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## EARLY SWEDISH SETTLEMENTS IN THE DAKOTA TERRITORY

E. G. TROTZIG

Very little has been written and published about Swedish immigration into the two Dakotas. There are scattered references to be found in the history of Swedish churches and in some local county histories. This neglect, perhaps, may be explained by the fact that the Norwegians so greatly outnumbered the other Scandinavian nationalities in this area that the latter were considered to be less significant.

It is true that many Swedish immigrants settled in the Dakotas without forming distinct colonies. The first Swedish settlers, however, did form compact settlements of sufficient size and density to exhibit a definite ethnic character which has persisted to this day. These settlements in the extreme southeastern corner of South Dakota were, and still are, the largest concentration of Swedes to be found in the two states.

The Dakota Territory was not opened to white settlement until 1859, a year after the government had concluded a treaty with the Yankton Sioux by which they relinquished their title to most of the land east of the Missouri River in what is now the state of South Dakota. There was no legal government in the area until Dakota Territory was formally organized in 1861 by an act of Congress.

Among the first white settlers was a group of Norwegian families who crossed the Missouri River from Nebraska in the summer of 1859 and squatted on land in the fertile valley between the present towns of Vermillion and Yankton. It was not until seven years later that the first Swedish settlers arrived.

An explanation for their later arrival is easy to find. The news that came out of the territory in the years between 1859 and 1867 was most forbidding. There were stories of droughts, blizzards, grasshoppers, and worst of all, an Indian uprising in 1862 which caused many settlers to abandon their homes and

flee for safety. Furthermore the Civil War years were a period of low emigration from Sweden.

After the war the situation changed rapidly. The Indian scare was abated, the weather was favorable for bumper crops, more land surveys had been completed, and the new Homestead Act made it possible to acquire a farm virtually free. Railroads were being built across Iowa to the Nebraska border, one line extending to Sioux City at the doorstep of the Dakota Territory. At the same time the railroad companies were conducting active publicity campaigns to attract immigrants. All of this came at the time when the "hunger years" in Sweden, 1867-69, were spurring a new wave of emigration.

Swedish settlers began arriving in the Dakota Territory in the summer of 1867. According to the data supplied by the parish registers, the first to settle in the area were: Mr. and Mrs. John Albin Peterson (the Peterson was dropped and Albin became the surname) from Molilla, Småland; Mr. and Mrs. Swan Peterson from Täby, Östergötland; Carl August Jungberg (Youngberg) from Jonstorp, Småland [Skåne?]; and Olof Rasmusson from "Järnskog, K. L." [Värmland?]. All had lived a year or more in Iowa or Illinois. The Albins left Sweden in 1864 and had lived in Des Moines. The Swan Petersons emigrated in 1865 and had stopped in Chicago. Youngberg and Rasmusson emigrated in 1866 and had temporary residence in Iowa.

The route they followed from Iowa was through Sioux City and from there along the military road which led westward through the towns of Elk Point, Vermillion, and Yankton to Fort Randall. There was a Norwegian settlement along Brule Creek in central Union County, but there was unoccupied land to the west and it was there they settled. This was the beginning of what became known as the Ahlsborg settlement, the first Swedish settlement in the Dakotas.

In the following year, 1868, more families arrived, including some directly from Sweden, and within a short time all the free land in the immediate vicinity was occupied. Being hemmed in on all sides by other settlements, the Ahlsborg community was limited to about thirty families.

With the completion of the railroad to Sioux City in 1868 the number of new settlers increased greatly, putting pressure on

the Swedes to find a larger area of unoccupied land. They began selecting homesteads in Clay County to the northwest of Ahlsborg and in the Union Creek Valley to the northeast in Union County.

The location and the extent of these settlements are shown on the map of Clay and Union Counties. The largest of these is the Dalesburg community, covering an area of 37,500 acres or about 94 square miles. The Union Creek settlement con-



Clay and Union Counties in Southeastern South Dakota with shaded areas showing Swedish settlements.

sists of a less distinct area about half that size, and the Ahlsborg settlement of a still smaller area. Since the distance between the three settlements is slight and because their histories intermingle, they can be treated as though they were a single unit.

The procedure followed by the typical immigrant arriving in Sioux City with his family can be described as follows:

The head of the family, along with a companion or two, would walk into the territory to select the land he wished to occupy. After determining the legal description from the surveyor's stakes he would walk to the town of Vermillion where the U. S. Land Office was located. After visiting the courthouse to declare his intention of becoming a citizen (if he had not already done so) he would go to the Land Office to file his homestead claim. That completed he would start on the thirty-five mile walk back to Sioux City to rejoin his family. There he would buy a wagon, oxen, and other necessities and with his family proceed to the land he had chosen.<sup>1</sup>

This was "tall-grass" country, grass so high that a child could get lost in it, but also carrying the promise of adequate rainfall to grow crops. There was no need for the laborious chore of clearing away timber or digging out stones. The deep layer of rich black loam was a welcome sight to those who had worked with thinner soils in their native land.

The treeless feature of their land had its drawbacks. Without timber the settler could not build a log cabin. Even more critical was the need for fuel. For firewood the pioneer had to go to the tree-lined banks of the Big Sioux River or the occasional groves along the Vermillion. For logs and lumber it was necessary to go to the heavily timbered area near the Missouri River. Near Elk Point and Vermillion there were mills sawing up cottonwood logs into lumber.

For a temporary home settlers in this area commonly resorted to what was called a "dugout." This was described as an excavation generally around 12 by 16 feet and 6 feet deep. The inside was lined with cottonwood boards and a roof of turf or thatch covered the whole. Unless the dugout was made in the side of a hill where drainage was good, the interior was uncomfortably damp.



What might happen to the roof of a dugout is told by Pastor L. A. Hocanzon in recalling a visit he made to the Ahlsborg church one Sunday. He had been invited to dinner by a family from Dalarna who had recently built a new home to replace the dugout. On the way from church a very heavy rain fell. "The food for the dinner was in the old house, a *jordkällare*; the roof had dissolved and we were without food."<sup>2</sup>

A different type of temporary home was built by John Sellberg from Gräsmark, Värmland, in the Union Creek settlement. His daughter, Hannah, described it as follows:

When Mr. Sellberg built his first home, he drove his oxen to the saw mill south of Elk Point and got cottonwood boards and other crude material. He raised the boards on end with a few two-by-fours to hold them together. Out of willows he made a network between the two-by-fours. Then he made a mill with a mixer in the center attached to a long pole to which he hitched the oxen. In this mill he ground clay from the creek with grass, producing a kind of mortar which he pounded into the network of willows. This made a solid mud wall which, when dried and white-washed, gave a nice appearing and warm room within. In this house, to which a small kitchen was added later, the family lived until 1883 when a new home was built.<sup>3</sup>

The settlements continued to grow rapidly until 1873, when the flow of immigrants was slackened, largely by the financial panic of that year. By that time, however, the available free land in Clay and Union Counties had been claimed by homesteaders and the Swedish communities had become fully established. Of the 380 Swedes in the Dakota Territory as shown by the 1870 census, 322 were in Clay and Union Counties. The other 58 were scattered, although most of them were in the new Beaver Valley settlement in Minnehaha County.

The published census statistics for the years 1870 and 1880 lump the Swedes and Norwegians together in the tables showing the ethnic distribution by counties. To find out the number of Swedes in each county it was necessary to examine a microfilm copy of the original reports of the enumerators. In 1870 there were 181 persons of Swedish birth in Clay County and 141 in Union County. The total of 322 thus represents the number of Swedes who came into these settlements and remained during the years 1867-69.

Immigration into the Dakota Territory during the 1870s brought the total number of Swedes to 3,177. Many of these were attracted to the gold-mining camps in the Black Hills while others were settling in counties along the eastern border adjacent to Minnesota. The great boom period of the 1880s brought thousands of Swedes into the territory, but no large compact settlements rivaling those in Clay and Union Counties were formed.

The census reports, of course, are of no help in determining which part of Sweden these immigrants came from. A partial source is the parish registers of the Lutheran churches in the settlements, but no such record exists for the Baptists and other sects. Fortunately there was in the Dalesburg community a dedicated chronicler who gathered complete information on all the pioneer Swedish families in Clay County. In his privately published book, *History of the Swedes who Settled in Clay County and Their Biographies*, August Peterson supplied the needed information on the 235 families who homesteaded in the county.\* As one would expect from the name of the community, Dalarna was the origin of the largest number of families, but other provinces are well represented. A tally shows the following distribution: Dalarna 94, Hälsingland 42, Småland 26, Östergötland 18, Skåne 15, Västergötland 14, Gästrikland 10, Jämtland 8, Halland 6, and only token numbers from Norrbotten, Värmland, Uppland, Ångermanland, and Stockholm.

For the settlements in Union County the only data concerning the origin of the Swedish settlers is found in the membership records of the Lutheran and Baptist churches. The parish register of the Union Creek Lutheran church yields the following pattern of distribution: Västergötland 16, Närke 6, Medelpad 5, Västernorrland 4, Gästrikland 3, Värmland 2, Halland and Östergötland 1 each. The Big Springs Baptist church records, on the other hand, show an overwhelming predominance of those from Dalarna. The register of the Ahlsborg Lutheran Church shows that most of the settlers in that community came from the provinces of Östergötland, Småland, and Värmland.

The major factor in maintaining the ethnic character of these settlements was the church. No less than seven Swedish con-





SUNDELL FARMSTEAD IN PLEASANT VALLEY TWP. IN 1890s.  
(Photo courtesy of Ren Johnson.)

gregations were organized in the early 1870s and all but one are still functioning and have celebrated their centennials. There are three Lutheran churches, two Baptist, and one Mission Covenant. The seventh, which failed to survive, was the Free Church Ansgar Meeting House in the Dalesburg area which had only a brief history during the 1870s.

Missionary pastors from the Augustana Lutheran Synod were early visitors to these settlements, encouraging the formation of congregations. The first Swedish Lutheran congregation in the Dakota Territory was organized at Ahlsborg at a meeting held January 11, 1870, in the home of John Albin. A year later, January 3, 1871, the Dalesburg Lutheran congregation was formed at a meeting in Andrew Bolin's dugout. The congregation at Union Creek was organized January 10, 1874, at a meeting called by John Sellberg and P. G. Wiberg. The first resident pastor, Rev. Carl Beckstrom, who resided on a claim north of Dalesburg, served all three congregations during his pastorate, which continued to 1875.

The first Baptist congregation was formed in the Union Creek community following the arrival of a group of Baptists from Sweden under the leadership of Reverend Peter A. Ring in the summer of 1869. This was the only known example of a group

migration into the Territory from Sweden which ostensibly had religious motivation. The group, consisting of eight families, settled in Big Springs Township near friends who had arrived the year before, and were known as the Big Springs Baptist congregation. The Reverend Mr. Ring also organized a Baptist congregation in the Dalesburg settlement. At midsummer 1871 he conducted a baptismal service in the Vermillion River at Bloomingdale and later the same day held an organizational meeting in the home of G. Jonas Peterson, one of the original settlers in Dalesburg and an influential member of the community. After first being designated as the Bloomingdale Baptist Church the name was changed to Dalesburg.

The Komstad Mission Church was organized in the autumn of 1874 and the Reverend J. E. Bodin was called to serve as pastor in 1875. The signatures appearing on the minutes of the meeting on October 23, 1874, were those of Gustavus Norgren, Adrian Isackson, and Lars Peterson.

During the same period, the Reverend C. H. Lundeen, who was skilled as a carpenter, built the Ansgar Meeting House or Swedefield Free Church in the southern part of the Dalesburg community. Several years later Lundeen removed to Minnesota where his son, Ernest, later became a U. S. Senator. His small flock disbanded; many joined the Baptists.

The importance of the church in the minds of these early settlers can be measured by the sacrifices they made toward the building of their houses of worship. While still living in their primitive dugouts and undergoing a succession of crop failures, they nevertheless went ahead with their building plans.

The first to be completed was the Big Springs Baptist Church in 1873. Next in order were: Dalesburg Lutheran, 1874; Ahlsborg Lutheran, started in 1874 but completed later; Komstad Mission, 1876; Union Creek Lutheran, 1877; and Dalesburg Baptist, 1879. These were the first Swedish churches to be erected in the Territory, and the only ones to be completed before 1880.

The Swedish language was used in all the services at these churches, including the Sunday schools. It was not until the time of the First World War that English began replacing Swedish, first in the Sunday schools and then for the Sunday evening

services. As recently as 1945 Swedish services were held on the first Sunday of each month in the Dalesburg Lutheran Church.

Of equal importance in preserving the language were the parochial schools conducted for six weeks each summer. There were three of these so-called "Swede" schools in the Dalesburg community, where the children were taught Swedish as well as religious subjects.

The organization of musical groups, such as church choirs, choruses, and other singing societies, contributed its share in maintaining the ethnicity of the community. Through the years both young and old joined in singing songs from the old Swedish song books, *Lammets Lof*, *Pilgrims Sångar*, *Herders-Rösten*, and *Barnavännens Lyra*.

A musical organization that was the pride of the community was the Dalesburg band, which became a fixture at fairs and celebrations in the surrounding area and locally at Midsummer picnics and other occasions. In the election campaign of 1896 the Dalesburg band traveled around the state to rallies for Wil-



DALEBURG BAND IN THE 1890s.

(Photo courtesy of Ron Johnson.)

liam Jennings Bryan in a bandwagon painted red, white, and blue and drawn by one white horse and one bay, symbolizing silver and gold. Many years later the Dalesburg band participated in the Swedish Tercentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, in June 1938<sup>5</sup>

Achievements in other fields were also a source of pride in the community. Solomon Anderson, from the Kallsjön area of Jämtland, was the leading promoter of new ventures. He was the first to build a silo on his farm, was the organizer of a co-operative creamery, and established a telephone exchange at Alsen which served rural patrons in both Clay and Union Counties. His brother, Lars A. Anderson, graduate of an agricultural school in Sweden, introduced new farming methods, including such things as beet culture and the growing of alfalfa. Solomon's son, Andrew Anderson, represented Clay County in the South Dakota senate and was the favored candidate for governor when he was tragically killed by a mad bull. Clinton P. Anderson, former secretary of agriculture and senator from New Mexico also originated from this same community.

Peter Norbeck, two-term governor of South Dakota and U. S. senator, was born in a dugout in Clay County, the son of another Jämtland Swede, Gjöran Norbeck, who settled on a homestead in Prairie Center Township in 1868. Because as a young man he had moved into Norway and married a Norwegian woman, he emigrated from Norway and continued to associate himself with the Norwegian settlers, acting as a lay preacher of the Haugean faith and instrumental in organizing St. Peter's Lutheran Church south of the Dalesburg settlement.

Hans Qvarnberg, who emigrated with his parents from Rättvik, Dalarna, operated a grist mill in partnership with the Norgren brothers, and later expanded his operations to become the leading flour miller in the state. At one time the Qvarnberg family had flour mills at Centerville, Platte, Chamberlain, Belle Fourche, and Rapid City.

Samuel Norgren, born in 1820 at Husby, Dalarna, emigrated with his family of five children and settled in the Komstad area. His sons filed on homesteads of their own. A grandson, Carl Norgren, attained success as an inventor and the owner of a large manufacturing plant in Denver.

John Norelius, a native of Uppland, was active in politics, serving on the board of commissioners for Clay County and in the state legislature.

Gjed Jonas Peterson from Gagnef, Dalarna, was one of the first Swedes to settle in Clay County. The first julotta was observed in his home at Christmas 1868. He was a supporter of the Farmer's Alliance and wrote and published two books, *The Public Schools 1,000 Years Hence* and *The Horseless Carriage*. His son, P. W. Peterson served in the state legislature.

No account of these early settlements would be complete without some mention of the mysterious "Reverend" Daniel Peter Brown whose many acts of kindness and helpful service to the community have made him a legendary hero. Documented facts concerning him are indeed meager. We know that he enlisted in the army at Fort Snelling in 1862, at which time he gave Stockholm as his place of birth and his age as 35. He was discharged in September 1863 at Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis, Missouri, after spending a month in the hospital. He filed a homestead claim at the Vermillion Land Office in February 1869. His familiarity with the English language and the legal requirements for filing homestead claims made him particularly helpful to the immigrants. He gave freely of his services in helping them to select land. He is supposed to have arranged it so that the Swedes settled on land east of the Vermillion River and the Norwegians on the west."

In addition he conducted religious services in the neighborhood, which gave evidence of his complete familiarity with Lutheran liturgy. To help both children and adults in acquiring knowledge of English, he conducted a school in his cabin in the period before the public schools were organized. After thirteen years of voluntary service he sold his farm in 1882 and moved to Nebraska, where he died in 1886 under mysterious circumstances. "Reverend" Brown's log cabin near Riverside has been restored and is now one of the historical landmarks in Clay County.

As this is being written the Swedes have just held their 106th annual "Midsommar Fest" at Dalesburg with a program designed to renew their interest in their cultural heritage. A delightful feature of the program was a children's chorus pains-

takingly trained to sing "Jesus älsker mig" and "Tjuv och tjuv." Soloists sang Swedish songs and the audience was taught to join in singing the hymn, "Tryggare kan ingen vara." There was a showing of Swedish slides, a Maypole dance, and of course a bountiful *smörgåsbord* was served by the women of the community. The final event of the evening was a baseball game between the Baptist and Lutheran teams, the 25th renewal of this friendly rivalry. Further evidence of community solidarity was the participation in the program by the pastors of the Union Creek, Komstad, and Dalesburg churches.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> South Dakota Historical Collections, Vol. XI, p. 577.

<sup>2</sup> *Minnes album över Sv. Ev. Luth. församlingarna inom Sioux Falls distriktet*, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> S. D. Historical Collections, Vol. XI.

<sup>4</sup> August Peterson, *Swedes of Clay County* (n. p., 1947).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Also see Agnes N. Hanson, "The Reverend Daniel Peter Brown, South Dakota Pioneer," *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, V (1954), 56-61.

Most helpful in addition to the above were the historical accounts contained in the centennial booklets published by each of the six churches in these settlements. Church history is also to be found in Emeroy Johnson's *A Church Is Planted* (Minneapolis, 1948), and T. M. Shanafelt's *Baptist History of South Dakota* (n. p., c. 1899). For more information about S. Schell, *History of Clay County* (Vermillion, 1976). Dr. Schell kindly permitted me to consult his notes while preparing this article.