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A tragic 130th anniversary

The murder of a Småland immigrant in Northfield, Minnesota

BY MAGNUS EKSTRAND AND BIRGER BRING

Christdala Church

The more than 120-year old church of Christdala rises close to the country road a couple of kilometers west of the town of Millersburg, Rice County, in southeast Minnesota, about 50 kilometers south of the state capital of Saint Paul. This simple wooden church, erected by Swedish immigrants, is in this area the foremost building that links the present Swedish-Americans and the immigrants of the 1870s to this part of Minnesota. Christdala church has recently been the object of interest to the antiquarian authorities and was in 1995 placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service. It has recently been thoroughly restored.

When the first Swedish settlers arrived in the neighborhood of



Christdala church around 1870, one of them was Peter Ljungquist, born 2 January 1844 in Vittsjö parish in Skåne. He was followed shortly by a great number of his countrymen, including the “*smålänning*” Peter Gustafsson, born 3 February 1842 in Fiddekulla, Vissefjärda parish in Kalmar *län*, and his younger brother Nicolaus Gustafsson, born 20 August 1846 in the same place. The Swedes who arrived in the Millersburg area during the 1870s came mostly from Småland, Skåne, and Blekinge.

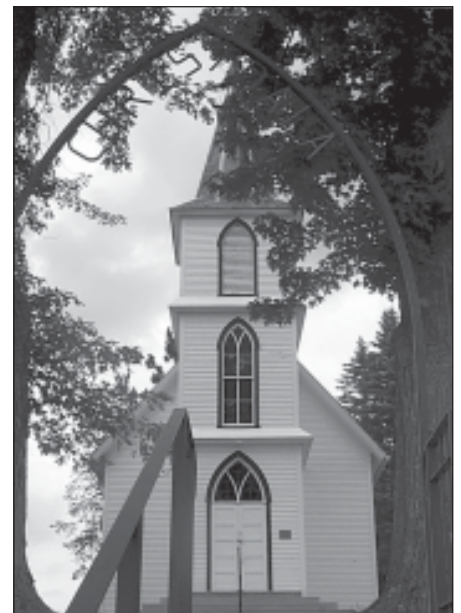
The Christdala Congregation

The Swedes soon started to cater to the spiritual needs and in 1877 founded a congregation, in the beginning consisting of 13 Swedish families. When they had to choose a name for the congregation, they finally chose Christdala, and it is said that it was their spiritual leader, Pastor A. Wahlin, who suggested this name.

Several Swedish place names with the same spelling are found in several instances in Sweden. The name Kristdala though is unique and only found in one place – as a parish in the city of Oskarshamn. Is it probable that a small group of immigrants, consisting of 13 families without knowledge of the ancient Swedish name, would construct a similar name in an old form of the language far away in Minnesota?

Well, hardly. The choice of name points to the possibility that somebody in the group knew about the Swedish parish in Oskarshamn. By this time several inhabitants from the *småländska* Kristdala had immigrated to the town of Andover in Illinois, not far from Minnesota. Perhaps it was through his contacts with his ministerial colleagues there that pastor Wahlin obtained information about Kristdala in Småland, and found the name so pleasing that he chose to use it for his new congregation at Millersburg.

The building of the church started in 1878. The foundation was laid by John Lundberg and for the majority of the carpentry work John Olsson



Christdala church.

from nearby Northfield was responsible. In the summer of 1878 the church was ready to be used. John Olsson had an indelible memory of something that had happened about 2 years earlier, but more about that later.

Clouds of trouble

Life for the first immigrants to the Christdala congregation was not without its share of burdens and hardships. The breaking of the untilled Minnesota soil and the building of necessary houses demanded enormous physical efforts.

The first houses of the immigrants were often small, cold, and dark, sometimes even worse than what they had left in the old country. In the beginning many of the Swedes also had problems finding cash to buy all the tools that were necessary to farm properly. In the beginning most of the Swedes in Minnesota led a fairly primitive life, not without its worries.

The settlers sometimes heard stories about the bloody Indian uprising in Minnesota in 1862, when many Europeans, including a number of Swedes, had been killed. But the immigrants of the 1870s no longer had any cause to fear the Red Man. Instead soon eight white Americans were going to become a short-lived but deadly threat to two of the Swedish immigrants, and the Swedish colony would lose a member.

The 6th of September 1876: preparations

Peter Ljungquist had the only team of mules among the Swedish settlers around Millersburg. Thus he owned the fastest means of transport in the colony and his countrymen used to go with him on his travels. On 6 September he decided to go to Northfield the next day. Some other Swedes were coming along, including Nicolaus Gustafsson.

On the same day, the 6th of September, Cole Younger and three other horsemen came to Millersburg in the heart of the Swedish colony, where they lodged at the Cushman Hotel

for the night. These men were probably not known by sight in the area, but the hotel staff might have noticed their heavy armament. The following day they were to meet with four other men on a common errand in Northfield.

In the morning of 7 September 1876: on the road to Northfield

On the morning of 7 September Peter Ljungquist harnessed his mules and started on the road to Northfield. At the Gustafsson farm, not far from Christdala Church, lived the former Vissefjärda resident Peter Gustafsson and his wife Anna Carin Andreadotter, born 1846 in Sillhövda parish, Blekinge *län*. Near them also lived Gustafsson's younger brother, Nicolaus Gustafsson, age 30, who had just arrived from Sweden. There Ljungquist fetched the latter and Peter Gustafsson's wife, and when they all had settled in the wagon pulled by the mules there was a total of five Swedes. They had all brought some farm produce that they intended to barter in the town. Cash was not often found among the settlers, so a condition for trading was you had something to trade with.

The company hoped to reach their goal at noontime.

But more people had an errand in Northfield that day. Eight horsemen were getting close to the town. Four of them had spent the night at the Cushman Hotel in Millersburg, and the other four someplace else in the vicinity. Otherwise they had travelled a long way – through several states of the union – for an errand that was well-planned. They did not come like the Swedes to exchange produce or services peacefully with the townspeople, nor to just make a friendly and polite visit. They had other things on their minds, and the goal of their long travel was the First National Bank of Northfield. But it was not a question of making a deposit or a withdrawal, as none of them owned any honestly-earned money. They supported themselves in a different way. They brought the equipment that always accompanied them on their travels – rifles, guns, and ammunition – by the use of which they aimed to make the biggest withdrawal in the short history of the Northfield bank: the bank was going to be robbed of all cash.

The eight-man gang was led by the 29-year-old Jesse James, the most feared bank, train, and stagecoach



Cole and James Younger.

robber in North America. By his side rode his brother Frank James, the hardened brothers Robert, James, and Cole Younger and three more men. Partly schooled during the Civil War, these men were a highly dangerous group with several murders and robberies on their consciences, and who did not hesitate to use violence to reach their goals. It was Cole Younger who soon enough was to meet eye-to-eye two Swedish immigrants.

Afternoon 7 September 1876: the bank robbery and the fatal shooting

The eight Americans rode into Northfield about 11 in the morning. A few hours later, about 2 in the afternoon, they regrouped according to their plans. Three of them dismounted and went into the bank, while the other five, including Cole Younger, stayed mounted to watch the closest streets.

By one o'clock the five Swedes arrived in town, where they started their trading. It was then still quiet and peaceful in the town. When the first shot was heard by the bank around two in the afternoon, Nicolaus Gustafsson was not far away, possibly on the same block. The shooting created, naturally enough, some excitement in town, and several persons, including John Olsson, who lived in Northfield and was later to build the Christdala Church, rushed towards the town center.

By the street crossing just south of the bank he was stopped by one of the robbers, Cole Younger, who with a gun in his hand told him to leave the street. At the same time more shots were fired and a man was seen falling to the ground on the other side of the street, and Olsson turned around and started to run towards the basement where he had come from. Shortly before he reached the basement stairs he met Nicolaus Gustafsson who seemed to walk towards the center of the shooting without understanding the danger. Gustafsson, who despite the alarm along the Main Street, did not understand the danger for some reason, ended up



Frank James.



Jesse James.

face-to-face with the 32-year-old Cole Younger, who was mounted on his horse and watched the street corner just to the south of the bank. He told the Swede to leave, but Gustafsson had not yet learned enough English, and did not seem to listen to Younger, who then fired his gun and hit Gustafsson in the head.

Bleeding profusely from a wound close to his eyes Nicolaus Gustafsson fell down on the street just by the feet of John Olsson, where he laid on his back. Olsson continued a few meters more and took shelter by the basement door. When he soon tried to rescue his wounded countryman, he was ordered by Younger "Stay where you are, or I will kill you too!" Younger evidently believed that his shot of Gustafsson had been instantly killing him.

Later the shocked *smålänning* would rise and walk on his own to

the nearby river to wash his bleeding head. On his way back he met John Olsson, who took him to the *Norska Hotellet* (Norwegian Hotel), from where they sent for a doctor. He stated that Gustafsson had a fracture in his skull and that a piece of bone had intruded into the brain.

Gustafsson's condition deteriorated quickly, and after four days in a coma under the care of John Olsson and others, he died in Northfield on Monday 11 September 1876. He was buried in the town cemetery.

The hunt

One of the shots that was fired in the bank killed the cashier, who paid with his life for refusing to open the safe. But with alacrity not expected by the robbers, the townspeople got out their arms to defend themselves and their money. A gunfight started outside the bank, during which two



Gun used by Cole Younger.

of the robbers were killed and left dead in the street. Wounded and without other booty than just some coins, the other six had to flee the town.

Hunted by a huge posse, the outlaws divided into two groups, so that Jesse and Frank James managed to escape their pursuers. The other group was not so lucky: on the 21st of September they passed a Norwegian farm, where the escapees were observed by a watchful 17-year-old youth by the name of Oscar Sorbel, who sounded the alarm.

The local sheriff immediately organized a posse, which is said to have included a couple of Norwegians, and that later in the same day managed to surround the robbers. During the gunfight that followed another of them lost his life. Unable to defend themselves any longer, the much-wounded Youngers had to surrender. During the trial that followed they were all sentenced to life in prison for taking part in the attack on Northfield.

Epilog

The 17-year-old Norwegian youth Oscar Sorbel's part in the catching of the Younger brothers was soon common knowledge. To shield him from unwanted attention from other members of the Younger gang, his name was changed to Oscar Oleson Suborn. His true identity was not known until about 50 years after the bank robbery.

Jesse James, the man who led the attack on the Northfield bank, was murdered in 1882, 35 years old. His brother Frank left the outlaw career later the same year. After a short trial he was acquitted of all his crimes. Together with Cole Younger he participated for some time in a Wild West Show. On and off he supported himself by showing his and Jesse's parental home to tourists, and his last years he worked as a starter at trotting races. He died 1915, 72 years old.

Robert Younger, the youngest of the brothers, never regained his liberty. He became ill with tuberculosis and died in prison in 1889. Cole Younger, the man who killed Nicolaus Gustafsson, was released from prison in 1901 together with his brother James. They had then made amends for the attack on Northfield with 25 years of their lives. James committed suicide in 1902. Cole worked for a while as a tombstone salesman. Later he joined his old pal Frank James and the once feared bandits now went on tours and gave lectures on the plight of being an outlaw. Cole Younger was the last of the men around Jesse James. He died in 1916, aged 72 years.

The further details on John Olsson's life are unknown. Peter Ljungquist, the man with the mule team, died in the 1920s. He was then in his 80s and was buried in the cemetery by Christdala church.

The Swedes in southeastern Min-

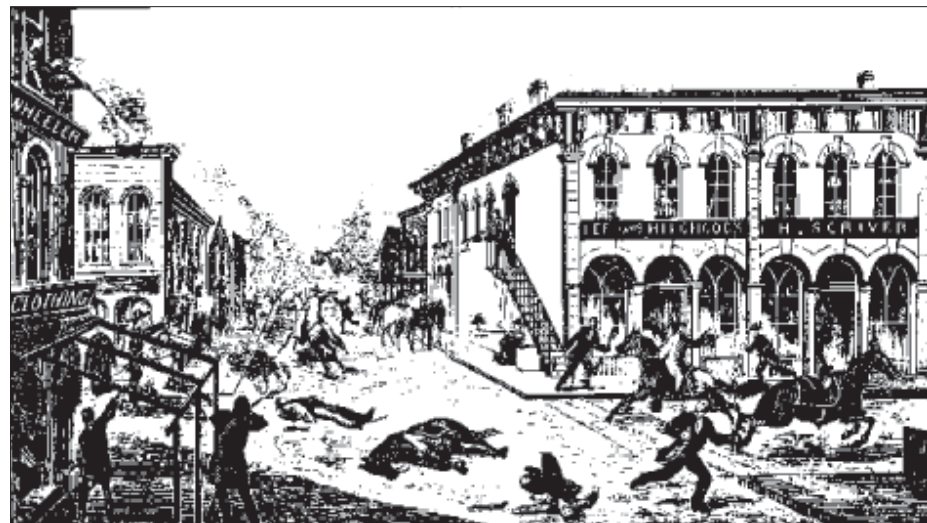
nesota for many years talked about Nicolaus Gustafsson, who only lived for 30 years, of which just a few months in North America. His burial place in the Northfield cemetery was unmarked for a long time and was thus forgotten. In May 1994 it was found again, and 7 September the same year, on the anniversary of the bank robbery, the townspeople erected a stone on his resting place.

In his Småland home parish he seems to be totally forgotten; nobody seems to know who he was. But since the 1940s the people of Northfield every year in September celebrate the memory of the failed bank robbery. Before thousands of spectators eight amateur players ride into town and group themselves around the bank. Shots are fired along the street, and close to the street crossing at the end of the block every year one of the main characters falls to the ground, a Swedish farmer's son from Vissefjärda who already long ago wrote his name in the history of Minnesota.

The Christdala congregation was disbanded in 1966.

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The Northfield Raid.

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