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# A journey from Sweden to America

## "The children have so much better chance in this new world". Part 2.

By MATILDA PERSDOTTER OLSON

SUBMITTED BY JOHN R. OLSON

### The journey by train from New York to Nebraska, June 1887:

*The train ride across the country was the hardest yet. At first we were glad to see land after being on the water for a week, but after watching the landscape go by, that got tiresome. The cars were crowded and [had] no place to lie down to sleep. It was hardest on grandfather; he was old and [had] no place to lay down. On the ship he had his bunk at least. Mother used to lay the boys on the seat in the train and lay down on the floor in between [the] seats. The rest of us had to just lean over and get what sleep we could.*

### No food on the train

*And then the food. No one gave us anything to eat like on the ship. We had taken some bread and cheese and boiled eggs in a satchel from the old country to have to lunch on, but after two weeks the eggs had spoiled and those had to be thrown out through the car window. And the bread was dry, but we had nothing else; [we] had to eat [it] if we wanted anything. We had the worst time with John<sup>1</sup>; he would not eat, and if the train stopped for a few minutes in a city, father had to get off if they would let him, and sometimes he could buy a bottle of milk off some boy that was selling it, no matter how much it cost. We had no way to wash and keep clean, only I suppose Mother got a wet cloth and wiped us off. And it was getting warmer the farther we got west with our*

*winter clothes that we had to wear when we started. I think it was after five days, maybe it was six, that we arrived in Columbus [Nebraska]. Then the agent that had been with us all the way put us on the train to go to Genoa, and he went back east. We were the very last ones he had. Our friends that came with us from our neighborhood, they stopped off in Iowa at a town by the name of Bancroft.<sup>2</sup> I corresponded with the girl for quite some time. Her name was Caroline.*

### Arrival in Genoa, Nebraska, June 10, 1887

*In the afternoon of June 10, 1887, we arrived in Genoa. My Aunt, Mrs. Mortenson,<sup>3</sup> was there to meet us. She had driven in the 2 miles with the mules and lumber wagon. We were so glad to be at our destination. We had been on the trip for 24 days, and that is a long time with a family. I can remember the first meal we had. Aunt fried pork and eggs and potatoes for supper and I think we had apple sauce and cookies and bread and butter and milk that tasted good to us that were so starved for good food. The next thing we had to do was getting cleaned up. Our baggage did not arrive for some time but we had a few things that could be washed. Mother and Aunt washed for several days before they got all our dirty clothes clean. Our clothes were too warm, so they had to go right to sewing for us children and make us calico dresses.*

### Life in Nebraska

At this point in her memoir, Matilda begins describing the process of adjusting to her new life in America. Due to her mother's illness, she spends two years with her father's sister and her husband in Malmo, Nebraska, approximately 55 miles east of Genoa. She describes her struggle to learn English at school, how most of the other children were Swedish, and how she had to work and do chores while other children played.

She also describes her deepening religious beliefs and the influence of a Sunday school teacher at the West Hill Swedish Methodist Church near where her family lived from 1887 to 1898 when they moved approximately eight miles away to a farm just west of Genoa, NE. She wrote the following about her strong religious beliefs:

*At about fifteen years of age, during revival meetings, I was converted, much through the influence of my Sunday School teacher. I have always been thankful I gave myself to the Lord in my early years. I was spared years of sin in the world. A school girl friend of mine tried hard to get me to go with her to dances with the rest of the young people that did not care for church, but thank the Lord I was able, with His help, to stand against temptation and was not drawn into that kind of life. I always had to work hard to help my parents so it was very little time I had to be among the young people and I did not have the*

*Finally when my parents realised they never could pay for the extra land they had bought which by the way cost more than 7,000 kroner an acre. They decided to sell their home and sail for America. Uncle wrote them it is so much better when you have the children, to bring them when they are young they have so much better chance in this new world.*

*Excerpt from Matilda's diary about when her parents decided to immigrate.*

clothes to wear that the other girls had. Many times when the other young people gathered at the parsonage for recreation, I and my brothers had to go past there and lead our cows home to be milked. Anything that you have to do that is different from others is hard on a young person.

The remainder of Matilda's memoir is a chronicle of her life in Nebraska, including her marriage in 1902 to my great-grandfather, Frank A. Olson, Sr. (she notes that she did not have to change her last name after marrying, "only added the 'Mrs.' as Frank's name was the same as mine.")



*Matilda Olson (Persdotter) (1878-1972) and husband Frank A. Olson (1872-1938) in Nebraska. Possibly a wedding photo from 1902.*

She reports on the lives of her family including her two sons and two daughters as well the lives of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren that arrived as the years went by. She tells of a number of crop failures on their Nebraska farms but that she was nonetheless thankful to the Lord for providing. She documented the illnesses and deaths in the family and noted the death in 1945 of [the] last of "the old people": her Aunt Matilda Mortenson Johnson (her mother's sister) with whom she had lived from 1887-1889 as a young girl newly arrived from Sweden.

Although coming from a very small farm of about ten acres in Sweden, Matilda Olson, along with her two brothers, would, during the 1940s and 1950s, own several farms of from 160 to 320 acres in Nance County, NE. Her siblings and children would also prosper in America as have their descendants.

Life in Sweden was difficult for Matilda and her family due to a small and unproductive farm. Matilda's life in America was also challenging but in different ways. Although she wrote of her family's successes and joyful times in Nebraska, Matilda's descriptions of floods, droughts, and crop failures, and well as the usual trials and tribulations of life – the illnesses, accidents, and untimely deaths – suggest that her life in Nebraska was not an easy one. But Matilda's memoir demonstrates well that her Uncle Bengt, in his mid-1880s letters from America, was right: "the children

here have so much better chance in this new world."



*Matilda Olson, Genoa, NE (1878-1972) in later years.*

## Acknowledgements:

My daughter, Emily Williams, who started our Olson family history project, provided the map of the location of the farm in Södra Vallösa, Sweden, where Matilda Olson lived until 1887. (See SAG 2014/1, p. 11). Many thanks are due to Matilda's granddaughter, LeVere Linnerson Crum, who has recently shared her grandmother's memoir with others in the Olson family.

## Endnotes:

- 1) Matilda's brother, born May 2, 1885, and thus only two years old at this time.
- 2) Bancroft is in extreme north-central Iowa in Kossuth County.
- 3) Hanna Olson, sister of Matilda's father Peter Olson and the wife of Bengt Mortenson.

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