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# Finland Swedes

Elizabeth Oman\*

Along the Gulf of Bothnia in the western part of Finland is a narrow strip of land about 150 miles long that is known as Svenska Österbotten (Swedish East Bothnia). There are provinces in Sweden named Norrbotten (North Bothnia) and Västerbotten (West Bothnia) also located on the Gulf of Bothnia, but on the east side of the same. Österbotten stretches from Sideby (Siipy) in the south to Gamlakarleby (Kokkola) in the north. It includes the larger cities of Vasa (Vaasa) and Jakobstad (Pietersaari). It is a very narrow strip of land, approximately ten to fifteen miles wide and the parish that is the greatest distance from the coast is Terjärv (Teerijärvi) which is no more than thirty miles inland.

Among the thirty-six Lutheran State churches in this area only one fourth of them have services in both Finnish and Swedish, the remainder use the Swedish language exclusively. Finnish church services are held in Kristinestad (Kristiinankaupunki) and Kaskö (Kaskinen) in the Närpes district, Vasa (Vaasa) in the Korsholm (Mustasaari) district and Jakobstad (Pietersaari), Karleby (Kaarlela) and Gamlakarleby (Kokkola) in the Pedersöre district. The congregation in the Pedersöre Parish dates back to 1250, the parish in Korsholm to the 1200s and the church in Närpes to 1435.<sup>1</sup> Bilingualism is very evident in the schools of the area today.

It was from many of the parishes in Swedish Österbotten that the Swedish Finns on the Iron Range in Minnesota came. They arrived from such parishes as Gamlakarleby, Jeppo, Kronoby, Kvevlax, Munsala, Nykarleby, Pedersöre, Purmo, Solf and Vörå. Many of the Swedish place names in this area had been influenced by the Finnish language. As an example the parish of Kvevlax is about eight or ten miles northeast of Vasa. It is made up of six settlements — Kvevlax, Österhankmo, Västerhankmo, Vassor, Petsmo and Koskö. The Finnish word for bay is *laxi* or *lahti* which has influenced the use of *lax* in the place name Kvevlax. *Mo* in Österhankmo, Västerhankmo and Petsmo comes from the Finnish *maa* meaning land. The *sor* in Vassor was influenced by the Finnish word *saari*. Koskö comes from the Finnish word *koski* which means a rapids.<sup>2</sup> The parish of Pedersöre was doubtless influenced by the Finnish place name Pietarsaari, although there are those who believe that it comes from the Swedish *Peders öre* meaning Peter's pence.<sup>3</sup>

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People began emigrating to America from Swedish Österbotten in 1871. Before this the chief emigration had been to Sweden in the 1500s, the 1600s and the 1700s. This was a seasonal migration of Swedish Finns who crossed over to Sweden to work in the copper and iron mines for about eight months of the year.<sup>4</sup> In 1872 more than 600 persons from the province of Vasa set sail for the United States.<sup>5</sup> Up until February of 1899 there was no separation of Swedish Finns from Finns on the ships' manifests.<sup>6</sup> The greatest emigration from the parish of Kvevlax took place between 1881 and 1910. During this period approximately 24% of the population had gone to America. Some of them returned to Finland for good, but exact figures were not kept on the returnees.<sup>7</sup> During the period from 1899 to 1910 a total of 222,157 Swedish Finns departed from Finland for Sweden or North America.<sup>8</sup>

The history of the Åman family of the Kvevlax Parish gives much information about the emigrants of this period. The first to leave for America from the family was Johan Erik Åman, who then was in his mid-thirties. He was married and had a daughter and six sons, all under the age of 15 years. He is listed in the history of Kvevlax as owning a very small farm known as Skräddar and had also been a tailor.<sup>9</sup> He promised to send for the rest of his family when he had earned enough money. By 1889 there had been no word from him and the eldest son, also named Johan Erik Åman, eighteen years old, emigrated to America to find out what had happened to his father. The senior Åman had taken a room in a boardinghouse near the water front in Duluth, MN, but had died in an accident in July 1883, the same year he had arrived in the United States.

What followed in the history of this family is very interesting as they came to America one by one. Young John Oman (that is how he Americanized his name) went north to Tower, MN on the train and then walked to Ely (about 25 miles) where he found work in the underground iron ore mines. In the meanwhile a young Swedish Finnish woman by the name of Ida Johanna Andersdotter Forsman, born in Forsby in Pedersöre Parish, who had working as a maid (*piga*) in Purmo since she was sixteen years old, emigrated to Ely in 1892. She was 23 years old at the time and engaged to marry Jakob Mattjus, 22 years old, also an emigrant from Purmo, who worked in the mines in Ely. Unfortunately he was killed in a mine accident thirteen days after the marriage banns had been read in the church.

Purmo and Kvevlax are about 45–50 miles apart in Finland and John and Ida did not know each other before they emigrated. They were married early in 1893, two Swedish Finns who were left alone, having lost the people they had come over to join. John's mother and elder sister, Brita Katrina, did not emigrate, but one by one four of the five remaining brothers did come to this country.

The reasons for emigrating from Finland at this time can be summed up in the following way statistically:<sup>10</sup>

1. Economic reasons	51%
2. Political reasons	11%
3. Love of freedom and self-esteem	5%
4. Conditions at home	8%
5. To teach or study	6%
6. To seek a fortune	7%
7. Youthful imprudence and recklessness	4%
8. Other	8%
	<hr/>
	100%

The first of the Åman brothers to follow was the 18 year-old Edward in 1893. He, also, went to Ely and took a job in the mines. Next came the 19 year-old Isak in 1895. He also received employment in the mines. Misfortune befell Edward in 1896 when he was killed at the Chandler Mine in Ely. The next to come was the 19 year-old Israel who emigrated in 1898, also to Ely, where he also worked in the mines. He married an immigrant from Monå in Munsala parish by the name of Maria Sophia Jackson (Gästgivars) and in 1903 the couple moved to Eveleth, MN. Israel had changed his name to Ohman instead of Oman. Another brother, Michel, emigrated to the United States in 1901 at the age of 27, but returned to Finland two years later in 1903. Isak Oman married a sister of Israel's wife and later worked his way up to become a mine captain in the Hibbing and Chisholm, MN areas.

In 1903 John Oman's wife died from pulmonary disease and he was left a widower with five sons, all under the age of ten. Hearing that there was a Swedish Finnish widow residing in Duluth who was looking for work, he took the train to Duluth to see if she would become his housekeeper. She agreed and on the way back the couple stopped in Tower, MN to find a Lutheran clergyman who would marry them before they continued to Ely.

How did these immigrant brothers get along in the underground mines? We have already heard that Edward was killed. Michel returned to Finland after two years and Isak worked his way up to become mine captain. Israel, who moved to Eveleth, did not like working underground and was able to find employment in the Eveleth public schools as a janitor, which was more to his liking. Israel later became correspondent for *Vasabladet* and *Norden*.<sup>11</sup>

John Oman, the first to become a miner in 1890, became active in the strike in Ely in 1904. One of the reasons for the strike was that "the Chandler was not the safest place to work."<sup>12</sup> Things became so tense during this strike that the miners were going to hang Captain Trezona. The latter heard about the plot and he had two deputies help him escape to Ely by train. The train pulled into the station, but Captain Trezona did not board it there. Instead

the train backed up, close to his residence and Captain Trezona and two deputies emerged with pistols in each hand and boarded the train. The train then started for Duluth, picking up speed before it passed the depot. John Oman, sensing that things were not happening as the men had planned, ran as fast as he could and threw the switch so that the train went up a coal dock where coal was unloaded for use in the mines, instead of towards Tower. John Oman heard shots from the train and took off through the woods to Canada. As it was still winter, he hid in the hunting shacks in the woods for two weeks. There was a U.S. federal warrant out for him since he had stopped a train carrying U.S. mail. The mines remained closed.

Finally John Oman had the federal charges against him dropped and he was encouraged to come back to town, where he only faced a misdemeanor charge. This he did and was fined \$10.00. His friends took up a collection for him to pay the fine. In a few weeks the merchants and the miners began to hurt and a committee was sent to Duluth to ask the Oliver Mining Company to return Captain Trezona to Ely in order to open the mines.<sup>13</sup> After a couple of months he did so, but John Oman and several others, mostly Finns, were blacklisted from ever working in his mines again.

There were two other mining companies in Ely and there was employment to be found in them until 1908, when they were bought by the Oliver Mining Company. At this time John Oman and three other Swedish Finns moved to Chisholm, but John didn't last too long there because he refused to work in the damp conditions in a narrow underground drift. His brother Isak, who also had moved to the area, saw to it that he received a respectable job. He became shift boss and then was being groomed for a higher position. The mining company sent him to Minneapolis for six to eight weeks for treatment of his drinking problem. When he returned to the mines he was struck by the fact of how dangerous it was to work there. He was heard to say that one needed to be drunk to go to work under those conditions.

John Oman then began to work for himself. He bought two horses, cutting and splitting cedar trees for use as supports in the underground mines and selling them to the mining company. Isak Oman, who in the meanwhile had advanced to mine captain in the mines at Kinney and Hibbing, had an opportunity to take over his father's-in-law property in Finland and he thus returned to Finland about 1913. There he purchased more property in the Monå area in Munsala Parish. In the 1930s many of the farms in the parishes of Maxmo and Munsala went into the raising of fox and mink. Today Isak Oman's sons and grandsons are still in the mink raising business in Monå.

An interesting sidelight of John Oman's personality is the fact that this man who had been active in the strike in Ely, named all of his seven children with his two wives with some form of the Swedish word *frid* meaning peace. They were *Sigfrid*, *Axel Walfred*, *Theodore Alfred*, *Edward Frithiof*, *Wanner Godfrey*, *Freda* and *Tury Holmfred*.

In summing up the Swedish Finnish presence on the Iron Range in Minnesota it should be noted that the greatest number emigrated between 1890 and 1910. Most of these people were single when they arrived but then married other Swedish Finns upon arrival in America. Among the first Swedish Finnish immigrants 33.1% were women. This percentage rose, reaching its peak in 1897 with a total female immigration of 54.8%. In later years this figure dropped back to 33%.<sup>14</sup> Many of the male arrivals worked in the mines. Those that began in the mines attempted to get jobs on the surface as soon as something opened up. A few of the immigrants returned to Finland for good. Others, in turn, returned to Finland for a few years, but because of adverse conditions there returned to the United States after a few years. One of the reasons for emigrating was to escape compulsory service in the Russian military since at this time Finland was a grand duchy under Russian sovereignty. Ray Martinson, a doctor in Eveleth, MN, tells of how his father escaped the Russian draft by taking a small boat across the Gulf of Bothnia in the middle of the night.

Other Swedish Finnish families went to Alabama around 1910 to try their luck in the Southland, but after a few years they returned to the Iron Range.<sup>15</sup>

As the first generation of the immigrants began marrying non-Swedish Finns, they began leaving the Iron Range and today most of the second generation have also departed from the Range.

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<sup>1</sup>Edvin Stenwall, *Kyrkorna i svenska Österbotten*. En presentation av kyrkor och församlingar i Närpes, Korsholms och Pedersöres prosterier. (Pamphlet without place of printing and date).

<sup>2</sup>Bror K. V. Åkerblom, *Kvevlax historia* (Vasa, Finland 1962), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Selim Melin, *Pedersöre kyrka* (Jakobstad 1965), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Anders Myhrman, *Finlandssvenskar i Amerika* (Helsingfors 1972), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Åkerblom, *Kvevlax historia*, p. 155.

<sup>6</sup>Myhrman, *Finlandssvenskar*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Åkerblom, *Kvevlax historia*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Myhrman, *Finlandssvenskar*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup>Åkerblom, *Kvevlax historia*, p. 748.

<sup>10</sup>Myhrman, *Finlandssvenskar*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup>Lee Brownell, *Pioneer Life in Ely* (Virginia, MN 1981), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup>Myhrman, *Finlandssvenskar*, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Information gathered from questionnaires sent to children of Swedish Finnish settlers.