

COOK and cookee
before the cookhouse
calling men to dinner



FROM SENATOR DICKINSON'S COLLECTION

SKY PILOT PRIMITIVE

HAROLD DEAN CATER

ONE JANUARY DAY in 1924 a stranger who introduced himself as the Reverend Andrew Stenstrom walked into the lumber camp of the American Cedar Company, about twenty miles east of Washkish on Red Lake. He announced that he had come from Big Falls on the logging railroad, and he immediately began to make friends with some of the eighty lumberjacks working in the camp.

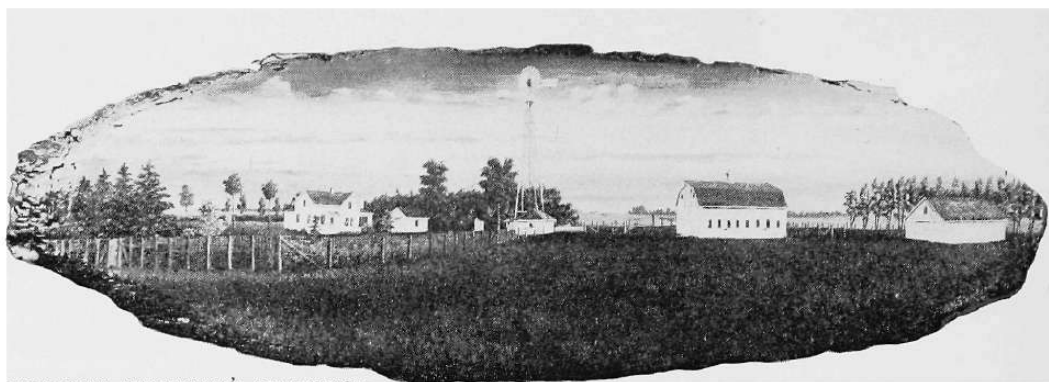
After the men had finished supper, Stenstrom called them together by announcing, "Now boys, we're going to have a meeting." He took out his Swedish harp and began to sing such selections as "The Grumbler's Song," "Your Mother Still Prays for You

Jack," "The Hornet Song," and "Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" Some of the men knew snatches of these semisacred songs and they sang with the visitor when they could. The rest of the meeting was devoted to familiar hymns and preaching.

Stenstrom knew what the lumberjacks wanted and he gave it to them hard. Hell-fire-or-heaven was his specialty and he delivered it with a combination of scolding and beseeching, and just the right amount of coarseness calculated to meet the men on their own ground. At the end of the meeting there was the usual "show of hands" that meant requests for special prayers. Although Stenstrom went into the camp a stranger, he left it as a friend, and he knew he would be welcome whenever he wanted to return.¹

DR. CATER has been director of the Minnesota Historical Society since 1948. His published works include a volume entitled *Henry Adams and His Friends* (1947).

¹ The facts in this paragraph were furnished by the Reverend Fred S. Granstrom of Harris.



FROM MRS. STENSTROM'S COLLECTION

A typical farm scene, as depicted by A. M. Stenstrom

Visiting preachers, or sky pilots as the lumberjacks called them, made important contributions to logging history. Stenstrom can stand alone as an able sky pilot and, though he may not be as famous as those two titans of evangelism in the Minnesota woods, Frank Higgins and John W. Sornberger, he preached in the lumber camps for over thirty years. Less common in logging history, however, is an artist who could record in pictures its colorful life. Stenstrom is unique in this respect. Since he was entirely self-taught with brush and palette, he can be called a primitive painter. Moreover, he continued with his art oblivious of the fact that the photographer had long since replaced his kind in every part of the country. Photographers abounded in the lumber camps, and the Minnesota Historical Society's picture collection is rich with the results of their work. Unlike photographs, Stenstrom's paintings are in vivid colors and are based upon years of firsthand experience. He left, therefore, a record that goes far beyond the photograph in reproducing the atmosphere of the logging camp, and it conveys a better idea of the kind of men who worked in the lumber industry and of the special equipment that made it succeed.

Stenstrom's pictures are important because they document Minnesota's past. His work came to the Minnesota Historical Society's attention in 1953 only a few weeks after he died. Mr. W. H. Deubener of St. Paul, a member of the society, wrote to it about a series of Stenstrom's paintings hanging in Senator Leonard R. Dickinson's store

in Bemidji, and suggested that they might be of historical interest. The society investigated, and Senator Dickinson was glad to lend them for exhibit in the Historical Building. A preliminary search brought more to light, and by autumn thirteen of Stenstrom's pictures were hanging in the society's museum. They have attracted considerable attention. During the intervening months investigations have unfolded the fascinating story of the man and his work which, while not complete, deserves to be told while the exhibit is still on view.

For almost thirty-five years Andrew Stenstrom journeyed from one lumber camp to another in northern Minnesota, the Dakotas, and westward to the Pacific coast, preaching and painting as he went.² He preached not only in lumber camps but wherever he could gather a group "to have a meeting," whether it was in a church, a schoolhouse, a farmer's home, a tent, or even in the street. Above everything else, he wanted to be a "true witness for God" and once, when attendance or the "show of hands" was not satisfactory, he cried out in his diary: "Burdened for souls at 11 A.M. service. Jesus goes the way of Some. My soul is broken and tears flowing. 8 P.M. just a few out."³

There are people still living who heard him and can attest to the power of his

² Unless otherwise indicated, personal data on Andrew Stenstrom was furnished by his widow, Mrs. Alvira T. Stenstrom of Bemidji.

³ Interview with the Reverend Granstrom. Stenstrom's diary is owned by Mrs. Stenstrom.

preaching. He habitually fasted for "the morrow service," and he often carried with him printed copies of "The Believer's Bank-note" which he distributed after a meeting as a kind of certification of faith. Although he never belonged to any one denomination, he represented at various times the Christian Missionary Alliance, the Pentecostals, and the Baptists; and he conducted campaigns for such denominations as the Covenant, Assembly of God, Free Methodists, and Evangelical Free Church.

He was a familiar sight on the highway, for most of his life was spent in travel. In his early years he traveled on foot, and thought nothing of walking great distances in a single day. Later he used a Model A Ford and finally a jeep station wagon. Even when traveling on foot he carried his heavy harp and a knapsack filled with supplies, hymn books, and a few odd paintings. As the years rolled by, bringing with them a family of nine children, and as income from preaching became increasingly inadequate and even unpredictable, he resorted to earning a living by using his hands. He became a journeyman in more than one sense. Besides being an itinerant artist, he was a skilled carpenter, a sign painter, a house painter, apparently an excellent saw filer, and even a book salesman. Thus he never

lacked ways of earning money to support his growing family.

Andrew Manuel Stenstrom, the youngest of three sons, was born on August 8, 1880, to Louis Simon and Anna Stenstrom in the village of Brunsberg in Alvdalen, Sweden.⁴ The following January the parents migrated to Minnesota and settled in Cambridge, where other Swedes from their home province were living. Within the next six years two girls were born to the Stenstroms. Louis Stenstrom found it difficult to earn enough money to support his large family. Because they believed a farm was a better and a cheaper place than a town for bringing up five children, in 1888, when Andrew was not quite eight years old, his parents purchased from John Olson an island in Devil's Lake, a few miles south of Mora.⁵ It consisted of seventeen acres, most of which Louis Stenstrom tried to convert into a farm. But farming was not one of his numerous talents, and the family was forced at certain periods to live largely on the fish that abounded in the lake. Once, for lack of a horse, the father tied the three boys to a plow and tried without success to make them pull it.

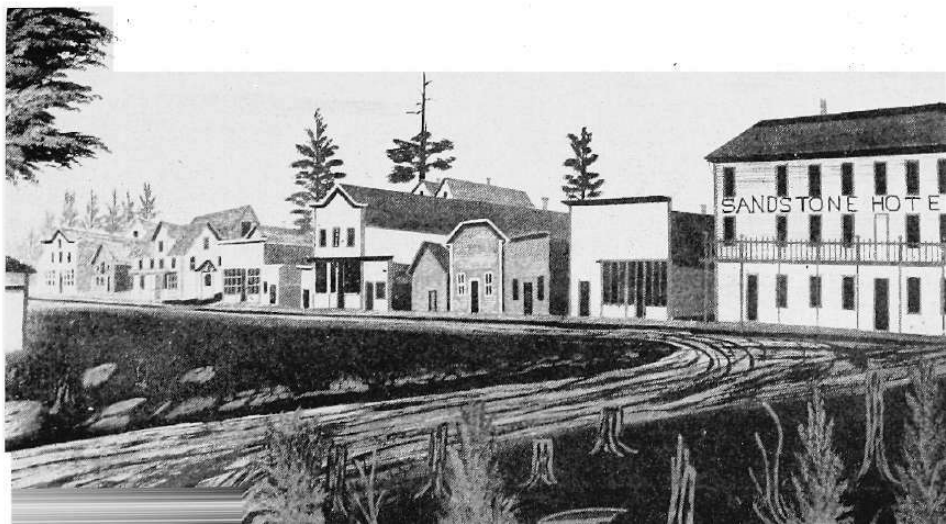
Louis Stenstrom was away from home for months at a time. His principal talent was watchmaking and repairing, and at one time he had a shop at Sauk Rapids; but he also made harps, carved such wooden articles as buttons and kitchen utensils, including rolling pins, and he traveled through the country on foot to sell them. For a while he also tried preaching.⁶

⁴From the Stenstrom family Bible owned by Woodrow Stenstrom of Princeton.

⁵Interview with Albert W. Olson of Mora.

⁶This composite description is based upon interviews with Andrew Nygren of Princeton, Mr. and Mrs. Albert W. Olson of Mora, and Mrs. John P. Stenstrom of Braham.

LOUIS Stenstrom's
view of
Sandstone





PENCIL sketch for a farm scene,
by A. M. Stenstrom

He developed quite a business in painting views of farm homesteads and many of his pictures of local farms can still be found in the vicinity of Mora. He had painted such scenes before he left Sweden. One particularly interesting example of his work is a view in tempera and oil of a block of buildings in Sandstone. The picture, which is reproduced with this article, is an important piece of documentation for early Sandstone, since it shows the business section as it looked before it was destroyed in the great forest fire of 1894.⁷

The Stenstrom farm was in Brunswick Township, in a region known as Fish Lake, taking its name from the largest lake in the area. Andrew went to school in what is known today as District Number 6. At the age of fourteen, while he was only in the fifth grade, he left school and went to work in a lumber camp north of Mora. It was called the Lake Camp and was one of five owned by the Ann River Logging Company. At first he was given the job of loading the sleds, or "tending sled" as the lumberjacks called it, and later he was made a blacksmith's helper. During the approximately ten years of his employment in lumber camps, he learned the specialized skills connected with logging and the drive, and he was especially clever with the cant hook.

It was during this period that he was converted. Andrew Nygren of Princeton re-

members the circumstances well. A group of twelve young men, who were called the "Fish Lake Boys," customarily spent every Saturday night at the saloons in Mora. Nygren, who had recently married, resolved one night never to drink liquor again. "Boys, I'm through," he said. He put down his glass and walked down the street. He passed the Salvation Army and then turned back and entered. That night he was "saved." He was a much happier man and he urged Andrew Stenstrom to follow his example. Stenstrom, who was a heavy drinker, acknowledged that it would be a good thing to do, but he was not ready to take such a step. Nygren urged him so strongly that Stenstrom became irritated and one day disappeared. Later Nygren heard Stenstrom had gone West and Nygren felt he

⁷ After Stenstrom finished the picture, he apparently found a frame which was too large. Rather than adapt the frame to fit his painting, he added a deeper foreground on another piece of paper at the bottom. The pieces are fastened together on the back with eight blue-green business stamps bearing the legend: "Watchmaker and Jeweler. Sauk Rapids, Minn. Special Attention given to Repairing." Originally there had been nine of these stamps in the row, but one was removed and pasted on the lower right-hand corner of the painting. Above it, on a matching strip, is printed the name of "L. S. Stenstrom." Since the painting is unsigned, the artist may have put the stamp there himself in lieu of a signature. The picture has been presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by the painter's grandson, Harold A. Stenstrom of Mora.

was to blame because he had hurt his young friend. A few years later, Stenstrom returned and sought out Nygren to tell him with great joy that while in the West he too had been saved by the Salvation Army. He knew now, he told Nygren, how wonderful the feeling was, and he had determined to preach the gospel in lumber camps.⁸

Thereafter Andrew Stenstrom did very little work in lumber camps. He was converted in 1907, but he did not begin preaching until ten years later. He had been a typical lumberjack — a heavy drinker, tough and hard working, bluff and big hearted. Slowly he made the transition to a devoutly religious life. It made a profound change in him. His conversion, however, must have meant a happier way of life in more than a strictly religious sense, for with it a new period of development began. He traveled widely, mixed more with people and thoroughly enjoyed the new contacts. His interest in people must have given a strong impetus to his gradual dedication to evangelism.

In 1919 Stenstrom married Alvira Theresa Fossum, who had been teaching school near Kelliher. After living briefly in Ogilvie, they settled in Bemidji to raise a family, and until Stenstrom's death their home remained there. Except at intervals, however, the little town could not satisfy Stenstrom's

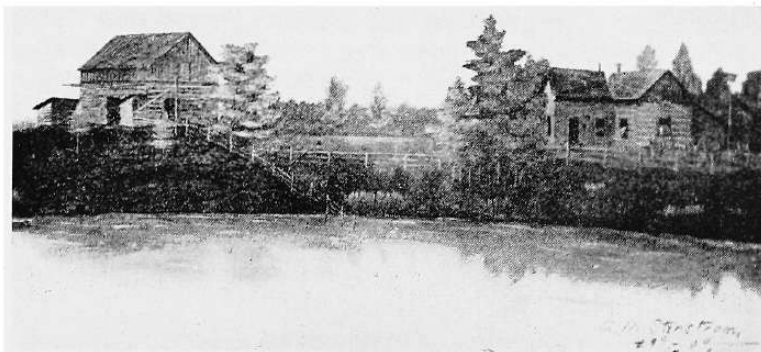
restless spirit, nor could it offer sufficient scope for his strong desire to influence people.

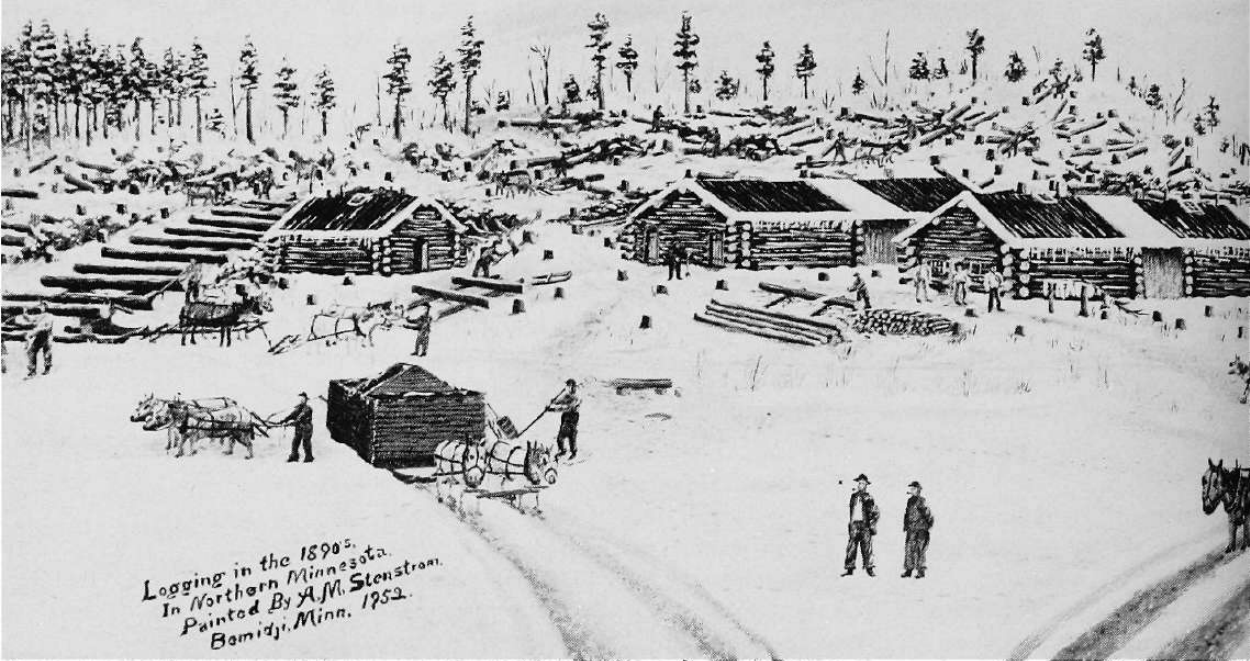
THE FATHER-SON tradition, which is not too common in the history of art, adds interest to the Stenstroms. Although both could paint in oils, the father seems to have preferred working in tempera, while the son evidently painted exclusively in oils. On the whole, the father seems to have had a better sense of color and was more careful in mixing his paints. Nevertheless the son eventually developed a certain amount of grace and lightness of touch which the father never achieved. Both, however, painted to augment income, and art therefore was a serious business with them.

When Andrew Stenstrom began to show an interest in painting, his father urged him to learn a more practical trade. Andrew could be practical when necessary, but apparently he developed such practical skills as carpentry in his rather aimless pursuit of work wherever he could find it. Shortly after his father's death in 1904, Andrew began to paint. One of his earliest pictures, dated 1909, and reproduced on these pages, shows the farm homestead of log buildings which belonged to his brother John. About this time he was also painting as far south as Zumbrota and as far west as Yellow Medicine County. He traveled from farm to farm, taking orders on the basis of preliminary sketches. Evidently the work

⁸ Interview with Mr. Nygren.

JOHN Stenstrom's
farm near
Fish Lake, 1909





was lucrative, for he continued to use this method of supplementing his income throughout the rest of his life.

He carefully combined painting and evangelism. In 1920, for example, he preached at the Rice Lake Lutheran Church at Hanska, and while there he painted the Earl Thompson farm.⁹ Again, in 1933, while on a trip, he stopped at a farm southeast of Motley and showed the owner a sketch of his farm buildings made from a neighboring hillside. Then and there Stenstrom was commissioned to paint the scene in oils for an unknown price. William H. Scherling, a son of the original owner, treasures the picture today as the only existing view of his boyhood home. After commenting upon the accuracy with which the artist had reproduced the buildings, he added: "I remember well that the road along the front of our place was very crooked, but Stenstrom painted it straight as an arrow."¹⁰

Some of Stenstrom's pictures reflect his interest in religion. He often stopped at churches and offered to paint religious pictures for the pulpits or altars. Usually these were murals; "Christ in Gethsemane" seems

to have been a favorite theme. Unlike the best of the limners who traveled up and down the Atlantic seaboard painting portraits of early Americans, Stenstrom could not paint faces. Moreover, his religious paintings are done in garish colors, which he may have used to please his customers, for he certainly could use restraint when it was obviously appropriate. Among his church paintings are those at Grand Forks and Regan, North Dakota.

Stenstrom must have produced hundreds of paintings. In one diary, covering only a five-year period from 1942 to 1946, he mentions over a hundred and fifty paintings. Among the largest are four Yosemite scenes, two of Lake Tahoe, and a seven-by-fifteen-foot view of Mount Shasta that took ten days to paint for the Wittman Store in North San Diego.

Stenstrom found from experience that what he called plaques or mottoes sold most readily. Since they were produced in quan-

⁹ Mrs. Earl Thompson to the author, November 9, 1953.

¹⁰ Interview with William H. Scherling of Bemidji.



LOGGING activities
in a northern
Minnesota camp

tity, they must have provided good income. There is evidence that he painted hundreds of them during the later years of his life. Varying in length from eight to twenty inches, they consisted of sentimental, brightly colored scenes and flowers, with Biblical verses beneath, painted on thin, quarter-sawed birch and pine slabs.

In his diary, Stenstrom frequently mentions painting "p card" plaques, presumably copies of post cards. On one occasion he painted twenty-three of them in a single day. During the last few years of his life he sat all day long throughout the tourist season beside the huge statue of Paul Bunyan on the shore of Lake Bemidji painting plaques of all sizes, which he sold for a dollar or more. Sometimes, when on the road, he would set up his combination studio-shop on a street corner. Once he hired the window of a dime store and, using it as a combined studio and gallery, took in as

much as ninety dollars a week, less, as he carefully noted, thirty dollars rent for the window. Sometimes he gave his plaques to people he liked and particularly to those who had rendered him some service. In Black Duck he once traded a four-by-two-foot painting of a lake scene for five gallons of gasoline and a quart of oil.¹¹

FARM HOMESTEADS and logging were Andrew Stenstrom's special subjects. Together they represent his greatest contribution as a painter. His sketchbooks show his aptitude for meticulous detail and they indicate his knowledge of carpentry. When he was sketching a farm homestead, he employed the technique of a carpenter and a draftsman. Individual boards on a building are clearly set forth and ornaments are drawn with great care, often magnified in marginal sketches. In contrast to trees and shrubbery, which are merely noted in rough lines, buildings are done with detailed emphasis and an eye for perspective and measurement. His sketchbooks are of special value to students of rural Midwest architecture.¹²

It is a curious fact that if Senator Dickinson had not gone down to the shore of Lake Bemidji only three years before Stenstrom died, and interrupted him as he sat by the Paul Bunyan statue painting plaques, we would not have the series of eight logging paintings which the artist then and there agreed to do for fifteen dollars each. The senator had worked in lumber camps for several years and, with an interest in history and an awareness that records of logging were rapidly disappearing, was able to tell Stenstrom exactly what subjects he wanted pictured.¹³ These eight paintings, done during 1950 and 1951, comprise important documentation for a frontier industry because each portrays a particular aspect of logging activity and each delineates the use of a particular tool or focuses upon a workman with highly specialized duties. Unlike most of Stenstrom's previous work, they include people as necessary parts of the pictures.

¹¹ Interview with Dale Russell of Bemidji.

¹² Mrs. Stenstrom has presented three sketchbooks kept by her husband to the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹³ Interview with Senator Dickinson.

They are painted in a most uncompromising manner, as if the artist were fully aware of his lack of skill in painting human faces and bodies, but nonetheless put them in relentlessly because he was commissioned to do so. In fact the scenes in this series are precise, stark, and spare; and the colors used are practically unmixed. The whole effect is that of a hard toughness of line and material which could well have been intended to match lumber-camp life as the artist had experienced it. Whatever his intent, these eight paintings are like clinical studies for the student of the industry. While they give almost no impression of what Stenstrom could accomplish when he was relaxed, gracious, and imaginative, they compel a sense of pride in these heavy, square men who made possible one of Minnesota's great industries.

Actually Stenstrom's best painting of a logging scene was one made for his wife in 1949. In this case he used an abundance of creative imagination. Painted on a large slab of quarter-sawn pine and entitled "Northern Minnesota Logging Camp Operation - 1904," it is a lively panoramic scene and probably represents his greatest

achievement. Its illusion of depth and space is a credit to a self-taught artist. The scene was painted again by Stenstrom in 1952, this time on canvas and with less attention to detail. These two pictures show that not until the end of his life had he reached the summit of his ability. The slightly inferior copy may also reflect the fact that he was already suffering from anemia and other complications that were to cause his death the following year.¹⁴

Andrew Stenstrom's life was that of a typical hard-working and conscientious man. Preaching gave him inspiration and confidence; painting gave him both pleasure and income. In his humble way he aspired to be a "true witness for God," and in his painting he tried both to please his customers and to give the best expression he could to what he felt within him. He did not aspire to great art; and he probably never once thought his pictures would hang in a museum. Nevertheless, his realistic paintings are a valuable record of an aspect of Minnesota life that is gone forever.

¹⁴ A nephew, Harold A. Stenstrom of Mora, owns another copy of the same scene painted on a smaller scale.

A road monkey followed by a load of logs on a logging trail





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

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