

9-1-2009

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Marianne B. Lenner

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### Recommended Citation

Lenner, Marianne B. (2009) "The Influence of Swedish Settlers," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 29 : No. 3 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol29/iss3/8>

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# *The Influence of Swedish Settlers on a Community or Region*

A result of an essay contest in 1948

BY MARIANNE B. LENNER

## **Editor's introduction:**

In 1948 the Swedish American Line had an essay contest for youngsters and received many entries from high school seniors, as was then the present author, and others. Many of them were printed in *Stories of Swedish pioneers in North America: a selection of essays submitted in a contest in 1948*: sponsored by The Swedish American Line to commemorate The Swedish Pioneer Centennial. Editor: Lundbeck, G. Hilmer. 10 volumes. Available at the Library of Congress and Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö.

One of the entries concentrated on a family from Nordmark parish in the mining area of Värmland.

## **The story of Johannes Olsson and his family:**

This is the true story of the family of Johannes and Katherine Olson, born in Nordmark in the province of Värmland, Sweden. Johannes and Katherine gave birth to eight children, all of whom were born in Sweden. Beginning with the oldest, they were the following according to the year of birth: John, (1859); Gustaf, (1861); Karl, (1867); Anna, (1870); Andrew (1872); Hulda, (1874); William, (1877); and Oscar, (1881).

This story is centered around Andrew, the fifth member of the family, who now in 1948, is a retired resident of the city of Wakefield, Michigan, in the county of Gogebic. He has been a friend of our family for many years and has been associated with my father in a number of community projects in the interests of public welfare. For this reason, as a result of

admiration for Andrew Olson and the Olson family as a whole, it was natural that the name of Andrew should be singled out in demonstrating the influence of the family of Johannes and Katherine Olson on the regions known as the Marquette Iron Range and the Gogebic Iron Range, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

This presentation was made possible because of my father's several interviews with Mr. Olson in making the biographical material an authentic document of an outstanding community-minded American citizen of Swedish birth.

## **It begins in Sweden**

As a matter of historical review, it is well to remember that our story of the Olson family had its origins in Sweden about the middle of the nineteenth century. Iron ore had been discovered in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and miners were in great demand.

Sweden seemed to have very little possibilities for the Olson family because practically all or most of the land was controlled by large estates or else by the smaller landowners where land titles had run for generations.

Johannes Olson and his family were neither farmers nor miners. Father Olson had been a sort of Jack-of-all-trades or handy man for one of the large landowners. His duties included that of overseer of forestry production, conservation, and the making of charcoal, which was finding important usage in the smelting of iron ore. An iron ore mine had been worked near the landowner's estate for several years. The shipping of ore

and charcoal to a mill at Uddeholm was the beginning of the industry in that section of Sweden. The sons of Johannes Olson and Katherine Olson were destined to follow their father's footsteps and thus work on the estate.

## **The first to leave**

In 1880, the oldest of the Olson brothers, John and Gustaf, at the ages of 21 and 19, respectively, had decided to leave for the United States. As there were visa and other permits from the crown, state, and church to be secured, it was not until early the following spring before they were ready to leave Sweden. Even the owner of the estate on which the family was employed seemed to make it as difficult as he could for them; but finally leave was granted and the Olson brothers were on their way. When they reached America, they headed for the mines in Marquette County, Michigan, where some of their friends from Sweden had preceded them. They easily acquired jobs at one of the mines known as Cambria.

By late summer John and Gustaf Olson had earned enough, at probably \$1.50 per day, to send for their father in Sweden. Tempting their father with a prepaid passage, the boys encouraged him to join them at Negaunee, Michigan. He sailed for the United States in October 1881, thus leaving Mother Olson with the remaining six children in the old country. However, by next spring, Father Olson and the two brothers had earned enough to send to Sweden the prepaid steerage passage for two full fares, four half-fares, and a



*The Nordmark valley. Postcard from around 1900.*

baby, no charge. The latter child, Oscar, was only five months old when Mother sailed with her brood for the land of promise.

### **The rest follows**

Andrew Olson, although only ten years of age when he came to America, said he still has vivid memories of the trip coming here from Sweden. In recalling the journey, Andrew stated that Mother and the remaining six children left home on a beautiful day in the middle of May, 1882. The landlord's finest team of horses and best carriage brought them to the railroad station. By train the family reached Filipstad for some examination or interview. During the time the steamship passage was being prepared, the oldest sister had passed her twelfth birthday, and only a half-fare ticket had been prepaid for her. She was now scheduled for full fare and as Mother Olson had no extra money, it was thought the family would get no further. Brother Karl and Mother were resourceful and they got through. By the time the family arrived at Gothenburg, the pleasant weather had subsided and a big storm came up. Since there were no docks in those days, the large ship

could not tie up.

Passengers for America were hoisted into a small boat and taken over to the ship, and by that time the entire Olson family was so sick that no one cared what happened. It was thought the ship would never make it, but as Andrew, said "Who cared." In the morning, the passengers were told the ship had gone through the worst storm on the North Sea in twenty years. The ship was really not a luxury liner as it was an old cattle-ship which had been converted into a passenger boat called the *Orion*. Its destination was Hull, England. The "bedroom" was composed of what had been cattle stalls, each with enough room for four bunks, two up and two down, and was a little wider than the length of a bed. Each section would hold altogether about twenty-five people.

Andrew recalled that a strange incident occurred during the storm: "There were four or five young men in one of the bunks across the area way in the Olson section who were from somewhere in Sweden. They had all found it necessary to pile their belongings between the bunks. The younger Olson sister, Hulda, had been the sickest, and she found it convenient to lean over the edge of

the bunk and relieve herself of what little she had last eaten, and it went into one of the young fellow's boots. He made a little fuss over it and had to clean his boots someway, but did not know who had done it. Fifteen years or so later Hulda married a minister. A few years after, when a group was together talking about happenings, it was discovered that Hulda was the one who had vomited into the boots of the young man, now a minister and her husband."

When the old cattle-ship *Orion* reached Hull, England, after three days of what appeared a sure shipwreck, the passengers traveled across country to Liverpool. At the latter port of embarkation, the White Star liner the *Baltic* continued with the journey to America. This was a luxury trip in comparison with the days on the *Orion*, according to Andrew. The *Baltic* reached the New York harbor after nine days. The Olsons were none the worse for their ocean trip.

### **Arrival in the U.S.**

It so happened that "Papa Olson" and the two oldest sons had left Marquette County, Michigan, and had gone to Worthington, Minnesota,

because there was a Swedish settlement there that seemed to offer prosperity in farming. They arranged for prepaid transportation for the rest of the family from Sweden to the town of Worthington. However, after the entire Olson family had a reunion in Worthington, the newcomers found nothing but grass and more grass; the land of promise in Minnesota proving to be merely a mirage. After a few months of work on a railroad building project, the laborers in the Olson family decided to return to Marquette County, Michigan, in the fall of 1882, with the town of Negaunee as their future home.

## Back in Negaunee

The first thing the Olsons did was to build a house in Negaunee. There was lots of material as the woods were full of virgin timber, but there were not many sawmills. It was necessary for the older Olsons to work at a small sawmill on the lake nearby to help cut the lumber for the house. Most of the house was up before winter really set in. Mr. Andrew Olson said: "The lumber was green, the winter of 1882 cold, and Jack Frost had quite a time trying to pull out the wrought-iron cut nails from the lumber and two-by-fours." However, the house must have been well-built because to this very day in 1948 it is occupied where it stands in Negaunee.

After the house was built, Father Olson and the oldest boys went to work at the Cambria mine. The brothers became miners, while the father cut and framed heavy timber sets for underground mining to keep the ground from caving. He continued at this kind of work for the rest of his life. As the main bodies of iron ore around Negaunee had not yet been discovered at this time, the miners believed the mines to be depleted. It was actually the lull between depression and boom. As large deposits of iron ore were being uncovered on the Gogebic Iron Range, and a process was discovered for converting the new finds of Bessemer ores, there was quite a rush for this new range.



*The house in Negaunee, built in 1882 by Johannes Olsson. Picture from 1954 with Mrs. Stark outside. (<http://flickr.com/photos/81494713@N00/437812663>).*

## On the move again

The Olson family, especially the men, again got the wanderlust, so plans were formulated to go westward a little over one hundred miles to the new iron ore range, with the town of Ironwood as the destination.

While in Negaunee, the Olson children got two things of great importance — a family name and a little education.

Taking Andrew Olson, the fifth oldest child, as our example, here is what happened in Negaunee. At the age of ten he started his American education. The father's name being Johannes, Andrew started to register as Johanneson or Johnson in school, according to Swedish custom. However as the surname was Olson, Andrew soon convinced his family their name should always be Olson. When the oldest brothers had come to America, they had been told that there were already so many Johnsons and Olsons in the United States and so much confusion on account of it that they had already taken some other names, but they were soon convinced that Andrew had the proper slant on the name; and finally the family agreed with Andrew to become all "Olsons."

In Sweden, Andrew had received only two years of schooling in the

primary studies, but his training was so well-rounded that he had no difficulty in advancing scholastically in the Negaunee schools. Finally, when in the ninth grade, an attack of rheumatic fever put an end to Andrew's schooling. But anyway, a new superintendent insisted that the pupils should wear dress suits and low, well-shined shoes, while the Olson dress suits were mostly overalls and hightop boots. Since the Olsons could afford nothing different at that time, Andrew quit for good and went to work in a confectionery.

It was in 1886 that the Olson family moved to Ironwood, Michigan, the boom town that the Olson family decided would bring them prosperity on the new Gogebic Iron Range.

John, the oldest of the brothers, went to work in Ironwood's well-known "Norrie" mine. Brother Gustaf having had enough of mining started a small confectionery business. It was a rather unsuccessful enterprise, as the rough and tumble miners were not candy-minded. However, this experience and a meat market venture gave Gustaf the ambition to become a whole-sale grocer. So finally, when an opportunity presented itself in 1890, the whole-sale grocery firm of Olson Brothers and Company, under the leadership of Gustaf, had its humble beginning.

Now in 1948, after fifty-eight years of depressions and booms, the Olson Brothers firm is considered the largest independent wholesale grocery firm in this section of Michigan and Wisconsin.

## A family business

At some time or another every member of the Olson family has been interested in the firm. Gustaf has been the most persistent, and has continued firmly through thick and thin, panic and depressions, prosperity and booms. His two sons had picked up enough experience in the business and after serving in the First World War came into the firm. One of the sons, Walter, is now, in 1948, the mayor of the City of Ironwood. His two sons are now also being groomed to eventually carry on the traditions and business enterprises of Olson Brothers and Company.

This essay being centered around Andrew, whose education and experience consisted of "hard knocks," it is now the intention to summarize the activities of Andrew on the Gogebic Iron Range. His schooling being terminated at Negaunee, it was necessary for him to secure a job as soon as the family reached Ironwood. For a year he worked in a bakery, and then went into the Olson Brothers grocery firm. Being ambitious, Andrew took up some office and book work, and spent a year in an Ironwood law office. He learned some shorthand and typewriting, and read a little Blackstone, as he could not rid himself of the urge for law.

However, he never had the chance to continue an education. Andrew moved to the town of Wakefield, near Ironwood, and started a confectionery store and ice cream parlor. As a sideline, he was a justice of the peace from 1908 to 1920 and associate relief director of the poor in Gogebic County to the end of 1939. Wakefield had no attorney until about 1928, and, so during all this time, Andrew was a sort of legal adviser for most of the people of the town, thanks to his year in the Ironwood law office. In December 1898 Andrew married



*Wakefield City Hall in Wakefield, Michigan.*

and raised three daughters.

Andrew has always been active in the welfare of the Wakefield community. He served faithfully as secretary of the Rotary Club and the Masonic Lodge; both groups have prospered as the result of his untiring efforts. In Wakefield, countless performances of charity, goodwill, and community and church services can be traced back to Andrew Olson. Now in 1948 Andrew has retired. He has been an exemplary symbol of the motto of the Rotary club "Service above Self" and "He Profits Most Who Serves Best."

## Appendix: The Olssons in Swedish records

According to the Gåsborn and Nordmark Church records:

*Johannes Olsson* was born 1838 Feb. 24 in Gåsborn.

Wife *Johanna Catharina Olsdotter* was born 1837 Mar. 7 in Gåsborn.

Son *Erik Johan Carlqvist* was born 1859 Dec. 21 in Färnebo.

Son *Nils Gustaf Nordström* was born 1861 Dec. 14 in Nordmark (as all the younger siblings)

Son *Karl Olsson* was born 1867 Mar. 4.

Daughter *Anna Mathilda Olsson* was born 1870 Jan. 10.

Son *Anders Fredrik Olsson* was born 1872 Nov. 15.

Daughter *Hulda Maria Olsson* was born 1874 Oct. 31.

Son *Wilhelm Olsson* was born 1877 July 7.

Son *Oskar Edvard Olsson* was born 1881 Dec. 29.

The two oldest sons, Erik and Nils, emigrated from Göteborg on May 15th with tickets for Negaunee. Their father followed on Sep. 23 with a ticket for New York, and then Johanna and the rest of the children left Göteborg on 1882 May 12. She was recorded there as a Johanson(!?).

Anders (Andrew) married in 1898 Dec. 28 in Bessemer to Hulda Amalia Wandau, a fellow immigrant from Sweden. She was born 1874 Apr. 18 in the parish of Naverstad (Bohu.), and immigrated in 1890 to Ashland, Wisc., and moved to Ironwood in 1891. They had daughters Mildred Wandau (born 1900 Jan. 21 in Bessemer), Hazel, Elma, and Margaret (Margit) Elizabeth, born 1906 Sep. 26 in Bessemer. (Dates from records of the Salem Lutheran Church in Ironwood. Thanks Jill!)