
**Prairie Bound: Migration Patterns
to a Swedish Settlement
on the Dakota Frontier**

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A topic that is frequently addressed in settlement studies is the process of frontier migration. The fact that new settlers on the frontier had to come from somewhere else naturally raises questions about the origins of these people, the timing of their migrations, the routes they followed, and the communication process that motivated them. Moreover, the widespread occurrence of culturally homogeneous immigrant communities, especially on the homestead frontiers of the American Middle West, gives rise to a curiosity about the significance of migratory experiences and associations in explaining immigrant settlement behavior. To a certain extent, the selection of a place to live and the choice of one's neighbors must have been a product of experiences with places and people along the way.¹

The study of historic patterns of movement to the American frontier, however, is not easily accomplished. Detailed information about the travels and stopping places of large numbers of immigrant settlers does not generally exist. When people are on the move they tend to make a far fainter imprint on the historical record than when they put down roots. Consequently, it is often possible to make only generalized comments about the migration patterns of frontier populations. Available data, for the most part, are place oriented. We know when people arrived in a certain place and when they left that place, but lack the connecting evidence necessary to determine where they came from or where they were going to. Faced with such data problems, most studies of frontier migration have dealt with the frequency of migration rather than the pattern. These "turnover" studies have yielded a great deal of information about population mobility rates in a variety of places and time periods.² They tell us little, however, about the cumulative migration experience of individuals and groups.

On occasion material does surface that lends itself to the detailed study of migration patterns for a particular population. This type of

material usually appears in the form of collected pioneer autobiographies or life histories. A recent and seminal example of the use of material of this nature is an article by John Hudson that delimits frontier migration patterns to the state of North Dakota on the basis of pioneer autobiographies collected in the late 1930s.³ Hudson uses a sample of one thousand autobiographies to test and flesh out various notions about migration and mobility in American life. His article deals with these questions on a very broad scale in that the sample population is widely scattered in both time and space. It reflects the entire North Dakota frontier experience from the 1870s to the 1910-20 period. The patterns revealed are interesting in a comparative sense and hint at what might be achieved in working on a smaller scale.

This paper focuses on the migration experience of the early population of a single frontier settlement. The population is a group of 206 immigrant Swedish settlers who made their way in the late 1860s and early 1870s to the same place in southeastern South Dakota—the Dalesburg settlement of Clay County. The tracing of their presettlement activities is made possible by the existence of an uncommonly rich data source. In the 1930s a local resident wrote, as a hobby, detailed histories of all the homesteaders in the settlement.⁴ What makes his collection of histories so rich is the remarkably consistent attention paid to the moves and domiciles of its subjects. The information allows a nearly complete view of the migration experience of each homesteader from the time he left the home parish in Sweden until his death, whether it was on the homestead in South Dakota or elsewhere. The aim of this paper is to describe the migration experience of the Dalesburg settlers and to relate that experience to the early settlement patterns and associations that occurred in the community.

The Dalesburg Settlement

The destination of the 206 Swedish settlers and their families who are the subject of this study was an area of rolling prairie situated on the east side of the valley of the Vermillion River, a sluggish tributary of the Missouri River located in Clay County, Dakota Territory (fig. 1). Clay County was opened for settlement around 1860, roughly about the time that the rapidly moving pre-Civil War frontier began to push up the major river valleys into Nebraska and Dakota territories. A combination of Indian troubles, the Civil War, drought, and grasshopper plague caused the advance of



Figure 1. Clay County, South Dakota

settlement to halt just short of the area, which meant that until the late 1860s the only sizable population in the county was located at the town site of Vermillion.

With the return of better times, the lure of free homestead land, and the construction of the Dakota Southern Railroad up from Sioux City, the area underwent a boom period. From 1868 to 1873 settlers flooded into the county, advanced up the Vermillion Valley, and spread out onto the prairies. The influx was dominated by settlers of Scandinavian origins who, like most immigrants, segregated themselves in the process of settling the region. The Norwegians settled largely to the west of the Vermillion River, the Swedes to the east of the river, and the Danes formed a number of communities in various locations across the county.

The Swedish settlement area became known as the Dalesburg settlement—the name given to the first post office in that part of the county. The name, which was originally spelled *Dahlsborg*, came from the fact that many of the original settlers hailed from the Swedish province of Dalarna.⁵ At its greatest extent, the settlement stretched for about fifteen miles from north to south along the east side of the Vermillion River and extended eastward from the river for a distance of six to eight miles.

The map in figure 2 shows the location of most of the early Swedish homesteads in the settlement. The arrows, which were drawn on the basis of the dates when homesteads were claimed, show the general manner in which settlement progressed across the community. The creeks that emptied into the Vermillion clearly played an important role in determining the settlement pattern. The advance of settlement tended to move up the creeks and the homesteads tended to cluster near the creeks, which represented the only convenient source of water and wood on the prairie. Two areas along the Vermillion, labeled "Cabbage Flats" and "Vermillion Bottom" on the map, were poorly drained and generally avoided in the settlement process.⁶

The settlement was organized socially around the religious institutions that were founded within its boundaries. The first and largest of these was the Dalesburg Lutheran Church, which was founded during the winter of 1871. The Lutheran church could by no means command the allegiance of the entire community, since a great deal of religious dissension apparently existed from the beginning. The dissension resulted in the establishment later that year of a rival organization, the Bloomingdale Baptist Church, just two miles away.⁷ Later on, a Mission Covenant church was organized in the

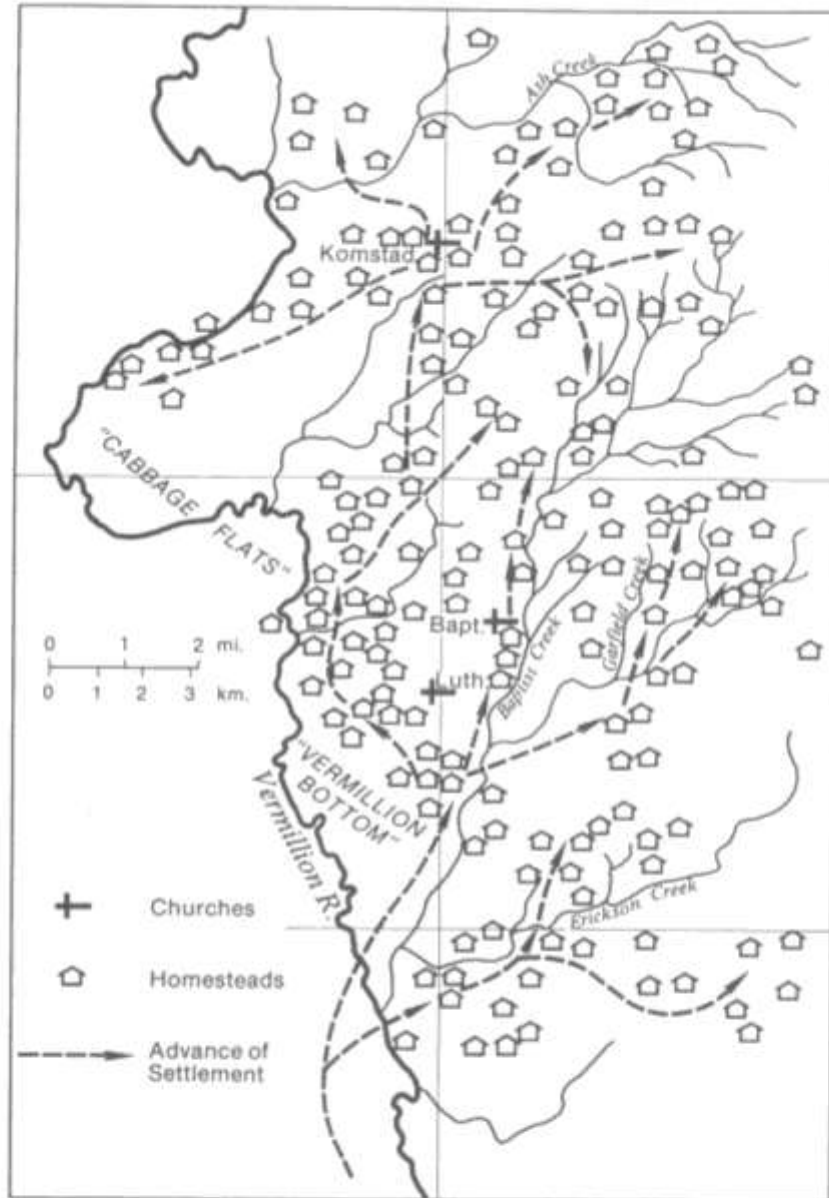


Figure 2. Early Homesteads in the Dalesburg Settlement

northern part of the settlement near the Komstad post office. All three churches functioned vigorously throughout the early history of the settlement, serving as focal points for the social associations of the settlers.

Origins in Sweden

With few exceptions, the people who would eventually settle in Clay County began leaving Sweden in the mid-1860s. Their departure was a part of the ground swell of emigration that took place in Sweden as that decade drew to a close. A series of bad harvests in Sweden, coupled with good times in America, provided the impetus necessary for the mass migration. Most of the Dalesburg migrants (75.6 percent) left during the period 1868-70, the three peak years in the Swedish emigration curve for that period.

Of perhaps greater interest, in terms of differentiating the experience of the migrants, is the exact location of their points of departure. The map in figure 3 shows the distribution of parishes from which the Dalesburg people emigrated.⁸ The "emigration field" covers nearly all of Sweden, but concentrations of activity occur in certain areas. For purposes of analysis, it is useful to regionalize the pattern. Three distinct regions delimited on the map serve to group those emigrants that seem to have had a common cultural background.

The first of these culture groups is made up of those who emigrated from the forested regions of Upper Dalarna and similar districts in northern Värmland. This group, comprising sixty-eight primary emigrants and their dependents, will hereafter be referred to as the Upper Dalarna culture group. A second group, consisting of sixty-one primary emigrants and their dependents, emigrated from the coastal and lower river valley parishes of the Bothnian Coast. The third group hailed from the old province of Östergötland and adjacent districts in northern Småland (forty-three emigrations). The remaining thirty-three emigrations were from scattered locations, although it should be noted that there is a rather weak fourth group (ten emigrations) from the province of Skåne.

There is every indication that the emigrants left Sweden quickly. There are but one or two cases of children being born in Swedish coastal towns or cities, and in nearly all cases the records show that the emigrants arrived in America the same year that they left Sweden. Most proceeded to the larger Swedish ports and sailed first to England and then to America. The majority entered the United

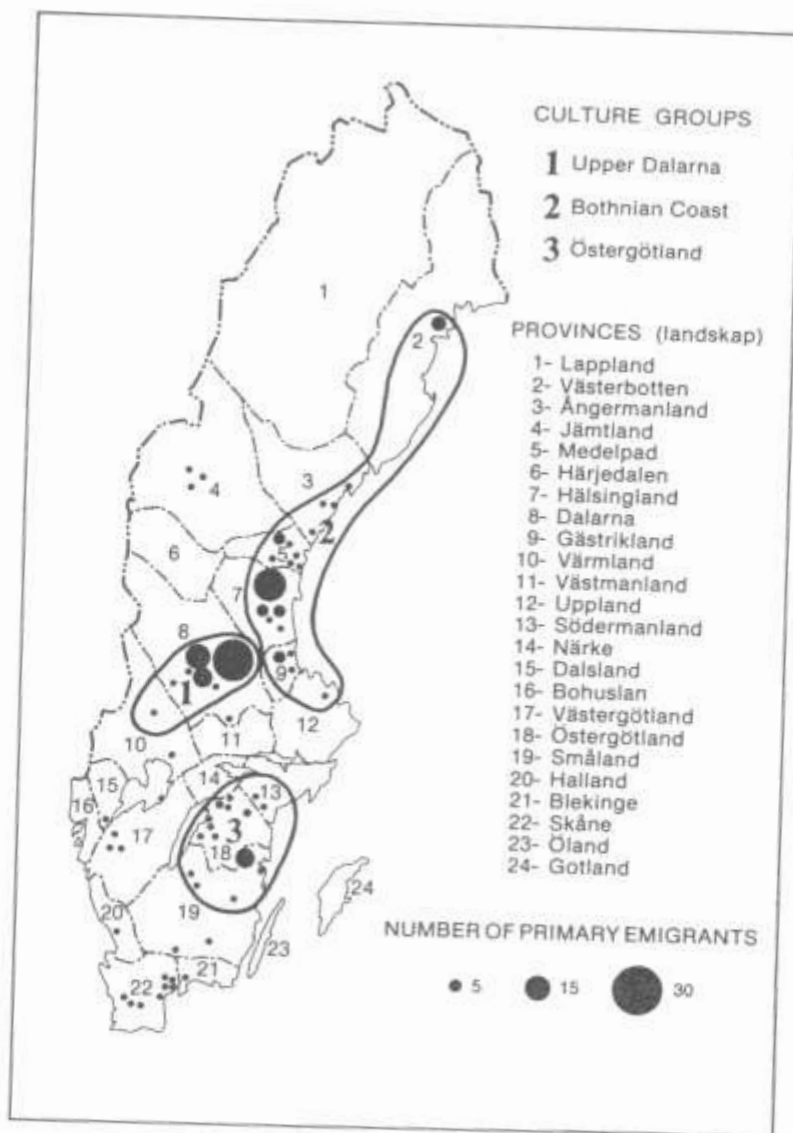


Figure 3. Parish Origins in Sweden of Clay County Settlers

States through the port of New York. The major difference in their experience, up to that point, is that their cultural backgrounds differed, depending upon the part of Sweden they were from.

The Movement to Clay County

Most scholars agree that the business of moving to the frontier was a serious undertaking that required planning and the acquisition of reliable information about one's destination.⁹ To be sure, the very first inhabitants of a newly opened area may have come there by happenstance, but the waves of settlers that filled the area in were the product of a complex communication system. Potential migrants were prompted to act by the receipt of information through both public and private channels. Many areas were widely advertised in newspapers and pamphlets or promoted by agents representing land and railroad companies. Even more reliable was the information that came through relatives and acquaintances.

For a substantial number of the Dalesburg migrants, the receipt of information about the Dakota frontier must have taken place in Sweden and prompted the decision to emigrate. The speed and directness with which many made the move is indicative of this. Eighty-one of the emigrants (39.3 percent) proceeded directly from a U.S. port of entry to Clay County. They made no intervening stops, which suggests that they knew exactly where they were going. The remainder (125 migrants) moved indirectly to Clay County, stopping at least once along the way for a period of a month or more. It is uncertain whether or not those who moved indirectly had information about their ultimate destination, but we can assume that many did because information about the Dakota frontier was widespread in Sweden at the time.¹⁰

The fact that some moved directly to Clay County while others did not is an intriguing one. What could explain this difference in behavior? The time of arrival of direct and indirect migrants in Clay County follows no particular pattern. Therefore, the explanation is not that the early migrations were indirect and that the later migrants, who possessed better information, were able to move more directly. Nor do variables such as age or marital status have any bearing on the way in which people moved to Clay County. The proportion of direct migrants to indirect migrants remains fairly constant over time. Furthermore, single migrants were just as apt to move directly as were married men burdened by dependents. There was some difference in age. The average age of the direct

migrants tended to be somewhat greater than that of the indirect migrants (34.5 years vs. 29.8 years), but the difference is not large enough to explain the divergence in behavior.

The explanation lies in the channels of personal information flow that individuals may have been following. It is reasonable to assume that if an immigrant was in contact with a relative or friend that had preceded him to America, his first action would be to go to that person. He could then proceed westward, with the encouragement and advice of trusted friends who knew what lay ahead. Moreover, the rigors of the journey could be lessened by following in the path of others who had left the settlement for points west in earlier years.¹¹

If one considers the emigration history of the culture regions from which the Dalesburg people emigrated, it becomes clear that the probability of having such contacts was greater for some than it was for others. Emigration, for instance, began relatively late in the forested upland parishes of Dalarna and northern Värmland. The Dalesburg people who left the Upper Dalarna area in the late 1860s were among the first to leave the region. The opportunity for them to go to established settlements where they might have contacts was not great. Most immigrant Dalacarian communities were located in places that were settled about the same time as Dalesburg or later. The Bothnian Coast, on the other hand, is a region that experienced earlier migration. One might expect emigrants from there to have had a greater opportunity to make intervening stops. The Östergötland region experienced the earliest emigration. Its later emigrants probably faced the greatest prospect of proceeding to the American frontier by way of a place where they knew someone.

In fact, the migrations followed exactly that pattern. The proportion of indirect migration was very low for those that emigrated from Upper Dalarna (38.2 percent) and considerably higher for those who emigrated from the Bothnian Coast (70.5 percent) and Östergötland (76.7 percent). Table 1 and the map in figure 4 show the distribution of initial stops for the 125 migrants that proceeded indirectly to Clay County. Certain places figured prominently in the migration process for certain groups. Of special importance to the Bothnian Coast group is Allamakee County, Iowa, an important 1850s settlement of Hälsingland people. Keokuk, Iowa, was an important Östergötland settlement, and the Galesburg-Andover-Moline district of western Illinois embraced settlements from Östergötland and the Bothnian Coast area. The cities of Chicago, Council Bluffs, Sioux City, and Omaha had Swedish populations of mixed origins

TABLE 1
Indirect Migrations to Clay County, South Dakota
(Heads of Households)

Initial Stops	Total Pop.		Upper Dalarna		Bothnian Gulf		Östergötland		Others	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Allamakee Co., Iowa	22	17.6	—	—	18	41.9	3	9.1	1	4.3
Andover, Ill.	16	12.8	5	19.3	—	—	10	30.4	1	4.3
Chicago, Ill.	15	12.0	2	7.7	—	—	5	15.2	8	34.7
Sioux City, Iowa	13	10.4	5	19.3	4	9.3	1	3.0	3	13.4
Moline, Ill.	10	8.0	—	—	5	11.7	5	15.2	—	—
Council Bluffs, Iowa	10	8.0	—	—	9	20.9	—	—	—	—
Galesburg, Ill.	6	4.8	4	15.4	1	2.3	1	3.0	—	—
Keokuk, Iowa	4	3.2	—	—	—	—	4	12.1	—	—
Omaha, Nebr.	4	3.2	—	—	1	2.3	1	3.0	2	8.7
Stockholm, Wis.	3	2.4	—	—	—	—	1	3.0	2	8.7
Dakota City, Nebr.	3	2.4	2	7.7	—	—	—	—	1	4.3
Rio, Wis.	3	2.4	3	11.5	—	—	—	—	—	—
Isanti Co., Minn.	2	1.6	2	7.7	—	—	—	—	—	—
Madrid, Iowa	2	1.6	—	—	2	4.7	—	—	—	—
Le Seurr, Minn.	2	1.6	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	8.7
Boonesboro, Iowa	2	1.6	—	—	1	2.3	1	3.0	—	—
La Porte, Ind.	2	1.6	1	3.8	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kandiyohi Co., Minn.	1	0.8	—	—	1	2.3	—	—	—	—
Wapello Co., Iowa	1	0.8	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	4.3
Oakland, Nebr.	1	0.8	—	—	1	2.3	—	—	—	—
San Francisco, Calif.	1	0.8	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	4.3
Detroit, Mich.	1	0.8	1	3.8	—	—	—	—	—	—
Unknown	1	0.8	1	3.8	—	—	—	—	—	—
Totals	125	100.0	26	100.0	43	100.0	33	100.0	23	100.0

and served as staging areas for frontier-bound immigrants. The Missouri River towns of Omaha-Council Bluffs and Sioux City were especially important to Dakota-bound immigrants. About 10 percent of the indirect migrants made second and third stops. In most cases these stops took place in these gateway towns of the Missouri Valley.

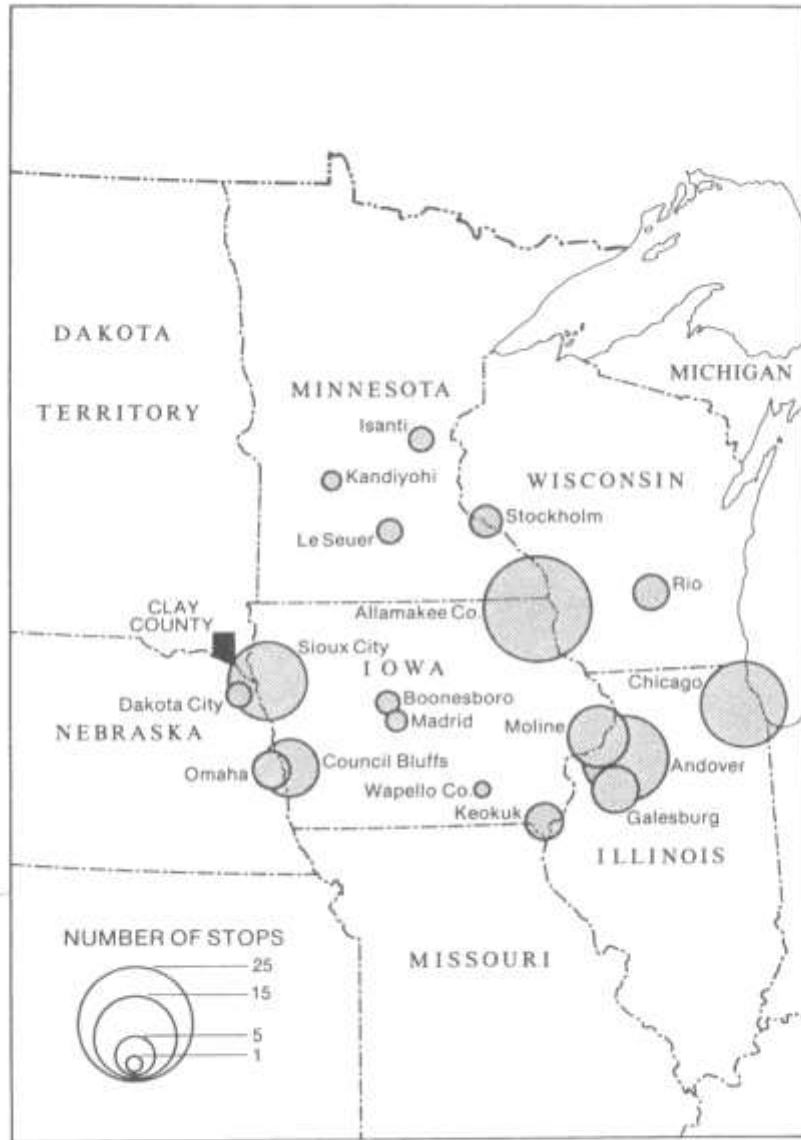


Figure 4. Initial Stops of Indirect Migrants to Clay County

The difference between culture groups in their potential for stops on the way westward would have the effect, in addition to varying their experience, of varying their time of arrival on the frontier. It was pointed out earlier that most of the Dalesburg migrants left Sweden at roughly the same time and proceeded directly to America. The graph in figure 5 shows how similar their emigration curves were. In contrast to that is the graph in figure 6, which shows the arrival curves for each of the three culture groups. The effect of intervening stops was to delay the arrival of the people from the Bothnian Coast and Östergötland. It should be pointed out, however, that there were also direct migrants in both the Bothnian Coast and Östergötland groups that arrived right alongside the earliest settlers from Dalarna. On the other hand, the Upper Dalarna lead was enhanced by the fact that the indirect migrations of the people from Dalarna were delayed for a shorter time on the average than those from the other groups. The average time from emigration to settlement for the indirect Dalarna migrant was 1.48 years. Migrants from the Bothnian Coast took an average of 1.9 years and those from Östergötland took 3.5 years.

Settling the Dalesburg Community

The collection point for settlers arriving in Clay County was the town of Vermillion, where the land office was located. It was customary for land seekers to leave dependents and possessions there while they went out to have a look at the land. Often this was done in small parties, since there were men who were in the business of guiding people out to survey the countryside.¹² In some cases, parties came up from Sioux City to find land and file claims. They would then return to Sioux City for their dependents and baggage.¹³ These land-seeking parties were a key element in determining the spatial pattern of homesteading, for it was the timing of an immigrant's arrival in Vermillion, along with the associations he had made with other migrants back in Sweden or along the way, that often determined the make-up of land-seeking parties and collective trips to the land office.

The map in figure 7 indicates that to a remarkable extent culture group associations played an important role. There was a clear tendency for those with common backgrounds to congregate along certain creek beds. People from Upper Dalarna colonized the areas along Erickson Creek, Garfield Creek, and the lower and central reaches of Baptist Creek. Immigrants from the Bothnian Coast area

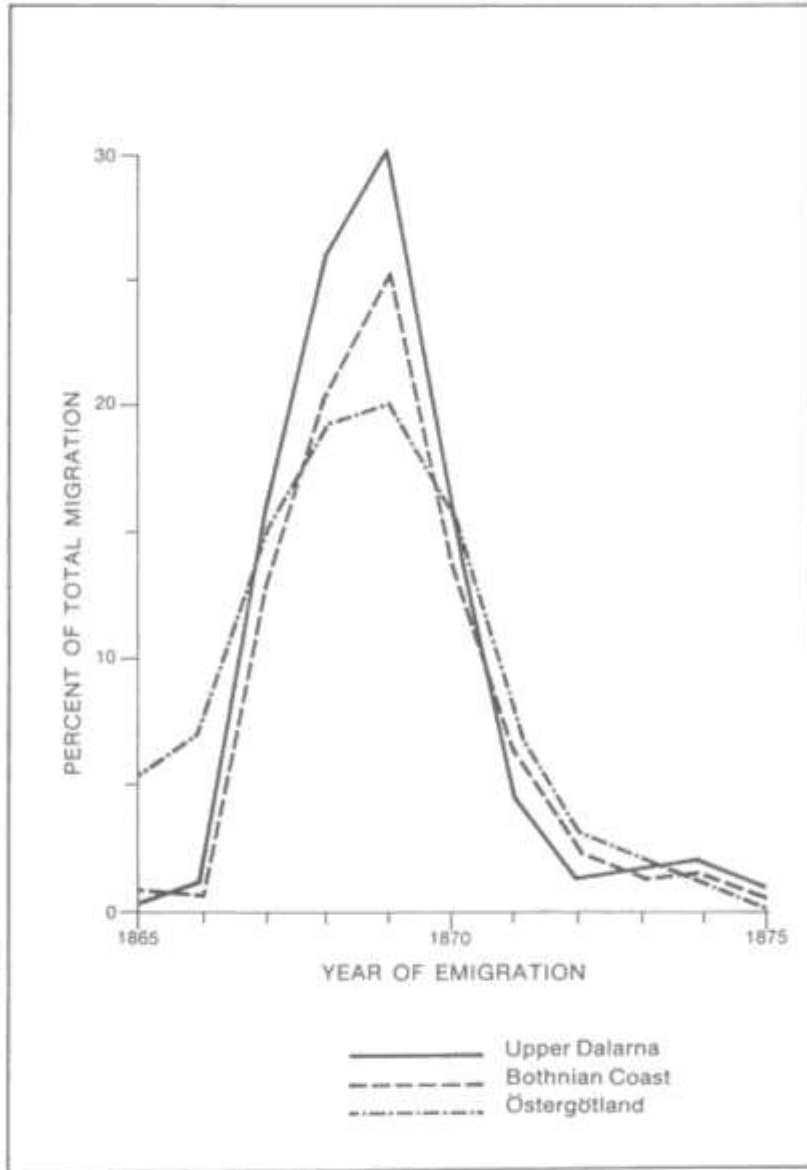


Figure 5. Emigration Curves by Culture Group

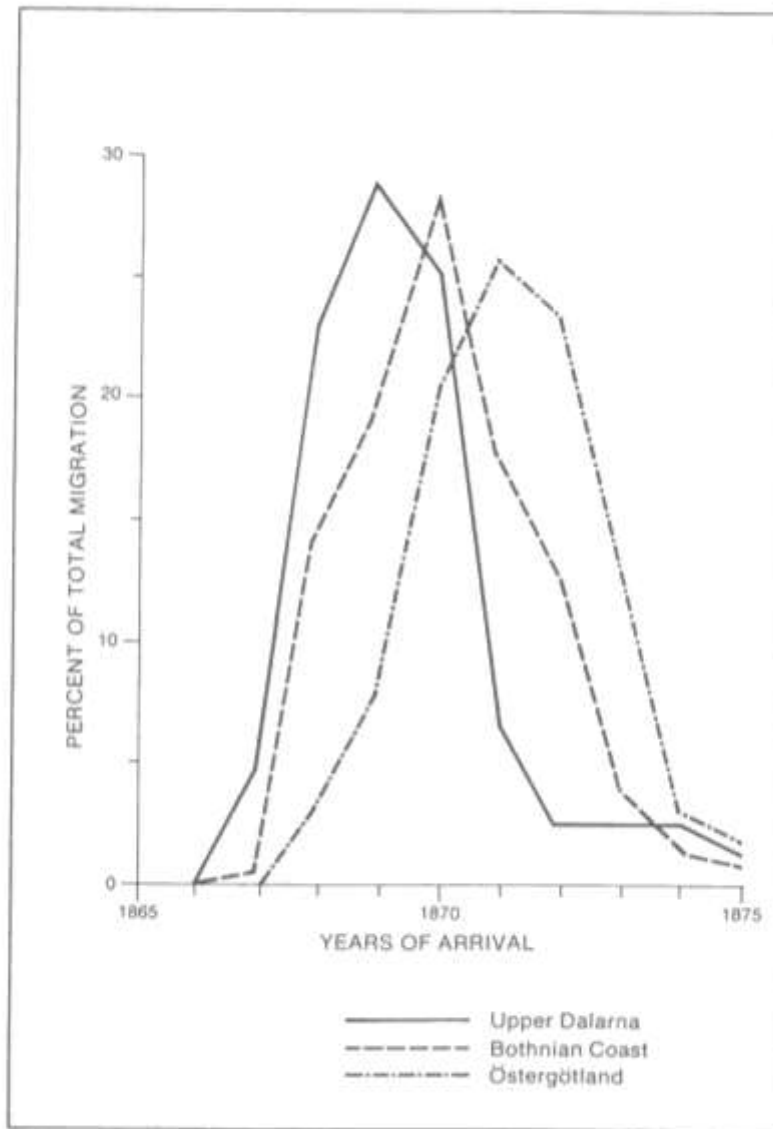


Figure 6. Arrival Curves by Culture Group

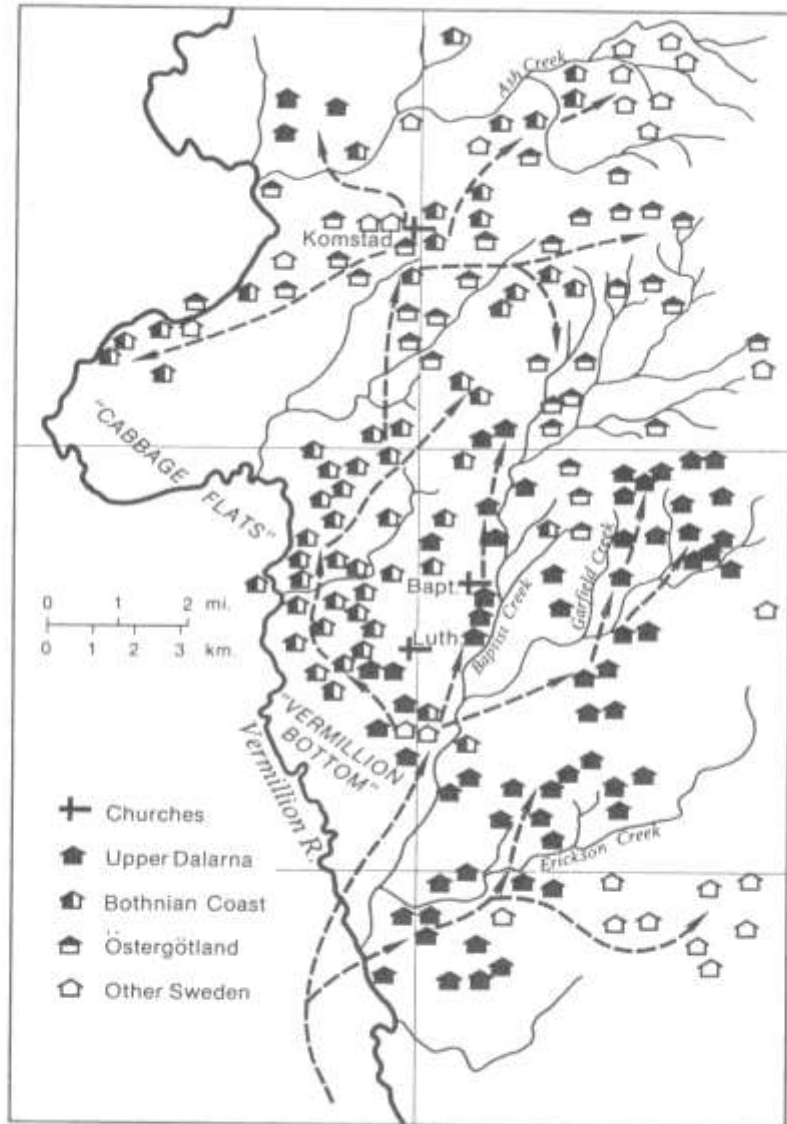


Figure 7. Homesteads by Culture Group

concentrated very heavily along the small unnamed creek that flows into the Vermillion River between Cabbage Flats and Vermillion Bottom. Others scattered northward along the Vermillion and some of its upriver tributaries. The Östergötland group occupied the area at the headwaters of Baptist Creek and along the unnamed creek directly to the west (near Komstad post office).

The importance of personal associations within the culture groups is evident if one inspects more closely the patterns outlined above. For instance, the Upper Dalarna people that settled along the lower reaches of Garfield Creek were all from the same place—the parish of Gagnef. Those that settled along Erickson Creek were largely from the parish of Svärdsjö, while residents of the neighborhood that emerged along Baptist Creek hailed largely from the parish of Rättvik. Each of these groupings reflects associations that were made back in Sweden.

At another level, the Östergötland people who occupied the headwaters of Baptist Creek and the area around Komstad post office had, for the most part, the common experience of spending time near Andover in Henry County, Illinois. The large concentration of Bothnian Coast people located to the west of the Lutheran church came from widely scattered locations in Sweden, but had, in most cases, proceeded to Clay County by way of Allamakee County, Iowa. Most of the Bothnian Coast people settling to the northeast of Cabbage Flats had moved as a group to Clay County, stopping at Madrid and Council Bluffs, Iowa.¹⁴ All of these are examples of associations made or strengthened by common experience in moving west toward the homestead frontier.

A remarkable thing about this clustering process is that not all the homesteads in each of the neighborhoods were taken simultaneously. There was usually a three- or four-year lag between the time that the first settler and the last settler of a neighborhood cluster filed his claim. During that period, the fringe of settlement would have advanced a considerable distance beyond. The formation of such distinct units was the product of conscious effort rather than the simple availability of land. A settler that was interested only in acquiring good land might well have made his choice elsewhere.

Conclusion

The degree to which these associations were perceived within the Dalesburg settlement and influenced the later life of the community is an important question. To investigate it is beyond the scope of this

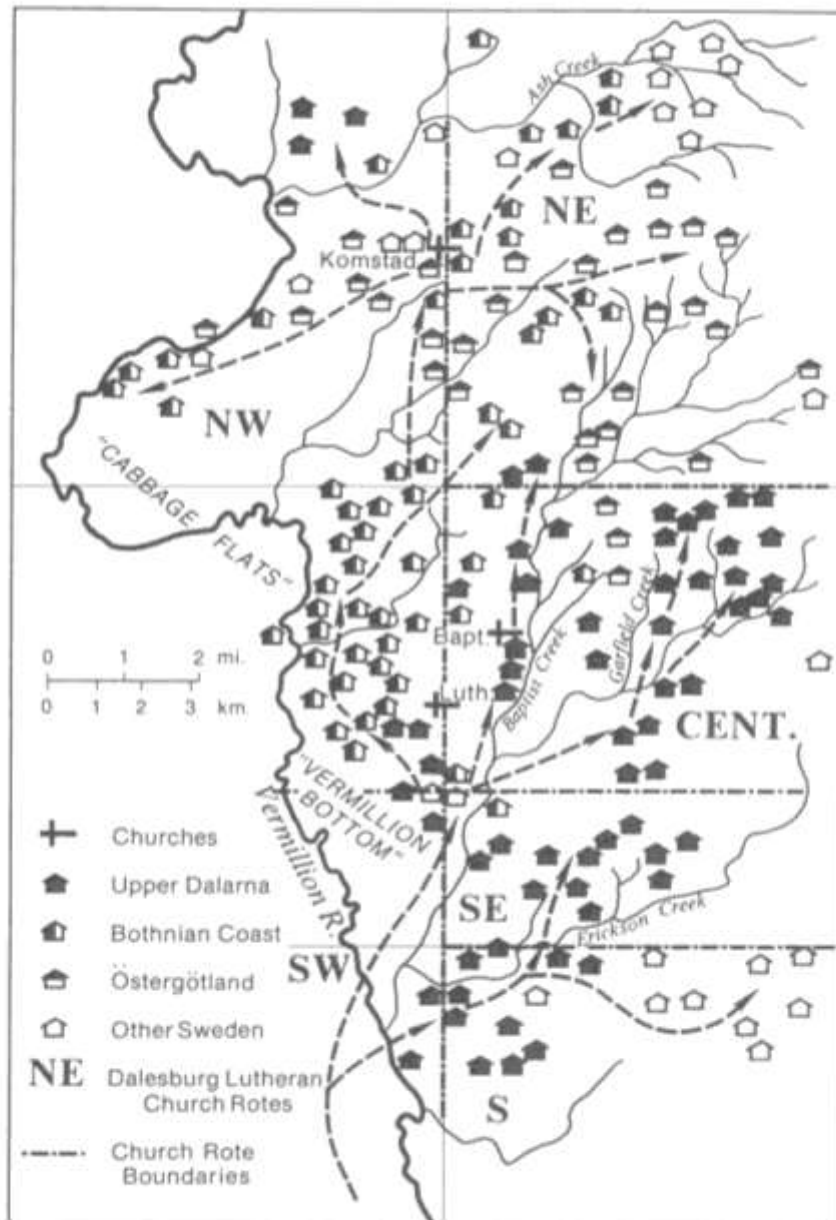


Figure 8. Dalesburg Lutheran Church Rotes

paper, but a possible line of inquiry would be a study of the religious structure of the community. A quick survey of the membership rolls of the Dalesburg churches suggests that church membership cut across neighborhood lines. A look at the internal organization of one of the churches, however, is more revealing. The Dalesburg Lutheran Church divided its membership into administrative districts called *rotas*. Although the boundaries of the *rotas* shifted somewhat during the history of the church, the map in figure 8 gives a fairly good approximation.¹⁵ The districts correspond reasonably well with many of the neighborhood clusters identified above. One may conclude that there was an official acknowledgment here of a community social organization that was older than the community itself.

The social organization of the Dalesburg community was the product of associations made or strengthened by common experience in making the journey from Europe to the homestead frontier. People who had known one another before the emigration began or who came to know one another at stopping points along the way grouped themselves into clusters or neighborhoods when they took their land. It was the communication and migration axes that connected home districts with intermediate settlements in the Middle West and eventually Dalesburg itself that guided the entire process and promoted the spatial concentration of homogeneous groups that is associated with ethnicity on the agricultural frontiers of the Great Plains.

Notes

1. The literature on the segregation of culture groups in the American Middle West is large. Some examples are John G. Rice, *Patterns of Ethnicity in a Minnesota County, 1880-1905* (Umeå, Sweden: Department of Geography, University of Umeå, 1973); Robert C. Ostergren, "Cultural Homogeneity and Population Stability among Swedish Immigrants in Chisago County," *Minnesota History* 43 (Fall 1973): 255-69; and Peter A. Munch, "Segregation and Assimilation of Norwegian Settlements in Wisconsin," *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* (1954): 102-40.

Questions about the migration process have become especially prominent in recent years as scholars have begun to view movement as possibly a more significant factor in explaining the American experience than the frontier institutions of Turner's celebrated thesis. See George W. Pierson, *The Moving American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

2. Knowledge about the comings and goings of people is normally extracted from place-oriented sources such as manuscript censuses, church registers, city directories, etc. An early example of a study that dealt with population turnover in a frontier community is Merle Curti et al., *The Making of an American Community* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

3. John C. Hudson, "Migration to an American Frontier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66 (June 1976): 242-65.

4. August Peterson, *History of the Swedes Who Settled in Clay County, South Dakota and their Biographies* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Swedish Pioneer and Historical Society of Clay County, South Dakota, 1947). The book actually contains 242 life histories, but the number used in this study was pared down to 206 by the elimination of multiple homesteads within the same family and a number of entries for which information was scant. The 206 individuals studied here are the heads of the families that homesteaded in the area.

5. Lloyd R. Moses, ed., *Clay County Place Names* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Clay County Historical Society, 1976), p. 45.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 134-35.

7. Herbert S. Schell, *History of Clay County* (Vermillion: S.Dak.: Clay County Historical Society, 1976), p. 149.

8. The emigrations shown are those of primary emigrants. It was often common for other members of a family to emigrate later. These later emigrations are not shown, since they are viewed in this paper as a continuation of the first person's emigration.

9. This is well demonstrated in Hudson, "Migration to an American Frontier," pp. 244-56.

10. Approximately one month is considered for the purpose of this paper to be a significant stop. Staying in one place for that length of time or longer implies that fairly permanent lodgings and perhaps employment had to be found. The type of employment sought during extended stops would be an interesting piece of information, but it is not uniformly available for this population.

Agents representing the railroads and immigration commissions of the plains states and territories were present in Sweden during the late 1860s and early 1870s. In addition, there were letters home from Swedes living in the Midwest, where information about the Dakota frontier was widespread. Examples of letters may be found in Bjorn Hallerdt, ed., *Emigration från Dalarna* (Falun: Falu Nya Boktryckeri AB, 1968).

11. An important feature of settlement in the Middle West was the strings of communities that were linked by bonds of kinship. When the population of a community grew beyond the capacity of the land to support it, surplus population commonly left the community in search of land, establishing daughter communities farther west.

12. Schell, *History of Clay County*, p. 111.

13. Homesteaders who had filed in Clay County often returned to Sioux City in order to find work, especially if they filed too late in the season to break ground and plant a crop.

14. A relatively large group of emigrants from the parish of Gnarp in Hälsingland traveled together as far as Council Bluffs and then dispersed. These people were part of that group.

15. The map is based on information obtained from Pastor Robert G. Lundgren, Dalesburg Lutheran Church, Vermillion, South Dakota.