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A pioneer from the 1850s, Part 3

Hans Mattson

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A pioneer from the 1850s – Hans Mattson tells the story of Vasa



Part III

(continued from SAG 1/2008)

Training for war

A few Scandinavians had also enlisted in the First and Second Regiments; but there was no general rising among them in our state until I published an appeal in the Swedish newspaper *Hemlandet* in Chicago.

A few days later I left a dear wife, home, and two children, and started for Fort Snelling, but not alone; about seventy Swedes and thirty Norwegians from Red Wing, Vasa, Chicago Lake, Holden, Wanamingo, Stillwater, Albert Lea, and other places went there with me, or joined us in the course of a few days.

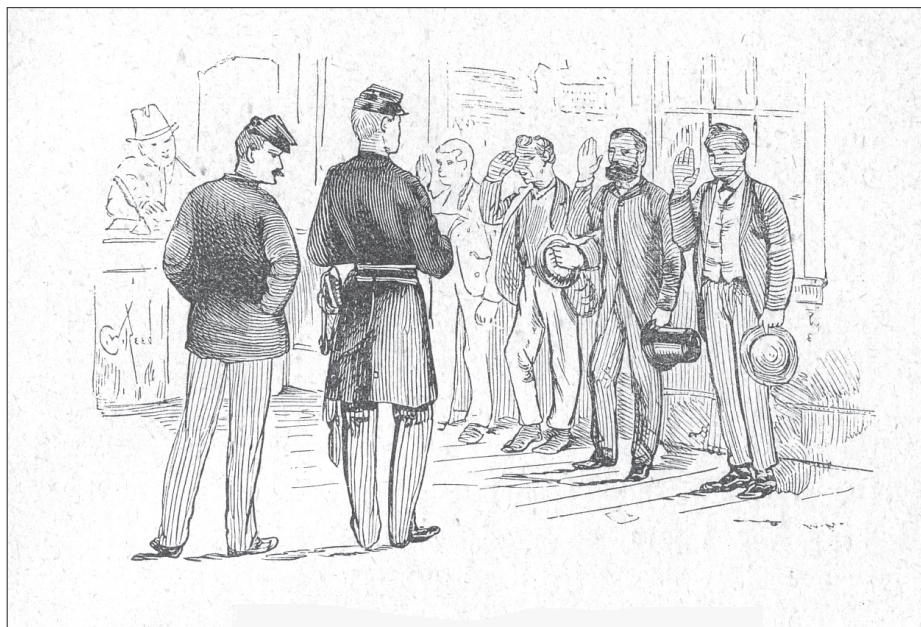
Meanwhile the Third Regiment had been called, and one hundred of my companions were mustered in as Company D of that regiment, with myself as their captain, a Norwegian friend, L. K. Aaker, formerly a member of our legislature, as first lieutenant, and my old friend H. Eustrom as second lieutenant. Although Company D was the only military organization in our state consisting exclusively of Scandinavians, there were quite a number of those nationalities in every regiment and company organized afterwards.

I may be excused for saying a few words concerning my old military company. It consisted of the very flower of our young men. It was regarded from the start as a model company, and maintained its rank as such during the whole term of four years service. Always orderly, sober, obedient, and faithful to every duty,

the men of Company D, though foreigners by birth, won and always kept the affectionate regard and fullest confidence of their native-born comrades. A large majority of them are resting in the last grand bivouac, many under the genial Southern sun, but no word of reproach or doubt of soldierly honor has ever been heard against any of those living or dead.

About this time a whole regiment of Scandinavians, mostly Norwegians, was organized in Wisconsin, the Fifteenth Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, which rose to great distinction during its long service. Its brave colonel, Hans Hegg, fell mortally wounded while commanding a brigade on the bloody field at

Chickamauga. There were many partially or wholly Swedish companies from Illinois, one of which belonged to the Forty-third Illinois Regiment, under the lamented Capt. Arosenius, and came under my command a few years later in Arkansas. There were also many prominent Swedish officers in other regiments, such as Gen. C. J. Stohlbrand, Cols. Vegesack, Malmborg, Steelhammar, Broddy, Elfving, and Brydolf, Capts. Stenbeck, Silversparre, Sparrstrom, Lempke, Chas. Johnson, Erik Johnson, Vanstrum, Lindberg, etc., and Lieuts. Osborne, Edgren, Liljengren, Johnson, Lindall, Olson, Gustafson, Lundberg, and many others whose names I do not now recall.



Mustering volunteers.

In the Goodhue County records for October 15, 1861, is a paragraph which states that, as the county auditor, H. Mattson, has voluntarily gone to the war with a company of soldiers to defend our country, it is resolved that leave of absence shall be extended to him, and that the office of county auditor shall not be declared vacant so long as the deputy performs his duties properly.

The *St. Paul Press* of the same date, has the following: "We congratulate Capt. Mattson and his countrymen for the splendid company of Swedes and Norwegians which he commands. Never was a better company mustered in for service."

Going to war

In the beginning of November two steamers arrived at Fort Snelling and took the Third Regiment on board. We were ordered to join Buell's army in Kentucky. Company E, of our regiment, was also mainly from Goodhue County, and when the steamers arrived at Red Wing, they stopped half an hour to let Companies D and E partake of a bountiful supper, to which they had been invited by their city friends, and to say a last farewell to their families and acquaintances. My wife, with the little children, my sister, father, brother, and other relatives, were gathered in a large room in the hotel opposite the landing. The half hour was soon past, and the bugle sounded "fall in."

I pass over the parting scene, leaving it to the imagination of the reader, for I cannot find words to describe it myself. I will only relate one little episode. When the bugle sounded for departure I held my little two-year-old daughter in my arms; her arms were clasped around my neck, and, when I endeavored to set her down, she closed her little fingers so hard together that her uncle had to open them by force before he could take her away from me. When a little child was capable of such feelings, it may be surmised what those felt who were able to comprehend the signif-

icance of that moment.

In a few days we were camped on a muddy field in Kentucky, quickly learning the duties of soldier-life, and familiarizing ourselves with the daily routine of an army in the field.

My military career of four years duration passed without any event of particular interest or importance; it was like that of two million other soldiers to do their duty faithfully, whatever that duty might be, that was all.

Over the Cumberland Mountains

After eight months service I was promoted to the rank of major in the regiment. At that time we were serving in middle Tennessee. Shortly afterward our regiment, with some three thousand men of the troops, made a forced march across the Cumberland Mountains.

In order to give the reader an idea of the hardships which the soldiers occasionally had to endure on a march, I shall give a short sketch of this. The detachment broke camp in Murfreesboro in the forenoon of a very hot day toward the close of May, and marched twenty miles before night, which was considered a good distance for the first day. Most of the men suffered from blistered feet, and they were all very tired. We prepared our supper, and had just gone to rest in a large open field and were beginning to fall asleep, when, at ten o'clock in the evening, the signal was given to fall in. In a few minutes the whole force was in line, and silently resumed the march forward. We marched the whole night, the whole of the next day, the following night, and till noon the day after, moving altogether a distance of over eighty miles, over a difficult and partly mountainous country, and stopping only one hour three times a day to cook our coffee and eat, while those who sank down by the roadside entirely exhausted were left until the rear-guard came and picked them up. When we finally arrived at our destination the enemy that we were pursuing had already decamped, and



Lieutenant Hjalmar Edgren.



Colonel Ernst von Vegesack.

we had to return by the same route over which we had come, though more leisurely. Among the many victims of this march was a bright Norwegian lieutenant of my old company, Hans Johnson, who died shortly after our return to Murfreesboro.

Fever hits

A few days afterward the regiment started on an expedition to the South. During this march I got sick with the fever, and would probably have died at Columbia, Tenn., if my friend Eustrom, who at that time was captain of Company D, had not succeeded in getting me into a rebel family, where I was treated with the greatest care, so that in a few days I was able to go by rail to Minnesota on a twenty days leave of absence. This took place in the beginning of the month of July, 1862.

Battle of Murfreesboro

Having spent a fortnight in the bosom of my family I returned, with improved health, to resume my command. I arrived at Chicago on a Sunday morning, and, as I had to wait all day for my train, I went to the Swedish church on Superior Street. Leaving the church, I heard a newsboy crying, "Extra number of the *Tribune*; great battle at Murfreesboro; Third Minnesota Regiment in hot fire!" I bought the paper and hurried to the hotel, where another extra edition was handed me. The Union troops had won a decisive victory at Murfreesboro, and totally routed the forces of Forrest, consisting of eight thousand cavalry.

The regiment taken prisoners

Later in the evening a third extra edition announced that "The Third Regiment has been captured by the enemy, and is on the march to the prisons of the South." Only a soldier can imagine my feelings when I received this news.

I arrived in Tennessee two days later, only to meet the soldiers returning from the mountains where they had been released on written parole by the enemy. They were sore-footed, exhausted, hungry, and wild with anger, and looked more like a lot of ragged beggars than the well-disciplined soldiers they had been a few days before. All the captured officers had been taken to the South, where

they were kept in prison several months. Only two of them succeeded in making their escape. One of those was Capt. Eustrom, who, in company with Lieut. Taylor, made his escape from a hospital building, some negroes giving them clothes, and, through almost incredible hardships and dangers, they succeeded in reaching our lines, and I met them two days after my arrival at Nashville.

The capitulation of our splendid regiment was one of the most deplorable events of its kind during the whole war. It was regarded one of the best regiments of volunteers of the Western Army. It had defended itself with great valor, and, in fact, defeated the enemy, when for some unaccountable reason, Col. H. C. Lester decided to surrender, and he exerted such a great influence over our officers that seven company commanders went over to his side in the council of war, which he called, while the remaining officers and the soldiers were strongly opposed to the capitulation. When the men finally were ordered to stack arms they did so with tears in their eyes, complaining bitterly because they were not allowed to fight any longer. All the officers who had been in favor of capitulation were afterward dismissed from service in disgrace.

In command again

Arriving at Nashville I was immediately ordered to assume command of my own scattered regiment, of the Ninth Michigan Infantry Regiment, and of a battery of artillery, which had also capitulated on that fatal Sunday. Having supplied the men with clothing and other necessities, I took them by steamboats to a camp for prisoners in St. Louis, and returned to Nashville to report the matter in person. On my return to Nashville I was appointed member of a general court martial, and shortly afterwards its president, which position I occupied from July till December, 1862. The sufferings which my friend Captain Eustrom had endured during his flight from the

rebels shattered his health so that he was soon forced to retire from service.

The Indian Conflict

About this time the well-known Indian massacre in the western settlements of Minnesota took place. About eight hundred peaceable citizens, mostly women and children, and among those many Scandinavians were cruelly butchered, and their houses and property burnt and destroyed. The soldiers of the Third Regiment had given their parole not to take up arms against the enemy until they were properly exchanged, but, as this did not have anything to do with the Indian War, they were ordered from St. Louis to Minnesota and put under the command of Major Welch, of the Fourth Regiment, and soon distinguished themselves by their fine maneuvers and valor in the struggle with the Indians.

In the month of December the officers were exchanged and ordered back to Fort Snelling, to where the enlisted men had also returned from the Indian War.

Back to Tennessee

In January, 1863, we again left Minnesota for the South. The whole of this winter and the beginning of spring were devoted to expeditions against guerillas and Confederate recruiting camps in southern Tennessee. Most of this time I commanded the regiment, four companies of which were mounted. We had to procure horses as best we could, here and there through the country. We had many skirmishes with the enemy, and captured a number of prisoners.

In the beginning of June we joined the forces that were besieging Vicksburg under the command of Gen. Grant, and remained there until that city had capitulated. The siege of Vicksburg is so well known from history that I shall make no attempt to describe it here.

For five consecutive weeks the cannonading was so incessant that the soldiers became as accustomed



General Grant's camp at Vicksburg.

to it as the passengers on a steamer to the noise of the propeller, and, when the capitulation finally put an end to all this noise, we found it very difficult to sleep for several nights on account of the unusual silence.

The July number of *Hemlandet*, contained a letter from me, dated Vicksburg, June 24th, from which I make the following extract:

"The army of Gen. Grant is divided into two Grand Divisions, one of which is arranged in a semi-circle toward Vicksburg, only a few hundred yards from the entrenchments of the rebels, the other in a semi-circle turned away from Vicksburg, and fronting the army of Gen. Johnston. We are aft protected by strong entrenchments, and always keep over two thousand men as picket guards, and the same number are digging rifle pits and building intrenchments.

"Gen. Logan's Division is close up to the intrenchments of the rebels. The Swedish Maj. Stohlbrand is chief of artillery in Logan's Division, and, has, as such, under his special charge one of the most important positions in the beleaguering army.

"I visited Gen. Logan yesterday, and will relate a little episode concerning this brave commander: When Gen. Logan heard that I was a Swede, and wished to see Maj. Stohlbrand, who had just ridden out

to look after his batteries, the general, being always full of fun, assumed a very solemn air, and said: Too bad you did not come an hour sooner, for then you could have seen Stohlbrand. There, and he went to the door of his tent and pointed across the camp ground, there is the tent of Maj. Stohlbrand. Half an hour ago a bomb exploded from the main fort yonder. Poor Stohlbrand! Only a few remnants were left of the contents of his tent. Poor Stohlbrand! Perhaps you would like to see the remains?

"Accompanied by Gens. Stevenson, Ransom, and several other officers, I followed Gen. Logan to the tent of Stohlbrand. Then Logan said: Out of respect for poor Stohlbrand, we have put everything in order again. Here you see his camp stool, there his uniform, and there is his little field cot. The bed looked as if a dead body was lying on it, covered by a blanket.

"Logan walked solemnly up to the head of the bed, lifted the blanket, and behold, there was only a bundle of rags! The rest of us, of course, supposed that Stohlbrand was dead, and that his corpse was lying on the bed.

"This little joke made the humorous Logan laugh so that his whole body shook.

"As to the Swedes in the army, I

may mention that, besides our Company D, there are in the same division the company of Capt. Arosenius of the Forty-third Illinois Regiment, and that of Capt. Corneliuson of the Twenty-third Wisconsin Regiment, and a number of Swedes of the other regiments from Illinois and Wisconsin, and of the Fourth and Fifth Minnesota Regiments. Old Company D is a model, as usual, the best one I have seen yet. Both officers and men are quiet, orderly, cheerful, and obedient, always faithful at their post, and ready to go wherever duty calls them.

"They are loved and respected by all who come in contact with them. When I feel sad or despondent, all I need do is to walk along the camp street and take a look at some of my old Scandinavians. Their calm and earnest demeanor always makes me glad and proud. I ask for no greater honor than to point them out to some stranger, saying: This is my old company.

"Not these alone, however, but all of my countrymen whom I met in the army have a good name, and are considered most reliable and able soldiers."

I shall now relate a couple of anecdotes from the siege of Vicksburg, which I did not mention in the letter to *Hemlandet*.

Outside Gen. Logan's tent stood a big magnolia tree. While laughing at Logan's joke Gen. Stevenson picked up a little stick of wood and whittled on it with his penknife, in genuine Yankee fashion. Accidentally he happened to drop his knife, and, while stooping down to pick it up, a fragment of a shell from the rebel batteries came and went two inches deep into the tree right where his head had been when he was whittling. He coolly remarked, "That piece of iron was not made for me."

One day as I, in company with Lieut. Col. (afterward Gen.) C. C. Andrews, was visiting Gen. Grant outside of Vicksburg, a wagon drawn by six mules passed close by his headquarters. The driver, an old, rough-looking soldier, stopped, and asked the way to a certain regiment.

Gen. Grant's tent stood on a little elevation, at the foot of which were several fresh wagon tracks. A number of officers, including myself, were standing and sitting around the general outside the tent. Gen. Grant, who was dressed in a fatigue suit and slouched hat, without other marks of distinction than three small silver stars, which could scarcely be distinguished on his dusty blouse, went toward the driver and, with the most minute particulars, gave him directions how to drive. While he was talking, we observed that the driver showed signs of deep emotion, and finally he alighted from the mule, which he was riding, stretched out his arms, and, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed: "Aiy God! I believe it is Gen. Grant! General, do you remember Tommy Donald? I was a soldier in your company during the Mexican War!" With touching kindness the

great commander-in-chief now took both hands of the ragged soldier in his, and, like old friends who had not met for a long time, they rejoiced in remembering the companionship of fifteen years before.

When Gen. Grant returned to the tent the conversation turned to the newspaper clamor and general discontent because Vicksburg was not yet taken, upon which the general expressed himself in the following words: "I could make another assault and hasten the capture a few days, but will not do it because I know positively that within ten days the garrison must surrender anyhow, for I have got them, and will take them all. Let them howl. I don't care. I have got Pemberton tight as wax." Saying which, he closed his right hand and laid it on the little camp table with such force that I noticed the veins filling and turning blue on

the back of his hand. These two little incidents give a key to Gen. Grant's whole character, and the secret of his unparalleled success, not only in winning battles, but in bagging the entire opposing force.

A week later Vicksburg fell into our hands. We took thirty-two thousand prisoners, fifteen generals, two thousand other officers, and nearly two hundred cannon.

(to be continued)

Hans Mattson published his memoirs first in Swedish with the title *Minnen*, printed in Lund 1890. The following year they were printed in English as Mattson, Hans, *Reminiscences, The Story of an Emigrant*. St. Paul, MN: D. D. Merrill Co., 1891.

The subtitles in the present SAG version have been added by the editor.

The 2008 Mellerud Emigration Conference

In the middle of August a group of dedicated emigration researchers assembled in Mellerud in Dalsland, Sweden, for a couple of conference days. Among the group members a number of Americans were also seen.

Some thirty participants spent all day Friday on a bus tour, which took us to the fragrant herb garden i Dals Rostock, where we could also listen to a key fiddle player and enjoy the museum. From there we went to Lästvik manor in Steneby parish, where the painted tapestries from the 1800s, showing various castles, in the dining hall were a most interesting sight. Here Elisabeth Thorsell spoke about Salt Lake City and The Swenson Center, places that then seemed like they were on another planet. Next the bus went to a nice inn, where we after lunch listened to Ted Rosvall and Anna-Lena Hultman explaining all about the Swedish CD databases.

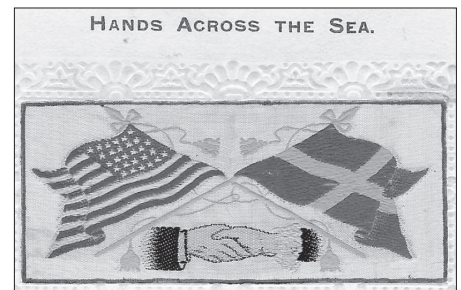
Dalsland is not famous for its wide highways, so on the way back to

Mellerud, we travelled small backroads over the Kroppefjäll, but did not encounter any moose. Afterwards Lilly Setterdahl from Moline, IL, lectured on Dalsland people that she and her late husband Lennart had researched in the U.S.

Saturday was open to the public and held in the *Kulturbruket på Dal*, a local cultural institution, with a full day of lectures, mostly in Swedish. We could listen to lectures on the Swedish American Line, on the soldiers and the allotment system, on Genline, on hidden sources for emigrant research, on female emigrants, on the coming EmiWeb, and on the Vasa Order of America. A popular session was presented by Owe Clapson on "Olle i Skratthult" with old songs and gags in the *bondkomik* tradition.

The lectures attracted a large crowd and the organizers could be very pleased at the end of the day, as the conference seemed to be a big success.

The day was ended with a *smör-*



gåsbord dinner at the "Värdshuset på Dal", where we all enjoyed the beautiful landscape and the sight of the sun, sinking into Lake Änimmen.

There was already some talk about having another conference in a year or two, and it may be well worth the travel to Dalsland.



Anneli Andersson introducing Lilly Setterdahl and her lecture.