

3-1-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Hempel, William J. (2005) "The Saga of Sella and John," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol25/iss1/5>

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# The Saga of Sella and John Nelson

## A sad story about a short-lived romance

BY WILLIAM J. HEMPEL

### Sella in Red Wing

My great-aunt *Sella Victoria Seastrand* was born January 14, 1883, in Red Wing, Minnesota, a small city on the Mississippi River downstream from St. Paul, the capital.

The 1895 Minnesota state census reports John Seastrand 52, Elizabeth 50, Herman 22, Augda 20, Rudolph 16, John H 14, and Sally [!Sella], 12. Both her parents were born in Sweden. Her father died in 1906 of an accidental fall. Sella was employed as a clerk in a millinery shop. Somehow she became acquainted with a young Swedish immigrant, John M. Nelson. Romance bloomed between them later.

### John Goes to California

John's own employment record shows he worked as a brakeman

from 1901 to 1904 for the Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Omaha Railroad. He then went to California to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1904 he bought block two of the Calexico townsite for \$400. The property is a few blocks from the border with Mexico. Its official assessed value was \$300 for land and \$120 for improvements. In 1905 he was commended by his employer for exceptional work on the Imperial Branch tracks during heavy rains. The Imperial Valley is in the southeast corner of California.

### Their Marriage and Move West

In August, 1909, John returned to Red Wing and on September 1 he married Sella. The ceremony was performed by Pastor Henry Soder-

holm, witnessed by Rudolph Seastrand and Ruth Nelson. The couple went to Calexico, a huge change for Sella from the lush valley of the Mississippi River to the harsh desert of the Imperial Valley. In November, 1909, they took a mortgage on block two, paying it off three years later.

The 1910 U. S. Census reported them residing on Heber Ave. (block two) in Calexico, ages 29 and 27. When the census was taken in April of that year, John worked as a grocery store salesman. Sella is reported as having no work outside the home.

### Deaths in Los Angeles

On June 10, 1912, Sella delivered a stillborn child in Los Angeles. The death certificate signed by Dr. H. F. Boardman gives the name only as infant of John M. Nelson and the undertaker as family. The boy was buried the next day at Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles.

Beginning in November, 1912, John was under the care of Dr. William Barnhart. John Nelson died at 4 a.m. on March 13, 1913, at home. He had been seen by his doctor just the day before. The cause of death was pulmonary tuberculosis, with valvular heart disease contributing. No duration of the disease was given. His occupation was railway brakeman.

By mistake, in the death certificate he was said to be single. The informant was described as Miss J. M. Nelson. His length of residence



Lakeside Cemetery in Red Wing, Minnesota.



at the place of death was given as nine years, true for the state of California, but not for Los Angeles. His place of birth was stated as Sweden, as was his father's, Albin Nelson.

But the words "don't know" appear in the spaces for the maiden name of John's mother and for her birthplace. He was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery, not far from Evergreen Cemetery. His grave marker simply states the years of his birth and death.

The *Red Wing Daily Eagle* reported the death the next day on its front page, saying it was due to dropsy and complications and that the deceased had been well-known in that city years before. The paper said Mrs. J. Seastrand planned to travel to Los Angeles to be with her daughter.

## Sella Becomes a Teacher

Sella soon returned to Minnesota, and then moved to Minneapolis, near the banks of the same Mississippi River she had left in 1909. She became qualified to teach business English, typing, and shorthand. She served on the Minnehaha Academy faculty from 1921 to 1952, when she retired. She encouraged attendance there by my mother, Margaret Elise, who graduated in 1923 and after col-

lege, taught French for a year in Red Wing. My sister Elizabeth graduated in 1949, after touring with the famous *Minnehaha Singers*. As a freshman I took typing from Mrs. Nelson and Latin from Gertrude Sandberg. She also taught Swedish and was Sella's housemate for many years. The 1930 U.S. census reports both women as boarders in a house near the academy campus. Our family tradition at the academy continued with high school attendance and graduation by our daughter Elise Margaret and son Drew William in the 1980s.

## Sella's Legacy

On November 15, 1960, Sella died at age 77 while living at the home of Gertrude Sandberg. She left no will but had told her friend of her wish to leave \$1,000 to Minnehaha Academy and \$1,000 to her church, Bethlehem Covenant. Minnehaha is owned and operated by the Northwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church, with a strong Swedish heritage. Her heirs, sixteen nieces, who of course shared the Swedish heritage if not the church connection, all agreed and contributed \$125 each to those charities. I was one administrator of the estate. The other was Arthur Munson, husband of one of the nieces.

## Conclusion

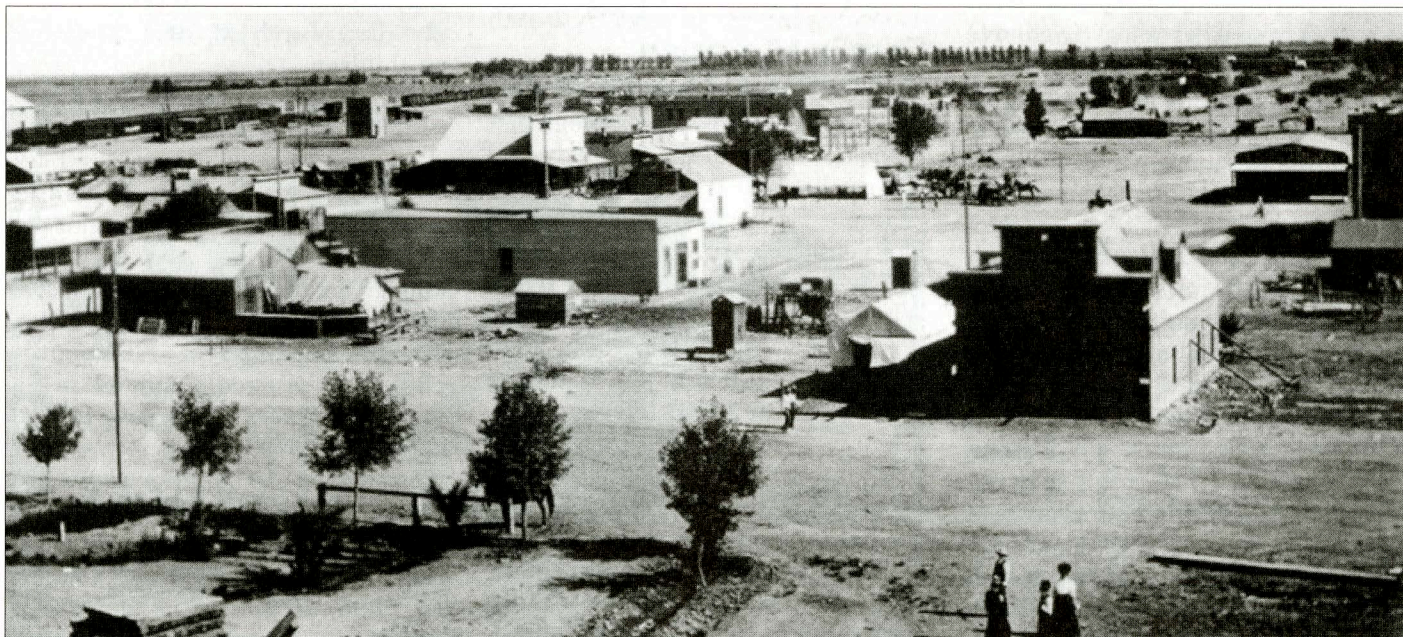
One of the still surviving nieces, Mildred Seastrand, told me recently that on the rare occasions when her aunt spoke of her time in Calexico she had a twinkle in her eye.

Today the fertile sands of the Imperial Valley, irrigated by the mighty Colorado River, produce many crops year round. Block two in Calexico has some substantial homes on it with a school nearby.

Born November 14, 1880, John Mikael Nilsson, son of Albin Nilsson and Anna Greta Pettersdotter, he immigrated to Red Wing at age one with his family. I found no record of change of name, but he used Nilsson at least once in California in his real estate transactions.

Readers interested in the Colorado River and the Imperial Valley of California, especially the Salton Sea, well below sea level, are referred to an excellent book with many fine photographs, *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low Down California* by William deBuys and Joan Meyers (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1999) available both in hardcover and softcover editions.

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Calexico, California, Tent City in 1908.