

Ignatius Donnelly

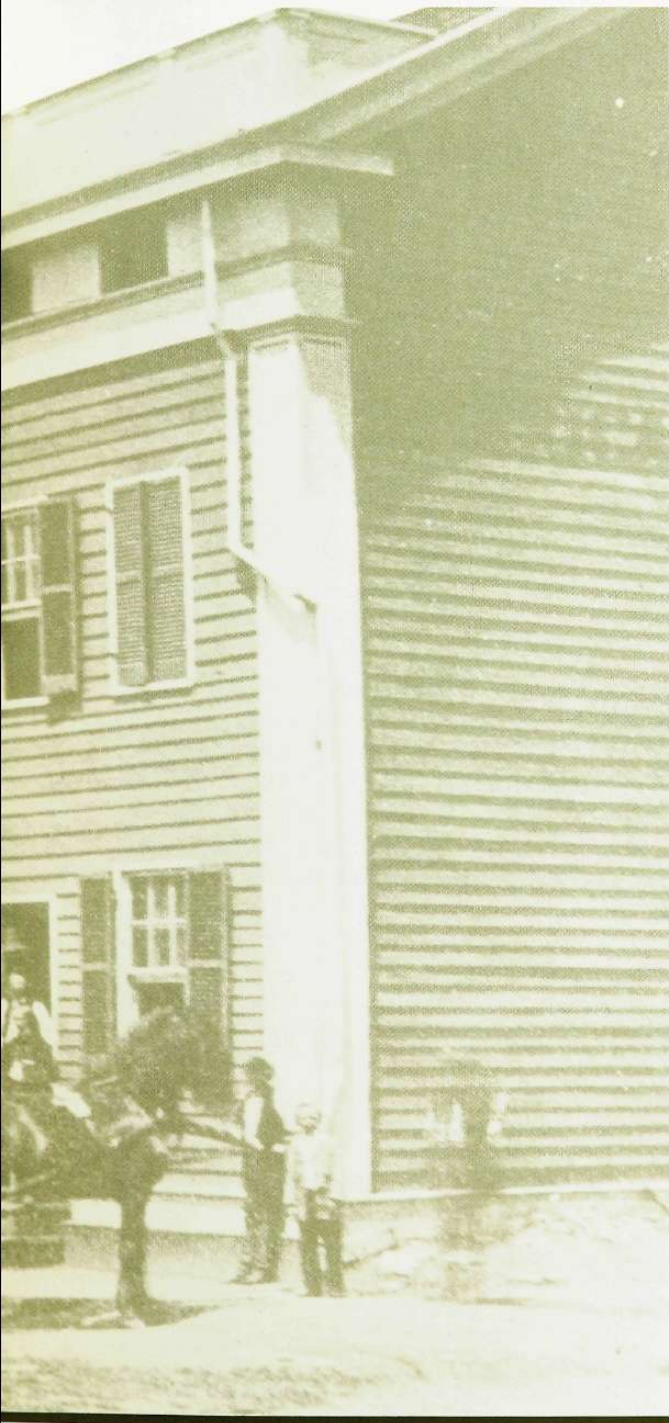
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St. Paul's American House, where young Ignatius and Katherine Donnelly lodged while visiting Minnesota in 1856

Meets the Swedes



THE YEAR 1996 MARKS THE SWEDISH IMMIGRATION JUBILEE, THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING OF SWEDISH MASS MIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA. AS EARLY AS THE LATE 1630S AND 1640S SWEDISH TRADING PARTIES HAD ESTABLISHED OUTPOSTS SUCH AS FORT GRIPSHOLM IN THE DELAWARE RIVER VALLEY, A SUBJECT THAT FASCINATED YOUNG IGNATIUS DONNELLY. TWO CENTURIES PASSED BEFORE GROUPS OF SWEDISH SETTLERS ARRIVED IN THE MIDWEST TO STAY.

THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT OF DONNELLY'S OWN EXPLORATORY EXPEDITION IN 1856 FROM PHILADELPHIA TO ST. PAUL AND THE FLEDGLING CHISAGO COUNTY SWEDISH SETTLEMENT OFFERS AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION OF THE HARDSHIPS FACED BY EARLY SETTLERS. DONNELLY'S MUSINGS ABOUT THE SWEDISH CHARACTER AND WORK ETHIC ALSO OFFER A GLIMPSE INTO THE COMMON ATTITUDES OF THE ERA'S DOMINANT YANKEE CULTURE.

ACCORDING TO THE 1990 U. S. CENSUS, MINNESOTA HAS A MUCH HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS CLAIMING SWEDISH ANCESTRY (ALMOST 16 PERCENT) THAN ANY OTHER STATE IN THE NATION. IN NUMBER OF RESIDENTS WITH SWEDISH ROOTS, MINNESOTA'S TOTAL OF 687,000 RANKS SECOND ONLY TO CALIFORNIA'S. —*Editor*



YOUNG IGNATIUS DONNELLY, an illustrious Minnesota politician and author, was a Philadelphia high-school senior when he wrote a research paper on Fort Gripsholm, an early Swedish trade outpost in North America. The choice of topic allowed

him to investigate, in the field and in books, a subject of interest to his inquiring mind.¹

Shortly before graduation in 1849, Donnelly set his feet on "some ancient history," presaging a life-long interest in antiquities. The focus of his research and primitive archaeological investigation was a site in the Schuylkill River near a cluster of rocks and a soft muddy place, perhaps once an island. The spot was well known to Donnelly, who had often bathed there.

Examining the area

closely, he supposed that the rocks were the foundation of a midseventeenth-century Swedish fortification.²

Donnelly planned further investigation, expecting to find the remains of log walls. Observing holes in the rocks where iron bolts had apparently been driven, he expected to find a pattern in their arrangement and thus the fort's shape.

Donnelly's search for historical information led him first to an 1846 work by Benjamin Ferris on early Dutch and Swedish settlements on the Delaware River. With the help of Ferris and others, Donnelly imagined the look of the fort in 1643, when the Swedes had built a forest

trading post "within gunshot of the mouth of the Schuylkill." Using Ferris's map, he and a party of friends had sailed upriver to the site, happily noting that Ferris placed the fort where Donnelly himself had concluded it had been.³

Often, young Donnelly wrote, he had "wondered what were the thoughts of those who more than two hundred years ago here piled up the logs. I have wished for the bodies of the long dead Dutch and Swede traders to arise before me in all their antique costume." For information on these traders Donnelly turned to Ferris, whose sources had included a 1683 letter by William Penn. The Swedes, Penn had written, "are a plain, strong, industrious people [who show] respect to authority" and friendship toward the English. Penn further noted, "As they are a people proper and strong of body, so they have fine children and [almost] every house full."⁴

While all the fair Swedish children were gone with Fort Gripsholm, they lived on in Donnelly's fertile imagination. Combining research and digging with lively conjectures and neat maps, Donnelly finished his paper and graduated in July. While he later became aware of Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale," and Frederika Bremer, a popular Swedish author and traveler, he had no other known encounters with Swedes—living or dead—until he visited Minnesota in the spring of 1856.⁵



AFTER GRADUATION DONNELLY studied law, practiced his profession intermittently, and involved himself with Philadelphia building-and-loan associations. By April 1856 he was almost 25 years old, married, and much dissatisfied with his opportunities for advancement. He had promised his wife, Katherine McCaffrey, that they would search for a new home in the West. In his brief diary of this westward adventure, the source for several later, fuller, versions of the trip, he wrote: "My desire is to found a new city and there find

¹ Ignatius Donnelly, "Fort Gripsholm," 1849, Ignatius Donnelly Papers, microfilm edition, R[oll] 1, F[rame] 360–76, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul. Information on Donnelly's life may be found in Helen M. White, *Guide to a Microfilm Edition of the Ignatius Donnelly Papers* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1968), and Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly, The Portrait of a Politician* (1962; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1991).

² Here and below, "Fort Gripsholm," R1, F360.

³ "Fort Gripsholm," R1, F362–63, and map, R1, F373; Benjamin Ferris, *A History of the Original Settlements on the Delaware* (Wilmington, 1846), 70–71, 310 (map).

⁴ "Fort Gripsholm," R1, F364, 374; Ferris, *History of the Original Settlements*, 136–37; the bracketed words are in Ferris's book but not in Donnelly's manuscript.

⁵ Certificate of graduation, R1, F377; for reference to Lind and Bremer, see Donnelly's diary, "Note Book of Trip to the West," R139, F336.



A youthful Donnelly, about 1850

Ignatius Donnelly

The third of seven children born in 1831 to an Irish immigrant and his Irish-American wife, Ignatius Donnelly graduated from Philadelphia's Central High School, taking classical courses equal to those in many colleges of his day. He then studied law in the offices of Benjamin Brewster (later U.S. attorney general), practiced for several years, and served as an officer of several land and building associations.

In 1855 Donnelly married a young school principal named Katherine McCaffrey, and the next spring the couple set out on their two-month adventure, scouting out new possibilities in the West. A year later, they left Pennsylvania permanently for Nininger City, a new townsite south of St. Paul that Donnelly had organized and begun promoting.

Donnelly built a fine home there, but the national financial depression of 1857 sabotaged Nininger's prospects. Although he failed as a promoter, he soon found a satisfying career in politics. Young, tireless, and eloquent, he stumped Minnesota on behalf of the new Republican Party, serving as lieutenant governor (1860–63), in Congress (1863–69), and in the Minnesota legislature (1874–78, 1887, 1891–93, and 1897).

In the 1870s Donnelly began lecturing on wide-ranging topics around the country, finding only modest financial returns but staying close to the political arena. He helped shape platforms and political strategy, ran for office, and campaigned for himself and others in almost every state and national election in the next 30 years. As an independent in politics and a supporter of agrarian, antimonopolist, and currency reform, he was associated with the Patrons of Husbandry, the Anti-



Monopoly and Greenback Labor Parties, and the Farmers Alliance. His greatest public honor came in 1900, when he was nominated for the vice-presidency on the People's Party ticket headed by William Jennings Bryan.

In the 1880s Donnelly turned to writing well-received books. Best known is his first, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, a popular and financial success still in print. Like *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*, his second book, it

revealed Donnelly's interest in ancient history and the frontiers of science. Many of his other writings reflect his search for solutions to the economic, social, and political problems of his day. Most popular was *Caesar's Column*, a novel foretelling the future of America through the adventures of a young traveler in the year 1988. Far in advance of his time was another novel, *Doctor Huguet*, which attempted to explain to white people what it meant to be black in America. Almost forgotten today are *The Great Cryptogram* and *The Cipher in the Plays*, and *on the Tombstone*, books investigating the authorship of plays attributed to William Shakespeare.

Nininger was home to the Donnellys and their three children until he died in 1901. Nothing remained of the town when his extensive library was dispersed and his house torn down. Most of his books are out of print. Perhaps his most enduring legacy is the collection of his extensive papers housed at the Minnesota Historical Society. A 167-reel microfilm edition makes them available to a world audience.

SOURCE: Helen McCann White, *Guide to a Microfilm Edition of The Ignatius Donnelly Papers* (St. Paul: MHS, 1968), 2–6.

occupation and fortune with the growth of the country."⁶

Donnelly planned a trip of exploration that combined the advantages of railroad travel with the hospitality of friends and relatives along the way. Years later he said he had not intended to visit Minnesota, but his diary, letters, and other papers suggest he had read about it and, despite its reputation as a cold, inhospitable region, had considered a stop in the territory.⁷

Certainly Donnelly had opportunities to learn about Minnesota in newspapers after 1849, when Alexander Ramsey, a member of Congress from Pennsylvania and a rising political star, had been appointed Minnesota's first territorial governor. Following Ramsey there were Dr. Thomas Foster, his secretary and a pioneer newspaper editor, and others who strove mightily to attract Pennsylvanians and their money.⁸

Among those who had invested in Minnesota was John Nininger of Harrisburg, husband of Ramsey's sister, Catherine. Through a chain of acquaintances beginning with Mrs. Nininger, who took music lessons from Donnelly's friend Philip Rohr, Nininger and Donnelly met. John Nininger, in turn, introduced Donnelly to Samuel W. Arnold of Philadelphia's Arnold, Nusbaum & Nirdlinger. Arnold and his New York associate, Isaac Bernheimer, proprietors of extensive Minnesota land holdings, were interested in promoting settlement.⁹

Donnelly met Nininger and Arnold before he began his trip west, and Rohr, who hoped to join Donnelly's adventure, believed that under certain circumstances Nininger could be expected to give them a share in his land investments adjacent to St. Paul, the territorial capital. Possibly, they believed, Arnold could also be induced to part with a share of Bernheimer's and Arnold's lands. Then, wrote Rohr to Donnelly, "Our fortunes are made, independent of our grand Colonisation scheme." It was also

through Bernheimer and Arnold that Donnelly would again encounter Swedes.¹⁰



DONNELLY SET ASIDE \$600 for his journey, enough, he hoped, to cover his expenses for two months. On April 14, he and his pregnant wife, her nephew, and her cousin said goodbyes at the railroad depot to a collection of McCaffrey friends and relatives. Because Donnelly's mother had not accepted her son's new wife, neither she nor his sisters or brother saw him off. In Donnelly's words, his little party departed "amid great weeping and lamentation, such as accompanied Columbus when he sailed out of the Spanish harbor in his first voyage to the New World."¹¹

The group first took the train to Louisville, Ohio, where they visited his wife's sister Mary and her husband. Then they traveled to Cleveland, where, "hearing dreadful stories of the rough life of the great west," Donnelly purchased "a pair of Colts self-cocking, six barrelled, revolvers; price \$15."¹²

Passing through Toledo, they crossed southern Michigan, glimpsing Conestoga wagons and a group of immigrants, picturesque in bright, rough clothing. In Chicago, it seemed as though they had finally entered the heart of the West. Welcomed at the hotel of a friend, they explored the young city on board sidewalks and muddy streets, but Donnelly was not impressed with its reputedly "mighty possibilities."

On April 22, after "laying in a supply of powder, caps, etc. for my terrible revolvers, and purchasing a geological map of Iowa and another of Minnesota," Donnelly wrote, the entourage moved on to Rock Island, Illinois. Crossing on the first passenger train over the first bridge to span the Mississippi River, they arrived inavenport, Iowa, and boarded another train to Iowa City.

When the railroad terminated at Iowa City, Donnelly and the young nephew took the wom-

⁶ R1, F663. The original source for the events is "Note Book of Trip," R139, F320-51. Donnelly's "My Journal," R139, F352-431, is an 1871 narrative based on the diary and other sources. Other versions of his western journey are in Everett W. Fish, *Donnelliana* (Chicago, 1892), 15-21, which, however, has no references to the St. Croix valley part of the journey, and "Minnesota," a published speech Donnelly delivered in New York on Mar. 27, 1857, in Donnelly's unmicrofilmed pamphlets, 10:7, MHS.

⁷ In "My Journal," R139, F380, he repeats the statement that he had not intended to go to Minnesota, yet he bought a map of it before leaving Philadelphia; R139, F349.

⁸ Helen M. White, *The Tale of a Comet and Other Stories* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1984), 88-109.

⁹ Rohr to Donnelly, Mar. 4, 1856, R2, F189; R139, F409.

¹⁰ Rohr to Donnelly, Mar. 4, 1856, R2, F189.

¹¹ R139, F359-60. Donnelly said the trip cost about \$650, but his accounts show it was considerably more expensive; R139, F346-50, 359, 430.

¹² Here and two paragraphs below, R139, F362-69.

en to a "comfortable and cleanly" hotel while they continued west by "intolerable" stagecoaches driven by "rough and impudent" drivers. Their journey over "utterly abominable" roads took them some 80 or 90 miles through "almost altogether treeless prairie" where "even a bush is a relief to the eyes" and "winds roar and sweep the land as they do over the ocean." They were forced to sleep in log hotels with "wretched" accommodations and "detestible" fare of fried ham and bad bread.¹³

On April 25 they reached Albion on the Iowa River, where the young nephew was reunited with his father. After a polite interval Donnelly returned by stage to Iowa City. "This country will not do for me," he wrote. "It is a great and rising country, certain to become rich, populous and prosperous, but it is desolate and bleak and the comforts of life are all wanting." Conceding that in a new country one "must expect to travel only by the most tortuous and wearisome roads; by the most uncomfortable conveyances; to pay extortionate prices for detestible fare; and to submit to every imposition that meanness can devise or impudence exact," it was still more than he could accept.

On May 2 he and his two companions took the train back to Davenport and boarded the steamboat *York State* for Minnesota. Although he had "imbibed the common prejudice" that Minnesota was too far north and too cold, he was now prepared to give it a chance.¹⁴

In contrast to the Iowa experience, the Donnellys' four-day journey upriver to St. Paul was "delightful" and the food "not to be surpassed in any hotel." There were other advantages: "a beautiful cabin, fine beds, and polite attendance; everything in short that the most fastidious could desire. Deducting the value of the meals, this floating piece of civilization carried us four hundred miles for two dollars." The view from the steamboat provided "one unending and ever varying panorama of beauty," Donnelly reported. The scene of "black waters, the green islets, the guarding hills, the sunlight and the fresh wind, made it all seem like fairy land."

Here and there on the banks of the Mississippi and St. Croix Rivers, Donnelly glimpsed townsites with promising futures. Hastings impressed him as a possible depot for an agri-

Philadelphia Apl. 12, 1856.

I have for some time past felt a strong desire to visit the Great West: - particularly by the State of Iowa.

I believe a young man, - I am now 24 years of age, - married 10 Sept: last, - will have greater opportunities of success in a new country than he could in this crowded city. My desire is to found a new city and then find occupation and fortune with the growth of the country.

I have drawn out of bank \$600, and will leave on Monday next. -

Apl. 14: Left Philad: by Pennsylvania Central R.R. accompanied by my wife, and Miss Kate O'Bryan, (cousin of my wife) and young John Dross O'Bryan, her nephew. His father and her brother, James O'Bryan, is living in Iowa, and they take advantage of our going west to visit him. -

We are accompanied to the depot by numbers of the O'Bryan and McCaffrey and family and depart amid great weeping and lamentation, such as accom-

Donnelly's first journal entry about his 1856 visit to the "Great West"

cultural region and for its proximity to water power on the Vermillion River. Much more interesting, however, was a site at the first large bend of the Mississippi, some five miles above Hastings. Donnelly would eventually return and make it his new home.

¹³ Here and below, R139, F370-74. Another, even less flattering version of Donnelly's experiences in Iowa appears in Fish, *Donnelliana*, 16-18.

¹⁴ Here and two paragraphs below, R139, F380-90. Another version appears in Fish, *Donnelliana*, 18-19.



ON MAY 7, 1856, the *York State* docked at St. Paul, enthusiastically described by Donnelly as “the new St. Louis—the youthful Chicago—the capitol of the newborn Territory of Minnesota—the ultimate practicable point of navigation on the great river.” Very early in the morning, he left the sleeping women and climbed the steep river bluff. “Everything in the town is as might be expected, crude and new,” he wrote. “The houses and stores are generally small and of frame. There are very few on the upper half of the main street between the American [hotel] and the steamboat levee. There is however a great appearance of growth and prosperity. It is the heart of all this region.” In the midst of the sights and sounds of the new town Donnelly felt a premonition that his “future life would hold some intimate relations with this place.”¹⁵

Soon the Donnelly party settled in at the American House, and John Nininger became his guide to development prospects. Nininger and his wife introduced the Donnellys to local citizens of prominence, among them the bankers Charles W. W. Borup and Charles Oakes, Governor Willis A. Gorman, former Governor Ramsey, and members of the fledgling Minnesota Historical Society.¹⁶

Donnelly had mixed feelings about Nininger, a rich butcher from Harrisburg, whom he characterized as “close and selfish,” an illiterate man with “no breadth of mind, but great nerve and shrewdness. His knowledge of men, his self-control and his cunning were remarkable.” Nininger was one of a large class of land speculators, according to Donnelly, “who infest the hotels, examine the registers, get acquainted with all strangers, and under the guise of courtesy, show them property which they have for sale; and fill their heads with stories of enormous fortunes made in a few weeks or months by the rise in real estate. Their art is of course to sell without appearing to want to sell.”

Claiming that Nininger’s “only redeeming trait” was his pride in his well-dressed wife and children, Donnelly nevertheless consented to be shown land investments. Together they rode

by horse and buggy to outlying, treeless Lake Como, to Minneapolis, St. Anthony Falls, Kaposia, Hastings, and north on the Mississippi to Manomin in Anoka County, where Nininger and other parties from Harrisburg wanted to make a town. None appealed to Donnelly.

On another fine day they rode southeast on rough and broken roads into Dakota County over country he found “beautiful, rolling, variegated picturesque . . . dotted with farms” and with “all the evidences of civilization.” Finally they reached the crest of the bluff overlooking the spot Donnelly had seen from the steamboat. “I thought I had never before beheld anything more beautiful,” he wrote.¹⁷

Here again Donnelly experienced “that peculiar sensation . . . an inward conviction that my life in some way would be intimately connected with this place.” Convinced that this was where he should build his city, he began negotiations to purchase the lands. To encourage Nininger’s continuing support, Donnelly named the town after him.



BEFORE DONNELLY RETURNED to Philadelphia, he investigated one more possible townsite. While Arnold and Bernheimer had expressed an interest in buying some lots in Donnelly’s new town, they also pushed him to consider investing in their lands some 30 miles north of St. Paul in Chisago County. Wanting Donnelly to see what they had already accomplished there, they arranged a tour to Chisago City, their townsite between Green and Chisago Lakes. While Nininger was still only a dream, Chisago City had been plated with streets and public areas laid out. Surveyed roads connected it with St. Paul and sites on the St. Croix; before year’s end a store opened, and mills were being constructed. Arnold and Bernheimer had lobbied in Washington, D.C., for favors such as a post office that would also open later in the year. They had plans, too, to displace Taylors Falls as the seat of government for the county, a goal delayed by legal and political maneuvering for ten years.¹⁸

¹⁵ Fish, *Donnelliana*, 20; R139, F390–91.

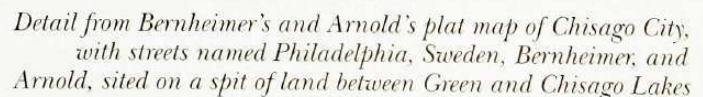
¹⁶ Here and two paragraphs below, R139, F393–95.

¹⁷ Here and below, R139, F400–2.

¹⁸ Donnelly’s association with Arnold and Bernheimer is documented largely through references in correspondence, for example, Donnelly to Nininger, Aug. 18, 1856, R150, F235–36. The men’s Minnesota ventures included investments in buildings in St. Paul and Stillwater. The original plat of Chisago City by Henning von Minden and C. Meyer is in the office of the Chisago Co. Recorder, Center City; the Abstract of Title to Chisago City (T33, S517–18, R20W), Oct. 16, 1861, is in miscellaneous records of the Chisago Co. District Court, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.

lived in Russia and been chased for his life by wolves in the forests of that country. He had on one occasion saved his life from starvation by killing and eating his dog. . . . He tells me, in his broken English, that he has often

Its streets were crowded with noisy, drunken, red-shirted men who might pass for sailors. They were in fact lumbermen, wood-choppers and raftsmen, who after passing the long winter in the pine forests to the North had





C. Meyer and H. Von Minden's 1856 map of Minnesota—engraved in Philadelphia and available from Bernheimer, Arnold, and Nusbaum—includes Chisago City, a "Philadelphia Settlement," and Drontheim.

lately returned to the confines of civilization and having been "paid off" were having a good time. They are a tall, robust, savage-looking set, boisterous and turbulent, but with magnificent physiques, and with all the generosity and kind-heartedness of the sailor class.²²

North out of Stillwater the horses made quick time on the road beside the blue waters of the St. Croix toward Marine Mills, now Marine on St. Croix. On either side of the road they saw Indian mounds, prompting Meyer to remember similar barrows in Norway and Denmark.²³

In his journal Donnelly noted particularly two large and symmetrical mounds standing by the roadside. (These may, in fact, be a few miles north of Marine on St. Croix.) Near them, he wrote "lives an Italian—Colon or Columbo by name, he keeps a rough saloon, and claims relationship to the discoverer of the continent. What a contrast! A native of semi-tropical Italy living amid the wilds of this cold northern region!"

John Columbus had moved to Minnesota about 1850 from Galena, Illinois. He had been a peddler, and a rich one, by the time he reached Stillwater, where he had erected two buildings on Main Street and opened a store "dealing in every article known to ancient or modern business or commerce."²⁴

Meyer and Donnelly next stopped to examine some of the mounds near Columbus's saloon. One was being used as a graveyard and the other "had been dug into and converted into a cellar in which to keep butter and eggs cool." Donnelly opined, "'To what vile uses may we come at last'. Here was a mound, piled high by loving hand over dead royalty and departed greatness, converted into a receptacle for the humblest articles of food. The monument of glory turned into a butter cooler!"²⁵



BEYOND MARINE MILLS, Donnelly and Meyer turned west from the river toward Chisago Lake. Here the land "became more level, somewhat swampy, and covered with a dense growth of small half grown

trees." It was, alas, infested with mosquitoes, "about a million to the square yard."

They approached Chisago City between Green and Chisago Lakes through a region being settled largely by Swedish farmers. Their primitive homes were built beside the lakes, and every family had a boat to catch fish, a staple of their diet. Donnelly noted that the lakes were a beautiful deep green in color and sweet to drink, and in the distance he glimpsed mounds like those along the St. Croix.²⁶

Of the countryside and the Swedish inhabitants he observed:

I am surprised that they have settled in so forbidding a region. They are very poor. There is not a single plough or ox team in the entire settlement—their little patches of land are cultivated with hoes. They are greatly in fear of debt. Messrs. Bernheimer and Arnold offered to lend them money enough to buy oxen and ploughs and wait a long time for their pay, but they unanimously refused to run in debt. . . They are a simple, worthy, good race, and eminently practical.²⁷

Donnelly, of course, saw their settlement in its earliest, lean years, when the Swedes were just clearing land for their farms. Fish were readily at hand, yet without the friendly Indians who brought the settlers venison they might not have survived the first winters. Many of the men also worked in logging camps to earn money to buy animals, seed, and equipment. Within a few years the practical, hard-working Swedes had accomplished much. By 1860, reportedly,

The seventeen farmers who used the Chisago City post office claimed a total of 1,529 acres of land, and they had cleared 265 of them, or an average of fifteen per landholding. Their farms, highly diversified, were nearly self-sufficient. Most farmers owned an ox or two, some sheep, pigs, dairy and beef cattle, and chickens. There was one horse in the settlement. Crops included many kinds of grains and vegetables. Rye and potatoes, both well known to the Swedes, were especially popular.²⁸

(continued on page 28)

²² R139, F388, 410–11. Donnelly also mentions a house of prostitution and a good fishing lake on the road to Stillwater; R139, F335.

²³ Here and below, R139, F411–12.

²⁴ Augustus B. Easton, *History of the Saint Croix Valley* (Chicago, 1909), 1: 350, 352.

²⁵ Here and below, R139, F412–13.

²⁶ R139, F337, 415, 419.

²⁷ R139, F413–14.

²⁸ *Building Chisago City* (Chisago City: Chisago City Booster Club, 1981), 9.

Minnesota's First Swedes

The first Swede to settle permanently in what is now Minnesota (other than enlisted men stationed from time to time at Fort Snelling) was very likely Jacob Fahlstrom, a fur trader in the 1820s who eventually took up residence with his family in Still-

water. When the U.S. Census of Minnesota Territory was taken in late summer 1850, he and three other men of Swedish nationality were listed. Another Swede in Stillwater boarded in the home of the town doctor. At Fort Snelling was the talented Sven (?)

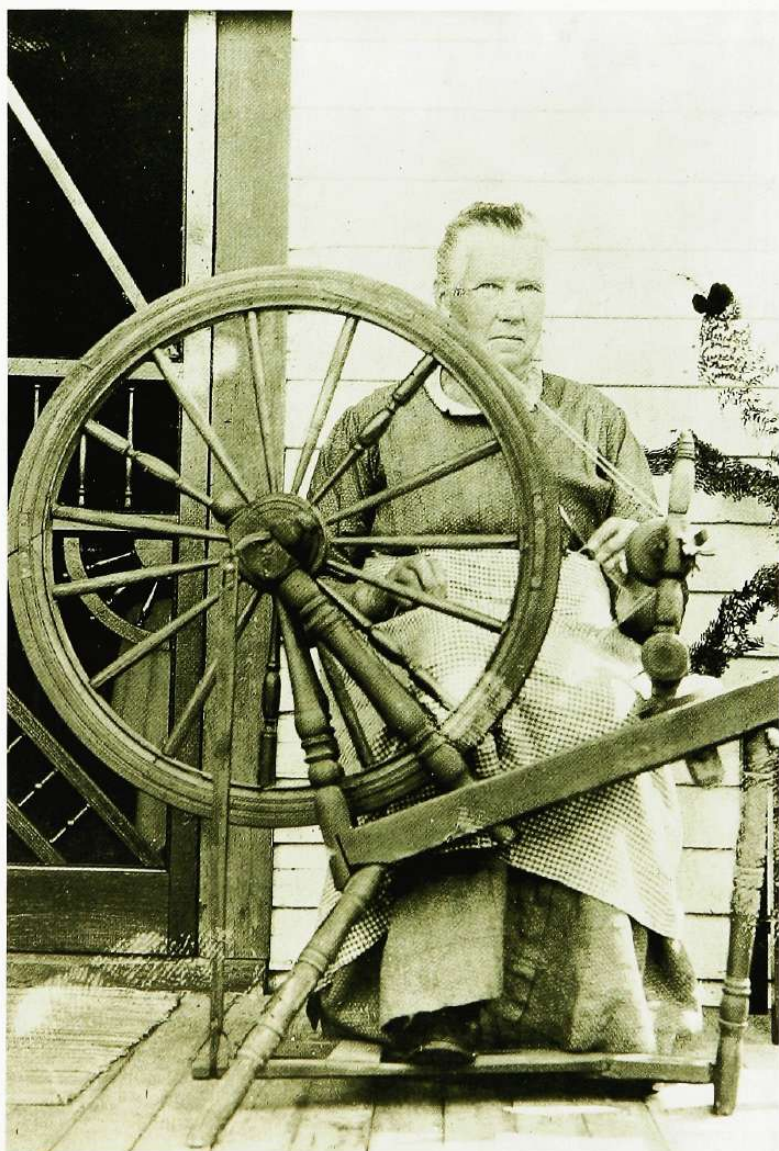
Williamson, musician and leader of the U.S. First Infantry regiment band. The fourth was a farmer at the Long Prairie Winnebago Indian Agency.

The tale of the Swedes who followed these known pioneers to settle in territorial Minnesota begins in 1841, when Gustav Unonius, his wife, a servant, and two students emigrated from Sweden to Wisconsin. Seeking a life of rural simplicity and republican virtue, the young, upper-class man, who had been a lawyer and government clerk in Uppsala, settled with his household at Pine Lake, near Milwaukee. Soon they were living in a one-room log house with bare walls and simple furnishings. Other Swedes read the romantic tale of their experience in accounts Unonius sent to a Stockholm newspaper, *Aftonbladet*.

Inspired by these accounts or a previous friendship, Erik Ulrick Norberg, a 29-year-old public official, and his sister, Edela Sophia Norberg, immigrated to Wisconsin in time to spend Christmas 1842 with Unonius and his family. Within a few years Unonius had studied theology and become pastor of St. Ansgarius Swedish Episcopal Church in Chicago. There he ministered to hundreds of newly arrived immigrants.

By 1847 Norberg and his sister were living in Michigan, where he cut timber and made shingles. A year later he had become an active and contentious member of Bishop Hill, the Illinois communitarian colony founded in 1846 by Erik Jansson of Hälsingland and some 1,200 fellow dissenters from the Lutheran Church. After Jansson was mur-

Swedish-born Emma Mobeck (Stevenson) settled in Chisago County in 1855 at age seven (photo about 1905).



dered, Norberg left the colony temporarily to search for a friend who lived near St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin.

Norberg reached Taylors Falls in 1850, only to discover that his friend had been murdered. A seasoned woodsman, Norberg explored the area around Taylors Falls and came upon the beautiful Chisago Lake region. On the site of present-day Center City, Norberg made a squatter's claim and wintered on the peninsula long known as "Norberg's holmen" or island.

Making a map of the Chisago Lake area, Norberg sent it to Bishop Hill with a letter describing the opportunities for settlement. He also may have corresponded with Unonius, who soon was advising immigrating Swedes to look for new homes in Minnesota.

On April 14, 1851, Norberg first voted in an election at Taylors Falls. A week later a small party of Swedes traveled up the St. Croix on a flatboat from Stillwater and found their way with Norberg to his claim, becoming the first permanent Swedish community in Minnesota. On April 22, the *Minnesota Democrat* observed:

During the last Summer, Mr. E. U. Norberg, an intelligent Swedish farmer, visited the country around the St. Croix, for the purpose of selecting a location for the settlement of a colony of his countrymen.

He selected the margin of Lake Chisaga . . . [and] thinks that his countrymen generally will prefer Minnesota as [a] place of residence to Illinois, or any region farther south. Six families came up on the Nominee, trip before last, and 4 families on the Yankee, who have gone up to join Mr. Norberg at Lake Chisaga. They expect during the season, the addition of thirty or forty more families to their number.

The Swedes are a moral, industrious and thrifty class of people. They are good farmers and will be a valuable acquisition to the population of our Territory.

Other Swedes joined them, many lured by America letters from friends and family. Those who settled around the many bays and inlets of Chisago Lake founded the communities of Center City, Lindstrom, and Chisago City, soon becoming a dominating force in the economic and political life of their area.

Other early immigrants followed another trail to Minnesota. On April 13, 1850, Johan Oscar Roos, Carl Fernstrom, Lars J. Stark, and August Sandahl boarded the steamer *John* at Gothenberg for New York. Roos, born in Åbo, Finland, to a Swedish mother and "Laplander" (Sami) father, had been clerking in a bookstore at Norrköping, where he may well have seen Fredrika Bremer's popular account of her visit to Minnesota. Fernstrom came from Stockholm, Stark from Linköping. Little is known of Sandahl.

From New York the young Swedes traveled to Illinois, where Stark remained for almost two years. Fernstrom seems to have learned about Minnesota from Unonius. Before fall 1850, Roos, Fernstrom, and Sandahl had ascended the Mississippi and St. Croix as far as the hamlet of Marine Mills in Washington County. A few miles north and west on Hay Lake, they selected land for their new home about the same time that Norberg was claiming land a few miles away on Chisago Lake.

Neither Roos nor his companions had farmed, and they had only a few tools, but they acquired oxen, built a log cabin, and cut hay for the winter. By

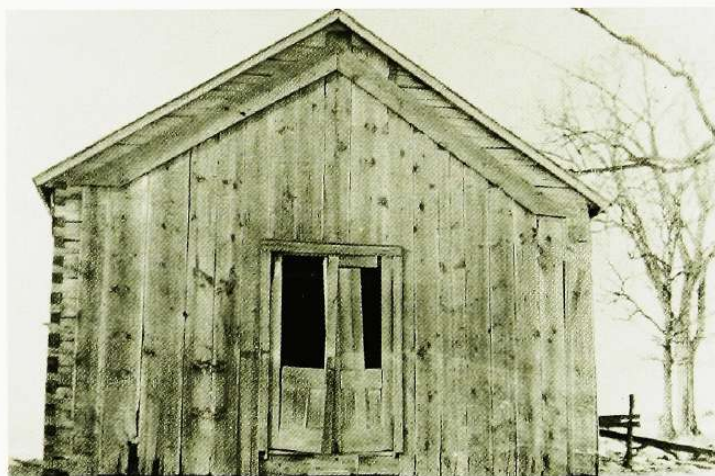
spring the three were fed up and sold their claim and cabin to another immigrant.

Sandahl is said to have returned to Sweden; Fernstrom went to the California gold fields and then settled in Iowa. Two years later Stark left Illinois to settle in Chisago County and become one of the first Swedes in the Minnesota legislature. Roos joined a crew building a log boom on the St. Croix and then one constructing the government road from Point Douglas to Superior. He next spent several years as an employee and proprietor of a logging business. Before 1860 he had settled permanently at Taylors Falls, where he became postmaster, an elected official, and a businessman.

While Norberg may have been one of the first Swedes to claim land in Minnesota, he soon left the territory for a prominent career at Bishop Hill. Roos and his friends were close behind him in claiming Minnesota land, and the Swede-Finn-Sami Roos became best known of the early Swedes. He is honored as the "first" on a monument at Hay Lake in Washington County. Other monuments in Lindstrom and Center City honor the immigrants guided there by Norberg in 1851 who became the nucleus of "Swedeland, U.S.A." From their true stories, mingled and transformed, Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg fashioned his emigrant novels, recently reprinted by the Minnesota Historical Society.

SOURCES: Helen M. White, "First White Man [Norberg] at Chisago Lakes in 1850," *Taylors Falls Dalles Visitor*, 1985, p. 6-7; "Oscar Roos: Settling the River Valley"; *Lindstrom Chisago County Press*, Aug. 18, 1988, p. 5A; "Home was No Rosebed for Stark Immigrants," *Lindstrom Chisago Pioneer*, June 1975, p. 1, 15; Emeroy Johnson, *Chisago Lake Reflections* (n.p.: by the author, 1985), 15.

Donnelly noted that the Chisago City Swedes, most of them Lutheran, traveled to church by boat. By the summer of 1856 Lutherans had already outgrown two houses of worship and had begun an ambitious new building in Center City, some 70 by 48 feet in size and 18 feet high. Members met its costs, amounting to \$930. It was in this church that the Minnesota Conference of the Lutheran church was organized in 1858. Methodist and



Original Swedish Lutheran church in Chisago County's Scandia, built 1854–55, with the vertical siding that is characteristic of Swedish buildings

Baptist worshipers also gathered in the Swedish community.²⁹

As he had when he wrote about Fort Grips-holm, Donnelly paid particular attention to the structures built by the Swedes. He noted that in the countryside some houses were sheathed with hand-sawn boards, although most were log structures, roughly made, "but every log is hewed square, and the surfaces which join are planed perfectly level so as to make a joint almost impervious to the cold. This fashion they have introduced from Sweden." The log or block-house construction may well have been typical of Swedish architecture in the earliest Swedish settlements of North America.³⁰

In some ways Donnelly found the Swedes

"centuries behind our own people." Rather than adopting family names, they clung to "the old patriarchal style" of identifying children by the first names of their fathers. For example, "John the son of Carl is John Carlson—his son John will be John Johnson, and so on *ad infinitum*." Yet, Donnelly admitted: "This Scandinavian race is a great one. It has given conquerors and aristocracies to all Europe. Its terrible grasp of fact, its self control, its prudence, (shown in the refusal of this colony to run in debt even for oxen and ploughs) insures it the ultimate possession of the future."³¹

The Swedish men he saw were "generally spare and shrivelled with weather-beaten faces, telling of their hard struggle with fate and fortune. A little girl, however, who handed us a cup of water, had a sweet face, with light hair and blue eyes." In her he saw "the possibilities of beauty in roughly used races." Looking to the future, Donnelly predicted, "They will work themselves into riches and leave their children in the enjoyment of all the comforts and luxuries of life."³²

Respect for the admirable qualities of Swedish immigrants he met on his excursion did not convince him, however, to purchase Chisago-area land, an investment soon proven far sounder than his own ill-fated Nininger City. Donnelly had already given his heart to that charming site in Dakota County; perhaps, too, he preferred to plan a colony of his own from its beginning. It is even possible that a thoroughly unpleasant experience one night along Chisago Lake kept him from looking very favorably on Bernheimer's and Arnold's Swedish-American enterprise.



HAVING ARRIVED AT Chisago Lake, Meyer and Donnelly found accommodations for the night in "the best house in the place," where they were treated to "the best they had." Supper consisted of "poor doughy bread" and fish that "tasted very strongly of pine wood." No pleasant evening conversation with their host was possible because he did not understand English and the guests were distracted by the mosquitoes. Smoke from old

²⁹ Emeroy Johnson, *A Church is Planted, The Story of the Lutheran Minnesota Conference, 1851–1876* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Minnesota Conference, 1948), 37; Eric Norelius, *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America 1845–1860*, tr. Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island, Ill.: Augustana Historical Society, 1984), 277–78; R139, F414.

³⁰ R139, F413–14; Lena A:son-Palmqvist, *Building Traditions among Swedish Settlers in Rural Minnesota* (Stockholm: Nordiska Museet, 1983), 39, 42.

³¹ R139, F414–15.

³² R139, F336, 414.



Swedish farm building and garden at Chisago Lake, sketched by Elijah Edwards in 1862

men's pipes and a smudge of rotten wood "drove them off a little though some were so ravenous they would fight their way through the smoke to their victim." Donnelly claimed that the old Swedes "laughed to see the villainous insects desert their tough old smoke-dried hides for my delicate skin."³³

Worse was to come. Donnelly and Meyer were shown to their bedroom, a very large room lighted by a tallow candle. By its dim light Donnelly noticed that the pillow on his bed was black in the center, "gradually shading off to a lighter color toward the edges." Holding the candle closer, he discovered that the pillow was black with "the accumulated dirt of years of use!" He turned the pillow over. "The other side was the same." The sheets, he discovered, were also dirty "but not so bad."

The night was young and, said Donnelly: "A traveler must not be fastidious! So I took out my handkerchief, pinned it over the pillow, blew out the light and retired." Meyer and his dogs had already gone to their beds.

"I had not been ten minutes in bed when I began to experience a peculiar sensation. It was a feverish feeling, all over my body. *It was bed bugs!!* Millions of them! They were crawling all over me. I could feel them on my face. They would advance even to my nose and ears and curiously stop at the brink as if examining the orifices! Their biting made me more and more feverish. I got up and lighted the candle killed some and the rest retired in swarms." Even Meyer, "with a hide like leather could not stand them but complained bitterly of the 'dam ped pugs.'"

What to do? Donnelly noticed that the dogs were sleeping on buffalo robes in a corner of the room. He took one of the robes, spread it on the floor, covered it with a blanket, and lay down again to sleep. "Horror of horrors! It was full of *fleas* from the dogs!"

In desperation Donnelly dressed and "rushed out of doors. It was a glorious moonlight night. I seated myself on a stump overlooking the lake and enjoyed the peace and beauty

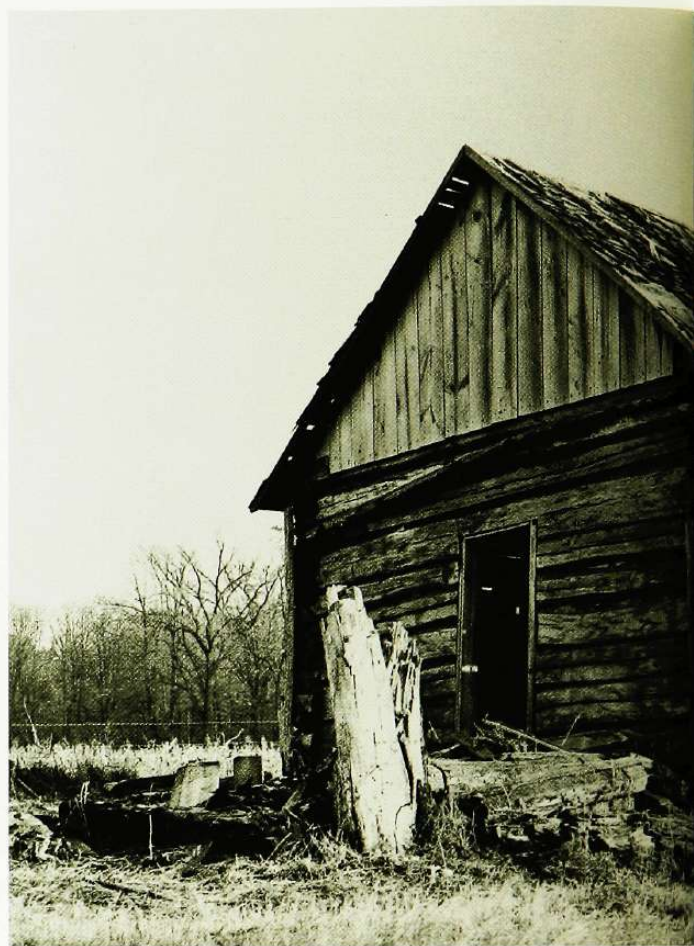
³³ Here and six paragraphs below, R139, F415-19.

of the scene. I determined to sit there until morning." Far away he heard the "fearful" cry of the loon. Nearby, and coming nearer, he heard mosquitoes.

"I could hear them calling to each other, 'Here he is—here he is!' They began to gather like ravens to the banquet of the dead." Donnelly fled back to the house and the bed bugs. "By keeping the candle lighted I enjoyed a little peace."

In the morning, breakfast was miserable, and so was Donnelly, who wrote, "My head is so swollen into lumps and ridges by my insect enemies that I can't get my stove pipe hat on, but have to wear it on the back of my head in a most rakish style." Meyer harnessed his horses and with no lingering goodbyes the travelers set off for St. Paul, "putting the studs to their best." Said Donnelly: "I want to get out of this country as soon as possible, never to return to it."³⁴

Back in St. Paul, Donnelly went to bed for two days, "feverish and sick" with bug bites from his stay with the Swedes of Chisago County. When he recovered, he and Nininger traveled back to Dakota County to negotiate the purchase of some \$12,500 worth of lands for the townsite. On May 27, invited by Nininger and a list of other sturdy pioneers, he spoke with much enthusiasm and an impressive array of facts and figures to members of the Minnesota



A Chisago County settler's cabin, built with hewn logs, still standing in about 1930

Albert Colgrave sketch, about 1862

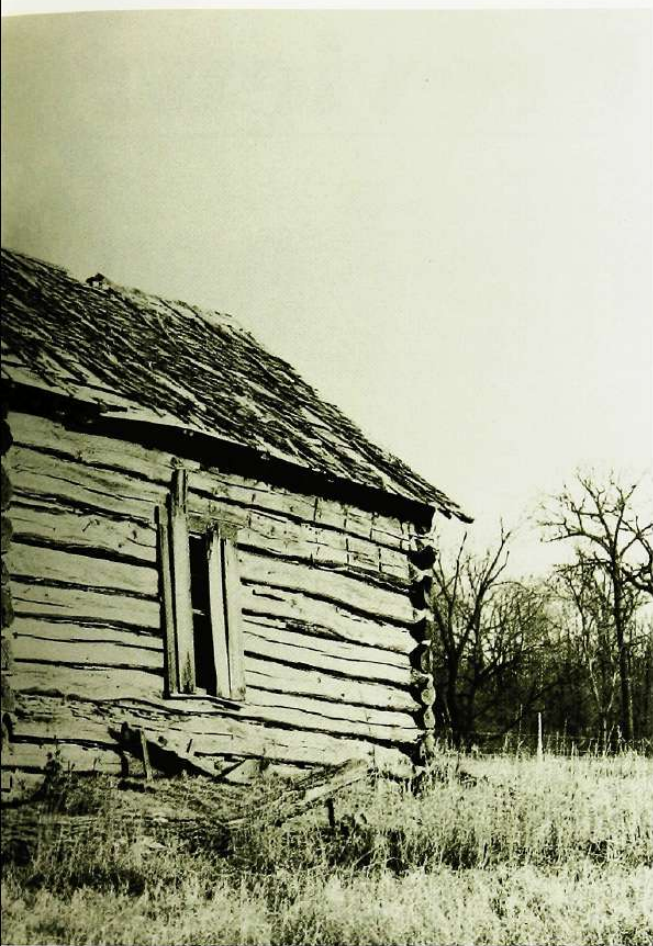


Historical Society. Celebrating the virtues of his newfound state—her splendid resources of wood and water, her enterprising people and beautiful scenery—nowhere did he mention its hostile bugs.³⁵

Neither did he speak of the Swedes or Chisago County. Within the year Arnold wrote an encouraging letter about Nininger that Donnelly used in promoting his new community. Arnold also made a tempting offer to include Donnelly in the Chisago County enterprise. Although Donnelly predicted that Chisago City would "eventually become one of the greatest inland towns of the Territory," he declined to invest there. And while Bernheimer and Arnold promised to aid him in the development of Nininger, they were not as eager to promote Donnelly's town as he had hoped they would

³⁴ R139, F419.

³⁵ R139, F419; *St. Paul Pioneer and Democrat*, May 31, 1856.



be. Considering their Chisago project worthy of emulation, however, Donnelly asked Meyer to survey and do a plat map of Nininger and a road to it, similar to what he had done for Chisago City. Meyer took partial payment in Nininger town lots and then urged Donnelly to help sell Meyer's lots in Drontheim and Chisago

³⁶ Arnold to Donnelly, June 10, 1856, R2, F336-37; Arnold to Donnelly, Dec. 24, 1856, R3, F414-15; Donnelly to George Robertson, Oct. 31, 1856, R150, F346; memorandum re Meyer, 1856, R2, F99; Donnelly to Nininger, Nov. 28, 1856, R150, F318; Donnelly, "A Pamphlet in Reference to Nininger City, Dakota County" (Philadelphia, 1856), 24, in Donnelly's pamphlets, 10:10.

³⁷ R139, F424; Fish, *Donnelliana*, 21, 23-25.

³⁸ R133, F305; R150, F117; White, *Tale of a Comet*, 161-62.

³⁹ June D. Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981), 250; *Taylor's Falls Journal*, Oct. 4, 1878; R333, F305.

County. Little could they know that within the year a nationwide economic crash would mean that few investors would buy lots in either place.³⁶

On May 28, 1856, however, full of plans for a new home, Donnelly, his wife, and her cousin started back to Philadelphia. Donnelly returned to St. Paul in July and again at year's end to satisfy himself that the winter climate posed no barrier to the health and happiness of the brave of heart. By May 1857, he was ready to make Minnesota his permanent home.³⁷



DURING HIS LONG Minnesota career as a successful politician and popular lecturer, Donnelly returned to visit Chisago County a number of times. Despite his admiration for the Swedish immigrants there, he seems never to have developed the easy rapport with them that he found with Irish and German Minnesotans. He failed to gain their support in his 1868 campaign, and his political address books of "leading" constituents list only three of Swedish ancestry in Chisago County. He nevertheless remained fascinated by their ancient literature and folklore, which is central to his *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*.³⁸

More than two decades after his first visit to the county, Donnelly again traveled through what had become perhaps the largest Swedish-speaking rural area outside of Sweden. He spoke to a "large and attentive audience," and his 1878 journal account echoes what he had observed more than two decades earlier about the Swedes. Although Swedes now held all top elective offices in Chisago County, Donnelly, oblivious to their growing sophistication in political and economic affairs, wrote:

Drove yesterday, by stage, from Wyoming to Taylor's Falls; a delightful drive; through an interesting country. A quaint, primitive, Swedish people, with their log-houses and thatched barns. The lakes full of fish; the woods full of game; the soil rich; the people out of debt. They spin their own cloth, from their own sheep, and have lots of chickens, hogs and cattle.³⁹

The youthful Donnelly portrait is from the National Archives; Edwards sketch, DePauw University Archives, Greencastle, Indiana; Chisago City plat map, Chisago County Surveyor, Hult & Associates, Forest Lake. All the other images are in the MHS collections.



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