

3-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Cox, Steve (2009) "The Reflections of B. P. Oakleaf," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 29 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol29/iss1/2>

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The Reflections of B. P. Oakleaf

– a Swedish Settler in Kansas

BY STEVE COX

In the summer of 1869, two Swedish immigrants, Benjamin P. Oakleaf (1827-1893) and Peter Swanson (1825-1890), quit their factory jobs and left the Swedish community in Moline, Illinois, to raise their families in the Osage Indian country of south-eastern Kansas.

In 1882, reflecting at age fifty-five with obvious satisfaction on his first thirteen years in Kansas, B. P. Oakleaf recounted that journey, and the settlement of the country, in a memoir reproduced in this article¹.

They settled in Labette County, country so flat that, as one pioneer said, the principal river, the Neosho, seemed to run uphill².

Oakleaf and Swanson chose land in the wooded Pumpkin Creek Valley, where scattered mounds or low hills broke up the landscape and gave a name to the town they helped to build, Mound Valley.

It was still an Osage Indian reservation, but pioneers had already arrived — slaveholding southerners before the Civil War and, after 1865, Union veterans, mostly from the

Midwest, and a few European immigrants³.

These pioneers had begun to break the sod, build towns, and introduce public order just before Oakleaf and Swanson arrived. One pioneer remembered salvaging driftwood logs from the Neosho River to feed a sawmill that cut lumber for the new settlers' houses and fences. He also told of a committee of farmers who rounded up four brothers accused of horse theft, selected a stout tree, and hanged them all from the same limb⁴.

It was not until 1875, after the Osages had moved south to a new reservation in Indian Territory, that the United States Supreme Court set a price of \$1.25 per acre for land that the settlers had claimed⁵.

Swedish immigration to the U.S.

Just as pioneers had settled in Kansas before the Oakleafs arrived, Swedish immigrants had preceded them to America.

Pushed by hard times in Sweden

and pulled by a call for labor in America, in the 1840s a trickle of about 400 Swedes a year emigrated to the United States, establishing a beachhead in Chicago⁶.

By the 1850s, when the Oakleafs emigrated, the stream of Swedish immigrants had grown to more than 1,400 each year, but the Atlantic crossing, by sailing ship, was still long and hazardous. Emigrants could be at sea for six weeks or more, and one of every 184 passengers died at sea. (In the 1860s, after larger, safer, and faster steamships were introduced, Swedish immigration leapt to 10,000 per year, the trip required only two weeks at sea, and the death rate plummeted to one in 2,195.)⁷

Oakleaf background

The Oakleafs came from Hallands län, on the southwestern coast of Sweden. Benjamin Peter Oakleaf was born Bengt Peter Christensson, 9 December 1827, in Ålstorp, Ränneslöv (now: Ränneslöv) parish. His parents were Christen Bengtsson and Boel Knutsdotter. He was orphaned, and

December 9 ^{te}	Christen Bengtsson Son of m. & Boel Knuts dot. then 33 rd in Ålst. Ålstorp.	Bengt Peter	Peter Bengtsson i Håffstad Stammharen Peter Fredriksson i Ålstorp. Peter Mansson H. i Lilla Bastonia h. Göns Söls Jons H. i Yaglefång.
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Birth record of Bengt Peter Christensson in Ränneslöv. 1st column: date of birth, 2nd column: date of baptism, 3rd column: parents' names and homeplace, 4th column: name of child, 5th column: sponsors at baptism. Ränneslöv C:3, 1827.

served in the Swedish army, and acquired, as a descendant said, “a good common English education.” On October 22, 1850, in Ränneslöv parish, he married Maria Svensdotter Ekelöf from Edenberga #7 in Ränneslöv. She was born 17 September 1830, also in Ränneslöv parish, the daughter of Sven Ekelöf and Christina Jönsdotter⁸.

Four years after marrying, with two young children in tow, Benjamin and Mary left their home at Mellby #10 in the parish of Laholm *landsförsamling*, on the western-facing shore of Laholm Bay. They departed from the parish on 3 June, and for America from the port of Göteborg on June 25, 1854, and arrived in Boston forty-five days later, on August 10. Their first child, Christian (born 6 February 1852 in Ränneslöv), two and a half years old, died at sea, and their daughter Christina, only fourteen months old when they embarked, (born 16 April 1853 in Laholm *landsförsamling*), died soon after they arrived in Moline⁹.

The Oakleafs seem to have come to America in a stream of friends and relatives. A family named Anderson came with them to Moline, and other families named Johnson, Olson, Swanson, and Peterson seem to have followed them from Sweden directly to Kansas — they relied upon the Oakleafs as their English translators. Two or more of Mary’s brothers immigrated, as well — in America, they changed their name to Oakley and settled around Morrison, Illinois, northeast of Moline¹⁰.

On arriving in Boston, like many Swedish immigrants, the Oakleafs themselves took new names. Mary anglicized her Swedish name, Maria Ekelöf, to Mary Oakleaf, and Benjamin Peter abandoned his Swedish first name Bengt for more American Benjamin, and his patronymic Christensson, to adopt his wife’s name, Oakleaf, as well — perhaps because there were so many other Christenssons on the ship, as family tradition has it, or because Oakleaf was a shorter name¹¹.

In America

From Boston, the Oakleafs went directly to join the Swedish immigrant colony in Moline, Illinois. A small industrial city on the Mississippi River, Moline offered jobs operating water-powered flourmills and sawmills (the town took its name from the French *moulin*, “mill”), building railroads across the river, and making John Deere’s famous steel plows.

The working life had its perils. In a sawmill, a man could crush a finger. A worker building railroad bridges could contract malaria in the Rock River and Mississippi River bottoms. Blacksmiths at John Deere worked over fires that filled their lungs with coal smoke¹².

During most of his fifteen years in Moline, B. P. Oakleaf worked at the S. W. Wheelock papermill. Papermaking involved bleaching and pulping oat straw in liquor vats of strong chemicals. Inhaling the dust

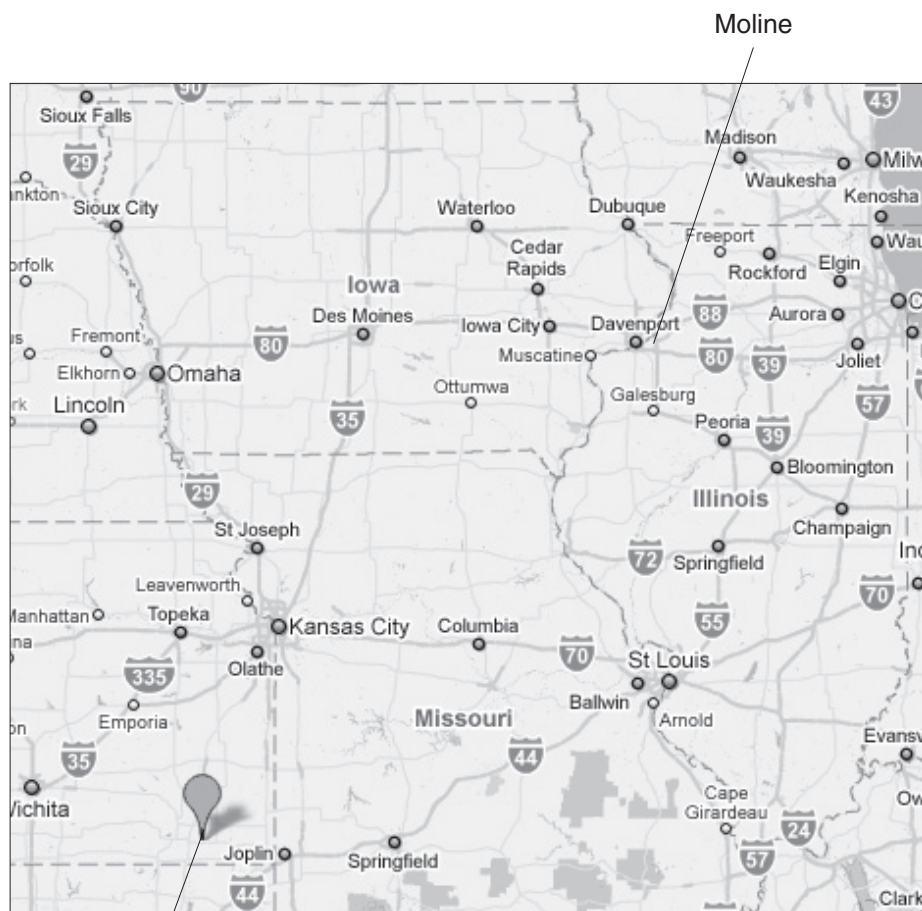
in the “liquor room” made Oakleaf ill. For three years he tried farming but, after he returned to the papermill, his son Joseph B. Oakleaf wrote, “the doctor advised him to go west¹³.”

Problems with health

Oakleaf evidently had the means to buy land in Kansas — nine years earlier, at age thirty-three, according to the 1860 census, he had accumulated an estate of \$1,600 and real estate worth \$600.

In the move itself, he made common cause with his neighbor, Peter Swanson. The Oakleafs and their three sons and one daughter lived on the north side of Park, the second house east of Lynde, in Moline. Peter Swanson, his wife Johanna, and their five daughters, lived next door, at the northeast corner of Park and Lynde¹⁴.

The Swansons had immigrated from Sweden in 1855, just a year later than the Oakleafs. They were nearly the same age, and Swanson



Mound Valley

(Map from Google Maps.)

also was a factory worker, in a saw-mill. The Swansons, too, were from southern Sweden — from the south-eastern province of Kristianstads *län* rather than Hallands *län*. Like the Oakleafs, the Swansons had lost a young son at sea¹⁵.

To Kansas

In May 1869, B. P. Oakleaf, worried about his health but apparently confident of his prospects, and Peter Swanson (whose name Oakleaf wrote as Sfanson) rode a steamboat down the Mississippi from Moline to St. Louis, Missouri, took the train (commonly called “the cars”) west across Missouri, and looked at land around Kansas City. According to Oakleaf’s son Joseph B., they found this land unsatisfactory for farming and too expensive. They then hired a wagon to carry them south and crossed the Neosho River at Osage Mission (now St. Paul), the site of a historic ferry, where they parted ways with companions bound for small towns named Humboldt and Montana. Oakleaf and Swanson walked the rest of the way, about twenty-five miles south-southwest to Mound Valley.

B. P. Oakleaf remembered that journey, and the settlement of the country, in the following memoir, which was first published in the Mound Valley (Kansas) *Herald*, 27 April 1882.

History of Mound Valley

Early History of Mound Valley and Pumpkin Creek Valley in Mound Valley Township. (By B. P. Oakleaf)

“The first settler in this valley was G. L. Canady, now a merchant in Coffeyville, who pitched his tent on what is now the S. W. Slocum farm in February, 1866. The nearest neighbor lived somewhere on Big Hill Creek six miles away. They were often visited by Osage Indians, sometimes as many as twenty at a visit. They got very tired of these guests and of feeding them as they had to haul their provisions a distance of 100 miles. In the summer of

1868, Mr. William Rogers [Rodgers] of Michigan, a lawyer by profession, settled three miles northwest of Mound Valley; about the same time Mr. McBride settled one mile south of Mound Valley, George and Alex Lutz coming here at the same time. In the fall of ‘68 the Olson brothers and Mr. Hanson took claims north and west of Mound Valley but remained only a few years. Israel Johnson settled at the same time on the farm where he still lives. In the latter part of May, 1869, the writer, in company with Peter Sfanson, left Moline, Ill., for Pumpkin Creek Valley and had a pleasant trip down the Mississippi River to the metropolitan city, St. Louis; from there we took the cars to Pleasant Hill, Mo. Here, in company with three others, we hired a man to take us in a wagon to Osage Mission, Kansas; here we separated, one of our company going to Humboldt, two to Montana, and Mr. Swanson and myself started on foot for Pumpkin Valley. When we arrived on top of the hills north of Mound Valley, where we had a full view of the country to the south of us, we thought it was the most beautiful country we ever saw.

“Coming down below the hills we found the McDole brothers, who had arrived a few days before, busy breaking land for hedge rows. Walking down this valley we found the land to be rich and fertile and it was beautiful. One evening we met with Mr. Hanson, who at this time was baching on the place now owned by Louis Reinhart. The next day we met the young industrious boys, George and Alex Lutz, who at that time were living in a log cabin on Mr. Dunn’s old farm; they induced Mr. Sfanson to take a claim joining theirs on the north. In walking down the creek I could not find a vacant claim to suit me until I came to the place where I now live, as most of the valuable timber claims were already taken. This was the 10th of June. After this we began to prepare for building a shanty to provide for our families who were coming in the fall.

“Messrs. Seth Wells, Ross and Robins settled in our neighborhood



Mary and B.P. Oakleaf

in August ‘69. Mr. John Kremer and parents settling in section 36 in July. Mr. James Armstrong came in about the same time and selected a place east of the valley. He said he had traveled with his family in a wagon in Kansas for six weeks and had not found a place he liked as well as Pumpkin Creek Valley.

“Some time in July we met for the first time with Mr. William Rogers [Rodgers], who informed us they had selected section No. 2 for a townsite and a town company had now been formed, of which he was president; he induced us to buy shares in said town. In August, ‘69, we put up a store building, 18 x 40, and offered anyone free use of the building who would put in a stock of dry goods, groceries, and hardware. Handath [Honrath] & Rohr accepted the offer and put in their goods in October. About the same time Mr. J. Kremer built a storeroom and put in a stock of groceries; he still occupies the same building. In the winter L. F. Nickolas [Nicholas] and the town company put up a two-story building, Nickolas to pay the expense for the lower story to be used by him as a business and the town company to pay for the upper story to be used as a town hall. The next move was to get our mail carried to Mound Valley as before this time we had to go to Oswego for it. We first hired a man to carry the mail, but in the spring of ‘70 we had a government post office established in Mound Valley and Mr. Honrath appointed postmaster. After this time we got our mail to Mound Valley twice a week.

“We will now go back to the settlement of the country. After we had lived alone for four long months our



Four Oakleaf sons. Top from left: Stephen and Emanuel. Bottom from left, Charles and Joseph, who wrote a sequel to this article.

families arrived about the first of October, '69. With them came Swan Peterson and family, Carl Olson and family, Mr. Swan Larson, Mr. Sandburg and youngest daughter, now the wife of Israel Johnson.

“Mr. J. M. Richardso [*sic!*] and Goumaz brothers had settled on the mounds west of Mound Valley some time in the summer of '69. The next winter and spring people came in so rapidly that it was impossible to keep track of them; almost every day we could see in every direction new shanties going up. In the summer of 1870 there was a house on almost every section in the valley.

“What a wonderful change has been wrought in so short a time; the valley is filled with thrifty, industrious farmers; shanties, log cabins, and dugouts have given place to large frame houses, and almost all the farms have good orchards on them and are surrounded by hedges. I doubt if any country can show as rapid a growth as Pumpkin Creek Valley. It has been said that three-fourths of the farms in Kansas are mortgaged; the best evidence that can be produced that this is one of the best portions of Kansas is that you can find very few farms in the valley that are under mortgage.”

What happened next

Once Oakleaf and Swanson had chosen claims, Peter Swanson returned to Moline to pilot their families, and a larger group of Swedes, to Kansas. The Oakleafs' son, Joseph B., recounted that journey in a memoir

to be published in a future issue of SAG.

As immigrants, the Oakleafs fell somewhere between the lone adventurers lured to America by legends of gold in California and Swedes who immigrated in groups such as the Bishop Hill Colony of 1850, near Moline, or the hundred settlers who, in 1869, established Lindsborg, the unique Swedish town in central Kansas.

In the melting pot of Labette County, Swedes represented only a tiny minority — the census of 1885, sixteen years after the Oakleafs arrived, found only 541 persons of Swedish birth in southeastern Kansas, a minuscule 0.3 percent of the population — so few that Mound Valley even lacked a Lutheran church, and the Oakleafs joined the Methodist Episcopal Church¹⁷.

Benjamin Oakleaf's reminiscence testifies to his determination to blend with other Americans, and his success helping to build a new community in Kansas. His farm remained in the Oakleaf family for more than a century, passing down through three generations until the death of his grandson, Marcus Oakleaf, in 1976.

Notes:

1. On the centennial of the Oakleafs' arrival in Kansas, their grandson, Marcus Oakleaf, saw to the reprinting of his grandfather's reminiscence in the *Mound Valley Times-Journal*, (Thursday, 21 August 1969). Marcus Oakleaf added some notes on the Oakleaf family since 1869, which have blossomed into a full-blown genealogy of *Descendants of Benjamin Peter Oakleaf* (2008) in the devoted and fastidious hands of an Oakleaf descendant, Ilene Oakleaf Bussman of Mound Valley, Kansas. I have cited, as Bussman, an edition formatted by a second Oakleaf descendant, Anne Frank Chittenden. Marcus Oakleaf's 1969 version of B. P. Oakleaf's account, without Marcus's additional notes, is reprinted here.

In 1875, Peter and Johanna Swanson and four of their five daughters had moved on to the mountains of southern Colorado, where Swanson worked in the silver mines. The eldest Swanson daughter, Augusta, had married Charles Tibbets, from Indiana, and settled down to farm and raise a family a mile or two from the Oakleafs.

2. “Pioneer Experiences: The Memoir of Wilmot Benjamin Hull,” edited by Jeffery Young, *Kansas History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1991), p. 46.
3. James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 46-47.
4. Young, “Pioneer Experiences,” pp. 46-48.
5. H. Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-71* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), pp. 130-31 and 163, n. 28, cite case of *The United States of America against The Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston R.R. Co. and the Missouri, Kansas & Texas R.R. Co.*
James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 48, calls \$1.25 an acre “a reasonable if not bargain price.”
6. John S. Lindberg, *The Background of Swedish Emigration to the United States: An Economic and Sociological Study in the Dynamics of Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1930), pp. 10-11.
7. Hans Norman and Harald Runblom, *Transatlantic Connections: Nordic Migration to the New World After 1800* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1988), p. 115.
8. Bussman, pp. 11, 12, 13, citing William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (1883), Labette County, Part 29, Biographical Sketches. Facts have been checked in Ränneslöv church records by the editor.
9. Bussman, p. 11. Facts have been checked in Ränneslöv church records by the editor.

10. Bussman, p. 14.
 11. Bussman, pp. 11, 13.
 12. Diary of Oliver Olson, a Norwegian immigrant who worked in a sawmill in Moline, 1870-72 (Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center), describes crushing a finger in the rollers in a sawmill and being out of work for several days. Hans Mattson, in his *Reminiscences* (St. Paul, Minnesota: D. D. Merrill, 1891), pp. 29-31, reports suffering from ague, or malaria, while working on a railroad bridge construction crew in the Rock River bottoms near Moline. John Diehl, a John Deere employee of 1874, described the shop of earlier days, as quoted in Wayne G. Broehl, Jr., *John Deere's Company: A History of Deere & Company and Its Times* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p. 230.
 13. Bussman, p. 12.
 14. 1867 city directory of Moline, Rock Island County Historical Society collection.
 15. Immigration records in Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, and 1867 city directory of Moline.
 16. Bishop Hill: Norman and Runblom, *Transatlantic Connections*, pp. 50-51, 55-56, 150. Lindsborg: Cutler, *History of Kansas*, McPherson County. Swedish population of southeastern Kansas: Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains*, pp. 50-52.
 17. Bussman.

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Final resting place of actor Warner Oland

Actor Warner Oland, born Johan Verner Ölund, 3 Oct. 1879 in Nyby, Bjurholm parish, Ång., Sweden, died suddenly of pneumonia on 6 Aug. 1938 in Stockholm, Sweden.

Warner Oland is best known for his role as the Chinese detective *Charlie Chan*.

He was married to a wealthy Bostonian, the artist Edith Gardener Shearn. Among their many houses was a historic farmhouse in the Southville section of Southborough.

Upon Oland's death in 1938, he

was buried in the town cemetery. The marker for his grave was originally the doorstep to the Oland's Smoke Tree Farm on Gilmore Road, which he and his wife bought in 1930.

Seeking an escape from the cacophony of California, Warner and Edith Oland had discovered Southboro, where they could spend their vacations painting and taking photographs.

The house they bought and renamed was known as the Mathews-Burnett house, as Joseph Burnett, an

early flavor manufacturer was born there in 1820. He was a leading citizen in his home town where he was held in very high esteem by his fellow townsmen.

Information from *Fences of Stone, a history of Southboro, Mass.*, by Richard E. Noble (1990). Information on Oland's ancestors can be found in *24 Famous Swedish Americans*, edited by Bo Lindwall (1996).

Thanks to Virginia M. Cumming, Southboro, Mass, for the interesting information on Oland's grave!



Warner Oland is buried in Southboro Rural Cemetery in Southboro, Mass.



Warner Oland 1879-1938.