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Swedes on the Mississippi of the 1850's

Some of the early immigrants ventured to the far west

BY JOHN E. NORTON

By the mid-1830's unrest between native Americans and new settlers from the east had largely subsided, and immigration into the American "northwest" had begun, not just by eastern "Yankee" settlers, speculators, and veterans claiming bounty land, but even by European immigrants. Sweden was no exception.

The first midwestern Swedish seed communities appeared in the early 1840's in places like Pine Lake, Wisconsin.

In our part of the Midwest, they began in 1845, as immigrant farmer Petter Cassel brought a small group from Kisa in Östergötland to what became the New Sweden settlement near Burlington, Iowa. It, in turn, spawned other communities along the Des Moines River to the north, in places like Swede Bend, now Stratford, Iowa.

The floodgates were opened in 1846-50 by the flight of some 1200 "Erik Janssonist" perfectionists from north-central Sweden, who created what became the "Prairie Utopia" of Bishop Hill in Henry County, Illinois, in 1846.

These settlements brought newspaper stories, letters, and great public interest back in Sweden. The experience of the Erik Janssonists at Bishop Hill also brought the decision of a pietistic Swedish Lutheran clergyman, Lars Paul Esbjörn of Hille (Gäst.), to minister to those Swedes by emigrating. He took leave of his duties in Sweden, and in June 1849 led a party of about 140 from the Gävle area to settle in Andover, Illinois, a speculative Yankee community near Bishop Hill and Moline.

Then, in 1849-51, a remarkable Swedish author, feminist, and keen



Fredrika Bremer (1801-1866). Painting in 1843 by J.O. Södermark.

observer of America, **Fredrika Bremer**, made a U.S. tour, leading to her writing *Homes in the New World*, recommending the Northern Midwest to her countrymen as a possible "new Scandinavia."

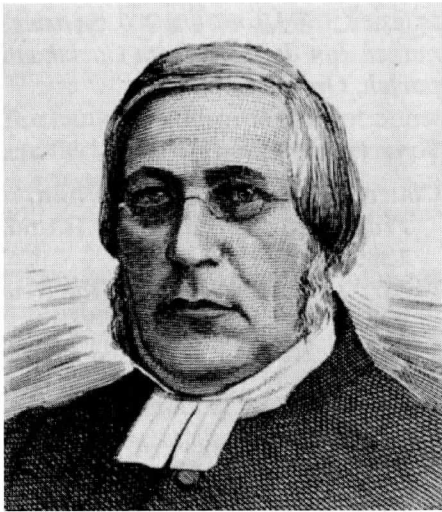
Until the 1854 crossing of the Mississippi by its first railroad bridge between Rock Island and Davenport, rivers had been considered among the safest and most pleasant ways to travel through our region, later encouraged by newspaper accounts of the 1854 "Grand Excursion," promoting the Midwest along the Mississippi as a place to tour, settle, and prosper.

Petter Cassel. The earliest immigrant organizer to our area arranged the group migration of some 20 farmers from Östergötland, Sweden, sailing on the *Superb* from Göteborg in August 1845, and settling in what became New Sweden, Jefferson

County, IA. His letters home were widely published, and even brought the first Swedes to Andover, Illinois, in 1845-46, before the later party led by Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn in 1849.

Erik Jansson. This remarkable farmer-preacher led the single largest mass migration ever to leave Sweden, using eastern Swedish ports like Gävle and Söderhamn, beginning in late 1845, and continuing through 1850. It involved some 1200 followers seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity. Their letters home, published in regional newspapers, were often critical of Jansson's leadership, but almost universally praised the opportunity of America. Their prairie Utopia of Bishop Hill remains almost unchanged today, and is a National Historic Landmark. Jansson and his followers used the Mississippi to export goods to thriving river communities like St. Louis, and to bring products, and even Durham cattle, from Shaker Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, back to Bishop Hill. They had a fishing camp on what is today Arsenal Island, where Jansson's first wife died of cholera, but which also supplied the colony's Civil War soldiers with occasional salt fish to supplement government rations.

Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn was moved by the plight of many former Erik Janssonists who had fled the Bishop Hill Colony to settle nearby communities like Victoria, Galesburg and Moline. Finally, in June of 1846 he led his own flock of some 144 emigrants from Hille near Gävle, Sweden, to Illinois. His work at Andover in establishing the first Swedish Lutheran congregation in the Midwest, then others in Galesburg, and



Lars Paul Esbjörn (1808–1870).

Moline, led to what became the Augustana Synod. This is considered the largest and most successful Swedish creation in the New World. It also brought the founding of Augustana College, first in Chicago in 1860, then for a short time in Paxton, IL, and finally in Rock Island in 1875, where it thrives today.

Esbjörn returned to Sweden in 1863 from his leave of absence, but the young clergy trained at August-

ana College and Theological Seminary became the builders of the Augustana Synod, now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

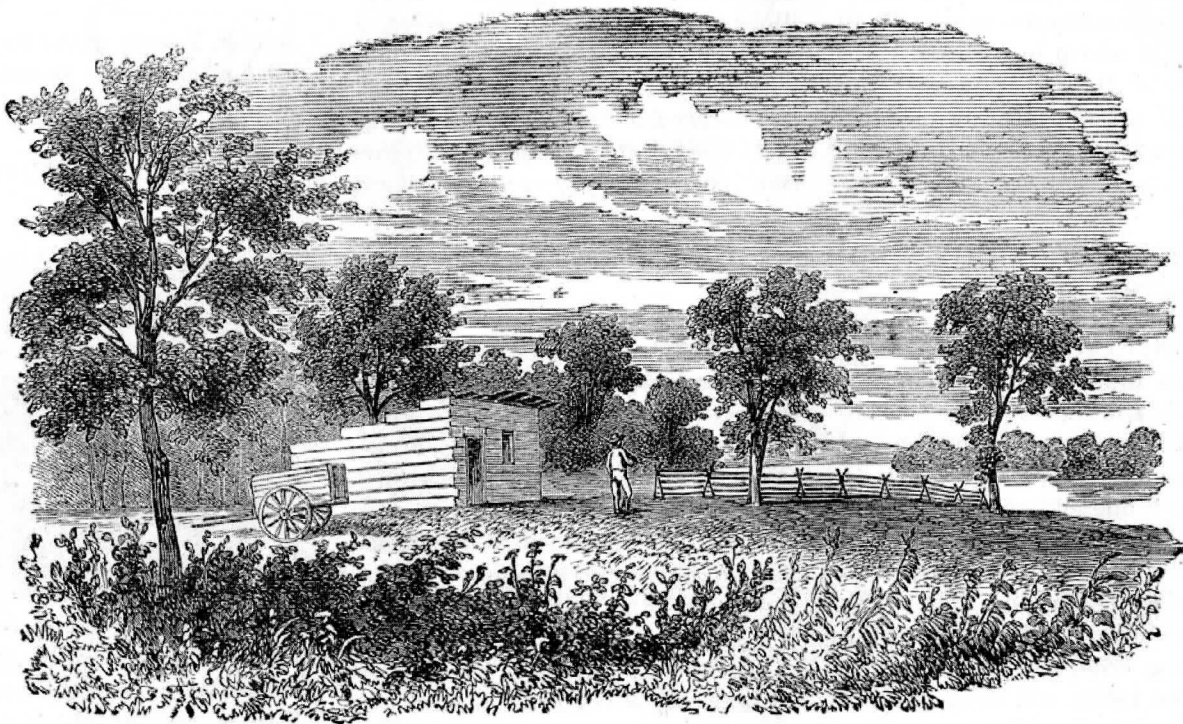
Erik Norelius. One of Esbjörn's discoveries was a 16-year old emigrant of 1850, Erik Norelius, who left with a group of 115 pietistic "Luther Readers" from Gävle, in November, 1850. He came to Andover, then to Moline. At Esbjörn's urging, Erik completed his education at Capitol University in Ohio. After ordination, he headed north on the Mississippi to begin a remarkable career in Minnesota, as both church organizer, founder of the newspaper *Minnesota Posten*, organizer of Gustavus Adolphus College, and historian of the early Swedish Lutheran church in North America. Other members of his immigrant group went north on the river to found immigrant communities near the St. Croix River, later made famous by novelist-historian Vilhelm Moberg in his classic immigrant novels.

Erik Olsson Fors(se). This 34-year-old farmer, born in Malung

parish, Dalarna, and member of the Swedish home guard, emigrated in November of 1850 with his wife and four children from the western city of Göteborg, Sweden, bound first for New Orleans, in a party of 36 immigrants, all hopeful of escaping summer diseases by their late departure. They headed upriver, where Erik was struck by cholera in St. Louis, but survived.

A fellow emigrant, Anders Svensson from Kättilstad (Östg.), also arrived in St. Louis penniless due to a transportation error, and appealed successfully to the famous "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind, who was singing there, for a gift of \$75.00, to complete his family's trip, ending successfully in Chisago, Minnesota.

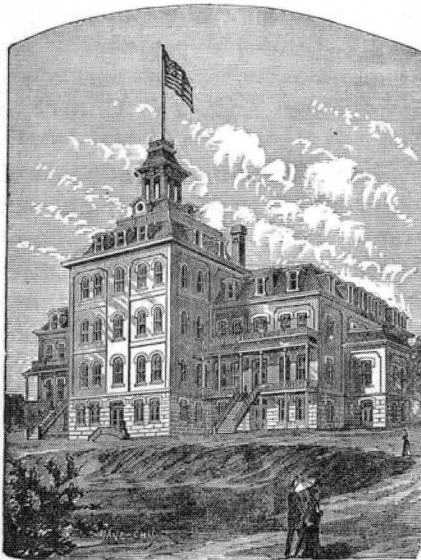
After recovering from cholera, Erik headed for our area, settling first in Galesburg where he worked for a short time as a tailor for \$0.25 per day, then in Moline, and finally to Bishop Hill by 1852. In 1859 he organized the "Swedish Union Guard" at Bishop Hill. The unit later volunteered for Civil War service as D Company, Illinois 57th Volunteer



A settler's first home. (From *Svenskarne i Illinois 1880*, by Eric Johnson and C.F. Peterson).

Infantry, which served with distinction at battles like Shiloh. He resigned his commission as major in October, 1864. He returned to farming in Henry County, then in 1869 he organized a colonization company headed for railroad land in Kansas. He founded the city of Falun, where he continued farming. He later became postmaster of Falun, a county trustee, and was elected state representative in 1873. Following his 1889 death, his old home town newspaper *Tidning för Falu län och stad*, noted that Forsse, in order to fund his immigration, had apparently burned his farm home for insurance, and may also have embezzled Swedish Army funds intended to buy horses!

Erik Pettersson from Herrnäs farm in Bjurtjärn, (Värmland), left Sweden in 1849 with his two brothers and a friend, heading for California's gold fields. Erik, however, stayed in the midwest, working first as a lumberjack on the St. Croix River in northern Wisconsin. Struck by the beauty of the Mississippi River, he registered Wisconsin claims in 1852 and 1853 on Lake Pepin. Erik and brother Anders returned to Sweden to recruit immigrants for their pioneer community, following a small group of 16 which had already left, to winter in Moline. They recruited some 210 persons, sailing in April 1854 for Quebec, then continued by steamer to Detroit and rail to Chi-



Augustana College, Rock Island, IL. in 1880 (From Svenskarne i Illinois 1880, by Eric Johnson and C.F. Peterson).

cago, on what became perhaps the most infamous voyage in Swedish immigrant history. It was immortalized by a song of warning, "We Sold our Homes." Stricken by cholera en route to Chicago, about half of the group died before arriving at Lake Pepin in July of 1854 aboard the steamer *War Eagle*.

That emigrant song, "We sold our homes" is based on letters about their ill-fated migration. It was published in Kristinehamn, Sweden, in 1854, with this introduction, "Excerpts from two letters from America, describing the unfortunate, deluded, and martyred Swedes who immigrated there

in April 1854, and written by brick-maker Jan Jansson from Carlskoga parish, Örebro County."

For more reading:

- Conrad Bergendoff, *Augustana, a Profession of Faith*, Rock Island, 1969.
- Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World, Part II*, New York, 1853.
- Fredrika Bremer, *America of the Fifties: Letters of Fredrika Bremer*, New York, 1924.
- William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, 1918.
- Olov Isaksson, *Bishop Hill, A Utopia on the Prairie*, Stockholm, 1969.
- Eric Norelius, *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America 1845-1860*, Augustana Historical Society, Rock Island, IL (1984). (Originally published in Swedish 1880).
- Stefan Nilsson, ed., *Kultur & Historia, Karlskogaemigrationen (web edition, in Swedish)*.
- Robert L. Wright, *Swedish Emigrant Ballads*, Lincoln, NE 1965.

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Swedish genealogy seminars in Lindsborg, KS, during 2014

There will be two Swedish genealogy seminars held in Lindsborg, KS, during 2014, organized by Lorna Nelson and Lenora Lynam of the Old Mill Museum.

The first one will be the weekend of **March 29/30**, and the number of attendees is limited to 30, as there is no more spaces at the Vision_Tek computer library, 121 Main Street in Lindsborg, where all classes take place. The topics will be on How to get started in Swedish genealogy, How to do research with Arkiv Digital, a case study of working with

Swedish church records, using Swedish records for your Family History Project, Tips for planning to visit Sweden, Finding ship records, Finding living relatives, and Estate inventories.

The next seminar will be **September 27/28**. The curriculum will be the same as in March, with the addition of a lecture on military records.

Computer stations for all, hands-on learning every session, and assistance from experts.

This looks like a very good learning and networking opportunity. But do



not forget to visit the Old Mill Museum which has many interesting collections and even the McPherson County Archives in the house.

Register soon as the seminars will quickly be filled!

Link on page. 30.