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## Book Reviews

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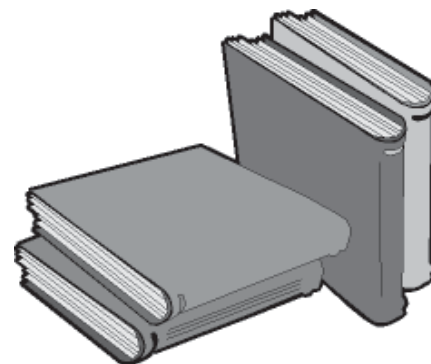
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# Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps. If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the Book Review Editor: Dennis L. Johnson at <djohnson@2vikings.com> or 2407 Hunsberger Drive, Limerick, PA 19468, so he knows what you are working on.



## Frontier Tales

**Old Rail Fence Corners, Frontier Tales Told By Minnesota Pioneers**, Lucy Leavenworth Wilder Morris, Ed., softcover, 344 pages, Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul, 1976, (Amazon.com, \$11.53).

What was it really like to be one of the first pioneers in the Minnesota Territory in the 1840's and 1850's, when you filed your claim with an axe mark or a boulder as markers and set about to build a farm and a life on the prairie? This is difficult for descendants to imagine four and five generations later, aside from images created by Vilhelm Moberg in his *The Emigrants* series of books, *The Little House on the Prairie*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, or Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.

**Old Rail Fence Corners**, discovered while I was browsing the back shelves of a small town book store in northern Minnesota, was first printed in 1914 and 1915 by a subcommittee of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.). It was reprinted in 1976 by the Minnesota State Historical Society, and copies remain available at some on-line booksellers and elsewhere.

The book contains personal stories told by some 154 of the earliest settlers in the Minnesota Territory. This collection of stories was edited by Lucy Morris, about half of them told directly to Mrs. Morris and the others

to members of other chapters of the D.A.R. in other locations in Minnesota. These are all first person stories as told to the interviewer with little editing, not hand-me-down tales from descendants who may or may not have altered these recollections. Together, these stories form a magnificent human record of these pioneer decades and the frontier experience.

Lucy Wilder came to Minnesota from Illinois in 1878 at the age of 16, living in Houston County and teaching in country schools. By 1890, after some time in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, to further her education, she returned to Minnesota and married James T. Morris, who was in the lumber business and later a lender. After some European travel, she did some writing: travel guides, children's books, and articles for magazines. She had a great-grandfather in the American Revolution and joined the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) in 1894. She rose to prominence in the D.A.R. organization, holding national office and receiving an honorary award in 1933. She died in 1935.

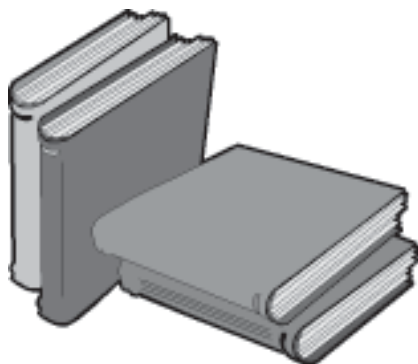
By the early 1900's, Mrs. Wilder recognized that the exceptional personal stories of the first settlers were rapidly being lost as these pioneers were dying off. By 1911, she conceived the idea for her book, and began to interview as many of these pioneers as she could, many then in their 80's and 90's. The task became overwhelming, and she organized a Book Committee to assist her with the interviews, consisting of members of 16 chapters of the D.A.R. in

Minnesota. These women collected and recorded the memories of 62 men and 92 women in all. Mrs. Morris assembled and edited this collection into the first edition, titled *Old Rail Fence Corners: The A.B.C.'s of Minnesota History*, published in late 1914.

This first edition sold out quickly and a second edition, almost identical to the first, was published in 1915. The book was widely acclaimed and read at the time, but sixty years later it was long out of print, rare, and little known.

In 1976, the Minnesota Historical Society reprinted *Old Rail Fence Corners* under its present title. The book is almost identical to the 1915 version and the original pioneer map is reproduced and included. A splendid introduction by Marjorie Kreidberg provided an up-to-date background for the book, and a new contents page and comprehensive index were added to assist readers. The main title was kept despite its somewhat puzzling nature.

These accounts of pioneer life make fascinating reading today, both for those with roots in the Minnesota Territory and for others with an interest in the settlement of the prairies of the American Midwest. These are not stories of important historic figures and events, but of everyday life for those who undertook this great adventure, in their own words. Stories of happy times, tragedy, encounters with native Americans, wolves, the sound of Red River ox carts, ferocious winters, drought, hunger, hot summers, fears, and dreams. Unlike many other pioneer adventures, nearly two-thirds of



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these stories are told by women, portraying the rigors of their lives as vividly as those of the men they accompanied to the frontier.

Although Minnesota Territory had been explored and traveled for two centuries before by Voyageurs, explorers, trappers, French-Canadian traders, and others, settlement did not begin until the 1840's, initially by people from the Eastern U.S. seeking land for farming. The population grew quickly, from about 6,000 people in 1840 to about 40,000 by 1855 and over 170,000 by 1860. Minnesota became a state in 1858. Many settlers came from nearby Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois, others from further East, and a few directly from Europe. Most came with little money and only a few possessions, sometimes cattle or horses. Families came in small groups or singly; sometimes men came alone the first year to build a shelter and stake a claim, returning the next year with their families. A few Swedes were scattered among these early settlers, but the vast majority came with other Europeans after Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862.

The first settlers were mainly English and Scots-Irish, descendants of earlier settlers in the Eastern states. Nearly all of the interviews recorded in *Old Rail Fence Corners* are of these people; almost no Swedes were represented in the book. These settlers founded the first towns and claimed land along the rivers, at first the only means of access to the area. By the time the Swedes arrived, most areas had been surveyed and each took his quarter section, or 140 U.S. acres under the Homestead Act. But by the 1890's, Swedes made up a

higher proportion of the population of Minnesota than in any other state. The conditions encountered by these early Swedes were little different from those for the first pioneers twenty years earlier, however.

One recorded interview caught my eye, that of Mrs. C.A. Smith who arrived with her parents in 1858. (She was Swedish born, but later married an English man). Her family arrived in St. Paul, and then traveled by boat to Chaska on the Minnesota River. The family walked to Watertown, MN, (27 miles from Minneapolis) where they purchased two quarter sections of land and began to farm. "We lived just as we had in Sweden," she said, "as we were in a Swedish settlement. We were Lutherans, so there were no parties. Going to church was our only amusement." She went on to describe the prairie, wildlife, and how they celebrated Christmas in Swedish fashion that first year.

Relations were described as quite good with the Native Americans, although sometimes unnerving. They would enter a pioneer house without knocking or stare in the windows and often help themselves to food and other objects. They were usually peaceable, more interested in scalps from other tribes than from settlers. (Prairie Indians were Sioux, and woodland Indians were Chippewa, Ojibwe, or Winnebago). After they were forced onto reservations by treaty, often broken, relations turned violent, leading to the major uprising of 1862. About 500 settlers lost their lives in Minnesota, and Army detachments forced the Indians further west, capturing and hanging some thirty or more in Mankato.

These frontier tales offer fascinating reading, hearing directly in the words of those who lived the pioneer life what conditions were like. Thanks to Lucy Morris, we can relive these times and draw upon the memories of these pioneers. Stories

that were lost in our own families through the generations because they were not written down or the chain of memory was broken by circumstances. In my case, I might have learned some of this from my father, who knew his pioneer grandfather and even worked on his farm for a time. But he died when I was only 14, too young to have an interest in these events. The times described in *Old Rail Fence Corners* will not occur again.

Dennis L. Johnson

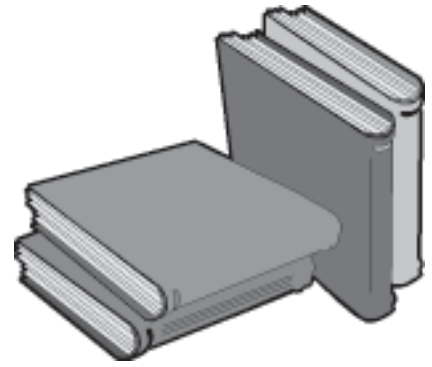
## A dream in pictures

*Images of Swedish America*, Ulf Beijbom, hardcover, 120 pages, Emigrant Institute Friendship Society, Kristianstads Boktryckeri AB, 2003, American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, \$27.95 or Adlibris.com 151 kr. (about \$20.00 U.S., plus postage)

There have been many books of photographs about the history of the populating of the United States, and other books about the Swedish immigrant experience which include a few photographs of early times. None, however, have been as rich in images or as focused on the experiences of Swedish immigrants in America as this little book printed in Sweden.

Ulf Beijbom, professor and former director of The Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden, is the editor and has provided the text for this book, assisted by Stig Marz, photo editor, and with an English translation by John Norton. The photographs span between about the 1870's to the 1930's and range from New York to the Yukon. The photos are largely based on items in the Emigrant Institute collection, supplemented by a few from private col-

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lections. These images are treasures from the collection at the Institute and many were a part of their exhibition, "The Dream of America." Most of these photos were taken by Swedes in the U.S. and they then either returned to Sweden with them, or sent them to relatives in Sweden.

The book is well organized beginning with "The Dream" of those wishing to go, then the emotional departure from friends and family, the voyage by ship and the usual stopover in Liverpool, U.K. Arrival images feature the Statue of Liberty and the Castle Garden immigrant reception center. The new land, called the "Land of Goshen" by Beijbom, has numerous photos and text showing farms, families, forests, prairie life, and other images of the frontier settlements. Swedish Chicago is well represented, as are photos from Rockford, IL; the Twin Cities; Jamestown; New York; Texas;

and other locations. Canada scenes include Winnipeg, Manitoba; Alberta, British Columbia; and the gold rush in the Yukon and in Alaska.

Occupations of immigrant Swedes are represented in many photos of railroad workers, miners, woodsmen, merchants, and maids as well as farmers and settlers. Most of the photos are of common people, but a number of Swedes who distinguished themselves in America are also included. Among them are the singer-entertainer Olle i Skratthult, Swan Turnblad the newspaper king, Curtis Carlson, Eric Wickman of "Greyhound Bus Lines", nurse leader Constance Magnusson, John J. Nordstrom, department store founder, and others. Swedes in the U.S. Civil War and in World War I are honored, and illustrations of the participation of Swedes in Swedish-American organizations are also featured.

This collection of images and the accompanying text provide a mar-

velous view of Swedish America as seen through Swedish eyes, a somewhat unique perspective as compared to similar immigrant collections published in the U.S. The book is not intended to provide a background or a detailed history of the great migration, but simply to focus on the destination of America in images of those who were part of that migration. It is a most worthy addition to your collection of books about Swedish America, and you may even find an ancestor or relative among the photographs included.

Dennis L. Johnson

## New and Noteworthy

(short notes on interesting books and articles)

For those who want to read about rural life in the northern U.S. we can recommend that you try *Echoes*. It is a magazine that focuses on positive values rooted in the past that have relevance for the present and the future, to cite its mission statement. *Echoes* is a quarterly, published in northern Maine, and often has articles and stories on New Sweden. Subscription is \$17.50 for one year. Address: *Echoes Press, Inc., P. O. Box 626, Caribou, ME 04736-0626. Phone: 207-498-8564.*

Professor *Ulf Beijbom* recently published a thick volume in Swedish, with the title *Utvandrarkvinnor. Svenska kvinnoöden i Amerika* (Immigrant women. The fate of Swedish women in America), published by Norstedts, ISBN 10:91-1-301493-5. 450 pages, illustrated, name index and good source citations. It is not now known if it will be published in English. Price in Sweden varies between 187 SEK up to 260 SEK.

A fun book was compiled by *Lars Hübnette* and *Bengt Odenstedt* in 1988, published by Studentlitteratur. ISBN 91-44-28871-9. The title is *Ord och inga visor. 2000 svenska idiom i engelsk översättning*. (Words and no songs. 2000 Swedish idioms translated into English). This book, for instance, explains that "att ha myror i byxorna" means being uneasy, restless, and furnishes the English variant as "having ants in one's pants." "Inte född i farstun," which means that somebody is not stupid, is translated as "not being born yesterday," "Nära skjuter ingen hare" which translates as a shot that almost gets the hare, is given the English version "a miss is as good as a mile."

