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A Pioneer From the 1850s

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



Part I

Introduction

The *skåning* Hans Mattson was born 23 December 1832 in the parish of Önnestad in Kristianstad county in a farmer's family. He went to the village school and then to the high school in Kristianstad. In 1848 there was a war between Germany and Denmark and Hans Mattson wanted to join the army to beat the Germans. So in 1849 he became an artillery apprentice and stayed for a year and a half in the Vendes Artillery Regiment. When he realized that his possibilities of rising in the ranks were very limited, as he was not a nobleman, he decided to leave Sweden. In May 1851 he and some friends left for America.

After various adventures on the East Coast he decided to go west in the company of his father and brother who had now arrived. They travelled on the railroad to Buffalo, then

by water to Toledo, and at last again on the railroad to Chicago. To continue further west the travellers went on a canal boat to La Salle, and from there by horse and carriage to Galesburg.

They found that the area did not suit them, and they heard many stories about Minnesota and its fertile soil, and the stone-free prairie lands in Goodhue County.

Hans Mattson's story:

After selecting this land my father returned to Illinois. In company with the other explorers, I went to St. Paul, where a council was held in which all participated, and at which it was decided that three of us, Messrs. Roos, Kempe, and myself, should go to our claims that fall and do as much work as possible, until the others could join us the following spring.

Having made the necessary preparations we three went to Red Wing by steamboat and found a little town with half a dozen families, among whom was the Rev. J. W. Hancock, who for several years had been a missionary among the Indians. The other settlers were Wm. Freeborn, Dr. Sweeney, H. L. Bevans, and John Day. Besides these we also met two Swedes, Peter Green and Nels Nelson, and a Norwegian by the name of Peterson.

On the bank of the river the Sioux Indians had a large camp. The country west of Red Wing was then practically a wilderness, and our little party was the first to start to cultivate the soil and make a permanent settlement.

At Red Wing we supplied ourselves with a tent, a cook stove, a yoke of oxen, carpenter's tools, provisions, and other necessaries. Having hired a team of horses, we then packed our goods on a wagon, tied the cattle behind, and started for the new settlement. The first four miles we followed the territorial road; after that we had nothing but Indian trails to guide us. Toward evening we arrived at a grove on Belle Creek, now known as Jemtland. Here the tent was pitched and our evening meal cooked, and only pioneers like ourselves can understand how we relished it after our long day's tramp. The team was taken back the next day, and we were left alone in the wilderness. After a day's exploration



The family home, Kellsagården in Önnestad, Skåne, Sweden.

we moved our camp two miles further south, to another point near Belle Creek, where Mr. Roos had taken his claim.

Haystack on fire

It was now late in September, and our first care was to secure enough hay for the cattle, and in a few days we had a big stack. Having read about prairie fires, we decided to protect our stack by burning away the short stubble around it. But a minute and a half was sufficient to convince us that we had made wrong calculations, for within that time the stack itself was burning with such fury that all the water in Belle Creek could not have put it out. Still, this was not the worst of it. Before we had time to recover from our astonishment the fire had spread over the best part of the valley and consumed all the remaining grass, which was pretty dry at that time of the year. Inexperienced as we were, we commenced to run a race with the wind, and tried to stop the fire before reaching another fine patch of grass about a mile to the north; but this attempt was, of course, a complete failure, and we returned to our cheerless tent mourning over this serious misfortune.

Brother-in-law creates problems

The next morning we all started out in different directions to see if any grass was left in Goodhue County, and fortunately we found plenty of it near our first camping-ground. Having put up a second stack of very poor hay, we proceeded to build a rude log house, and had just finished it when my brother-in-law, Mr. Willard, surprised us by appearing in our midst, having left in Red Wing his wife and baby, now Mrs. Zelma Christensen of Rush City, who is, as far as I know, the first child born of Swedish parents in St. Paul.

Mr. Willard who was a scholarly gentleman and not accustomed to manual labor, had found it rather hard to work with shovel and pick on the hilly streets of St. Paul, and

made up his mind that he would better do that kind of work on a farm. Messers. Roos and Kempe having furnished all the money for the outfit, I really had no share in it, and as we could not expect Mr. Willard and his family to pass the winter in that cabin, I immediately made up my mind to return with him to Red Wing.

Back to Red Wing

In an hour we were ready, and without waiting for dinner we took the trail back to that place. I remember distinctly how, near the head of the Spring Creek Valley, we sat down in a little grove to rest and meditate on the future. We were both very hungry, especially Mr. Willard, who had now walked over twenty miles since breakfast. Then espying a tempting squirrel in a tree close by, we tried to kill it with sticks and rocks; but we were poor marksmen, and thus missed a fine squirrel roast. Tired and very hungry we reached Red Wing late in the afternoon, and soon found my sister, Mrs. Willard, comfortably housed with one of the families there. Her cheerful and hopeful nature and the beautiful baby on her arm gave us fresh joy and strength to battle with the hardships that were in store for us. Mr. Willard and his wife had taken along what furniture they owned, a few eatables and five dollars and fifty cents in cash, which was all that we possessed of the goods of this world. But who cares for money at that age? Mr. Willard was twenty-five years old, my sister twenty-three, and I twenty, all hale and hearty, and never for a moment doubting our success, no matter what we should undertake.

Wood chopping

Our first work was wood chopping, for which we were less fit than almost anything else. We had to go to a place about three miles above Red Wing, where a man had made a contract to bank up fifteen hundred cords of wood for the Mississippi steamers.

There was an old wood chopper's cabin which we repaired by thatching

it with hay and earth, putting in a door, a small window, and a few rough planks for a floor. In a few days we were duly installed, baby and all, in the little hut which was only twelve by sixteen feet, but to us as dear as a palace to a king. We began to chop wood at once. The trees were tall, soft maples and ash, and our pay was fifty-five cents a cord for soft and sixty-five cents for hard wood. At first both of us could not chop a cord apiece, and before the winter was over we often chopped three cords together in a day.

After a few days we were joined by four Norwegian wood choppers for whom we put up a new cabin to sleep in; but my sister cooked for us all, and the others paid for their board to Mr. Willard and myself, who had all things in common. Those four men were better workmen than we, and one of them, Albert Olson, often chopped three cords a day. They were quiet, industrious, and generous fellows, so that we soon became attached to each other, and we were all very fond of the little Zelma. My sister managed our household affairs so well and kept the little house so neat and tidy that when spring came we were all loth to leave.

To the claim

The weather being fine and the sleighing good in the beginning of January, we hired John Day to take us with his team to our claims while there was yet snow, so that we might chop and haul out logs for the house which Mr. Willard and I intended to put up in the spring. My sister remained in the cabin, but Albert went with us for the sake of company. We put some lumber on the sled, and provided ourselves with hay and food enough to last a few days, and plenty of quilts and blankets for our bedding. John Day, who was an old frontiersman with an instinct almost like that of an Indian, guided us safely to Willard Spring. A few hundred yards below this, in a deep ravine, we stopped near some sheltering trees, built a roaring campfire, and made ourselves as comfort-

he would never have left his cold seat again.

After a drive of eight miles we arrived at a house on Spring Creek, near Red Wing, where we found a warm room and a good shed for the horses. After an hour's rest we continued the journey, and safely reached our little home in the woods before dark. I do not know that I ever appreciated a home more than I did that rude cabin when again comfortably seated by its warm and cheerful fire-place.

A few weeks later I had an opportunity to visit St. Paul, and while there attended the wedding of a young Norwegian farmer from Carver County and a girl just arrived from Sweden. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Nilsson, a Baptist minister, who had been banished from Sweden on account of proselytizing. Among the guests was Mr. John Swainsson, who since became well known among the Swedes of Minnesota, and who died in St. Paul a short time ago.

Meeting with Jacob Fahlstrom

I also made the acquaintance of one Jacob Fahlstrom, who had lived forty years among the Indians and devoted most of that time to missionary work among them. He was a remarkable man, and was well known among the Hudson Bay employees and other early settlers of the Northwest. As a boy he had deserted from a Swedish vessel in Quebec and made his way through the wilderness, seeking shelter among the Indians; and, by marrying an Indian girl, he had become almost identified with them. I think he told me that he had not heard a word spoken in his native tongue in thirty-five years, and that he had almost forgotten it when he met the first Swedish settlers in the St. Croix Valley. His children are now living there, while he has passed away to the unknown land beyond, honored and respected by all who knew him, Indians as well as white men.



Mountain Chief, chief of the Sioux.

Returning home

On my return from St. Paul I stopped at the cabin of Mr. Peter Green, at Spring Creek, near Red Wing. The only domestic animals he had was a litter of pigs, and as Mr. Willard and I intended to settle on our land in the spring I thought it might be well to start in with a couple of pigs. Accordingly, I got two pigs from Mr. Green, put them in a bag which I shouldered, and left for our cabin in the woods. According to my calculations, the distance I had to walk ought not to be over three miles, and in order to be sure of not getting lost I followed the Cannon River at the mouth of which our cabin stood. I walked on the ice where the snow was about a foot deep, and, if I had known of the meandering course of the river, I would never have undertaken to carry that burden such a distance. From nine in the morning until it was almost dark I trudged along with my burden on my back, prompted to the greatest exertion by the grunting of the pigs, and feeling my back uncomfortably warm. These were the first domestic animals I ever owned, and I think I well earned my title to them by carrying them along the windings of the river at least ten miles. Both I and the pigs were well received when we reached the cabin. We made a pig pen by digging a hole in the ground

and covering it with poles and brush, and fed them on the refuse from the table. Before we were ready to move one of them died, while the other, after being brought to our new farm, ungratefully ran away, and was most likely eaten up by the wolves, which perhaps was just as agreeable to him as to be eaten by us.

Indians

While living in this camp we saw more Indians than white men. A band of Sioux Indians camped near us for several weeks. They were very friendly, and never molested us. The men brought us venison and fresh fish, which they caught in great quantities by spearing them through the ice. We gave them bread and coffee, and sometimes invited one or two to dinner after we were through. Their women would stay for hours with my sister and help her take care of the baby. Indeed they were so fond of the white-haired child that they would sometimes run a race in vying with each other to get the first chance to fondle her. Sometimes we visited them in their tents (*wigwams*) in the evening and smoked *Kinikinick* with them.

Several of their dead reposed in the young trees near our cabin. When somebody died it was their custom to stretch the dead body on poles which were tied to young trees high enough to be out of the reach of wild beasts, then cover it with blankets, and finally leave some corn and venison and a jar of water close by. At some subsequent visit to the neighborhood they would gather the bones and bury them at some regular burial-ground, usually on a high hill or bluff.

Once we saw a regular war dance in Red Wing. A few Sioux had killed two Chippewas and brought back their scalps stretched on a frame of young saplings. At a given hour the whole band assembled, and, amid the most fantastic gestures, jumping, singing, yelling, beating of tom-toms and jingling of bells, gave a performance which in lurid savageness excelled anything I ever saw. The

same Indians again became our neighbors for a short time on Belle Creek the following winter, and we rather liked them, and they us. But eight years later they took part in the terrible massacre of the white settlers in Western Minnesota, and thirty-nine of their men were hanged on one gallows at Mankato in the fall of 1862 and the rest transported beyond our borders.

To our new home

Thus our first winter in Minnesota passed without further incidents, until the beginning of March, when the weather turned so mild that we were afraid the ice on the Mississippi might break up, and we therefore hurried back to Red Wing. By our wood chopping and Mrs. Willard's cooking enough money had been earned to buy the most necessary articles for our new home. When we had procured everything and taken a few days' rest, we again hired Mr. John Day to take us out to our land with his team. Hundred of thousands of immigrants have had the same experience, and can realize how we felt on that fine March morning, starting from Red Wing with a wagon loaded with some boards on the bottom, a cook stove and utensils, doors, windows, a keg of nails, saws, spades, a small supply of provisions, a bedstead or two with bedding, a few trunks, and a little box containing our spotted pig, Mrs. Willard in the seat with the driver, her baby in her arms, her husband and myself taking turns as guides, John Day shouting to his horses, laughing and joking; all of us full of hope, strength and determination to overcome all obstacles and conquer the wildness. The snow was now nearly gone, and the air was spring-like. After a twelve miles' heavy pull we arrived at our destination, and made a temporary tent of sticks and blankets, very much after the Indian fashion. Two of the Norwegians had accompanied us to help build our cabin. Mr. Day stopped a couple of days hauling building material, and before night the second day the rear part of our

cabin was under roof. After a few days the Norwegians left us, and Mr. Willard and myself had to finish the main part of the building which was also made of round logs. For many a year this rude log cabin was the center of attraction, and a hospitable stopping place for nearly all the settlers of Vasa.

Supplies running out

In the month of April cold weather set in again, and it was very late in the season when steamboat navigation was opened on the Mississippi. At that time all provisions had to be shipped from Galena or Dubuque, and it happened that the winter's supplies in Red Wing were so nearly gone that not a particle of flour or meat could be bought after the first of April.

Our supplies were soon exhausted, and for about two weeks our little family had only a peck of potatoes, a small panful of flour, and a gallon of beans to live on, part of which was a present from Messrs. Roos and Kempe, who had remained all winter on their claims, three miles south of us. They had been struggling against great odds, and had been compelled to live on half rations for a considerable length of time! Even their oxen had been reduced almost to the point of starvation, their only feed being over-ripe hay in small quantities. We would certainly have been starving if it had not been for my shot-gun, with which I went down into woods of Belle Creek every morning at day-break, generally returning with pheasants, squirrels, or other small game.

One Sunday the weather was so disagreeable and rough that I did not succeed in my hunting, but in feeding the team back of the kitchen some oats had been spilt, and a flock of blackbirds came and fed on them. Through an opening between the logs of the kitchen I shot several dozen of these birds, which, by the way, are not ordinarily very toothsome. But, being a splendid cook, my sister made them into a stew, thickened with a few mashed beans

and a handful of flour – in our estimation the mess turned out to be a dinner fit for kings.

The steamboat comes

Our supplies being nearly exhausted, I started for Red Wing the next morning, partly to save the remaining handful of provisions for my sister and her husband, partly in hopes of obtaining fresh supplies from a steamboat which was expected about that time.

Three days afterwards the steamer arrived. As soon as practicable the boxes were brought to the store of H. L. Bevans. I secured a smoked ham, thirty pounds of flour, a gallon of molasses, some coffee, salt and sugar, strapped it all (weighing almost seventy pounds) on my back, and started toward evening for our cabin in the wilderness. I had to walk about fourteen miles along the Indian trail, but in spite of the heavy burden I made that distance in a short time, knowing that the dear ones at home were threatened by hunger; perhaps the howling of the prairie wolves near my path also had something to do with the speed. There are events in the life of every person which stand out like milestones along the road, and so attract the attention of the traveler on life's journey that they always remain vivid pictures in his memory. My arrival at our cabin that evening was one of those events in our humble life. I will not attempt to describe the joy which my burden brought to all of us, especially to the young mother with the little babe at her breast.

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.