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Emigrant Traffic on the North Sea

BY NILS WILLIAM OLSSON (†)

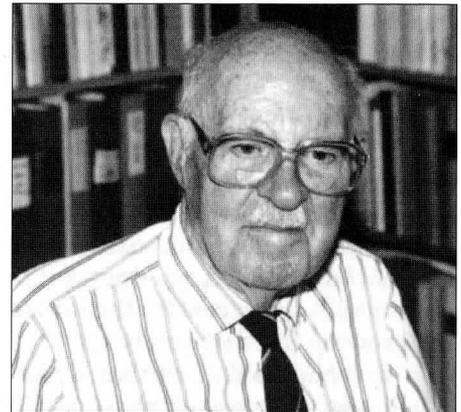
Americans of Swedish descent, whose ancestors made the long journey from Sweden to America, find the Swedish emigration phenomenon divided roughly into three time periods. These periods correspond roughly to (a) – the early emigration era, i.e. up to the 1850s and 1860s, (b) – the middle period, which saw the culmination of emigration, and (c) – the period just prior to and after the First World War.

The first period coincided with the sailing ship era, when Swedish sailing vessels from Göteborg, Stockholm, and the Norrland ports of Gävle and Söderhamn, ferried passengers the entire distance from Sweden to America. With few exceptions, the Swedish emigrants who left Sweden during the period 1820-1860 went the entire distance on Swedish or foreign vessels. The second period begins with the advent of the improved and more dependable steamship, the acceleration of emigrant traffic, and the need for speedier communications across the Atlantic. This was the time when the journey was split into two segments – the first being the trip across the North Sea from Copenhagen, Göteborg, or the Danish port of Esbjerg, located on the west coast of Jutland, directly to Hull on the east coast of England. From Hull the transportation of thousands of emigrants was carried out via the railway to Liverpool, where the giant British transoceanic steamships were tied up, waiting to receive their human cargoes. Despite the inconvenience of splitting the journey, the time saved was enormous and emigrants could now, hopefully, make the westward journey in much shorter time. It is true that many emigrants, particularly

from southern Sweden, found it preferable to travel to Germany and then via Hamburg or Bremen travel the long journey across the North Atlantic. It is estimated that roughly 15% of the Swedish emigrants chose this method.

The third epoch begins in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, when the Thingvalla Line out of Copenhagen, later to be renamed the Scandinavian American Line and later, in 1915, the Swedish American Line out of Göteborg, were able to offer direct and speedy transatlantic service aboard modern and comfortable steamships.

It is the middle period, however, which chiefly interests us, for this is the period which, more than the two other, involved the majority of the Swedish emigrants who sought a new life style in the West. Efforts to provide direct service via steamships between Göteborg and Hull had begun already in April 1834, when a British company, the St. George Steamship Company of Liverpool, dispatched its first steamer, the *Superb*, from Hull to Göteborg. It was followed by another vessel, the *Cornubia*. The steamers kept to the schedule fairly well, but the number of passengers who availed themselves of this new swift means of transportation, were few, varying from five to ten each journey. Also, because of the cholera epidemics which raged at this time and which forced the ships to go into quarantine at Känso, outside of Göteborg, traffic slowed and the number of passengers was further reduced. This first start in steamship service lasted but through the summer of 1834. By the time the ice broke up the next spring



*Nils William Olsson (1909–2007).
Founder of SAG.*

it was back to the sailing vessels again, the company having lost too much money on the venture.

The hope of inaugurating regular steamship traffic between Sweden and England still remained, however. In 1840 the British firm of Wilson, Hudson & Co., situated in Hull, opened traffic between Hull and Göteborg with two leased steamers, the *Glen Albyn* and the *Innisfail*. These were in turn replaced by two other vessels, the *Scotia* and the *Express*. Also this second attempt failed, after only two years.

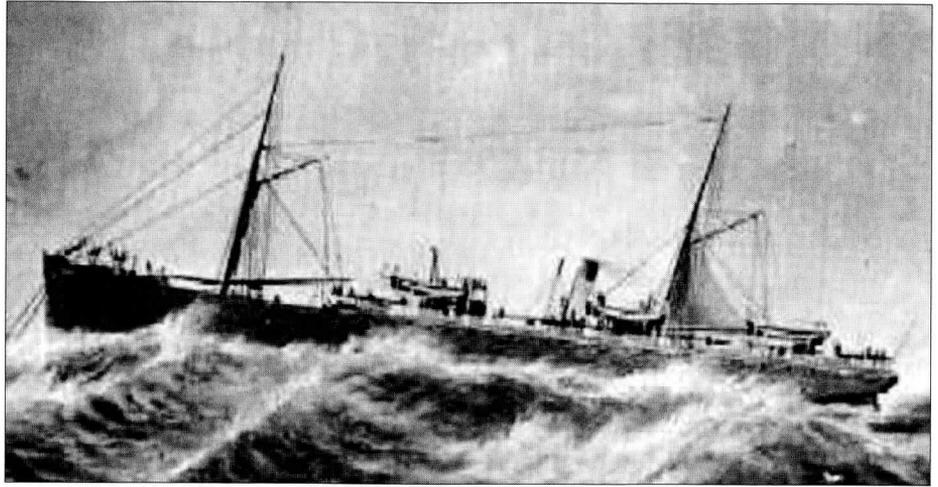
It was during these two years, however, that despite the paucity of passengers, something happened which was to create an entirely different situation. On board the *Innisfail*, which arrived in Göteborg from Hull on 19 Aug. 1842 was a Swedish passenger, who was returning to Sweden, after a grand tour, which had included a visit to the United States. He was Robert Rettig, the son of the Swedish tobacco tycoon in Gävle, Per Christian Rettig. On the journey across the North Sea young Rettig had made the acquaintance of an Englishman, David Wilson, a son of the ship's owner in Hull, Thomas

Wilson. Robert Rettig brought David Wilson and his brother John West Wilson to Gävle, where both spent some time studying Swedish and pursuing mercantile studies.

On 1 Dec. 1843, John West Wilson, then but 28 years old, founded in Göteborg the shipping firm of J. W. Wilson, which today under the name of Wilson & Co. still carries on the business of shipping and freight forwarding. His father, Thomas Wilson in Hull, owned the head firm in that city, and thus father and son could conduct a transit traffic across the North Sea to the mutual satisfaction of both. In Göteborg, John West Wilson established a thriving business in exporting to England – oats, cattle and Swedish wood products, importing to Sweden coal for the infant but growing Swedish industry.

It was not until 1848 that a new attempt was made to establish regular steamship service between Göteborg and Hull. Despite the former failures, many things had changed, not least the burgeoning emigrant traffic and the recent discovery of gold in California. Plans advanced slowly. Wilson suggested a contract with the Swedish Government that he would carry all mail free of charge, if the Government would waive all port charges in Sweden and Norway. After two years Wilson finally had his contract and on 29 June 1850 the first steamer *Courier* arrived in Goteborg with several passengers on board. After that a vessel departed from Göteborg every fortnight, touching at the port of Kristiansand in south Norway en route. In the beginning the service ran into some difficulties, particularly the cholera epidemic, which again forced vessels to go into Kängö quarantine for long periods of time.

In March of 1851, however, the first World's Fair was opened in London and traffic began picking up. The first tariffs were announced. The round trip between Goteborg and Hull in first class commanded a price of seven pounds, in second class it was four pounds. The railway journey from Hull to London was a little more than a pound.



S/S Orlando.

By the fall of 1852 the *Courier* was replaced with a brand new vessel, the steamship *Scandinavian*, measuring 500 tons, which provided the direct weekly connection with Hull, without going via Kristiansand. As a rule the journey across the North Sea consumed about 52 hours of travel.

The emigration to America, which during the 1840s had begun to develop at a modest rate, began in the 1850s to accelerate beyond the wildest dreams. The English steamship lines began building bigger and faster ships in order to compete with the sailing vessel traffic. Here the steamships could offer the speed which shrank the time consumed on the Atlantic run from period of eight, ten, or up to twelve weeks to an average of a fortnight. John West Wilson saw the opportunities and began negotiating with the British Atlantic Lines to coordinate the traffic by sending passengers to Hull, then by rail to Liverpool, the giant departure port for all of the British Isles, as well as parts of the European continent. Wilson thus inaugurated a service which was to continue uninterrupted up to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

Thus the *Oscar*, a spanking new propeller driven steamship, measuring 700 ton and built in 1853, was able to sail for Hull from Göteborg 19 May 1854, carrying 120 emigrants. In June of the same year the *Oscar* carried no less than 350 Swedish emigrants. At that time there were no less than 1,500 individuals from various parts of Sweden lodged in

Goteborg, waiting for space to cross the North Sea and the Atlantic. As the emigration grew, so did also the Wilson Line. At times it was necessary to bring over extra steamers from Hull to cope with the immense traffic. Among these temporary vessels, which aided the emigration effort, were such ships as the *Baltic*, *Humber*, *Propeller*, *Hamburg*, *Neva*, *North Sea*, *Kingston*, *Hawk*, *Jupiter*, *St. George*, *Arctic* and many others.

In 1859 the Wilson Line added a new vessel, the *Arctic*, which measured close to 700 tons. Increased emigration forced the line to acquire two new and modern steamships, the *Argo*, measuring 716 tons and which could carry 282 passengers, and the *Pacific*, which measured 688 tons and could handle 302 passengers. Soon another vessel, the *Hero*, measuring 985 tons joined the traffic and made the crossing over the North Sea in the record time of 39 hours. *Argo* and *Oder*, the latter measuring 694 tons, were to be the regular steamships which plied the North Sea continually through the 1850s and 1860s. The number of passengers increased. By 1865 the Wilson ships averaged between 170 and 200 passengers on each journey and on one journey alone, the *Argo* was filled to capacity with 300 passengers. The emigration scene in Göteborg on those days when the vessels left for Hull was one of excitement, confusion, anticipation, as well as sadness.

The *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* carried a story on 26 Aug. 1865, which paints the scene as

seen by the newspaper's reporter:

"Every week we witness larger and smaller groups of peasants from almost every province in Sweden, who have arrived here, ostensibly to travel with the large British steamships to the New World. The entire deck is covered with chests and bed clothes. The motivating drive for making this journey is the fact that relatives in America have written letters telling of how good life is over there. Thus one sells house and land in order to make the journey.

"Down in the harbor, where the Hull steamer *Argo* is docked, there is life and activity. The deck has to be cleared before departure, and now everybody is working desperately to stow the baggage. The emigrants are to be quartered on the middle deck.

The cargo consists of sawn timber and between the cargo and the deck there is enough room so that one or two hundred persons can lodge here comfortably. Along the sides of the vessel are provisional seats, which also maybe used for a head rest for those who wish to sleep. Here, also, the bed clothes are spread ready for the night's rest.

"The large hatchway provides the room with light and fresh air. Even around the engines, emigrants have made themselves comfortable. Boys and girls, mothers with babies, still nursing, young and old, every class of humanity is represented here. The

family fathers are attempting to cheer up their families, telling them to keep up their courage. The women seem passive. The Word of God is on their lips and with tearful eyes and anxiety in their hearts they attempt to sing a religious hymn in their solemn meditation. The men busy themselves seeing that everything is in order. They then settle down around a sea chest, take out their provisions of pork, meat, butter, cheese and bread. They are loquacious and freely dispense the one "for the road."

"Now the signal is given and the departure is at hand. Now the situation changes. Friends and relatives leave the ship. The passengers gather along the railing for the last look at the city. Now, the engines start up and there is unrest on board, weeping, moaning, crying, and shrieking is heard. Many of the passengers change their moods as they soberly reminisce about their homes and life in their native land. "Farewell, dear Sweden" is the cry one hears from many lips. Soon one can see nothing of the *Argo* in the beautiful September (read August) evening but the pillar of smoke streaking across the horizon."

Greater hordes of emigrants made it necessary to build larger and more commodious vessels. In 1866 a new *Hero* arrived in Göteborg (the old one had been sold to Australia). It measured 1,034 tons and could carry 550



S/S Rollo.

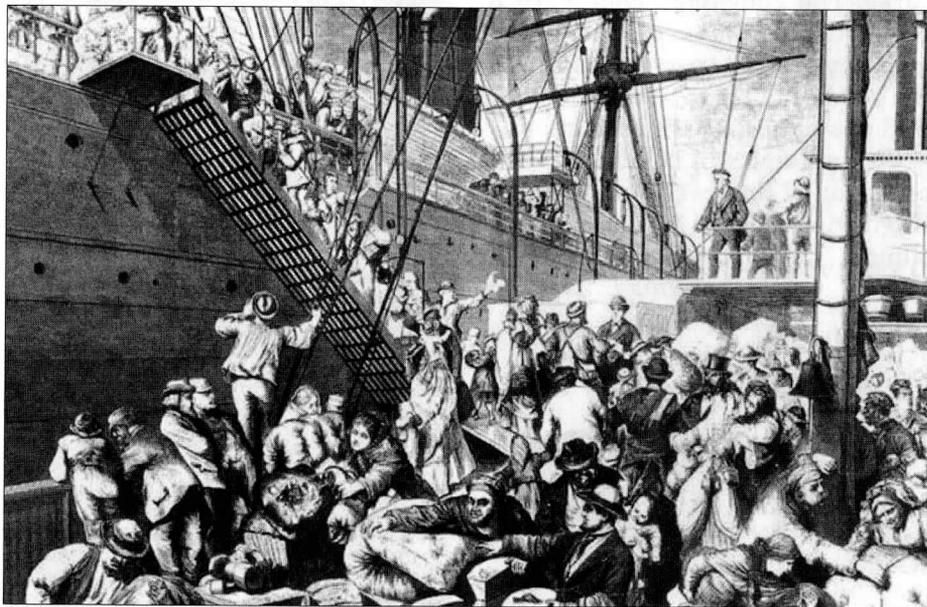
passengers. The *Argo* was replaced with the *Albion*, which measured 1,066 tons.

But it was in the late 1860s and the 1870s that the Wilson Line really increased its carrying capacity. Two ships, the *Orlando* and the *Rollo* were built in Hull 1869-1870 and measured the unheard-of size of 1,500 tons and could carry from 800 to 900 passengers. These vessels were serving the emigrant trade for many years and thousands and thousands of Swedish emigrants began their journeys to the United States aboard one of these two sturdy vessels. In 1881 another vessel, the *Romeo*, measuring 1,855 tons, replaced the *Rollo*. The *Ariosto*, measuring 2,376 tons, the largest ship which at that time called at Göteborg regularly, was added in 1890. In later years two other Wilson ships were added to the Göteborg-Hull run. These were the *Calypso*, measuring 2,876 tons, built in 1904 and the *Eskimo*, built in 1910, measuring 3,326 tons.

As mentioned earlier, the outbreak of World War I brought an abrupt end to the emigrant traffic between Göteborg and Hull. When the war was over it was the Swedish American Line that was to take over as the transportation medium for Swedes wishing to migrate. But that is another chapter.

For thousands of Americans, who have heard their parents and grandparents speak about their first chapter of their odyssey to the New World, names like the *Orlando*, the *Rollo*, the *Romeo*, and the *Ariosto* evoke a nostalgia which is difficult to describe. These were the ships that furnished the first break in the link that tied them to their native land.

This article was first published in SAG 1984/4.



Emigrants boarding a steamer in 1874.