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A pioneer from the 1850s, Part 2

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



Part II

(continued from SAG 4/2006)

We had now commenced a new career, located on our farm claims in the boundless West, with no end to the prospects and possibilities before us. We felt that independence and freedom which are only attained and appreciated in the western wilds of America.

From the Mississippi River and almost to the Pacific Ocean was a verdant field for the industry, energy and enterprise of the settler. To be sure, our means and resources were small, but somehow we felt that by hard work and good conduct we would some day attain the comfort, independence and position for which our souls thirsted. We did not sit down and wait for gold mines to open up before us, or for roasted pigs to come running by our cabin, but with axe and spade went quietly to work, to do our little part in the building up of new empires.

In the beginning of May, father came from Illinois and brought us a pair of steers and a milch cow; this made us rich. We made a wagon with wheels of blocks sawed off an oak log; we also bought a plow, and, joining with our neighbors of Belle Creek, had a breaking team of two pair of oxen. The breaking team and that truck wagon, with myself always as the chief ox driver, did all the breaking, and all the hauling and carting of lumber, provisions, building material and other goods, for all the settlers in that neighborhood during the first season.

More immigrants arriving

Soon others of our party from last year joined us. Some letters which I wrote *Hemlandet* describing the country around us, attracted much attention and brought settlers from different parts of the west, and while the Swedes were pouring into our place, then known as “Mattson’s Settlement,” (now well known under the name of Vasa), our friends, the Norwegians, had started a prosperous settlement a few miles to the south, many of them coming overland from Wisconsin, bringing cattle, implements and other valuables of which the Swedes, being mostly poor newcomers, were destitute. Many immigrants of both nationalities came as deck passengers on the Mississippi steamers to Red Wing.

There was cholera at St. Louis that summer, and I remember how a steamer landed a large party of Norwegian immigrants, nearly all down with cholera. Mr. Willard and myself happened to be in Red Wing at the time, and the American families, considering these Norwegian cholera patients our countrymen, hastily turned them over to our care. We nursed them as best we could, but many died in spite of all our efforts, and as we closed their eyes, and laid them in the silent grave under the bluffs, it never occurred to us that they were anything but our countrymen and brothers.

A prospering community

From these small beginnings of the Swedish and Norwegian settlers in Goodhue County, in the years of 1853 and 1854, have sprung results which are not only grand but glorious to contemplate. Looking back to those days I see the little cabin, often with a roof, single room used for domestic purposes, sometimes crowded almost to suffocation by hospitable entertainments to newcomers; or the poor immigrant on the levee at Red Wing, just landed from a steamer, in his short jacket and other outlandish costume, perhaps seated on a wooden box, with his wife and a large group of children around him, and wondering how he shall be able to raise enough means to get himself ten or twenty miles into the country, or to redeem the bedding and other household goods which he has perchance left in Milwaukee as a pledge for his railroad and steamboat ticket. And I see him trudging along over the trackless prairie, searching for a piece of land containing, if possible prairie, water and a little timber, on which to build a home. Poor, bewildered, ignorant, and odd looking, he had been an object of pity and derision all the way from Gothenburg or Christiania to the little cabin of some countryman of his, where he found peace and shelter until he could build one of his own.

Those who have not experienced frontier life will naturally wonder

how it was possible for people so poor as a majority of the old settlers were to procure the necessaries of life, but they should remember that our necessaries were few, and our luxuries a great deal less. The bountiful earth soon yielded bread and vegetables; the woods and streams supplied game and fish; and as to shoes and clothing, I and many others have used shoes made of untanned skins, and even of gunny-sacks and old rags. Furthermore, the small merchants at the river or other points, were always willing to supply the Scandinavian immigrants with necessary goods on credit, until better times should come. Our people in this country did certainly earn a name for integrity and honesty among their American neighbors, which has been greater help to them than money.

Some of the men would go off in search of work, and in due time return with means enough to help the balance of the family.

Frontier settlers are always accommodating and generous. If one had more than he needed, he would invariably share the surplus with his neighbors. The neighbors would all turn in to help a newcomer, – haul his logs, build his house, and do other little services for him.

The isolated condition and mutual aims and aspirations of the settlers brought them nearer together than in older communities. On Sunday afternoons all would meet at some centrally located place, and spend the day together. A cup of coffee with a couple of slices of bread and butter, would furnish a royal entertainment, and when we got so far along that we could afford some pie or cake for dessert, the good housewives were in a perfect ecstasy. The joy and sorrows of one, were shared by the others, and nowhere in the wide world, except in a military camp, have I witnessed so

much genuine cordial friendship and brotherhood as among the frontier settlers in the West.

The first religious service

One fine Sunday morning that summer, all the settlers met under two oak trees on the prairie, near where the present church stands, for the first religious service in the settlement. It had been agreed that some of the men should take turns to read one of Luther's sermons at each of these gatherings, and I was selected as reader the first day. Some prayers were said and Swedish hymns sung, and seldom did a temple contain more devout worshipers than did that little congregation on the prairie.

Before the winter of 1854-55 set in, we had quite a large community in Vasa, and had raised considerable grain, potatoes and other provisions. During that winter the Sioux Indians again became our neighbors, and frequently supplied us with venison in exchange for bread and coffee. The following spring and summer the settlers increased still faster, several more oxen and other cattle, with a horse or two, were brought in, and I had no longer the exclusive privilege of hauling goods on the little truck wagon.

That summer I again went to Illinois to meet a large party of newly-arrived immigrants from Sweden, who formed a settlement in Vasa, known as Skåne. The people from different provinces would group themselves together in little neighborhoods, each assuming in common parlance the name of their own province; thus we have Vasa, Skåne, Småland and Jemtland.

About this time a township was formally organized and, at my suggestion, given the name of Vasa, in commemoration of the great Swedish king. Roads were also laid out legally, and a district organization perfected. A school district was formed and soon after an election precinct, and as I was the only person who was master of the English language the duty of

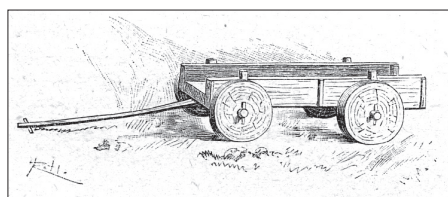
attending to all these things devolved upon me. We were particularly fortunate in having many men, not only of good education from the old country, but of excellent character, pluck and energy, men who would have been leaders in their communities if they had remained at home, and who became prominent as soon as they had mastered the English language. This fact, perhaps, gave a higher tone and character to our little community than is common in such cases, and Vasa has since that time furnished many able men in the county offices, in the legislative halls, and in business and educational circles. There can be much refinement and grace even in a log cabin on the wild prairie.

In the beginning of the month of September, 1855, Rev. E. Norelius visited the settlement and organized a Lutheran Church.

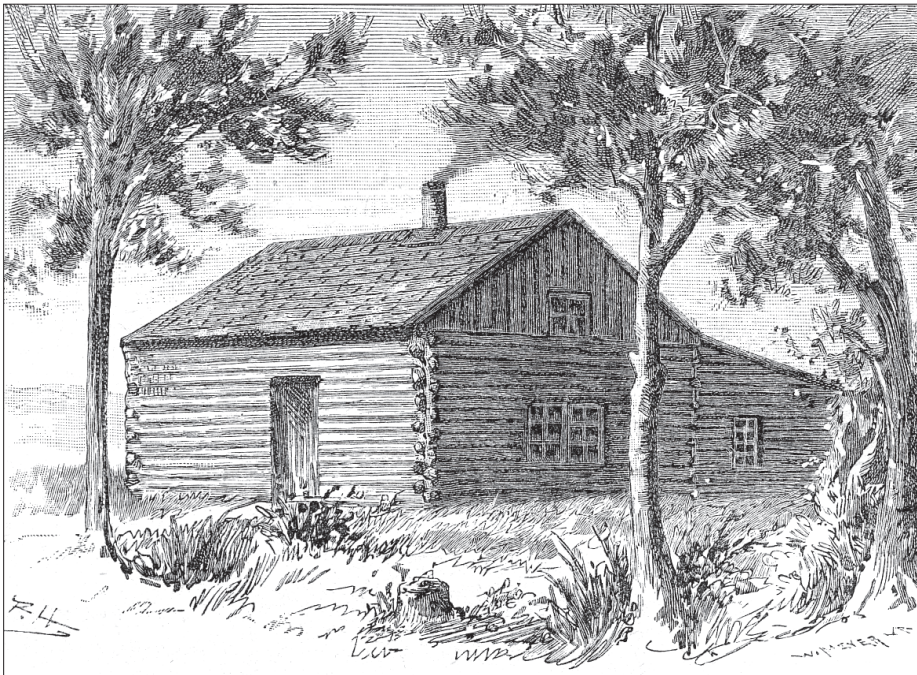
Thirty-five years have elapsed since that time, and many of those who belonged to the first church at Vasa now rest in mother earth close by the present stately church edifice, which still belongs to the same congregation, and is situated only a short distance from the place where the latter was organized. Rev. Norelius himself lives only a few hundred yards from the church building. Thirty-five years have changed the then cheerful, hopeful young man into a veteran, crowned with honor, and full of wisdom and experience. His beneficent influence on the Swedes of Goodhue County and of the whole Northwest will make his name dear to coming generations of our people.

The Mattson wedding

On November 23rd, in the same fall, the first wedding took place in our settlement. The author of these memories was joined in matrimony to Miss Cherstin Peterson, from Balingslöf, near Kristianstad, whose family had just come to Vasa from Sweden. By this union I found the best and most precious treasure a man can find – a good and dear wife, who has faithfully shared my fate to



Our wagon.



Our first home.

this day. Rev. J. W. Hancock, of Red Wing, performed the marriage ceremony. Horses being very scarce among us in those days, the minister had to borrow an Indian pony and ride on horseback twelve miles – from Red Wing to Vasa. On the evening of our wedding day there happened to be a severe snowstorm, through which my young bride was taken from her parents' home to our log house, on a home-made wooden sled, drawn by a pair of oxen and escorted by a number of our young friends, which made this trip of about a quarter of a mile very pleasant, in spite of the oxen and the snowstorm.

The next winter was very severe, and many of our neighbors suffered greatly from colds and even frozen limbs. But there was an abundance of provisions, and, as far as I can remember, no one was in actual need after the first winter.

More arrivals

In the spring of 1856 several newcomers arrived in our colony. That year marked the climax of the mad land speculation in the Northwest. Cities and towns were staked out and named, advertised and sold everywhere in the state, and people then seemed to be perfectly wild, everybody expecting to get rich in a short

time without working. The value of real estate rose enormously, and money was loaned at three, four, and even five per cent a month. Fortunately, very few of the settlers in our neighborhood were seized by this mad fury of speculation. I, however, became a victim. I bought several pieces of land, and sold some of them very profitably, and mortgaged others at an impossible rate of interest. And, the world becoming too narrow for me on the farm, I availed myself of the first opportunity to trade away my land for some property in Red Wing, which was a booming little town at that time. We moved from the plain log cabin on the old farm into a house in town, where I engaged in a successful mercantile business. But speculation was in the air, and before the spring of 1857 my entire stock of merchandise was exchanged for town lots in Wasioja and Geneva, two paper cities further west. Meanwhile my friend Mr. Eustrom, with his young wife and baby, had arrived from Boston, and both of us, with our families and a few friends, moved out to Geneva early in the summer, with the intention of building up a city and acquiring riches in a hurry. But at that time the waves of speculation began to subside, and nine-tenths of the cities

and towns which were mapped out, and the great enterprises which were inaugurated by enthusiasts like myself suddenly collapsed into a mere nothing. Among these was also Geneva, which is not larger today than when we left it, and it was about all I could do to raise enough money to get back to Vasa with my wife. My friend Eustrom pre-empted a claim near Geneva and remained there.

The 1857 crisis

Making an inventory of my property after the return to Vasa in 1857, I found that the principal thing I had was a debt of \$2,000, bearing an interest of five per cent a month. In order to pay this debt we sold everything we had, even our furniture and my wife's gold watch. This was the great crisis of 1857. It stirred up everybody and everything in the country, and it was no wonder that I, being an inexperienced and enthusiastic young man, had to suffer with so many others. But now the question was, what should I do? I could not return to the farm, for I had none; that is, it was encumbered for about twice its value.

In the midst of these difficulties I went to Red Wing one day to consult a prominent lawyer in regard to some business matters. During my conversation with him he said: "You have nothing to do now, you have had enough of speculation, you know the English language, you are tolerably well acquainted with our laws, well educated, young and ambitious. Why not study law, then? This state and this county is just the place for you to make a splendid beginning in that profession. Come to me, and within a year you can be admitted to the bar, after which you will find it easy to get along."

Change of career

I returned to Vasa in the evening, and, having consulted my wife, who was visiting her parents, I soon made up my mind. The next day both of us were on the way to Red Wing supplied with clothes, bedding, a few dishes and some provisions, which had

been given us by my wife's parents, who also conveyed us to town. In Red Wing we rented a room about sixteen feet square, got a cook stove and a few articles of furniture on credit, and everything was in order for housekeeping and the study of law. I immediately commenced my course of study with that excellent lawyer, Mr. Warren Bristol, who afterwards for many years served as U.S. Judge in New Mexico, where he recently died.

A new way of life

This life was something new for my young wife, who had grown up in a house of plenty. Now she had to try her hand at managing our household affairs, with the greatest economy, and she accomplished her task so well that no minister of finance could have done better. In fact we were so poor that winter that we could not afford to buy the tallow candles which were necessary for my night studies (kerosene was unknown at that time). But every evening during this trying but happy winter my wife made a lamp by pouring melted lard, which her parents sent us, into a saucer, and putting in a cotton wick, and in my eyes this light was more brilliant than the rays from the golden chandeliers in the palaces of the rich. By this light I studied Blackstone, Kent, and other works on law.

Late in the spring of 1858 a place became vacant in the justice of the peace, and I succeeded in getting the appointment to this position, which brought me a couple of dollars now and then, thus improving our financial condition considerably. Early in the summer I was appointed city clerk, with a salary of \$12.50 a month, which was quite a fortune for us at that time. After one year's hard study I was admitted to the bar, and my honored teacher accepted me as his partner on good conditions. My profession seemed to be well chosen; I had plenty to do, and met with all the success I could expect.

My first case

My first case in the district court was



The present Swedish church at Vasa, Goodhue County, Minnesota in 2002.

before Judge McMillan, who afterwards became chief justice of our supreme court, and then a United States senator. In opening the case I became nervous and excited and would have broken down entirely had it not been for the kindly manner in which the judge overlooked my diffidence, and helped me out of the embarrassment by leading me on and putting the very words in my mouth; this was only natural to his kind heart, and he probably never remembered it, but to me it was an act of great kindness, never to be forgotten, especially not when more than twenty years after the little incident he needed all his friends to rally for his return to the U.S. senate, his most formidable opponent being the venerable and beloved statesman, Alexander Ramsey.

My law practice lasted only a few months, as I was appointed county auditor to fill a vacancy, and soon afterwards elected to fill the regular term of office, and again re-elected two years later. Before that time no Swedish-American had occupied such responsible civil office in the United States.

But I probably made a mistake in accepting this office and thereby turning my back on a profession at

which I would undoubtedly have made more easy and rapid progress than by anything else. But for the time being it produced great economical improvements in our private life. Our little home, the narrow room which served as bedroom, study, kitchen and parlor, was soon exchanged for a neat little house, and a year later we moved into a larger and more comfortable building, which was our own property.

Meanwhile the settlement at Vasa had prospered, and the population had materially increased. The Scandinavian settlers had scattered over the neighboring towns and counties with marvelous rapidity. The crisis of 1857 had been an excellent lesson to us all, for, although the price of real estate had fallen to about one-fourth of its former value, the people were better off now than formerly, owing to better management and more prudent economy.

Growing interest in politics

The Scandinavians had now commenced to take a lively interest in the political discussions which were agitating the entire country at that time. The all absorbing political

question of the day was “slavery” or “no slavery” in the new territories. It is unnecessary to say that the Scandinavians were almost to a man in favor of liberty to all men, and that they consequently joined the Republican Party, which had just been organized for the purpose of restricting slavery.

In the winter of 1861, while I was holding the office of auditor the second term, the legislature of Minnesota appointed a committee to revise the tax laws. This committee invited five county auditors, of which number I had the honor to be one, to assist in its work. The tax laws which were formulated by this general committee were in force over twenty years.

It was about this time the great American statesman, W.H. Seward, visited Minnesota. I heard him make his famous speech in St. Paul, in which, with the gift of prophecy, he depicted the future grandeur of the twin cities. I also heard Owen Lovejoy, a member of congress from Illinois, and one of the leading anti-slavery agitators of the times.

The presidential election of 1860

During the presidential election of 1860 the political excitement ran very high in the whole country. The Southern states had assumed a threatening position, and expressed their intention to secede from the Union if Lincoln was elected president. Throughout the whole country political clubs were organized. The Democrats formed companies which they called “Little Giants,” which was the nickname given to Stephen A. Douglas, their candidate for president.

The Republicans also organized companies which they called “Wide Awakes.” I was chosen leader of the Republican company in Red Wing. Political meetings were very frequent during the last few weeks before election, and among the most prominent features of those meetings were processions and parades of the companies, which were uniformed,

and carried banners and torches. During the campaign C.C. Andrews and the late Stephen Miller, respective candidates for presidential electors on the Democratic and Republican tickets, held meetings together and jointly debated the important questions of the day, taking of course opposite sides, but within a year both were found as officers in the Union army, gallantly fighting for the same cause.

Becoming a lieutenant

About this time a company of militia organized in Red Wing, and I was one of the lieutenants, and took active part in its drill and maneuvers. Although none of the men who took part in these movements could foresee or suspect the approach of the awful struggle which was to plunge the country into a deluge of fire and blood, still they all seemed to have a presentiment that critical times were near at hand, and that it was the duty of all true citizens to make ready for them. It is a significant fact that fifty-four men out of our little company of only sixty, within two years became officers or soldiers in the volunteer army of the United States. Although the Scandinavian immigrants had been in the state only a few years, they still seemed to take as great an interest in the threatening political difficulties of the times, and were found to be just as willing as their native fellow-citizens to sacrifice their blood and lives for the Union.

Fort Sumter

Going from the court house on the afternoon of April 12th, 1861, a good friend overtook me with the news that the rebels of the South had fired on Fort Sumpter. The news spread rapidly, and caused surprise and intense indignation. In a few days the governor issued a proclamation that one thousand men should be ready to leave our young state for the seat of war; more than a sufficient number of companies were already organized to fill this regiment, and the only question was, who were to have the

first chance? This first excitement was so sudden that the Scandinavians, who are more deliberate in such matters, scarcely knew what was going on before the first enlistment was made.

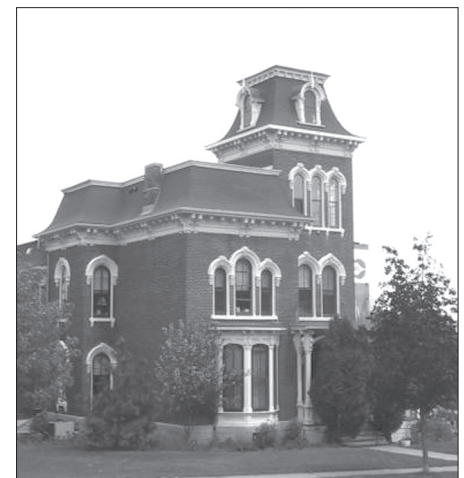
A few months passed, and the battle of Bull Run was fought. It was no longer a mere momentary excitement; it was no longer expected that the Rebellion could be subdued in a single battle or within a few months, but it was generally understood that the war would be long and bitter.

Then the Scandinavians of Minnesota began to stir. We had heard that a few Swedes in Illinois, especially Major, afterwards General, Stohbrand and a few others, had entered the army.

Editor’s note: Hans Mattson’s experiences in the war will be told in the next installment of his memories.

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.



A Victorian house in Red Wing, MN, perhaps of the type the Mattson family lived in later. (Photo: Bengt Thorsell).