 16, 1846. It is reprinted, with English translation, in the *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 2: 22-28, 55-62 (February,

If the beggar girl from Kisa had heard this letter read and discussed by simple-minded folk, little wonder that her imagination ran away with her. Surely Joshua's spies could not have found a more ideal land if they had gone to the ends of the earth. And this girl was not the only purveyor of "information" about America. In many parishes stories were current that in Gothenburg there was a bureau that provided emigrants with all the necessities for the journey — free of charge; that several vessels were waiting to transport emigrants to the promised land — also free of charge; that in two days enough money could be earned to buy a cow that gave fabulous quantities of milk; that all pastures were common property; that the grass grew so tall that only the horns of the grazing cattle were visible; that there were no taxes in that fortunate land; that rivers ran with syrup; that cows roamed at large and could be milked by anyone.⁸

There may have been occasional "America letters" published in the newspapers of Sweden prior to 1840, but they were rare, chiefly because the few Swedes in America were usually adventurers or deserters from vessels, who did not find it expedient to let their whereabouts be known. The interest of the press in these letters began with the publication in *Aftonbladet*, in January, 1842, of a long letter from Gustaf Unonius, a young man who had received some notice as the author of a volume of poems before emigrating with his bride and a few of the "better folk" in the early autumn of 1841. He used the columns of this widely read Stockholm daily to

1929). The abundance of fish and game was mentioned frequently in letters to the old country. See, for example, a letter from A. M. D—m, Taylor's Falls, Minnesota, in *Östgötha Correspondenten*, July 27, 30, 1853.

⁸ Correspondence from Döderhultsvik to *Kalmar-Posten*, April 23, 1852; *Landskrona Nya Tidning*, cited in *Borås Tidning*, June 13, 1854; *Hvad Nytt?* (Eksjö), February 18, 1869; *Wäktaren*, cited in *Dalpilen* (Falun), July 17, 1869; Aron Edström, "Blad ur svensk-amerikanska banbrytarelivets historia," in *Svensk-amerikanska kalendern*, 61-64 (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1882).

inform his friends and acquaintances, especially in and around Upsala, where he had been a student, about his experiences in the new world. Unonius was essentially a student and his letters were carefully phrased, with the advantages and disadvantages of America weighed in the balance; but he could write after a residence of one month in Wisconsin that it was unlikely that he would ever return to his native land, because he found his youthful dream of a republican form of government and a democratic society realized. He found no epithets of degradation applied to men of humble toil; only those whose conduct merited it were looked down upon. "Liberty still is stronger in my affections than the bright silver dollar that bears her image," he wrote. Three months later he could write: "I look to the future with assurance. The soil that gives me sustenance has become my home; and the land that has opened opportunities and has given me a home and feeling of security has become my new fatherland." The readers of his letters learned that the young idealist seeking to escape from the trammels of an older society had found something that approached a Utopia on the American frontier, although his writings about it resembled more the reflections of a man chastened by unaccustomed toil and hardships than the song of a pilgrim who had crossed the river Jordan.⁹

Within a few weeks an emigrant who preceded Unonius to Wisconsin by three years was heard from through the same journalistic medium, the man to whom the letters were addressed having been prompted to publish them by reading the Unonius document. The writer was John Friman, a member of a party consisting of a father and three sons, who settled at Salem, Wisconsin Territory, in 1838. The serious illness of the youngest son necessitated the return to Sweden

⁹ His first letter was dated at Milwaukee, Wisconsin Territory, October 15, 1841, and published in *Aftonbladet*, January 4, 5, 1842; his second letter was dated at New Upsala, Wisconsin, January 23, 1842, and published in *Aftonbladet*, May 28, 30, 31, June 3, 7, 9, 1842.

of father and son, but the eldest son remained to carry on the correspondence with the "folks back home."¹⁰ In a later letter the young pioneer told about his first meeting with Unonius in the latter's home at New Upsala:

We are healthier and more vigorous than we ever were in Sweden. Many people from England and Ireland have already come here. Last fall, in October, a few Swedes from Upsala came here from Milwaukee, Mr. Gustaf Unonius and wife, married only six weeks when they left Sweden. A relative, Inspector Groth, and a Doctor Pålman have settled on a beautiful lake near a projected canal, twenty-eight miles west of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County. They have named the settlement New Upsala and the capital of New Sweden in Wisconsin. They are expecting several families and students from Upsala this summer. . . . I visited New Upsala last fall. They wanted me to sell out and move there. Father has probably heard of them. Last fall Unonius wrote to *Aftonbladet*. I hope his letter will awaken the desire to emigrate among the Swedes. . . . Altogether we own two hundred acres of land, and when we have our farm fenced and eighty acres broken . . . I wouldn't trade it for a whole estate in Sweden, with all its ceremonies. Out here in the woods we know nothing of such. . . . Give our love to Herman and say to him that we hope his health will be better than it was the first time he was here.¹¹

Herman's health was restored sufficiently to enable him, in company with a young man from another city, to undertake the journey to the "states" a few weeks later. Imagine the sorrow of the father when he received a letter informing him that Herman had entirely disappeared, his companion, who had arrived at the Friman farm in due time, being unable to give a satisfactory explanation of the mystery.¹² The public in Sweden was informed of the misfortune through the publication of the letter in the papers, and interest was even

¹⁰ Letters dated January 18, 1841, and July 4, 1842, in *Aftonbladet*, April 6, October 6, 13, 1842.

¹¹ Letter dated February 10, 1843, in *Skara Tidning*, May 18, 1843. Unonius mentions the meeting with Friman in his *Minnen från en sjuttonårig vistelse i nordvestra Amerika*, 1: 182 (Upsala, 1861).

¹² Letter dated February 10, 1843, in *Skara Tidning*, May 18, 1843.

more quickened by the letter from the father of the companion, answering *seriatim* the charges of the elder Friman brother that Herman was the victim of misplaced confidence in his fellow traveler;¹³ for weeks thousands eagerly searched the columns of the papers for the latest word about "brother Herman." The wonderful adventures the prodigal son related when he finally accounted for himself at the Friman farm not only cleared the name of his companion and relieved the anxiety of both fathers, but it gave to the "America letters" a halo of romance that made them, in a very real sense, news letters from the rich, mighty, and romantic land out there in the West.¹⁴ The muse of history suffers no violence by the assertion that one of the most interesting and widely read features of the Swedish papers were the "America letters."

In that unique and valuable work that emerged from the survey of a commission appointed by the Swedish government, some twenty years ago, to seek out the causes of emigration, appears a volume entitled "The Emigrants' Own Reasons," comprising letters written at the request of the commission by Swedish immigrants who had lived a longer or shorter period in the United States and Canada.¹⁵ These letters have their value, but it must be recognized that the writers unconsciously injected into them the retrospections of several months or years. There is, therefore, a vast difference between these letters and the "America letters" — naïve accounts of experiences written for relatives and friends, who were as simple and naïve as the writers themselves, and before retrospection had wrought its havoc. It is just this "unconscious" and naïve quality of the "America letters" that opens for the historian windows through which he can look into the cottages in Sweden and into the log cabins in the adopted country.

¹³ Letter from J. C. Melander, Eksjö, June 27, 1843, in *Skara Tidning*, July 13, 1843.

¹⁴ Extracts from several letters in *Skara Tidning*, November 2, 1843.

¹⁵ *Emigrationsutredningen*, 7: 131-263 (Stockholm, 1908).

The student of emigration who is satisfied with poring over statistics, government reports, and "social surveys" will never sound the depths of one of the most human phenomena in history. The much-abused psychologist in this instance is an indispensable co-laborer with the historian, for the theme of the historian of emigration is the human soul. The emigrant was a product of his environment, but he was not held in bondage by it; his soul could not be shackled, even though his body was the slave of harsh taskmasters.

In the large the contents of the "America letters" written in the years from 1840 to 1860 may be divided into two categories: (1) impressions of and experiences in America; and (2) comments on conditions in Sweden. With the exception of a few letters written by men of the type of Gustaf Unonius, the great mass of them were the products of men who had only a meager education and who grew to manhood before the generation that enjoyed the advantages provided under the act of 1842, by which every parish was required to provide a public school. The spelling is faulty, to say the least, and the punctuation is atrocious. New York becomes "Nefyork" and "Nevyork"; Chicago, "Sikago" and "Cicaga"; Illinois, "Elinojs"; Iowa, "Adiova" and "Jova"; Pennsylvania, "Pensarvenien"; Galesburg, "Gillsborg" and "Galesbury"; Albany, "Albano" and "Albanes"; Troy, "Troij"; Princeton, "Princeldin"; Rock Island, "Rockislan" and "Räckarlan"; Peru, "Pebra" and "Perru"; and Henry County, "Hendi counti." Not only were liberties taken with American place names but even many innocent Swedish words were mutilated beyond recognition. But the person who has the patience to spell his way through a mass of these documents cannot fail to acquire a profound respect for the ability of the writers to express themselves and for their sound and wholesome instincts. They reveal that in their native land they had thought seriously, and evenly deeply, about their own problems and those of their communities — probably more

than they or their neighbors at the time realized; but it was during the first weeks and months in America that they gave vent to their feelings and emotions and tried the powers of expression that had previously lain dormant. America gave them a basis for comparison and contrast: church, government, society, and officials at home appeared in an entirely different light; and the contrast was such that the emigrant had no desire to return in order to relate to his countrymen his strange experiences; on the contrary, he did all in his power to urge them to follow his example — to emigrate. The emigrant became an evangelist, preaching the gospel of America to the heavy-laden. For him the year of jubilee had come.

There are, of course, among the "America letters" that have been preserved a number that express regret that the transatlantic adventure was undertaken and reveal a feeling of bitterness towards those who had painted America in such attractive colors and in that way had lured the writers into poverty and misery; but the overwhelming number of them are almost ecstatic in praise of the adopted country and bitterly hostile to the land that gave them birth. Some writers even went to the length of ridiculing or deriding those to whom their letters were addressed for remaining in a land unworthy of the man and woman of honest toil and legitimate ambition. Extracts from two letters written before 1850 are illuminating in this regard:

I doubt that any one will take the notion of returning to Sweden, because the journey is too long and expensive; and even if these considerations were minor with certain individuals, I doubt that they would go, for the reason that nothing would be gained. . . . Not until this year have I fully realized how grateful we ought to be to God, who by His grace has brought us away from both spiritual and material misery. How shall we show our appreciation for all the goodness the Lord has bestowed upon us! In like manner does He bid you, my relatives and friends, to receive the same grace and goodness, but you will not heed His voice. What will the Lord render unto you now? He will allow

you to be deprived of all this during your entire lives and in the future to repent bitterly of your negligence. We have the word of prophecy . . . and you will do well to heed it. . . . Ought not a place of refuge and solace be acceptable to you? . . . Now I have said what my conscience prompts me to say and on you rests the responsibility for yourselves and your children.¹⁶

The other letter contains the following admonition:

Tell Johannes . . . and others not to condemn me for failing to return home at the appointed time, as I promised and intended when I left Sweden, because at that time I was as ignorant as the other stay-at-homes about what a voyage to a foreign land entails. When a person is abroad in the world, there may be many changes in health and disposition, but if God grants me health I will come when it pleases me. If it were not for the sake of my good mother and my relatives, I would never return to Sweden. No one need worry about my circumstances in America, because I am living on God's noble and free soil, neither am I a slave under others. On the contrary, I am my own master, like the other creatures of God. I have now been on American soil for two and a half years and I have not been compelled to pay a penny for the privilege of living. Neither is my cap worn out from lifting it in the presence of gentlemen. There is no class distinction here between high and low, rich and poor, no make-believe, no "title sickness," or artificial ceremonies, but everything is quiet and peaceful and everybody lives in peace and prosperity. Nobody goes from door to door begging crumbs. . . . The Americans do not have to scrape their effects together and sell them in order to pay heavy taxes to the crown and to pay the salaries of officials. There are no large estates, whose owners can take the last sheaf from their dependents and then turn them out to beg. Neither is a drink of *brännvin* forced on the workman in return for a day's work. . . . I sincerely hope that nobody in Sweden will foolishly dissuade anyone from coming to this land of Canaan.¹⁷

This letter may be said to be a prototype of the "America letters." It contains a mass of details, and almost every

¹⁶ Peter Cassel to relatives and friends, December 13, 1848, in the *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 2:78 (February, 1929).

¹⁷ Letter from Johan Johansson, Burlington, Iowa, November 12, 1849, in *Östgötha Correspondenten*, April 5, 1850. Compare the following statement in a letter from Stephan Stephanson, May 17, 1854: "There is no class distinction here, but all are equals, and not as in Sweden, where the

sentence breathes a deep-seated dissatisfaction with government, institutions, and society in Sweden and at the same time a remarkable satisfaction with everything American. This tone is characteristic even of letters written by persons whose first experiences in the new country were anything but pleasant. An emigrant from Småland, who emigrated with his wife and eight children in 1849,—one of the “cholera years”—buried one of his daughters on the banks of an inland canal, suffered several weeks with malaria, and just escaped being cheated out of his hard-earned savings, was happy over his decision to emigrate and looked to the future with high hopes for a better existence in spiritual as well as material matters.¹⁸ Another enthusiast, who had been exposed to dangers of various kinds, wrote: “We see things here that we could never describe, and you would never believe them if we did. I would not go back to Sweden if the whole country were presented to me.”¹⁹

It is obvious that statements like these were topics of lively discussion in the cottages of Sweden. The astonished people naturally hungered for more information and some of them inquired of their “American” friends how the morals of this marvelous country compared with those of their own communities. Where everything was so great and rich and free, and the population was recruited from all parts of the world, how could the Americans be so honest, sympathetic, and kind as the letters pictured them? A correspondent in 1852 gave his explanation of the miracle. The country was large, he said,

working people are looked down upon and are called ‘the rabble,’ whereas the lazy gentlemen are called ‘better folk.’” This manuscript is in the author’s possession.

¹⁸ Steffan Steffanson to relatives and friends, October 9, 1849, in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Yearbooks*, 11: 86-100 (St. Paul, 1926).

¹⁹ Unsigned letters from New York in *Norrlands-Posten*, December 29, 1856; and from Chicago, September 9, 1853, in *Nya Wexjö-Bladet*, October 7, 1853.

and the rascals were not concentrated in any one place; and if such persons did come to a community, they found no evil companions to add fuel to their baser instincts. Moreover, if they did not mend their ways, a volunteer committee of citizens would wait upon them and serve notice that they had the choice of leaving the community or submitting to arrest. The Americans would not brook violations of law and therefore drunkenness, profanity, theft, begging, and dissension were so rare as to be almost entirely absent. This letter of recommendation did not stop here. It praised the observance of the Sabbath and asserted that the young people did not dance, drink, or play cards, as was the case in Sweden.²⁰

Unlike the earlier travelers in America, who usually belonged to the upper classes in Europe, the emigrants found the moral standards on a much higher plane than in Sweden. During a residence of nine months in the new Utopia one emigrant had not heard of a single illegitimate child — yes, one case had actually come to his knowledge, and then a Swede was the offender. He found whiskey-drinking very unusual and the advancement of temperance almost unbelievable. In a midwestern town of about two thousand inhabitants (the seat of a college with seven professors and three hundred and thirty-nine students) one had to be well acquainted in order to purchase whiskey or strong wine. "From this incident you may judge of the state of temperance in American cities," he confided. After a residence of four years in southeastern Iowa, Peter Cassel testified that he had "dined in hundreds of homes," and had "yet to see a whiskey bottle on the table. This country suits me as a friend of temperance, but it is not suitable for the whiskey drinker."²¹

²⁰ Unsigned letter, dated January 23, 1852, in *Bibel-Wännen* (Lund), September, 1852.

²¹ L. P. Esbjörn to Peter Wieselgren, Andover, Illinois, May 23, 1850, a manuscript in the *Stadsbibliotek* of Gothenburg; Cassel to relatives and friends, December 13, 1848, in the *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 2: 81 (February, 1929).

It is hardly conceivable that the Swedish immigrants were unanimously enthusiastic about temperance, whether voluntary or imposed by law, and the student of American social history would dot the map of mid-nineteenth-century America with thousands of oases; but it is nevertheless a fact that the Middle West, to which most of the immigrants gravitated, was in striking contrast to Sweden, where every land-owning farmer operated a still and where the fiery *brännvin* at that time was as much a household necessity as coffee is today. Men, women, and children partook of its supposed health-giving properties in quantities appropriate to the occasion. To many immigrants who had heard the speeches or had read the tracts of the great apostles of temperance in Sweden, George Scott and Peter Wieselgren, and had patterned their lives after their precepts, the rural communities of Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota must have approached their ideal.

We must not be deluded into thinking that all the earlier Swedish immigrants were saints or models of virtue, but many of their letters bear testimony to the fact that there was profound dissatisfaction with the state of religion in Sweden. The writers had listened attentively to pietistic pastors and Baptist and lay preachers with sufficient courage to violate the conventicle act or to incur the displeasure of the church authorities, many of whom made merry over the flowing bowl and served Mammon rather than God. One cannot escape the conclusion that religion played a greater rôle in stimulating the desire to emigrate than writers have hitherto suspected; and if the student of immigration wishes to understand why the Swedes in America have turned away in such numbers from the church of the fathers in favor of other denominations or have held aloof from all church connections, he will find a study of religious conditions in the homeland a profitable one. It is by no means purely accidental that the beginnings of emigration coincide with the confluence of various forms of dissatisfaction with the state church.

The immigrants quickly sensed the difference between the pastors in America and Sweden. In 1849 a writer put it thus:

There are also Swedish preachers here who are so well versed in the Bible and in the correct interpretation that they seek the lost sheep and receive them again into their embrace and do not conduct themselves after the manner of Sweden, where the sheep must seek the shepherd and address him with high-sounding titles.

Another requested his brother to send hymn books and catechisms, because the old copies were almost worn out with use.

We have a Swedish pastor. He . . . is a disciple of the esteemed Pastor Selligren [*Peter Lorenz Selligren, a prominent evangelistic pastor in Sweden*]. . . . During the past eleven months he has preached every Sunday and holiday; on week days he works the same as the rest of us, because his remarkable preaching ability makes it unnecessary for him to write his sermons. One Sunday I heard him preach for over two hours, and he was as fluent the second hour as the first.²²

A faithful disciple of the prophet Eric Janson drew an even sharper contrast between the two countries:

I take pen in hand, moved by the Holy Ghost, to bear witness to the things I have seen, heard, and experienced. We had a pleasant voyage . . . and I was not affected in the least with seasickness. . . . My words are inadequate to describe with what joy we are permitted daily to draw water from the well of life and how we have come to the land of Canaan, flowing with milk and honey, . . . which the Scriptures tell us the Lord has prepared for his people. He has brought us out of the devilish bondage of the ecclesiastical authorities, which still holds you in captivity. . . . Here we are relieved of hearing and seeing Sweden's satellites of the devil, whose tongues are inspired by the minions of hell and who murdered the prophets and Jesus himself and snatched the Bible from Eric Janson's hands and came against us with staves, guns, and torches, together with ropes and chains, to take away the freedom we have in Christ. But

²² Steffan Steffanson to relatives and friends, October 9, 1849, in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Yearbooks*, 11:97 (St. Paul, 1926); Peter Cassel to relatives and friends, December 13, 1848, in the *Swedish-American Historical Bulletin*, 2:75 (February, 1929).

praised be God through all eternity that we are freed from them and are now God's peculiar people. . . . This is the land of liberty, where everybody can worship God in his own way and can choose pastors who are full of the Spirit, light, and perfection. . . . Therefore, make ready and let nothing hinder you . . . and depart from Babel, that is, Sweden, fettered body and soul by the law.²³

The legal prohibition of conventicles and its consequences were fresh not only in the memory of fanatical Eric-Jansonists but also in the mind of a former master shoemaker from Stockholm, who wrote:

The American does not bother about the religious beliefs of his fellow men. It is the individual's own affair to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience, without interference from prelates clothed with power to prescribe what one must believe in order to obtain salvation. Here it is only a question of being a respectable and useful member of society.²⁴

Another letter describes the situation in America as follows:

It is not unusual for men of meager education to witness for the truth with much greater blessing than the most learned preacher who has no religious experience. There are no statutes contrary to the plain teaching of the Word of God which prohibit believing souls from meeting for edification in the sacred truth of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵

The sum and substance of the religious situation in America and Sweden is graphically stated in the words of an emigrant:

America is a great light in Christendom; there is a ceaseless striving to spread the healing salvation of the Gospel. The pastors are not lords in their profession, neither are they rich in the goods of this world. They strive to walk in the way God has commanded. They minister unceasingly to the spiritual and material welfare of men. There is as great difference between the pastors here and in Sweden as there is between night and day.²⁶

²³ Letter from Anders Jonsson, Bishop Hill, Illinois, February 9, 1847, in *Hudikswalls-Weckoblad*, July 17, 1847.

²⁴ Letter from Erik Hedström, Southport, Wisconsin, in *Aftonbladet*, September 20, 1843.

²⁵ Letter from Jon Andersson in *Norrlands-Posten*, January 12, 1852.

²⁶ Letter from Åke Olsson, Andover, Illinois, February 20, 1850, in *Norrlands-Posten*, June 3, 1850.

One of the highly prized advantages America offered to the immigrant was the opportunity to rise from the lowest to the highest stratum of society. He found a land where the man whose hands were calloused by toil was looked upon as just as useful to society as the man in the white collar. The man who chafed under the cramped social conventions of Europe could not conceal his joy at finding a country where custom and tradition counted for little and where manual labor did not carry with it a social stigma. He had probably heard that the American people had elevated to the highest position of honor and trust such men of the people as Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison, but the actuality of the democracy in the "saga land" proved to be greater than the rumors that had kindled his imagination back home. And so he sat down to write about it to his countrymen, who read with astonishment that knew no bounds such statements as the following:

The hired man, maid, and governess eat at the husbandman's table. "Yes, sir," says the master to the hand; "yes, sir," says the hand to the master. "If you please, mam," says the lady of the house to the maid; "yes, madam," replies the maid. On the street the maid is dressed exactly as the housewife. Today is Sunday, and at this very moment what do I see but a housemaid dressed in a black silk hat, green veil, green coat, and black dress, carrying a bucket of coal! This is not an unusual sight — and it is as it should be. All porters and coachmen are dressed like gentlemen. Pastor, judge, and banker carry market baskets.²⁷

And read what a boon it was to live in a land where there were no laws minutely regulating trades and occupations and binding workers to terms of service:

This is a free country and nobody has a great deal of authority over another. There is no pride, and nobody needs to hold his hat in his hand for any one else. Servants are not bound for a fixed time. This is not Sweden, where the higher classes and employers

²⁷ Letter from New York in *Aftonbladet*, reprinted in *Barometern* (Kalmar), June 5, 1852.

have the law on their side so that they can treat their subordinates as though they were not human beings.²⁸

The writer of this letter had probably felt the hard fist of his employer, because at that time physical chastisement was by no means unusual. If it was a great surprise to learn that a fine pedigree was not a requirement for admission to respectable society and to all classes of employment, no less sensational was the fact that the inhabitant of the western Canaan was not required to appear before an officer of the state to apply for a permit to visit another parish or to change his place of residence. In Sweden, of course, this official red tape was taken for granted, or its absence in America would not have called forth the following comment:

I am glad that I migrated to this land of liberty, in order to spare my children the slavish drudgery that was my lot; in this country if a laborer cannot get along with his employer, he can leave his job at any time, and the latter is obliged to pay him for the time he has put in at the same wage that was agreed upon for the month or year. We are free to move at any time and to any place without a certificate from the employer or from the pastor, because neither passports nor certificates are in use here.²⁹

This newly won freedom was, in some cases, too rich for Swedish blood. One of the first pastors among the immigrants was rather disturbed about the conduct of some of his countrymen:

This political, religious, and economic freedom is novel and astonishing to the immigrant, who sees the spectacle of twenty-two millions of people ruling themselves in all orderliness. As a rule, the Swedes make use of this liberty in moderation, but a number act like calves that have been turned out to pasture. In most cases their cavorting is harmless, but sometimes they run amuck. They seem to think that a "free country" gives them license to indulge in those things that are not in harmony with respect, uprightness, reliability, and veneration for the Word of God. . . . A rather

²⁸ Letter from Ake Olsson, Andover, Illinois, February 20, 1850, in *Norrlands-Posten*, June 3, 1850.

²⁹ Letter from Stephan Stephanson, May 17, 1854, in the author's possession.

characteristic incident illustrates this. A small boy, upon being reproved by his mother for appropriating a piece of cake replied: "Why, mother, aren't we in a free country now?"³⁰

Making due allowance for the orthodox pessimism of a minister of the Gospel in every generation, historical research applied to certain Swedish settlements confirms the observations of this shepherd.

To a Swede, whose tongue was trained to flavor with cumbersome titles every sentence addressed to superiors and carefully to avoid any personal pronoun, the temptation to overwork the second person singular pronoun in America was irresistible. The Swedish passion for high-sounding names and titles gave to the humbler members of society designations that magnified by contrast the grandeur of those applied to the elect. In his own country the Swede was shaved by Barber Johansson, was driven to his office by Coachman Petersson, conversed with Building Contractor Lundström, ordered Jeweler Andersson to make a selection of rings for his wife, and *skåled* with Herr First Lieutenant Silfversparre. There were even fine gradations of "titles" for the members of the rural population. Every door to the use of *du* was closed except in the most familiar conversation. The youngest member of the so-called better classes, however, might *dua* the man of toil, upon whose head rested the snows of many long Swedish winters. Can the sons of those humble folk in America be blamed for abusing the American privilege of using *du*? What a privilege to go into a store, the owner of which might be a millionaire, and allow one's hat to rest undisturbed! How much easier it was to greet the village banker with the salutation "Hello, Pete!" than to say "Good morning, Mr. Banker Gyllensvans!" "When I meet any one on the street, be he rich or poor, pastor or official, I never tip my hat when I speak," wrote an emigrant from Skåne in 1854. "I merely

³⁰ Letter from L. P. Esbjörn, Andover, Illinois, May 6, 1850, in *Norrlands-Posten*, June 20, 1850.

say ' Good day, sir, how are you? ' ' ' ³¹ On the other hand, what a thrill it was for the immigrant to be addressed as " mister " — the same title that adorned the American banker and lawyer and the first title he had ever had! " Mister " was much more dignified than " Jöns," " Lars," or " Per."

The equality that the law gives is not the equality of custom. The lack of political rights is comparatively easy to remedy, but social customs are harder to deal with because they are not grounded in law. From his birth the Swede was hampered by restrictive conventions which, though not always seen by the eye, were always felt by the emotions. The walls between the classes of society and various occupations were practically insurmountable. A person could not pass from a higher social class to an inferior one, even though the latter better became his nature or economic status, because that would be an everlasting disgrace. If a *bonde* had come into financial straits, the step down to the condition of a *torpare* ³² would have wrecked his spirit. Class distinctions in America did not assert themselves in the same way; very often the foreman and laborer were neighbors, sat in the same pew, and belonged to the same lodge. One immigrant wrote of this in 1854 as follows:

Titles and decorations are not valued and esteemed here. On the other hand, efficiency and industry are, and the American sets a higher value on an intelligent workingman than on all the titles, bands, and stars that fall from Stockholm during an entire year. It will not do to be haughty and idle, *for that is not the fashion in this country, for it is to use the axe, the spade, and the saw and some other things to get money and not to be a lazy body.* ³³

³¹ *Carlshamns Allehanda*, August 3, 1854. Anders Andersson, who for some time after his emigration corresponded with a crown official in Norrland, soon changed his style of address from *ni* to *du*. See his letters edited by Anna Söderblom, "Läsare och Amerikafarare på 1840-talet," in *Julhelg*, 80-93 (Stockholm, 1925).

³² "Renter" suggests the meaning.

³³ Unsigned letter from Chicago, August 3, 1854, in *Skånska Posten*, reprinted in *Carlshamns Allehanda*, October 4, 1854.

If the men appreciated the equality in dress and speech, the women were even more enthusiastic. In the old country married as well as unmarried women were labeled with titles of varying quality and their work was more masculine, judged by the American standard. In the "promised land" they were all classified simply as "Mrs." or "Miss," and the heavy, clumsy shoes and coarse clothing gave way to an attire more in keeping with the tastes and occupations of the "weaker sex." In Sweden the maid slept in the kitchen, shined shoes, and worked long hours; in America she had her own room, limited working hours, regular times for meals, and time to take a buggy ride with Ole Olson, who hailed from the same parish. If she had learned to speak English, she might even have a ride by the side of John Smith—and that was the height of ambition! And for all this she was paid five or six times as much as she had earned in Sweden. In letter after letter one finds expressions of astonishment and enthusiasm over this equality in conversation and dress. One writer relates that the similarity in dress between matron and maid was such that he could not distinguish between them until the latter's peasant speech betrayed her. It is easy to imagine the thorn of envy in the hearts of the women in Sweden when they learned how fortunate their American sisters were. Another letter contains the information that the duties of the maid were confined to indoor work in the country as well as in the city and that even milking was done by the men, an amusing sight to a Swede.

It is rather strange that there was not more serious complaint about the hard work that fell to the lot of the immigrants. It is true that more than one confessed that they did not know what hard work was until they came to America, but there was a certain pride in the admission. It was probably the American optimism that sustained their spirits. They saw everything in the light of a future, where the "own farm" plus a bank account was the ultimate goal. This feeling of

independence and self-confidence was also heightened by the vast distances of the Middle West, its large farms, billowing prairies, and cities springing up like magic.³⁴ In contrast with the small-scale agriculture and the tiny hamlets of his native parish, the immigrant felt that he was a part of something great, rich, and mighty, the possibilities of which were just beginning to be exploited. Said a Swedish farmer in 1849:

Here in Illinois is room for the entire population of Sweden. During the present winter I am certain that more grass has been burned than there is hay in the entire kingdom of Sweden. . . . The grass now is just half grown, and the fields give the appearance of an ocean, with a house here and there, separated by great distances.³⁵

The Swede who came to the Mississippi Valley found a frontier society, with many institutions in advance of those of an older society and without the multitude of officials that strutted and blustered in Sweden. In fact, as one immigrant wrote, he was hardly conscious of living under a government, and the system of taxation fooled him into thinking that there were no taxes at all. The salary of the president of the United States was a mere pittance compared with the income of the royal family — a fact not omitted in the letters.³⁶

Not a few of the "America letters" go to extremes in setting forth contrasts between "poverty-ridden Sweden" and the rich and mighty republic. Here is an example:

We hope and pray that the Lord may open the eyes of Svea's people that they might see their misery: how the poor **workingman** is despised and compelled to slave, while the so-called better classes fritter away their time and live in luxury, all of which comes out of the pockets of the miserable workingmen. . . . We believe that all the workers had better depart and leave the lords and parasites to their fate. There is room here for all of Svea's inhabitants.³⁷

³⁴ Letter to *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, April 22, 23, 1852.

³⁵ Letter of O. Bäck, Victoria, Illinois, in *Norrlands-Posten*, April 3, 1849.

³⁶ *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, April 22, 23, 1852.

³⁷ Letter from Åke Olsson, Andover, Illinois, February 20, 1850, in *Norrlands-Posten*, June 3, 1850.

Quotations from the "America letters" could be multiplied to show the reaction of the Swedish immigrants to the American environment, but a sufficient number have been presented to demonstrate that they were unusually responsive to the impressions that rushed upon them soon after they had cast their lot with their brothers and sisters from Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Norway, and Holland. And not only that, but their letters remain to record the fact that in America they found a society that nearly approached their conception of an ideal state. This explains why students of immigration agree almost unanimously that the Swedes assimilated more rapidly and thoroughly than any other immigrant stock. After all, why should anyone be hesitant about taking out naturalization papers in the land of Canaan? Some letters written by men who had had scarcely time enough to unpack their trunks read like Fourth of July orations:

As a son of the great republic which extends from ocean to ocean, I will strive to honor my new fatherland. A limitless field is opened for the development of Swedish culture and activity. Destiny seems to have showered its blessings on the people of the United States beyond those of any other nation in the world.⁸⁸

The Sweden of 1840-1860 is no more and the America of Abraham Lincoln belongs to the ages; but for hundreds of thousands of people in the land of the midnight sun America, in spite of the geographical distance, lies closer to them than the neighboring province. In some parts of Sweden the "America letters" from near relatives brought Chicago closer to them than Stockholm. They knew more about the doings of their relatives in Center City, Minnesota, than about Uncle John in Jönköping.

In deciphering an "America letter" the historian is prone to forget the anxious mother who for months — perhaps years — had longed for it, and the letter that never came is entirely

⁸⁸ Letter from C. P. Agrelius, New York, April 14, 1849, in *Östgötha Correspondenten*, July 4, 1849.

missing from the archives and newspaper columns. But if he turns the musty pages of the Swedish-American newspapers, his eyes will fall on many advertisements similar to the following:

Our dear son Johan Anton Petersson went to America last spring. We have not heard a line from him. If he sees this advertisement, will he please write to his people in Sweden? We implore him not to forget his aged parents and, above all, not to forget the Lord.³⁹

If many letters were stained with tears in the little red cottages in Sweden, there were not a few written by trembling hands in the log cabins of Minnesota and later in the sod houses of Nebraska. And sometimes the heart was too full to allow the unsteady hand to be the only evidence of longing for parents and brothers and sisters, as the following quotation reveals: "I will not write at length this time. Nothing of importance has happened, and if you come, we can converse. God alone knows whether that day will ever dawn — my eyes are dimmed with tears as I write about it. What a happy day it would be if, contrary to all expectations, we children could see our parents."⁴⁰ Miraculous things happened in the land of Canaan; it could transform a conservative Swedish *bonde* into a "hundred per cent American" in spirit, but it could not so easily sever the ties of blood. Neither could the storm-tossed Atlantic prevent sisters, cousins, uncles, and aunts from accepting invitations embalmed in "America letters" to attend family reunions in the land of Canaan.

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³⁹ *Chicago-Bladet*, January 13, 1885.

⁴⁰ Mary H. Stephenson to her relatives, November 3, 1867, in Swedish Historical Society of America, *Yearbooks*, 7:90 (St. Paul, 1922).



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