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Listening to the Prairie

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The old Jansson homestead in Minnesota is visited by a descendant. Part I

By Dennis L. Johnson

The Prairie silence gave way to the sound of hundreds of birds singing in the trees surrounding the old farmhouse. I continued walking up the gravel farm road toward the farmyard, a clearing within the woodlot of perhaps an acre, where the now empty farmhouse stands. The weeds have grown tall around dozens of abandoned cars from the 1950's. The old barn, chicken house, and sheds are slowly falling apart, with no one left to maintain them. The creaky steel windmill near the barn, there a few years ago, has disappeared.

Like hundreds of others in nearby townships in Nicollet and Sibley County, Minnesota, these woodlots mark the homesites of the pioneer farms of the 1850's and 1860's, when this township was settled. Many stand alone, others still have the pioneer's houses present, empty black windows silently looking out through the trees onto the cornfields of modern, mechanized farms. For the pioneer, planting the woodlot was almost as essential as building a first shelter, usually a sod house. The woodlot would give refuge from the relentless prairie winds, shade in summer, wood for burning and building, and nuts or apples to eat.

For over five generations, the few remaining farmers have slowly consolidated the original 160 acre homesteads into larger and larger holdings, until the typical farm is more likely to be 2,000 or more acres. The woodlots mostly still remain, the scant few acres to be gained by clearing them not worth the effort involved in doing so. Or perhaps there is a lingering respect for these remnants of earlier days. The original houses are disappearing one by one, as fire and vandalism take their toll on these once white, vertical, and proud, if modest, dwellings. Modern ranch style houses now appear, more widely spaced, and built by the latest generation of high technology farmers.

As I continued to approach the old homestead, built by my great-grandfather Jonas Jansson and his wife, Stina, in about 1870, I began to snap some photographs of the farmyard and the house. My thoughts rambled about with each new camera angle, wondering about so many unanswered questions I had. I knew that my grandfather, Otto William Johnson, was born and grew up here. He was the first natural-born American in the family, born in 1867 in the family's first year in America. This farm was the only home he knew, until he married and settled in St. Peter, about 20 miles to the East. Was he born in the usual temporary sod house? As a toddler, did he watch his father and older brothers build their first farm house, the four-room house which is now the front part of the old homestead?

To America

Jonas Jansson was 46 years old, his wife Stina Jacobsdotter 43, when they arrived with four children from

The desolate entrance to the abandoned Jansson homestead.

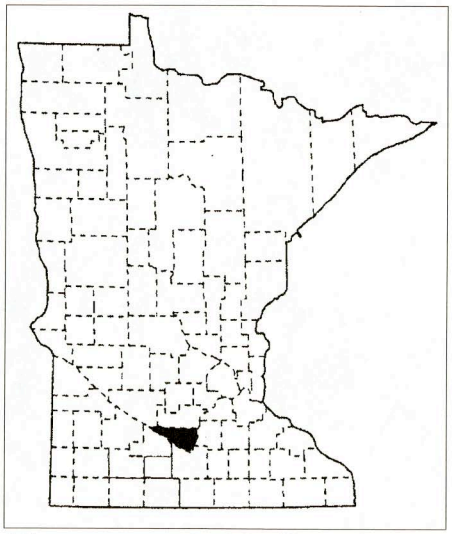
Brålanda church in Dalsland, Sweden, around 1895. (Brålandaboken 1975).

Sweden in 1866. They had left a small rented farm, only one or two acres, in Dalsland, Sweden, near Brålanda, the year before to make the long voyage to Minnesota and claim a 160 acre homestead in Bernadotte Township, Nicollet County, Minnesota. Also on the voyage was their oldest son, Lars Johan, twenty years old, his sisters Wilhelmina, 16, Mathilda, 14, and another brother Ephraim, ten years old. Little Anders Johan had died in 1864, in Sweden, at the age of 4 years. The baby Johannes, born 1863, left with the family but did not appear in Minnesota. The two-year-old may have died on the long voyage. A new baby brother, Otto William, would be born less than a year after their arrival in Bernadotte. Otto was my grandfather.

Life in Bernadotte

The township had quickly been filling with homesteaders, the first only a short ten years before. To the west was only prairie. Native Americans, few in numbers, lived nomadically as hunters and were slowly being pushed westward and onto reservations. Just a few years before, these badly treated people had risen up in anger and killed many homesteaders while many of the settlers' young men were away to fight in our great Civil War. More than two dozen leaders of the uprising were hanged at Mankato, the rest were pushed further westward. The "New Ulm Massacre" as it was to become known, was fresh in the minds of Jonas and Stina as they listened to the stories from those who had survived. Was it now safe?

My thoughts turned to the arrival moment, when this family first set eyes on their new prairie homestead. They arrived possibly on foot, or by a horse drawn wagon hired in St. Peter to carry them and their few possessions a long day's journey by a jolting Indian trail. They headed northwest from the safety of the small but thriving town of St. Peter on the Minnesota River, past the new homesteads of their predecessors in Norseland and New Sweden. They were greeted by their fellow Swedes, perhaps with a welcome drink of water or a bite to eat? Then they faced the vastness of the lonely prairie stretching ever westward, almost unbroken, and perhaps met a few neighboring settlers who had arrived shortly before. There was a silence, only the sound of the wind and the calls of a few prairie birds. How to spend the first night, with no shelter? Did a neighbor take them in for a few days? Did they build a lean-to or a makeshift tent? What dangers and adventures awaited them? Where to begin?



Minnesota counties. Nicollet is the black one.

The beginning

Awakening to an early May dawn, Jonas pondered his first steps on his first day on his own farm, vastly larger than any even his wealthiest neighbors had owned in Sweden. He and his sons no doubt traced the boundaries of the farm marked by the land surveyor, (equal today to about 145 football fields in area), and then looked for a place to locate their new home. It should be near the center of the farm, to be able to see and reach all of it easily on foot, and to see anyone approaching in time to sound an alarm and gather the family. Then they gathered the tools; an ax first, perhaps some carving knives brought from Sweden, possibly some borrowed tools.

The house

The thick prairie sod, older than time, must be cut into square blocks and laid up to form the first walls. The earth floor was sunken where the sod had been cut out. Then they needed to find wood for roof rafters and lintels for the openings. They also needed curtains for the windows, thrown open in the daytime and closed at night. It took a week of hard labor for the father and sons to build a one room dugout house, while Stina and the two girls prepared food, set up primitive housekeeping, and perhaps started a vegetable garden with seeds brought from town.

Water was hand-carried from a small stream some distance away, or possibly given by a helpful neighbor who had already dug a well. Still it was a long carry for the girls with buckets across their shoulders. Then they needed a privy, a hole dug in the ground with a makeshift toilet seat and a screen of branches or rushes for a little privacy. They also needed a fire to boil water and cook food,

some brought from town, some borrowed, perhaps some game caught in snares or traps by the boys. Prairie chickens were still abundant and good eating. Sometimes a farmer would shoot a deer, and some even reported seeing a buffalo now and then.

Differences

I glanced back along the farm road to our motor home parked on the gravel main road and wondered at the self-contained comfort we now enjoyed. My wife LaVonne was making sandwiches with lunch meats from our refrigerator, boiling water for tea on the propane stove, while listening to Beethoven on our satellite radio. It was a cool day, but air conditioning was available powered by a generator if needed, and a microwave was at hand for any serious cooking. A cellular phone offered instant connection to almost anywhere from this lonely place. There had been only four generations for such changes, when before that change was measured in centuries and scarcely noticed in one lifetime.

Resuming my picture taking, I approached the old farmhouse more closely. It was in bad condition, with the weather and vandals taking their toll. Windows were broken out, the roof was worn, the interior was a shambles. With an architect's eyes, I tried to reconstruct how and when it was built and took note of the approximate dimensions. This, plus my photos, would enable me to make sketches of the house at a later date. It seemed apparent that the house was built in two main stages, a two story four-room house first, then a later addition at the rear to add two downstairs rooms and a third bedroom upstairs.

Pioneers

A new wood house could not be built until there was enough money for materials and for a hired carpenter. The dugout would have to do for a few years until more important needs were met; a team of horses, a barn, a plow, a well, and many other necessities. The Jansson family, like most fellow immigrants, had brought little with them in either money or goods. Farming must begin the first season, to raise cash for any more improvements to the farm. Decisions must be made about many things : what to grow, how much land can be plowed the first year, where to get seed and how to pay for it, and so on. There were no horses, no plow, little else with which to begin. Jonas's new neighbors, nearly all from Sweden and even some from his home parish in Dalsland, would certainly help. Several had been there a few years already, and all were learning fast about farming the Minnesota prairie.

The May weather was bright, with puffy clouds marching across the sky from west to east. Frightening thunderstorms would crash and flash now and then, when the clouds built up to menacing blackness. Then the birds would become silent until the rains swept across the prairie and the storm ended. It was warmer for this time of year than in Sweden, and more given to sudden changes in temperature, winds, and cloud. The grass grew green and tall, and with his shovel Jonas learned the sod was thick and the soil was black.

Plowing would not be easy; in Sweden a horse and plow turned earth that had been plowed for centuries. The first plowing of this thick prairie sod would take a team of four or even six horses or oxen, his neighbors told him. They no doubt pooled their horses to help each newcomer, or possibly hired a roving plowman with a team of oxen, who made the first cut. The plow blade had to be sharpened at least twice a day. It was back-breaking work and the first year few homesteaders were able to till more than part of their land.

The first crop

Then they planted. Wheat was the crop most likely to bring in cash, Jonas's neighbors said. The rough plowing must be made smooth, going over the field again and again with harrows and rakes behind sweating horses. Finally, it was time to sow, probably by hand or a borrowed seed spreader pulled by borrowed horses. And then they prayed for only moderate, gentle rain until the seed caught hold and wouldn't wash away. Once planting was finished, Jonas could turn to other chores with the help of his two older boys. They fixed up the hut, maybe put in a wood floor and lined or whitewashed the inside walls, built a better outhouse, made furniture, and dug his own well to save the long trek for water.

Household chores

Meanwhile, Stina and the girls set up housekeeping and fell in to a routine of cooking, mending, fetching water, planting a vegetable garden, borrowing a few laying hens and a rooster to get a flock going, and trying to make a sod house more livable. A table was acquired first and a few chairs to be able to sit for meals. Then they made rough-hewn beds to raise the straw mattresses off the damp floor. And then they took a long trip into town by borrowed horse and wagon to buy a few necessities: kerosene and a lamp, fabric for clothing and bedding, sewing materials, tools, maybe even a newspaper in Swedish from Minneapolis to learn what was going on in the world and in Sweden. Then they stopped at the post office to see if any mail from relatives had made the long voyage, and perhaps sent a letter home to Stina's mother Maja Lisa, age 66, or to her brothers in Sweden, or to Jonas's father Johannes Larsson, still alive at age 75. Letters were rare in 1865; the postage for a letter to Sweden cost 36 cents.

Planting trees

Looking around at the unkempt woodlot with its aging trees and undergrowth, I imagined Jonas and his family collecting saplings from along the streams in the area or in other scattered places where trees grew, and bringing them back to the farm to plant around the house. At least twenty years would be needed to get much shade and shelter from these trees, but there had to be a

beginning. There were many more trees back home in Sweden, old forest between and among the farms everywhere one looked. There were trees around the old Brålanda church, along the river, by the stone bridge, and where the land was too irregular to plow and plant. Trees had always been a part of their lives, and the prairie must have seemed a green, hostile desert to the newest arrivals. Over the years these planted woodlot trees had grown, served their purpose, and were now abandoned except as a graphic remnant of the hard work of the homesteaders 140 years before. Soon the house, too, would be gone and only the old trees and the songs of the birds would remain.

Travel now and then

I glanced up and saw several vapor trails in the sky, the airplanes themselves too small to see at their great altitude. New York to Seattle in 4 hours? Dallas to Minneapolis in 2 hours? That would be a shorter time than it took Jonas and family to travel to St. Peter on foot or by wagon. Their journey from Sweden had taken at least two to three months, traveling by wagon to Göteborg, then by ship via England to New York, by canal boat or train to the midwest, up the Mississippi to St. Paul, then up the Minnesota River by barge to St. Peter. Their descendants can now fly to Sweden in seven or eight hours, nonstop from Minneapolis. But for Jonas, there was no thought of return to Sweden. Their future was here on the Minnesota Prairie and Sweden was just a memory, never to be seen again.

Midsommar (Midsummer's Day)

As the wheat began to sprout, the summer nights were long, but not as long as at this time of year in Sweden. The longest day, June 20, was a time in the old country for the ages-old midsummer festival, celebrating with dancing and music the longest day of the year. Did these Swedes join with their neighbors in this ancient ritual? It had stayed light much later in Sweden, only a few hours twilight until the sun again rose in those north latitudes. Here, midway between the pole and the equator, the sun set earlier and more quickly into the blackness of the prairie night. Then new stars and constellations could be seen, many unfamiliar to the Jansson family. The North Star was in its expected place, however, and so was the Big Dipper, but lower in the night sky. The prairie fell silent at night, with only the occasional owl or coyote's bark to break the stillness. In the distance, there was the faint light of a lamp or candle in the window of a neighbor's house. A light moved as the neighbor checked on his animals, or someone made a last trip to the outhouse before going to bed.

Founding the church

On the day after midsummer that year, Jonas interrupted his work to walk to a meeting in a log house down on the farm of John Magnus Peterson. The meeting had been called among all the new farmers in the area, possibly growing out of ideas exchanged at the midsummer's gathering. At that meeting, the decision was made to organize a new Lutheran congregation for the people in the area. There were now several hundred immigrant families in the area, and it was too far to travel east to the Norseland church. The new congregation would meet for several years in the new schoolhouse built about a mile west of Jonas's farm, on land donated by a neighbor, Oscar Gustafsson. Or sometimes they would gather in the homes of one of the members, until money could be raised for a church building. The church would be known as the New Sweden Church until 1890, when the name was changed to the Bernadotte Church.

By 1872, the congregation had pledged enough money to build the first church of wood; it measured 50 ft. long, 36 ft. wide, with a ceiling 16 ft. high. A wood steeple marked this first church, and inside there was a high pulpit in the center raised 7 or 8 steps above the floor. A big chandelier hung over the center aisle, and on either side of the altar two smaller chandeliers. A straight communion rail divided the altar area from the nave. There were four tall windows with pointed arch tops on either side of the pews. Jonas was listed as a founding member of the church, as having donated $20.00 (an average amount) toward the construction. The church was less than a mile away and this new landmark on the prairie horizon could now be seen from Jonas and Stina's farm. A new bell in the steeple was rung every Saturday evening at 6:00 p.m. (4:00 p.m. in the winter) to remind farmers to stop their work and prepare for the Sabbath day. On Sunday, the bell rang for five minutes before the start of Sunday school, and again for five minutes before the start of church. This bell could be heard at Jonas's farm. It would also toll the age at death of a member on the morning after a death.

(to be continued)

On the left, Otto William Johnson (1867-1946) [author's grandfather] and his wife Mathilda Brink (1870–1946) with Mathilda's twin sister Selma and her husband. Mathilda was born in Skara, Vägö., Sweden.

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