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A trip to Swede Bend, Iowa

– a very Swedish area

BY DENNIS JOHNSON

It was a spur of the moment decision when my wife, LaVonne, and I decided to make the trip to Swede Bend, Iowa. We were enjoying our spring at Deer Lake in Northern Minnesota, and Swede Bend was about four hundred miles to the south. A chain of coincidences had led us to this decision to satisfy our curiosity about Swede Bend, including an opportunity to visit a cousin in nearby Fort Dodge, a visit to a brother in Minneapolis, and a chance to stop at IKEA in Minneapolis to replenish our supplies of flatbread, *lingon* preserves, coffee, and herring.

A Stenfelt pioneer

I had recently been sent a book about Swede Bend for review (see accompanying review in this issue) at the suggestion of Elisabeth Thorsell, SAG editor. In the course of giving the book a quick look before completing another book review, I noted in the lengthy list of names of pioneer settlers in Swede Bend two familiar names. The names that stood out among all the Andersons, Petersons, Johnsons, etc., were Adolf Steinfelt, born in 1839 in Fliseryd, Småland, and his wife Emily (or Emilia,) born nearby in Döderhult, in 1842. I called the names to the attention of my wife since her family name from Sweden is Stenfelt. (There are several spellings, including Steinfelt, Steinfeldt, Stonefield and Stonefelt).

The family is descended from soldier Georg Stenfelt, who fought in all the campaigns of King Karl XII and was later ennobled in 1719. Most of Georg's children lived in Småland and the family continues to hold a

reunion in Sweden every third year. Finding Adolf and Emily in our family records, we were able to confirm them as members of the Stenfelt family, descended from another son of Georg Stenfelt than was my wife. As far as is known, Adolf was the first Stenfelt to come to the U.S. from Sweden. Adolf and Emily arrived in Swede Bend in 1863 and had twelve children.

Family records indicate that they had first lived for three years in Henderson Grove, IL, and their first three children were born there.

The Swedish Museum in Iowa

When I wrote to Ruby Erickson Hendrickson, chairman and a co-founder of the Swedish Foundation of Iowa's 'Swede Bend' Settlement, Inc., in Stratford, IA, to thank her for sending me the book, I noted what we had discovered. She was energized by this to send us more information about the Swedish Foundation's Swedish Immigrant Museum and news of an open house scheduled for the weekend of May 27-29, thus prompting our trip to Iowa to see the museum and learn more about the Swede Bend settlement. (Ruby lives in California, but returns to Stratford several times a year for special events and to continue to build the collection, with the aid of several local volunteers.)

Sunday was the day of our visit to the museum in Stratford. We met Ruby there at about 1:00 and she gave us a personal tour of their unique collection and building. The Swedish Foundation was founded in

1999, and the Swedish Immigrant Museum was opened in 2003, housed in a former gas station. The rent proved costly, however, and the museum was recently moved to its own building at 819 Goldsmith St., just off Main Street, in Stratford. This early 1890s building had originally served as a bank, then the post office, until it was moved to its present location. It has less than 1,000 sq. ft. but does manage to house a sizable collection, mostly dedicated to recording the history of the settlement of the Swede Bend area and the settlers who pioneered the area. It does also have materials about migration from Sweden and about the old country, plus a number of objects which date to the 1845-85 mass emigration and settlement days. The museum's theme is "Iowa Swedes, 1845-1945," with the purpose of preserving the history and telling the story of Iowa's Swedish immigrants, along with the historical events and innovations that impacted their lives – directly and indirectly – during this fascinating one-hundred-year period. Once the museum began, it quickly became the focus of the local history and many descendants of the original settlers donated records and objects for the collection.

A small town

Stratford is one of hundreds of small towns in Iowa which grew to serve the needs of the early farmers in the area. Founded in 1881, it is now off the beaten track, not on the main roads, but easily accessible. The population was about 750 people in 2000. There is a two-block-long main street of small shops and businesses which

is little changed from the original, and there are several large grain storage bins, a few churches, and many houses of various ages. It is a very quiet town, most newer businesses having gravitated to the larger towns some 20-30 miles away, among them Webster City, Fort Dodge, and Boone.

Stratford is central to the Swede Bend settlement, in a big bend of the Des Moines river, nearby. Most of the street names are traced to the railroad surveyors, who were English. The main street is Shakespeare Ave., and many local streets are named after English writers: Milton, Tennyson, Goldsmith running east-west, and Avon, Byron, Burns, and Moore running north-south, as does Shakespeare Street. The town itself was named after Stratford, PA, which in turn was named after Stratford-upon-Avon in England.

A tour of the area

After visiting the museum, we took a little driving tour around the Swede Bend area, and were able to locate the farm once owned by Adolf and Emily Steinfeldt just south of Stratford. The original house is no longer there, it was destroyed by a tornado

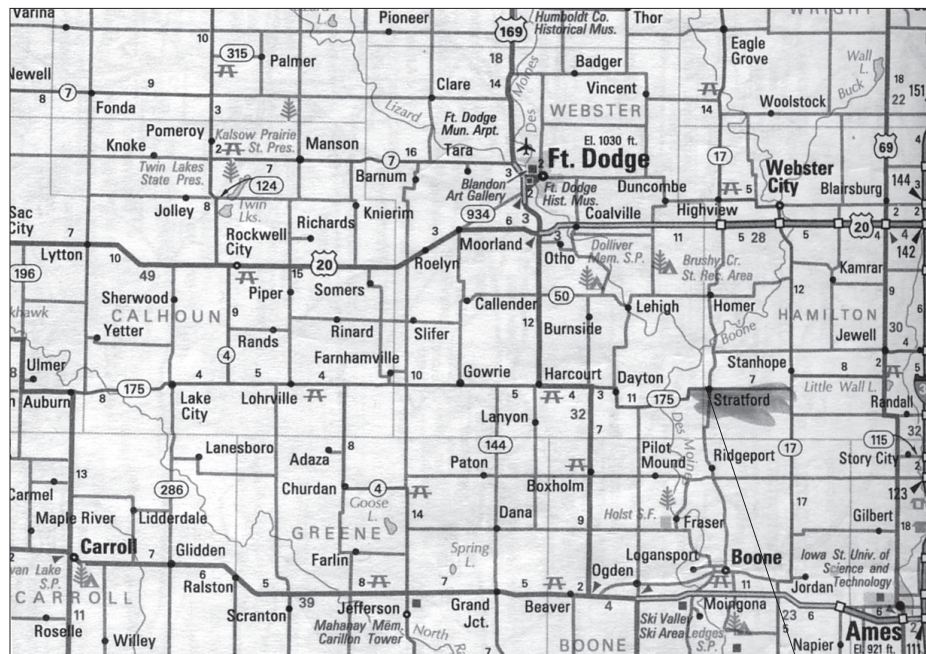
some years ago. We also found in Stratford a home once owned by one of Adolf and Emily's children. In the small township cemetery near their farm, we found the gravestones of Adolf and Emily and two of their children. On recommendation of Ruby, we visited the home of local resident Carol Sachrisson Larson, who operates a bed-and-breakfast at the rear of her home where she has restored the original Swedish settlers' farmhouse with period furnishings and equipment. Guests can stay in this farmhouse if they wish. Carol is a museum supporter and hosts other related events in her home.

The farmland in the area is among the best in the U.S., and its farms produce record crops of corn, soybeans, and a few other crops. It is level and generally well-drained and the fields are interrupted only by the valley of the Des Moines River and its smaller tributaries. The first settlers kept to the tree lines and wooded areas, but the open prairies proved to be even better for cropland, once the pioneers had the means to plow the tall grass of the prairies. The original farms of from 80 to 200 acres are often marked by one or two acre

woodlots, sometimes with an old farmhouse or barn still standing. Today the farms are much larger due to mechanization and range upwards of 1,000 acres or more.

Newer, prosperous-looking homes and storage buildings line the local roads. Before electrification, farm windmills pumped water from wells for each farm, but these are now gone. Most roads are now paved, with gravel roads occurring mainly on section lines for access to individual farms. The farm population is greatly reduced from the 19th century due both to many fewer households and to today's much smaller families.

Thanks to the initiatives of local residents, most of whom are descendants of the original settlers, Stratford and its museum has joined the many other towns who now celebrate their Swedish heritage and the history of their community. Although people of many other nationalities settled Iowa in the 19th century, the people pioneering the townships in Swede Bend were predominately Swedish, and their descendants today continue to make up a large majority of the local population.



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Dennis is, of course, the indefatigable book review editor for SAG. He and LaVonne also work hard for the Genealogy Club of the American-Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia. Thank you both!

Other places nearby also had significant Swedish settlements, places like Gowrie, Boone, Boxholm, etc.

Stratford