

## MINNESOTA AS SEEN BY TRAVELERS

### A SWEDISH VISITOR OF THE EARLY SEVENTIES

In 1874 there was published in Stockholm, Sweden, a travel book by Hugo Nisbeth bearing the title *Två År i Amerika*, (1872-1874); *Reseskildringar*, or, in translation, *Two Years in America* (1872-1874); *Accounts of Travel*. The various Swedish biographical aids do not mention this traveler, but from his own book we learn that he was a well-educated man whose home was in the Swedish capital and that he was on intimate terms with members of the official class in his native country. To facilitate his American journey he carried with him letters from Swedish officials to all the Scandinavian consuls in the United States and to many prominent Americans.

Often the purposes motivating a traveler's journey are more important for the student of history than the facts of his life, and on this point Nisbeth is explicit in his foreword. "In this journey," he writes, "I intended principally to visit those parts of the country about which Swedish readers know little or nothing. I have therefore made my observations in the wilderness of the 'West,' on the fringes of civilization, on the Pacific coast and in the sagaland of California." To Nisbeth, Minnesota was a part of the wilderness of the West, and to his experiences and observations in this state he devotes five chapters. In fact, after his arrival at Quebec he went directly to Minnesota, where he looked forward to the speedy fulfillment of yet another purpose—that of meeting as many Swedes in America as possible. His quest for his countrymen in Minnesota was not a fruitless one, as he soon discovered. The census figures for 1870 would have afforded him ample assurance on this point, for of the 160,697 foreign-born in Minnesota in that year, 59,390 were Scandinavians.

Nisbeth's travels took him not only to the older Swedish settlements of the state, but also to remoter regions that had

recently been penetrated by the railroad. When this traveler had taken the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, now the Great Northern, to Breckenridge, then the Northern Pacific from Moorhead to Duluth, and finally the Lake Superior and Mississippi back again to St. Paul he had made a complete circuit of frontier Minnesota. Such was the "grand tour" that the young state was able to offer in 1872.

In the following pages an English translation is presented of Nisbeth's narrative of his travels in Minnesota, drawn from scattered chapters in his book.

ROY W. SWANSON

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL

[Hugo Nisbeth, *Två År i Amerika*, (1872-1874); *Reseskildringar*, 33-70, 145-158 (Stockholm, 1874)]

#### CHAPTER 4

[*This chapter opens, appropriately enough, with the famous advice attributed to Horace Greeley, though the Swedish traveler, essaying to quote the exact English words, produces an amazing version: "Go to the West, get your a farm and grew up with the country." After a few general comments on Greeley, the author takes up his own story.*]

A visit of about two months in the northwest of the cultivated area of North America, or the state of Minnesota, has convinced me that Horace Greeley was a very good adviser, for during this period — in which I traversed the above-named state in every direction and used every conceivable form of transportation, the famous "prairie schooner" not excepted — I found the following conditions: In the eastern part of the state there is general prosperity, and in the central part a tolerably assured livelihood; and farther west, or where the settlers now live in primitive fashion, there is a new life of denial and hard work, lightened and made bearable by the thought that one does not toil in vain — the powerful factor that inspires everything in America. And if Horace Greeley had been permitted to live two or three generations more he could still afford to "go to the West," for the West does not

cease with Minnesota or Iowa or Nebraska or Missouri and Arkansas. West of these states again, where room and abundant food for millions of industrious people yet remain, lies a rich and mighty land comprising the states and territories of Dakota, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, California, Arizona, and others. These regions, with fertile soil and almost inexhaustible mineral riches of every kind, including enormous coal fields, still for the most part lie open to enterprise. North America's East has already extended a great railroad across this enormous country, and two other roads have been begun, the "Northern Pacific" and the "Atlantic Pacific," not to mention other proposed lines. The former goes out from Duluth on Lake Superior and the latter from St. Louis, the principal city of the state of Missouri. Once thus traversed by roads, these lands will be won to the civilization of the East, just as the East had been won in the past, and will share its wealth with the whole world, for the railroads will bring with them industrious and intelligent people who will spread over this vast area and there establish, within a century, ever more complex ways of living. For the man inured to hardships, who can and will deny himself the comforts of life and who brings with him only a pair of strong arms, a sound mind, and irrepressible energy, the West is the place. There he will never feel want, for his resources will be ample. For those immigrants, on the other hand, who believe that roast sparrows will fly into their mouths as soon as they set foot on American soil, who go about the big cities with their hands in their pockets and instead of working starve or become a burden to their countrymen, and who later fill the columns of the Swedish newspapers with their jeremiads against America and the treatment they received there, the West is no better than the East. Such people do better in every respect by remaining at home. This great though young country, undergoing a development which is amazing to a European who is accustomed to slow progress at best, requires work of every one of its inhabitants. Here one must keep up or be left behind. To keep up is equivalent to progress, to be left behind as a result of failing strength or determination is equivalent to poverty and ruin.

. . . . .

I arrived in St. Paul by the Chicago and Milwaukee some days before Midsummer Day.<sup>1</sup> St. Paul, lying on the right bank of the Mississippi, is a neat, well-built city, although evidently still in its youth, with a population of about thirty thousand — one thousand in 1852 and twelve hundred in 1856 — of whom six to seven hundred are Swedes. The city has tolerably clean streets, which are not exactly commonplace in America, and it even has street cars, although the streets incline somewhat steeply toward the river. It has elegant and well-furnished stores which compare favorably with those of Europe's larger cities. With a few exceptions there is, in general, nothing to suggest that one is in the westernmost part of the cultivated area of America. The center of the city is made up entirely of business houses, many of which occupy palatial buildings; and the dwellings, each one in the midst of its little garden, surround the city on three sides. These dwellings are all pretty, often actually dignified, and possess that homelike air which their exteriors indicate and their interiors do not contradict. This no doubt is due chiefly to the fact that the American, who always is the sole occupant of his house, devotes every possible care to this, his refuge from the madding business world.

It was, as I mentioned above, a few days before Midsummer Day when I arrived in this city at six o'clock in the morning. I had scarcely got my things up to one of the many and elegant hotels which are found there and placed myself at the breakfast table (in parenthesis I wish to state here that in America, particularly in the West, one starts to eat breakfast at six o'clock in the morning) when I had the good fortune to meet a Stockholmer, Mr. V. B. He had sojourned in Minnesota for three or four years and had had many hardships to contend with before he at last had the good luck to secure a paying position. He was the first Stockholmer I had met since I left Sweden, and since he was, to boot, an old acquaintance, the meeting was the more pleasant. After I presented my letter of introduction to the governor of the state, Mr. Austin, by whom I was welcomed in

<sup>1</sup> *Midsommardagen* or St. John's Day, June 24, is observed by the Swedes in church services and festivals. See *post*, p. 390.

a most friendly manner and who introduced me to the secretary of state, General Hansen [*Colonel Hans Mattson*], and his assistant, *docent* Sohlberg from Norway, I looked up the representative of the united kingdoms [*Norway and Sweden*] in St. Paul, Consul Sahlgaard, a young Norwegian who has sought with zeal and earnestness to fill the responsibilities one can reasonably impose on a consul in such a distant place as Minnesota. In his company I visited the public schools and the Capitol, the latter the meeting place for the state legislature, distinguished chiefly for the great number of spittoons set everywhere for the convenience of the representatives. In his company I also took a pleasant trip by wagon to the pretty waterfall of Minnehaha, or laughing waters, situated eleven English miles away.<sup>2</sup> Later I accepted an invitation to spend the midsummer holidays at Mr. A. Lindholm's farm, situated fifty English miles from St. Paul, right in the heart of the largest Swedish settlement in Minnesota. This settlement is called Vasa and was founded in 1853. It boasts about fifteen hundred Swedes, of whom about one thousand belong to the Lutheran church that stands on the top of a lovely hill. This church of about six hundred communicants was built by voluntary contributions from the congregation. It was completed a year ago and, so far as size and elegance are concerned, it compares favorably with the best rural churches in Sweden. It is one hundred feet long by sixty feet wide and cost \$25,000. I attended the services there on Midsummer Day and made the acquaintance of several of the Swedish farmers who were present. In vain I waited to see some of the Swedish peasant costumes, but not a trace of them was to be seen. The men were dressed in neat, light-weight American suits, and to judge by the women's dress one could as easily believe that he was present at a play in Stockholm, as in a Swedish peasant church on the western frontier of America. Of homespun kirtles, modest silk kerchiefs, and headcloths, not a single example was seen; but, on the other hand, one saw everywhere fine, light tulle dresses, nor were even silk dresses missing. There were lace

<sup>2</sup> There are six and six-tenths English miles to one Swedish mile. Today, however, Sweden uses the metric system, which was adopted in 1878.

shawls, light straw hats, profusely and often tastefully decorated with flowers and ribbons, and *chignons* fully as handsome as they are in Stockholm. Not only here, but in every other place that I have visited in America, I have found that no group more quickly and readily falls in with the American weakness for bedecking their women than do the Swedes. The Americans will sacrifice their all for their women, and it is not an uncommon sight to see a rather shabbily clad husband walking beside his wife who is dressed most elegantly and often very tastefully. Here such things do not arouse scandal; they are regarded as the most natural thing in the world; and the young lady herself seems not in the least embarrassed by her husband's threadbare and often slovenly appearance. This weakness for dress has invaded all classes, and one must be a keen and experienced observer out here in the West to be able to tell the hired girl from the mistress. On the other hand, it is extremely laughable to see the newly arrived Swedish peasant girls. Decked out in white, with jewels and other ornaments, parasols, and straw hats with flowing ribbons and other finery, they look unusually comical in their attempt to imitate the dignified and untroubled bearing which is so characteristic of the American women.

After the services I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of the congregation's pastor, Mr. Norelius. I found him a liberal clergyman free from prejudices. For instance, when I asked him what he thought of the religious freedom that existed in America and especially of the fact that a large number of the Vasa settlers had separated from the Lutheran Church and joined other sects, particularly the Methodist and Baptist, he answered, unexpectedly enough, that he regarded religious freedom to be perfectly right and legitimate, and he added that neither from his nor the congregation's side had any ill feeling been shown against those who belonged to other sects or who never visited a church. "It is fitting," he added, "that there should be religious freedom in a country with such free institutions as the United States."

The Swedish farmers in this part of Minnesota are, in general, well-to-do. Their land is regarded by Americans as the best tilled and their cattle the finest; and their pretty houses, all painted

white, recall vividly the many lovely summer villas on the Stockholm Archipelago. I visited ten or fifteen farmers in the vicinity of the Vasa church and I found everywhere neatness, cleanliness, and comfort as well as respect for the ancient Swedish hospitality. I was received well and cordially. I was asked constantly about "dear, old Sweden," and everywhere the most unfeigned joy was expressed when I reported that we had had three or four good years in Sweden. "How is the king?" was a standing question, "and the gentle Queen Louisa?" Many of these settlers did not know that she had died, nor, later on, did they know that the king himself had passed away. Accordingly, when I described her last moments, her good works quietly performed, and the king's sorrow and illness, many a heart-felt tear was shed, not less worthy because it was wiped away by a hand hardened with toil.<sup>3</sup>

On the homeward journey from Mr. Lindholm's farm to St. Paul we passed through the little town of Red Wing, about five thousand strong, so called after a famous Indian chief who is said to lie buried in a near-by mound. In this pretty little town on the Mississippi there are about nine hundred Swedes. Here we were invited to take part in a midsummer picnic, which happened to be in progress at a farm owned by a Swede eight or ten English miles from town. Here again I met a large number of Swedes and became fully convinced of the good living conditions which all Swedes residing in this part of Minnesota enjoy. True enough, it had taken them eight, ten, and twelve years of toil and privation to attain this prosperity, but the majority of them are still in their best years and can, therefore, still enjoy the fruits of their labor and can go on with the assurance that they have created a position of independence for their children. Here, too, are sung the songs of the old country, truly not always by "selected voices," but nevertheless strongly and heartily for the fatherland. There arose a nine-fold ringing huzza to the honor of the Swedish woman—the mother, wife, sweetheart, and sister. It was not difficult even here to see how deeply and affectionately the emi-

<sup>3</sup> Charles XV and Queen Louisa are referred to here. The king died on September 18, 1872. The queen, the "gentle Louisa," as she was called, had died the year before.

grating Swede is attached to his old fatherland. All the hardships and privations he suffered at home are forgotten. In the midst of his abundance here he recalls the frugal Swedish home, and few of the many Swedes I met did not wish longingly for the day when they could at least "look in on those at home." Our host, a man of sixty years, and a fine figure of a Swedish yeoman, came up to me after I had proposed a toast to Sweden and said with tear-filled eyes, "I have been out here for fifteen years. It has gone well with me, praise God, and my children, too, are well provided for and happily married here, but I can never reconcile myself to the thought that my old bones will never rest in Swedish soil!" In the sod house on the prairies, in the log cabin, in the forest, in the prosperous farmhouse on the fertile plains, and even among those living in the cities, everywhere there is the same feeling for the fatherland. When I expressed my surprise and wonder at such a state of affairs to an old Småland *bonde*,<sup>4</sup> he answered me warmly, "Aye, God knows, 'tis not the fault of Sweden that she could not provide thus abundantly for us all."

In Red Wing there is a large wagon and iron safe factory which is owned by two prominent and very ardent Swedes. Their manufacturing is done on a large scale, and in their handsome stock I saw safes priced at from seven to eight hundred dollars. Entirely without capital when they arrived, they have only enterprise, industry, and perseverance to thank for their success. One of the owners of the largest manufacturing firm in Red Wing, which does an annual business of more than half a million rix-dollars,<sup>5</sup> is a Swede who is greatly respected in the community. Wherever one goes in the little town one meets Swedes, and amiable Swedes at that. There are artists, lawyers, dentists, photographers, restaurant keepers, bookkeepers, artisans, laborers, and others. Their prosperity, of course, is not in excess, but it is tolerably universal, and in addition to a common meeting place, called Svea, which contains a small library, their social life is made agreeable by the many good Swedish women, who do not

<sup>4</sup> The Swedish *bonde* is a farmer or husbandman.

<sup>5</sup> The *riksdaler* was at this time the Swedish money unit and was worth about twenty-six and a half cents. The present unit, adopted soon after Nisbeth's visit, is the *krona* or crown, which is worth twenty-seven cents at par value.



hesitate to share with their menfolk the troubles and sacrifices that are ever inseparable from a new life in a new land.

Since this first visit I have been in Red Wing several times and have joined in many excursions from that place, and I shall always preserve in grateful memory the heartfelt friendliness and hospitality which always was my lot there.

## CHAPTER 5

[*This chapter opens with a discussion of the American press, after which the Minnesota narrative is resumed.*]

In the company of Consul Sahlgaard I made some shorter excursions by wagon in the neighborhood of St. Paul. We visited Fort Snelling, earlier used as a defence against the Indians, but now used as a penal institution; and the pretty little waterfall of Minnehaha, which has an Indian name meaning "laughing water." Here I made the acquaintance of a *New York Tribune* correspondent, who was faring about on Minnesota's many lakes and waters in a small portable canoe called the "Dolly Varden."<sup>6</sup> I made arrangements to press deeper into the country, especially into those regions where Swedes had settled. For this purpose I could use two railroad lines along which most of the Swedish settlements were grouped — namely, the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad between St. Paul and Duluth, a small town that has sprung up rapidly on the southwestern shore of Lake Superior; and the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, going from St. Paul in a northwesterly direction and at present completed to Breckenridge, an American town consisting of ten or twelve houses set in the midst of the wilderness on the border of Dakota Territory. I decided to follow the Lake Superior and Mississippi first, as it was the shortest road; and as I had a letter of introduction to its president, Mr. Frank H. Clark, I presented it and sought at the same time such information as would secure me the best possible

<sup>6</sup> The correspondent was Julius Chambers, whose account of a trip to Elk Lake, Minnesota, appeared in the *New York Herald* for July 6, 1872. He was correspondent for the *Herald*, and not the *Tribune*. Chambers, in his *News Hunting on Three Continents* (New York, 1921), has a chapter entitled "I Seek and Find the Mississippi's Real Source" in which he tells of his Minnesota adventures. See *ante*, 4: 290.

facilities for studying pioneer life in general and Swedish pioneer life in particular. I received from Mr. Clark all the references that would be of use to me, and he even carried his considerateness so far as to give me a traveling companion, Mr. J., a Swede in the company's employ and a person conversant with the conditions along the line. Mr. J. had studied at Upsala for a while and then given up a course at Carlberg in order to join an expedition from Sweden that had promised great profits to its members. He suffered many curious experiences in America before he had the good fortune to secure the position he now holds. Among other things, he was at one time reduced to the necessity of becoming a railroad laborer. It soon became clear that a stout will is not to be subjugated by brawn and mere habit, and accordingly, after he had straightened spikes at \$1.25 a day, he had the good fortune to secure lighter and more congenial work.

We left St. Paul in the afternoon and, after passing through an improved and smiling countryside, beautified by many lake and water scenes, we arrived at the little town of Rush City, situated fifty-five miles directly north of St. Paul. As there were many Swedes here, we planned to remain two days. We took advantage of the hospitality which the justice of the peace, Mr. Christensen, and his charming wife, a young Swedish woman whose maiden name was Willard, were kind enough to extend to us.<sup>7</sup> Rush City is a town of the kind that seems to have sprung out of the ground. True enough, the streets were laid out. That is to say, the direction and the width were planned, but one could not detect any trace of street construction work. Here one slipped down to the knee in a water hole, there one got stuck in the mire, and here again one had to defend oneself against an angry sow that had appropriated the usable part of the street for herself and her family; not to mention the fact that there were tree stumps two to two and a half feet high in every one of the streets. On the "Swedish street," which was about one hundred feet long and boasted ten houses, the stumps were especially plentiful, and I soon made the discovery that the simplest, quickest, and cleanest way to travel

<sup>7</sup> See *ante*, p. 375.

this street was to jump leap frog over the stumps.<sup>8</sup> Of the three hundred inhabitants of the town, from seventy-five to a hundred were Swedes. Some of these were laborers, that is, they worked for a day's wage varying from \$1.75 to \$2.50 a day. Some of these laborers were also farmers who, by outside work, procured means to farm their own land, which was usually in the immediate neighborhood. They were all in relatively good circumstances. Here I met a family I had known in Stockholm. They had just arrived and were in the course of building a house. On the afternoon of the second day we went on a picnic excursion—if it could be called a "picnic" to travel over a road where the mire rose to the bellies of the horses and huge branches at times came near sweeping us off the wagon—to beautiful Rush Lake, whose shores were decorated with pretty little pioneer homes. We deposited here two persons who had come with us in the wagon. They were dressed more like Indians than civilized people, having large mosquito nets on their heads and carrying instruments and tents.

"What sort of people are they?" I asked my host after they had put their packs on their backs and had disappeared in the thickest woods.

"They are two engineers."

"And where are they going now?"

"They are going twelve miles into the woods to lay out another city! This is done very easily here," he added, "and calls for no special formalities. By the way," continued my host, "I don't know yet what I shall name it."

"Oh, that matter is soon settled! What is the name of Mr. Christensen's wife?" I asked.

"Selma Willard."

"All right, then call it Selmatown!"

And thus it was named, and if I should go back there in five or six years, Mr. Christensen assured me, I would find that Selmatown was a not inconsiderable place.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> To leap from stump to stump would no doubt seem the logical thing to do in such a place, but the expression used in the original, *hoppa bock*, means "leap frog."

<sup>9</sup> There is no other evidence to show that the writer's suggestion ever was adopted.

Thus are cities made in America!

In Rush City, as well as along the entire railroad to Duluth, there are many sawmills, and enormous quantities of finely sawed lumber are shipped from this region for the most part to the prairies, where it is used for building purposes. These sawmills and the large lumbering interests connected with them are a good source of income to the farmers, many of whom have but little equipment and need money to improve their land and make it profitable. One enterprising Swedish *bonde* in Rush City began an industry which if rightly managed will probably grow to huge proportions. He manufactures birch-bark snuffboxes and other articles of the same material. He has been fortunate in getting his wares advertised and winning sales, and he has my host to thank for his success, for the latter supplied him with capital and secured customers for him. The *bonde*, by the way, insists upon making the snuffboxes the same shape as those used in Småland and upon always putting the royal Swedish coat of arms on the cover. A brick kiln was in the process of construction in the little town when I was there.

Duluth is a town that has sprung up rapidly on the southwest shore of Lake Superior, and has already more than five thousand inhabitants, although it is only three or four years old. The people there predict that Duluth will be the Chicago of the new West. This depends eventually on the development of the north-western railway system. With Jay Cook's failure, the completion of the Northern Pacific has been postponed for an indefinite period and as a result the development of the young city is essentially, not to say definitely, checked. The town has several factories and sawmills, and railroad tracks run in every direction to facilitate the transportation of freight. Of the five thousand inhabitants, nine hundred are Swedes. The majority of them are day laborers, receiving from \$2.00 to \$2.50 a day for their work. Board and room cost \$4.00 *a week* for a laborer. Everything has two sides in this world, however, for at the Clark House, the hotel where I stayed, the price was \$4.00 *per day*!

There are two Swedish churches here, one of which is a Methodist church. These two churches have a very unusual origin. Among the Swedes who first came to Duluth was a Småland

*bonde* by the name of H. He was a Methodist and he met seven other Methodists among the Swedes there. H., who "dabbled in religion," appointed himself pastor of the little Methodist congregation, and as such soon launched the notion that a church was necessary. No sooner said than done! H. had learned that Americans are very generous, especially when it comes to building churches, and he took advantage of this knowledge in a rather too ingenious fashion. He procured a list and began to go around to the most prominent and the richest Americans with requests for aid for the building of a church. It went like a dance! The first one gave a large piece of ground as a building site; the second, third, fourth, etc. gave money, from ten even up to a hundred dollars. In a week H. had his plot of ground and a subscribed sum of nearly eight thousand dollars. He hastened to turn this into cash and the work of building began. The other Swedes in the town — that is, the non-Methodists — opened their eyes in amazement when they saw the eight Methodists begin on their magnificent church edifice and they quickly got together a committee to seek voluntary gifts toward an Evangelical Lutheran church. The members of the committee immediately drew up a list and began going around the town. Like the Methodists they turned to the well-to-do among the town's inhabitants. How great was their anger and surprise when the answer they received everywhere was a cold *no*!

"And what is your objection?" finally asked the stunned Swedish committee members.

"Simply this, that we have donated to a Swedish church before."

"Yes, we know that. But that congregation consists of only eight members while we are about eight hundred."

"We know nothing about that. The person who received our contributions solicited them for a *Swedish* church. We did not know that this church was divided into two congregations but thought it was for every Swede's common welfare that our help was intended. By the by, it was 'smart' work," continued the American, laughing and snapping his fingers, "very smart, indeed!"

After they had laughed for a while over H.'s adroitness, which was very much to their taste, and had informed the sobered

Swedish committee members that the first requirement for getting ahead in America was to be alert and attentive to the main chance, they took the list and gave such generous contributions that within a few days more than five thousand dollars was subscribed and the other church edifice could be started. Both are now finished and make a good appearance, but when one compares them one can very readily see that the Methodists had a couple of thousand dollars more to spend on theirs.

The majority of the Swedes in Duluth were, as I have said before, laborers and artisans. All those to whom I talked were content and confident that they could "pile up money." One Swede, Mr. Hegardt from Stockholm, ran a large grocery store.

One day in Duluth as I wandered around the places most frequented by laborers in the hope of meeting as many Swedes as possible, I met in a beer hall three men who looked like newly arrived countrymen of mine. I opened a conversation with them and finally asked if they would drink a glass of beer. Yes, they had no objection to that. When the beer was served I took my glass, touched it against theirs, and said, "Skoal, my countrymen!" This, however, did not turn out so well.

"No," said their leader setting down his glass, "you may not say 'countrymen.'"

"And why not?" I asked, astonished.

"No, you see we are Norwegians."

"Yes, but we are at least Scandinavians then," I remonstrated.

"No, no!" cried the Norwegian and thumped his glass with force several times on the table, "we are only Norwegian — nothing else."

This was not the first time that I was in a position to see that the Norwegians out here are not particularly friendly toward the Swedes. It is a fact, as I myself have had the opportunity to note on several occasions and which is verified by persons who are better acquainted with conditions than I am, that the relations between the Danes and the Swedes in general are much more intimate and cordial than those between the Norwegians and the Swedes.

A genial, well-educated man from Copenhagen whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Duluth and who introduced me to several

Americans,—among others to the editor of the *Duluth Daily Herald*, Dr. Dintler,—always began his introductions in the following manner, “Allow me to present to you a countryman of mine, etc.” adding, with a friendly smile, that I actually was a Swede but that we considered one another countrymen.

In Duluth, as in Rush City, an immigrant home, where immigrants may live without charge while they are seeking land, has been established by the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad Company. These homes are roomy and comfortable, furnished with private sleeping rooms, bathroom, large kitchen, wash room, etc. The one in Duluth resembled a first-class hotel in one of Sweden’s larger towns more than an immigrant home.

After I had made a few trips by wagon into Duluth’s pretty suburbs (very reminiscent of Norway’s wooded regions) and rowed seven miles across the bay to Superior City, where several Swedish railroad workers lived in comfortable circumstances, I returned to St. Paul, stopping on the way at the stations from which I could penetrate into the country and meet Swedish farmers. I met many such, and among others, near the railroad between Rush City and North Branch, the members of a small Swedish colony of about eighty persons. These had not come direct from Sweden, but like many other Swedes had first settled in the state of Mississippi. For one reason or another they had not had the success there that they expected. Some died, some moved to other states, and for a time the remainder lived a very miserable life. Colonel H. Mattson was at that time in St. Paul in the employ of the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad Company. These needy Swedes heard of him and wrote to him asking aid to remove to Minnesota. It is as great an honor to his heart as to his head that Colonel Mattson obtained from his company the necessary means for their removal. These Swedes are now settled in good, roomy houses, satisfied with their condition, and show promise of an even better future. The company’s expenses for this removal amounted to about eight thousand rix-dollars.

The Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad is about 155 English miles long and, it is predicted, will be an especially profitable line. . . .

## CHAPTER 6

After the completion of my trip on the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad I took another trip along the St. Paul and Pacific road to the middle and northwestern parts of Minnesota, which are well populated by Swedes. This time, too, I had a pleasant traveling companion in an elderly Swede, a cultured and well-read man, well-known as the translator into English of Tegnér's *Axel och Maria*. With a few exceptions the two thousand well-bound copies of this work, however, became the prey of the flames in the Chicago fire. One of those saved, bound in velvet with gold lettering, was in the possession of Christina Nilson.

The St. Paul and Pacific road is a large company formed by rich eastern capitalists who plan to lay two railway lines from St. Paul, one cutting the northwestern and the other the central part of northern Minnesota in order to join with the Northern Pacific Railroad now under construction westward from Duluth.

We left St. Paul and after passing through a pretty, variable countryside arrived in the afternoon at the tiny, two-year-old town of Litchfield. This town has an almost exclusively Swedish population, all in good circumstances. We decided to remain there a few days, partly in order to visit the neighboring farmers and partly to be present at the celebration of the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the declaration of independence of the United States.

In a comfortable wagon — American wagons are without exception of first-rate quality — we rode the next day into the neighboring country for distances varying from ten to fifteen miles, and everywhere we met honest and faithful Swedes, owners of neat houses and waving fields of grain, happy in their family life, and holding sacred the ancient Swedish hospitality. It was not a struggle for the barest necessities of life that we met here. No, the first hard times had already passed. The majority, however, had been here five, six, and eight years and even longer before they could enjoy in full that prosperity which in general always rewards the farmer in America who does not fall before the first onslaught of hardships. These hardships, naturally, are even greater if, as often happens, one has nothing to contribute but two



empty hands, and in addition is unacquainted with the English language. Around Litchfield the larders must have been full to judge from the groaning tables and the good condition of the granaries and stables. The billowing grain and the juicy, green grass were reaped, not with scythes, but mostly with ingeniously constructed reaping machines.

After a day pleasantly spent among the Swedish farmers in the neighborhood of Litchfield we returned to the little town. Early the following morning we were awakened by the sounds of hissing rockets, shots, and divers other not especially attractive noise-making devices with which the town's American population hailed its freedom's day. We hurried to get up, and after we had had breakfast in American fashion at half past six in the morning, we went out on the hotel balcony to get a view. What life, what movement! The town's entire male population seemed to be up, singing or rather shouting with joy. Revolvers flashed in most hands, and I must say, they were often used! The upper atmosphere was crisscrossed with hissing rockets and the lower, where we mortals walked, by crackers, rockets, spinning-wheels, and the like. On the whole it was a perfect chaos and not exactly of a harmless kind. I was just on the point of asking my companion if our safety did not depend on a "concentration backwards" which would still leave us in possession of the field, when, through the billowing powder smoke some distance away, my eye suddenly caught sight of a well-known object, everywhere beloved — *the Swedish flag* raised on the top of a high pole at one corner of the large square where the "celebration" took place. It was the first time since leaving Sweden that I had seen our flag and — it may now seem sentimental and unmanly — I felt my heart beat faster and my eyes fill with tears. There was now no longer any question of retreating, cost what it would. Forward we would go to the dear blue and gold colors and press the friendly hands that raised them! We threw ourselves into the mob, almost wading in flame and smoke, and came at last to our goal without any other mishap than getting a bit powder stained and having the brim of my straw hat completely torn off by a descending rocket stick. Although my hat, after this reduction from above, resembled a chaplain's old-fashioned nightcap more than a some-

what respectable head covering designed for a temperature of one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, I waved it lustily as we neared the blue-gold banner and tipped it respectfully to the young and noticeably happy pair, both from Stockholm, who in this manner wished to show Americans that there was yet another land, far, far away, which shared in their joy.

How we were received here, I need hardly relate. Did not the Swedish colors wave over the door? Enough! We found a welcome shelter in the pretty home of this couple and it was with sincere regret that we left them after a few delightful hours of their company.

We left the railroad at Litchfield and took a wagon for a three or four-day trip to Minnesota's frontier to visit those Swedish farmers who lived in log cabins and sod houses. The regions we first passed through were pretty and delightful. There was water in great plenty and wood still existed, although it was relatively scarce. For instance, one saw here more and more unclaimed land, and respectable looking dwelling houses became fewer. Soon we left the edge of the wooded area, where still an occasional log cabin was to be seen, and in a short time came out on the endless prairie. Not a tree, not a single shrub met the eye wherever one turned. Everywhere there was emptiness, the silence of death. One felt oppressed by this great, vast emptiness. There was no road, of course, nor was one necessary, for the prairie was nearly as flat as a floor and wherever one went one had but to follow one's map, one's instinct, and the sun. If one adds to all this the fact that the burning sun produces heat that sometimes rises to 110 degrees Fahrenheit and causes unendurable thirst, one can easily imagine that there are pleasanter things in life than making pleasure trips out on the prairie. The prairies of northwestern America are of two kinds: those that are perfectly *flat*, where not a trace of vegetation exists except the grass mentioned above, and where not the slightest mound or rise is visible; and those that appear to have wave formation and are called *rolling prairies* by the Americans. I cannot give a clearer picture of the latter than to compare them to the sea in "L'Africaine" or "The Flying Dutchman," stretching out to infinity, their irregular waves taking on like proportions.

It is on the latter type of prairie that the dwellers in sod houses settled. These prairies are in many cases to be preferred, partly for the ease with which one can get a dwelling (one has but to burrow into a hillock), partly because one has more protection from the wind. Here, too, the vegetation is somewhat richer and the water supply more plentiful. Here farmers can venture a bit farther out than on the flat prairie. After a day's journey over level country we arrived on the rolling prairie and climbed up on one of the highest hillocks to see if we could not discern some sign of humanity. We wandered a long time in vain from hillock to hillock until at last we saw at a considerable distance a bluish smoke rising. Thither we went. Of course at first we were uncertain whether the smoke might not have its source in some prairie fire, since these occur here often enough, but when we came nearer we soon discovered that it rose from a sort of chimney and thus we concluded that we had finally found one of those famous sod houses which I, among many others in Sweden, had heard mentioned with a doubtful smile. We rapidly drew near and were soon so close that we could make out the dwelling's surroundings and its "architecture."

It reminded one of a half sphere about fifteen feet high, one side of which was cut off perpendicularly to the height of eight or ten feet. Into this side one burrowed, beginning with an opening about four feet wide and six to eight feet high, the so-called "door opening"; afterward the interior of the hillock was enlarged as desired and a hole was made in the top. In the door opening posts were set and on these a door was hung. All this I could make out at a distance. We soon drew near and I got out of the wagon and approached. Just in front of the door some potato patches were laid out, and in one of these stood a young woman with an infant on her arm. Three other children sat on the ground sorting potatoes. Was the woman a Swede? I both wished it and did not wish it. I wished it because I had journeyed out here purposely to meet Swedes, but, on the other hand, I did not wish it when I reflected what a life these pioneers of civilization are doomed to live. I approached the young woman. With half open mouth and wide eyes she and the children awaited the visit, certainly an unusual one for them, of persons dressed in European

clothes who came in a handsome carriage. The following conversation ensued. I give it carefully from my notebook as I wrote it down on the spot. Uncertain as to her nationality, I began [*in English*]:

"Do you live here?"

"Yes." (It sounded as little American as possible.)

"You are from Sweden, perhaps?" [*in Swedish*].

"Yes, that I am. Is the gentleman also from there?"

"Yes, I am. I have just come over from Sweden and am at present traveling about in Minnesota."

"Of course, the gentleman is here to seek out land?"

"No, I am not. I have no intention of becoming a farmer in America. I am traveling only in order to meet my countrymen and find out how they live in the New World."

"The gentleman will sail back again to the old country?"

"Yes, that is my intention."

"The gentleman is indeed fortunate!"

"How so? Don't you find yourself contented out here?"

"Oh, yes, that's understood. We cannot complain. But however things are, one never feels exactly at home here." (The young woman's eyes, when she said this, wandered with a melancholy expression around the endless prairies.)

"But why, then, did you leave Sweden? Was it some touring emigrant agent who lured you out here?"

"No, certainly not. We have never even heard tell of such persons. No, the reason we set out was that we never could pay the taxes and never could save anything."

"Did you have your own land at home?"

"Yes, we had a small *gård* in Småland which barely gave us enough to live on. When the taxes were due in the fall we never had enough for them, and so the police always served a writ of extent and that meant yet more striving and working. It was the same thing over again when the next fall came. At last we saw that conditions would never be different for us at home, and as we had heard that several in the parish who had moved out here were well off and sent home money, we decided that we who are still young and have both the will and the strength to work could also try our luck here."

"How much was your tax at home?"

"It went up to more than a hundred rix-dollars."

"But is it not just as hard to meet the taxes here?"

"Oh, no! Not a bit of it! Here we have eighty acres of good land which cost only \$14.00 and up to now we have paid only \$2.50 a year in taxes."

"That may be true, but this tax will doubtless rise, too."

"Yes, of course, the more we cultivate our land the more the farm will rise in value, and by that the tax rate is set. But it will never be so high that it will be difficult for us to pay it."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Something over two years."

"How much of your eighty acres have you been able to cultivate?"

"So far only fifteen acres, and this has been done gradually. The soil, however, has produced well. The first year we harvested sixty-five bushels, last year a hundred and thirty-seven, and this year we expect to get between two and three hundred bushels of wheat."

"What is your husband's name and where is he now?"

"His name is Henrikson and he is out with the oxen 'breaking up' for a farmer who lives over there," pointing to the other side of the prairie. "When we left Sweden," she continued, "we had from five to six hundred rix-dollars with us from the sale of our belongings. A part went for the passage, and a part we loaned on the voyage to Swedes who said they were in distress. This money we never saw again," she added with a rueful smile. "When we arrived here and took a homestead we had just enough left to buy a pair of oxen and a stove. But during the time when the soil was not productive we had to live as well as to buy grain for sowing. Therefore, my husband has worked at times with his oxen on our own and others' land. When he 'breaks land' for others he gets from two to three dollars a day, and when he is out for eight days, as at present, he brings home with him about twenty dollars, which will go toward living expenses or be put into the farm."

"But have you never experienced anxiety for your daily bread since you came here?"

"No, praise God, food we have had aplenty. And as we are now fixed we could put by enough for every year, and when we have all the eighty acres broken up and cultivated we shall consider ourselves prosperous."

"You have good prospects for the future?"

"Oh, yes, we can't complain. We could never have had it so prosperous at home. Well, so you are going home to Sweden? How nice!"

"You are not entirely happy here, I see that plainly enough," I said and took her hand.

"Happy!" she said and burst into tears. "No, I am not as happy and thankful as I should be, but, the gentleman understands, it is hard to be so alone. The gentleman sees how desolate it is here — and then there is the long, cold winter!"

"I admit it must be hard, but more and more people will come out here to settle and then you will not be alone so much."

"That is true. Besides I have no right to complain, for it was less for our sakes that we set out than in order to provide our children with a decent living, something that we could never have done in Sweden." Here she looked down upon the child she held in her arms and kissed it warmly. "But won't the gentleman come in and see how we have it?" she added, smilingly wiping away her tears.

"Yes, indeed, with the greatest pleasure."

Accordingly, we went in. We had to go down three steps before we came to the dirt floor. The room measured about twelve feet in width by twelve to fourteen feet in length and was something over eight feet high. Just within the door to the left stood a cast-iron stove, an object that is never wanting in America, farther over to the left was a child's bed, in the middle of the floor stood a table and chest, and to the right was a large bed and a sort of cupboard, where several household utensils were kept. The furnishings were completed with two or three chairs. Above the table hung the portrait of Charles XV. From the stove a chimney went up to the center of the hut, where a hole had been broken in the dirt roof. Daylight came in through the door!

Everything was clean, neatly arranged, and homelike. To leave without entertainment was, of course, impossible, so we drank a

basin of pure, unadulterated milk with freshly baked wheat bread.

Two hours quickly fled and it was time to say good-by and continue the journey. It almost hurt to leave this woman in all this solitude. I kissed the children, who looked plump and sturdy, and pressed the hand of the young mother, wishing her good luck and happiness. She thanked me and said slowly, "Remember me to Sweden!" I heard and felt her very heart in the words and I take this method of fulfilling her request.

That day I visited three sod houses, all occupied by Swedes. I found about the same reasons for immigration and the same prospects for the future as in the first. I remained over night in the last one; that is, I wrapped myself up in a blanket and slept on the dirt floor.

He who would set out to visit sod houses in America five to ten years from now will without doubt have to go farther west, for where the sod houses are now one will find instead a well-cultivated region with small plots of trees here and there (out here trees grow ten to twelve feet high in six years) and pretty white-painted houses in which dwell a prosperous people.

The following day, after having met all the Swedes on our route, we came to Wilmoore [*Willmar*], a two-year-old town on the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, named after one of the London directors of this company. His son lived two miles out of town on a fine farm which the father had bought him and where he was expected to atone for the sins of his youth.<sup>10</sup> It was a sort of place of exile. I paid a visit to the young, blasé gallant and was entertained with a bottle of real claret, which tasted divinely after having had so long only the wretched American wares served in the West. In Wilmoore, also, there were plenty of Swedes;

<sup>10</sup> Willmar was named for Leon Willmar, a Belgian who was living in London in 1870, when the town was founded, as the "agent for the European bondholders of the St. Paul and Pacific railroad company." He purchased several hundred acres of land near Foot Lake and presented them to his son, Paul Willmar, "who a few years before had served as a soldier of fortune under Maximilian, the adventurous invader of Mexico." The son lived here for ten years; then he sold his farm and went to live in Belgium. Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names; Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 272 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17).

some artisans, some day laborers. The latter worked for \$2.00 to \$2.50 a day. Living expenses were the same as at most of the other places I had visited, about \$4.50 a week for board and room. In Wilmoore, as is customary in the vicinity of the railroad company's stations, there was a roomy immigrant home where the immigrants could live free of charge while they sought land.

From here we took the train for Breckenridge, a small town lying on the border of Dakota Territory, and for the present the terminal of the St. Paul and Pacific line. The road went through one continuous and boundless flat prairie, and only here and there, at quite great distances, could one discern a solitary house where some bold pioneer had settled. At Breckenridge, however, there were some trees, for the Red River flows past this place and in America the banks of every stream, yes, even the smallest brook, are wooded.

In Breckenridge, which contains about fifteen or twenty houses, there were only three Swedes; namely, two brothers by the name of Petterson and their sister. They ran the town's principal hotel, and ran it *well*, which is to say a great deal in America, at least in the western parts. Here we were entertained (look at the map and see if it sounds believable) with oysters and champagne and in the evening a supper [*sexa*], as Swedish as possible, was prepared in our honor. I must add that the oysters, as everywhere in the Far West, do not, as one would suppose, come in the shell, but are removed and preserved in air-tight tin cans. Seldom does any trace remain of the fine, salt sea flavor.

Here, as I said before, the railroad stopped, but as I very much desired to see the northern part of Minnesota we bought stage tickets in order to reach the Northern Pacific Railroad. From Breckenridge to Moorhead, the station on this line to which we planned to go, the distance was fifty English miles. Never will I forget that journey! It was not enough that the stage — if one can give that name to the primitive conveyance we used — was designed for six persons at the most and that we stuffed in nine, but moreover the road was in such a terrible condition (where there was any road to be found!) that it was more by luck than skill that we arrived in safety. Eight or ten times we had to get out at the driver's request and wade through deep mudholes



because he could not guarantee that the wagon would not upset. In addition, as in all swampy regions in the American West, the mosquitoes appeared in such multitudes that they nearly darkened the sky. After a journey of twelve hours we arrived at last in Moorhead, tired out and completely covered with mosquito bites. We met the governor of the state, Mr. Austin, who planned to make the same trip, but who, after he heard our account of the journey, discreetly turned about and made a considerable detour. I met but one Swede in Moorhead. He had left the fatherland twelve years earlier and was now connected with the local government.

We left Moorhead by rail for the not far distant town of *Glyndon*, a purely American town. Here we found three or four wooden houses, which were primitive in the highest degree, while the remainder of the town was composed of tents. On one of these, *Continental Hotel* was displayed in big letters. Thither we removed our luggage, but we were saved from having to sleep there, for we were courteously invited to stay with Colonel de Graeff, on whom we had called.<sup>11</sup> Colonel de Graeff (or the "Western Railroad King," as he is known because he built, and continues to build, most of the railroads in the Northwest) was an especially polite and courteous man. The next day he took us out to a railroad that was under construction and here we were given a clear idea of how the American railroads are laid out on the flat prairie. The road is first surveyed by two engineers, after them come two others who examine the condition of the ground, and finally the laborers appear. The first gang throws up a little sand and dirt, the next gang lays the ties, while the next brings up the rails. The colonel explained that with a hundred men he could build over two English miles of road a day on a flat prairie and that his expenses here reached twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars per mile, all materials included. The engineers received from \$100 to \$150 a month and the laborers from \$2.00 to \$2.50 a day.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew de Graff was a railroad builder who came to Minnesota in 1857 to construct the Transit Railroad between Winona and St. Peter. He died in St. Paul in 1894. Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912*, 171 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14).

Colonel de Graeff is said to be worth two million dollars, all of it gained in a relatively short time by such enterprises.

Glydon is a "temperance town"; that is to say the town's inhabitants have pledged themselves not to use spirituous liquors nor to rent out, sell, nor build for anyone who is not an absolute friend of temperance. It is well-known fact that extremes generally do not lead to the desired goal, for just beyond the boundaries of the little town a Swede and two Norwegians had established "saloons," which were visited frequently, especially by the railroad workers. In Glyndon, too, I became acquainted with those grasshoppers that come to Minnesota as well as to other parts of America in immense numbers and destroy all vegetation in a couple of days wherever they go. The air was so full of them that the very sun appeared dim, and the ground was so thickly covered by these unappetizing looking creatures that in one place I counted about two hundred and fifty in a square foot. They were one and a half inches long and extremely disgusting looking. In the evening the white walls of the tents were so thickly covered with grasshoppers that one could scarcely see any of the canvas.

Ten to fifteen miles from Glyndon on the way to Duluth we entered the so-called "park region," a glorious country with small natural parks, pretty lakes, and luxuriant, level land. We arrived at last in Duluth, from whence we returned to St. Paul on the Lake Superior and Mississippi road after a journey of nearly three weeks.

## CHAPTER 14

### CHRISTMAS IN A SOD HOUSE

After about a four months' absence from Minnesota — during which time I traveled through Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and visited the larger cities on the eastern coast of North America, as well as crossed Canada in different directions — I returned to "the land of ten thousand lakes" in the middle of December, 1872. When last I was there waving fields of grain greeted my eye, and green pastures, and a happy, industrious people who joyfully turned to account the rich harvest with which the state had been blessed. Now all was changed. Winter had

spread its white blanket over the fields, the trees had discarded their green dress and taken on their hoarfrost attire, sparkling in the sun. No more could the sailing clouds mirror themselves in the sky-blue waters; even the proud "father of waters," the mighty Mississippi, had been forced to let himself be imprisoned by the conqueror who now wielded the scepter. That the winters are severe here cannot be denied, and the winter of 1872 could reasonably be counted as one of the coldest in the memory of man. But the air here is thin and clear, and when one sees the blue smoke rising in coquettish rings from the log cabins at the edge of some huge pine forest, and at the same time sees the *bonde* out in the wood lot busy with the chopping, one thinks one is seeing again the fresh, charming picture that so often meets the eye of the traveler in our northland provinces in the winter. It is not the winter itself that the settler out on the thinly populated prairie looks forward to with dread, for the harvest has been garnered and sold, the larders are full, and the cattle have been lavishly supplied with fodder for the period during which they cannot go out. No, it is winter's companion, the terrible blizzard, that he fears. And, in truth, he has reason to. Death is the inevitable lot of him who is foolhardy enough to intrust himself to it. The blizzards here, as in other parts of America, are not to be compared with even the worst of our snowstorms at home, for they spring up more suddenly, and the howling storm, which with terrifying speed races across the endless plains, drives before it a whirling mass of fine snow particles that take away the breath, quickly cover up every track, and make it impossible to see even a distance of a few ells. He who permits himself to be surprised out on the prairies by such a storm is truly in a pitiable situation. The icy wind numbs his limbs, he loses the direction he should follow to reach his goal, and in despair he at last sinks down in the snow drifts either to die or to be found long after the blizzard has passed in a condition that would leave scant hope for his recovery. Happily these blizzards are not a daily occurrence, although they are unfortunately not infrequent. This fact and the care that the settlers soon learn to take make serious accidents very uncommon.

Much activity prevailed in St. Paul when I got there. The handsome stores were filled with newly arrived articles, which were tasteful and often rather costly, intended as gifts for the coming holidays. There was a brisk sale of Christmas trees in the markets, and those streets along which the retailers had their shops were crowded with conveyances belonging to near-by farmers who were in town to buy gifts or delicacies for the Christmas table. It is not only the Scandinavians who celebrate Christmas here in America in a true ancient northern fashion, but even the Americans themselves have in late years begun to give more and more attention to this festival of the children and have as nearly as possible taken our method of celebration as a pattern. For example, most of them use fir trees with candles, confections, and other decorations, and so far as the number and costliness of the presents are concerned they often display a liberality that would amaze us Swedes. These Christmas presents are given in various ways. In the public schools, especially for younger children, the school officials usually arrange a huge fir, which stands for about eight days. On this tree the children's parents and friends hang small presents, which are distributed by the school-teacher. In the home the presents are sent with a message if the giver is someone outside the family, or they are distributed by a dressed-up Christmas mummer, who here goes under the name of "Santa Claus." Still another custom exists, although it is not used so commonly perhaps as the first two. If there is reason to expect presents, a stocking is hung up at bedtime in some convenient and well-known place and in it in the morning will be found the expected presents. Not a trace of our traditional *lutfisk* and rice porridge is found.<sup>12</sup> There is no special menu for Christmas Eve. On the other hand there are few American homes in which the customary turkey is not served on the following, or Christmas, day.

<sup>12</sup> *Lutfisk* is cod prepared for a Christmas delicacy by being buried for days in wood ashes. Today this Scandinavian delicacy has been appropriated to considerably wider uses than the original one, as the following item from the *St. James Independent* for October 13, 1927, will show: "One ton of ludefisk has been ordered for 'Ludefisk Day' at St. James, Friday, Oct. 21."

As I had planned to spend my Christmas Eve with some of my countrymen out on the prairie, I left St. Paul a few days before Christmas and went by the St. Paul and Pacific one hundred English miles northwest to the Litchfield station. Here, after some trouble, I was fortunate enough to secure a sled in which I set out over the prairie to the west. There was no road, of course. The level country which I entered first lay like an enormous white cloth spread out before my eyes, and the only guide I had for the direction I was to take was a small pocket compass and the blue smoke columns that here and there at a considerable distance arose from the log cabins. The way was not particularly difficult to traverse, for on the flat prairie the snow distributes itself comparatively evenly. But when, after twenty or thirty miles, I came out on the rolling prairie, I met with greater difficulties. In some places the snow had drifted in considerable quantities between the hills, and had it not been for the hardy horses and the extraordinary strong conveyances that they have in the West, I should have had extreme difficulty in making headway.

Toward nightfall on the day before Christmas Eve I perceived far off the smoke from a human habitation, which, from what I could make out at a distance, should be a sod house. I was soon there and found that this, in truth, was the case, although it was one of the very best kind. That is to say, in this case, the owner had only half dug himself into the ground. Three tiers of thick timbers were laid above ground and over these there was placed a roof with a slight pitch. One lived, so to speak, half under and half above the ground, and thus it became possible for the occupant to get daylight through a small window, which was sawed out of the south wall formed by the three timbers mentioned above. About twenty paces from the dwelling house was the granary and, annexed to it, the stable, also a half sod house, which was occupied by two oxen and a cow. Only a little grain was on hand; that which was not necessary for winter use had been sold, as usual, during Indian summer. The sod hay barn, on the other hand, seemed to be well filled with cattle fodder. I had not steered wrong, for I had reached the house of the man I sought, Jan Erikson from Wermland, who had been in America for three years and for the last two years had been living on his large eighty-acre

homestead. I was received by him and his friendly wife with that cordiality which I have been accustomed to find among my countrymen on the prairie. Nor did I need to put forth any request that I might stay over Christmas Eve, for I was anticipated in this by my friendly hosts, who simply but heartily bade me remain and help myself to whatever they had to offer. To the two children, a girl of seven named Anna and a boy of three, Eric, the visit of a strange gentleman seemed particularly surprising, but the sight of some packages I had brought along, which the dwelling's smallness made it impossible for me to hide, soon made us the best of friends.

Early in the morning of the day before Christmas my hosts were at work, and when I arose I found a huge ham already sputtering over the fire, while outside I heard my host's great ax blows, for he was busy getting the necessary Christmas wood ready. I hurried out and was met with a picture that was for me entirely new and particularly striking. The sun was about twenty degrees above the wavy horizon of snow and from the snow-clad tops of countless hillocks the sunbeams were thrown in a dazzling bewilderment all around. Yet, except for this tiny world in which I now found myself, I could not discern another sign of human presence than two columns of smoke, which arose, nearly perpendicularly, from the horizon, one in the northwest and one in the southwest. The first, explained my host, came from a sod house that was occupied the previous spring by the family of a German farmer who came from Illinois, where he had paid too much for his land and after two years of fruitless toil had been forced to leave everything with empty hands. In the other lived a Swedish family, a man and his wife and one child, who had lived there for a year and a half. After the wood was chopped and carried in, a task in which the two children took part with a will, the cattle were fed and watered, and a small sheaf of unthreshed wheat was set out for the few birds that at times circled around the house, in accordance with the lovely old Swedish custom.

With these and other chores the morning passed, and right after twelve o'clock we were invited in by the housewife for the midday meal. The cloth that covered the plain homemade table was cer-

tainly not of the finest, but it was whole and clean, and the defects of arrangement that a fault-finding observer would have been able to point out were plentifully outweighed in my eyes by the unfeigned, cordial friendliness with which I was bade to help myself to what the house had to offer. For the rest, one should have felt ashamed not to be satisfied. The bread that we dipped in the kettle was freshly baked and tasty,<sup>13</sup> and the fat chicken that was later served in a sort of stewed pie form, which awakened especially the children's delight, had clearly not fared ill during the short time allotted him to live. And so came the afternoon with its small arrangements for the evening meal and the Christmas table, for this could not be omitted. There was no Christmas tree, for fir trees are not yet planted in this part of Minnesota, but two candles stood on the white covered table and round these were placed a multitude of Christmas cakes in various shapes made by the housewife and such small presents as these pioneers were able to afford, to which I added those I had brought. Nor were *lutfsk* and rice porridge to be found on the table, but the ham which took the place of honor in their stead banished all doubt that the settler's labor and sacrifice had received its reward.

The meal was eaten in the happiest of moods and afterward the few presents were distributed to the children. The gifts were neither costly nor tasteful, but they were *gifts* and that was all that was necessary. On the wooden horse I had brought, the little three-year-old galloped over the hard-packed dirt floor of the sod house with as much joy and happiness undoubtedly as the pampered child upon one polished and upholstered. All was joy and thankfulness, and when later the head of the family read a chapter from the Bible about the Christ child I am certain that from the hearts of these poor people there rose many warm thanksgivings to Him who smoothed their path and gave them courage and strength to conquer the hardships of the New World.

Outside the snow fell slowly and spread its white Christmas mantle over the endless prairie. Now and then a snowflake fastened itself on the single window of the sod house, its curtains

<sup>13</sup> *Doppa i grytan* is a ritual of the Swedish Christmas. The members of the household, including the servants, gather about the boiling kettles of meat, in which each dips his piece of bread.

faded by the summer suns, and quickly dissolved and disappeared as if its icy heart had melted with joy at sight of the peace that reigned within. And later, from the corner of the room where the housewife's kind hands had made my bed, I heard the small voice of the youngest child, still clutching his wooden horse, repeating after his mother, "Good night, kind Jesus." Then it was I realized in full God's infinite wisdom when He willed to apportion "the palace for the rich, but joy for the poor."

## CHAPTER 15

### A DAY IN THE MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE

Early in March, 1873, the Minnesota legislature ended its work for the year and the representatives returned to their homes in different parts of the vast state. No great questions took up the time of the representatives in this session, except possibly that of the impeachment of the state treasurer for the unconstitutional use of the state's funds<sup>14</sup> and a proposal to amend the constitution by making the legislature assemble biennially instead of annually. This proposal, oddly enough, went through, although it was vigorously opposed by the minority, who upheld the importance of constant control in a new country of such hasty growth as Minnesota. Like all approved proposals for amendments to the constitution, it had to be confirmed later by the people at a general election.

Scandals connected with the balance sheets of officials may just as well be accepted as the order of the day here in America and will no doubt continue until it is understood that a good official must be paid sufficiently. And in the same way, continuity in at least some of the branches of the state's administration is just as necessary as it is healthy. The present impeached and discharged state treasurer had, under a bond of not less than two hundred thousand dollars, a yearly salary of a paltry thousand dollars, a sum which any able-bodied workman can easily earn. This man, under no actual control, had the state's entire funds in his hands. The result is easy to imagine. Naturally he could not live on a

<sup>14</sup> An account of "The Seeger Impeachment" appears in William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3: 357-362 (St. Paul, 1926).



thousand dollars, and he therefore appropriated some of the state's money for the purpose of augmenting his income. As the rate of interest is high here, one to two per cent a month, it was not difficult for him to take advantage of his position, although his business speculations were not always of the sort that coincided with the state's interests. The wholesome result of the scandal, however, was that the state treasurer's salary was raised from one to three thousand dollars.

Minnesota's lawmaking body is divided into two parts, as in all the other states; namely, the *Senate* and the *House of Representatives*. Since it would without doubt be of interest to get some knowledge about the organization of a lawmaking body and its duties so far West, I shall touch upon the subject here in a few words. I feel that I must mention that Minnesota only became a state in 1858 and thus, naturally, one cannot expect that the parliamentary forms should have had time to become well-rounded and solid as in older countries.

All elections to the Senate as well as to the House of Representatives are direct. For this purpose the state is divided into districts. Districts of at least five thousand inhabitants each elect a senator while districts of at least two thousand inhabitants each elect a representative. At the present time the Senate is composed of 41 members and the House of Representatives of 126.<sup>15</sup> The members of the House of Representatives are elected for *one* year while a senator can sit from *one* to *four* years. The senatorial districts are numbered from one on. Every senator who is elected from a district with an odd number leaves office after the end of the first year, but he can thereafter be reëlected for two succeeding years. This is also the case with senators elected from districts with even numbers, who leave after two years of service.<sup>16</sup> For

<sup>15</sup> The apportionment for the House was 106 members in 1872.

<sup>16</sup> Nisbeth evidently based his statement on the original clause in the constitution providing for the election of senators, and he does not seem to have understood that these officials were elected for times of varying length only to start the machinery of government. The term of representatives was extended to two years and of senators to four years in an amendment to the constitution ratified on November 6, 1877, which forms article 4, section 24, of the present constitution.

membership in both the Senate and the House of Representatives no qualifications are required other than suffrage in the state and residence of a year in the state and six months — immediately preceding the election — in the district represented. The election is held in October and the legislature meets in the middle of the following January, after which the customary working period is sixty days. The Senate and the House choose their secretary and clerk, each chamber has two of each. The House has its speaker, while in the Senate the lieutenant governor presides.

Although the government officials in America are in general very poorly paid, which naturally results in fraud on every side, on the other hand, the members of the legislative bodies are paid enough so that they do not have to go home empty handed. The president of the Senate and the speaker of the House each receive ten dollars a day and traveling expenses to and from the legislature (such notorious traveling expenses as certain members of the second chamber in Sweden demand are not tolerated here); and the senators and representatives are paid five dollars a day, and they receive free travel back and forth and about twenty dollars for stationery. The two secretaries in each of the bodies of the legislature are paid ten dollars a day, and the assisting clerks, also two in each house, five dollars a day. Of course the living expenses here are thirty and possibly fifty per cent higher than in Stockholm, but not more, and the salary of each member of the legislature is relatively greater than that which the members of the second chamber at home enjoy.

The business of the legislature is transacted in about the same manner as at home, though possibly with less care and perfection. Just as at home at the first meeting of the legislature a large number of committees are appointed, at least five times as many as we have. To these the various motions are submitted after the first reading; later they are returned to the legislature to be read a second and third time. No record of the discussions is kept and in the voting no ballots are used. They are satisfied to let the secretary record the *ayes* and *noes* of those present and later to submit the results.

The Senate chamber and the House of Representatives are both comfortably and neatly furnished, particularly the Senate chamber,

where each senator has a comfortable, upholstered armchair before a neat desk, which he has at his own disposal. Of course, there are carpets in both chambers. In the House of Representatives there are two armchairs before each desk. The public gallery is at least three times as large as the one in the parliament house in Stockholm, and is covered with carpets and furnished with armchairs for the comfort of the visitors.

It is an entirely natural thing that in a state where the Scandinavian element is so strongly represented as in Minnesota the same element should be represented in the legislature, and this year there are not less than three *Swedes* and one *Norwegian* in the Senate and three *Swedes* and eight *Norwegians* in the House of Representatives. They do not make themselves heard much, — except possibly in the general murmur, which here often attains deafening volume, — but are respected by the Americans for their firmness of principle and their honesty of purpose.

In addition to the chambers of both legislative bodies and several smaller rooms where the committees work, the Capitol also houses the executive departments, including the governor, his secretary, the secretary of state and his assistant, the state auditor and state treasurer with their assistants, the attorney general, whose duties most nearly compare with those of the solicitor general at home, and the supreme court. The governor, whose power in many instances is greater than a king's in a constitutional monarchy, draws far from a large or even a sufficient salary, for his fixed pay is only three thousand dollars. He cannot make personal use of the four thousand dollars which the state pays toward the yearly expenses connected with his office. His private secretary, whom the state pays, has a salary of fifteen hundred dollars. The salary of the secretary of state amounts to about two thousand dollars without fees, the state auditor's to three thousand dollars, the attorney general's to one thousand dollars plus thirteen hundred dollars for service (he also has the right to handle private law suits), and the three permanent members of the highest court receive up to three thousand dollars yearly. When one reflects that these highest officers of the state seldom hold their offices more than four years and often only two, one must admit that during the time they are in office at the expense of their own inter-

ests they receive particularly meager compensation. This cannot, however, be said of the Capitol's watchman, who, in addition to being surer of holding his job, enjoys a salary of fifteen hundred dollars. This watchman does not work in the assembly rooms, but functions only as a sort of fire warden and doorkeeper for the entire Capitol. Those who work as watchmen or pages in the chambers are young boys about twelve or fourteen years of age and sometimes younger, often the sons of well-to-do people. They usually receive two dollars a day and, aside from the duties connected with the position, these boys are supposed also to learn something about the forms of lawmaking.

The newspaper reporters have their comfortable table and arm-chairs to the left of the speaker.

During my visit to the various departments in the Capitol and to the legislature I was received everywhere with that courteous friendliness which one usually finds among Americans. It almost seemed as if these people considered it a duty to make me as familiar as I cared to be with the various details of their government. When I saw with what simplicity the current business was executed and with what politeness and readiness visitors were treated, I could not help but make comparisons in my own mind between the officials in Minnesota's Capitol and those who are found lodged in the numerous government offices in Stockholm.



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](#).