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Listening to the Prairie

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

BY DENNIS L. JOHNSON

Winter

The first crop of wheat had been pretty good. With the help of neighbors in exchange for his own, Jonas had successfully harvested nearly a thousand bushels of wheat, enough for at least ten wagon loads to be hauled in to St. Peter for sale. Even after buying a supply of flour, molasses, sugar, salt, and other items, Jonas had over fifty dollars left in his pocket, more money than he had ever seen before. Now it was time to prepare for the long, cold winter his neighbors told him about. He, Lars, and Ephraim worked hard for many days cutting, hauling, and stacking firewood from a woods by the stream some distance away, until he felt he must have enough to last the winter. They would burn the wood for heat, and cook on the cast-iron stove they had bought at the general store in St. Peter. Other chores kept them busy: building a chicken house and a better outhouse, digging a deeper well, and preparing their house for winter.

Indoors chores

Stina and the girls found time to prepare also, besides their normal housekeeping and cooking. Stina taught the girls to knit and sew, and many pairs of wool socks and several sweaters were knitted, clothes were repaired, and even the sacks from the flour they had bought were put to use for everyday dresses and shirts.

Worn-out clothes and other rags were collected and cut into strips, the strips sewed end to end, then braided to make rugs for the floor of their dugout. Some of the other Swedish ladies at church meetings had told her of the American custom of Thanksgiving, late in November, when the harvest was in. They all celebrated by roasting one of their new hens over an open fire, with biscuits and gravy.

First Christmas

It was not long after that Stina first felt her baby move. Her thoughts turned to what she would do when the baby came in March. Babies were still usually born in bed, a doctor was at least four hours away by horseback. This was to be her seventh childbirth, and everything had gone all right before. Now she was 43 years old, however, and it had been three years since poor little Johannes was born. Well, she mustn't worry, she had her family with her and several of her new neighbors were experienced and could be summoned when her time came. She had not expected this baby, they had enough to do with all the farm- and house-work, but she had little choice in the matter. She would put her trust in God.

Just before their first Christmas on the farm, a terrible storm came. Jonas had been to see a neighbor with a sick calf, and gone to his farm to try to be of help. When the snow

and wind came, he headed for home. He had heard about these storms the Americans called "blizzards." He could hardly see to find the way and by the time he reached his own house the snow was several inches deep. It snowed steadily for two days and two nights, and the wind howled and shook the door. Snow blew in around the window curtains, and piled up on the floor. Jonas had to dig his way out the door to get more firewood for the stove, and did not try to go any further. On the third morning it dawned bright and clear, and the wind had died down quite a bit. The snow lay nearly two feet deep on the ground, with a drift in front of the house almost as high as the roof. The temperature kept falling, colder and colder, until it was colder than Jonas had ever experienced in Sweden. The snow would squeak as he walked down the well-trodden path to the outhouse, and frost formed on his beard. He busied himself carving a few new serving bowls from some Basswood he had bought, and wondered if the firewood would last the winter.

Church and friends

The next Sunday, it was a struggle to get to Church. The snow lay deep, and Jonas broke trail for the rest of the family until finally they joined the path made by others who had ridden their horses or drawn a sleigh down to the schoolhouse serving as a church. It was warm inside as they

sang their old Lutheran hymns, mostly in Swedish, but they also tried to learn a few new songs in English. John Magnus Peterson led the worship service, his wife led the singing. The pastor from Norseland, ten miles to the East, did not try to get there through the snow. They prayed for the families on outlying farms, and for their deliverance from the storm. After the service, they all stood around and talked about the storm and shared their experiences. Finally, they said their good-byes and headed back the long walk to their farms, a little easier going through the now trodden snow.

The new baby

On March 21, little Otto William was born in the middle of the night and without any complications. Jonas had made a cradle out of pine boards, and the baby spent most of his time rocking near the stove. He was given even more attention than usual, because two babies had died after Ephraim was born, and he was considered a special gift. The first natural born American in the family! A neighbor had brought some milk when she heard of the new arrival, and Stina made Otto a sugar-teat out of a rag and string to keep him occupied between breast feedings. The winter had been cold, but the family could begin to think of spring coming. In a few weeks they would begin to see migrating birds heading north with the spring thaw. In two more months it would be time to plant again, and Jonas was already beginning to make plans with his neighbors to share in the plowing.

The Farmhouse

I looked more closely at the old farmhouse, now sagging and in disrepair. Typically, it would have been built a few years after the settlers arrived and when money had been earned from the sale of several years' wheat crops. The dugout sod house had certainly served them well, but was damp, crowded, and difficult to keep warm and to keep clean. Their house in Sweden, although small, had been

neat as a pin and the family longed for a real house with wood floors and glass windows, a stove, and a chimney. With money from several good harvests in his purse, it was now time to think of building a proper house.

I thought about our recent adventures building our own vacation home on a lake in Northern Minnesota. It was to be a family project, built with the aid of two hired carpenters guiding the work according to plans drawn and designed by me. My four sons, now grown, all pitched in to help along with some of their spouses. We had to face many of the challenges Jonas and Stina did and know how they must have felt as the work progressed. While they had the dugout to live in, we stayed in a travel trailer borrowed for a few weeks, plus our family camp trailer. I had the benefit of electricity, which Jonas's farm was not to have for at least 80 years or more. But for both of us, there was a lot of making do and improvisation until the house was far enough along to move inside. Meanwhile, for Jonas, farm work had to continue.

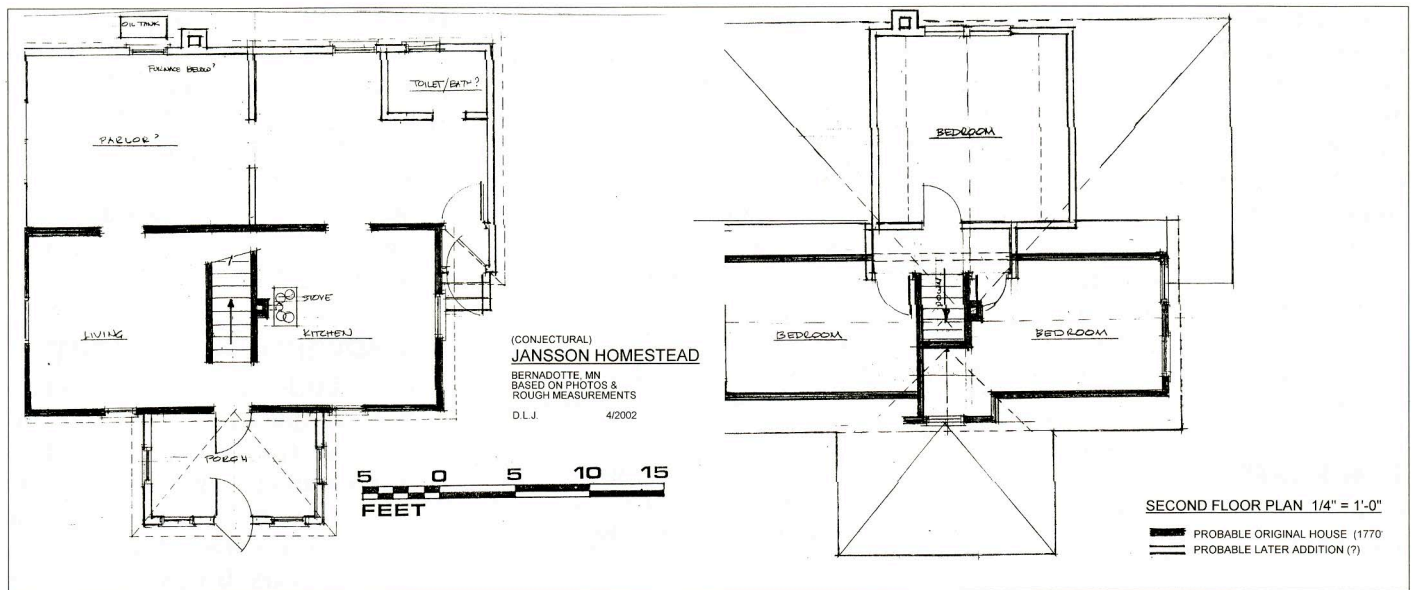
Jonas no doubt hired a carpenter but also pitched in himself, and sons Lars and Ephraim were now old enough to help with the work. Stina and the girls kept everyone fed and supplied cold water from the well for

the men working in the summer heat. Wagon loads of lumber and supplies had to be brought to the farm, most likely from St. Peter, and a forgotten item was sorely missed. There was no hardware store or Home Depot close by. All work was done with a hammer, saw, and a few other hand tools owned by the carpenter. First the foundation had to be dug and foundation walls built, then the first floor could be put down and the framing of the walls could begin. Little Otto William watched it all in wonder as he toddled about, his older sister Mathilda probably being assigned to keep him out from underfoot. Long hours of hard work to take advantage of the warm summer days interrupted only by a break for dinner at noontime and a late supper.

I wondered if when the last roof rafter was in place did they pause for the old Scandinavian custom of putting a small evergreen tree at the top of the house, to bring good luck, the *taklagsfest*? I know we did when we topped out the last beam at "Myggebacke," our vacation home, in 1992. We passed cold beers around; did the Jansson family celebrate with a special treat for dinner? Perhaps a chicken from their growing flock? Work quickly resumed with the installation of siding, floor-



The Jansson Homestead in 1986.



ing, and a roof to keep the weather out. A mason had to be brought in to lay a brick chimney for the stove, a cast-iron stove to cook on and to heat the entire house with warmth from the kitchen. Sawdust was used to fill the spaces in the outside walls and hold the heat in the winter. Then plasterers did all the inside walls and partitions, so that the carpenter could install the new windows and doors. The windows and doors had to have simple wood trim applied, then the walls were ready for wallpaper, patterns carefully picked out in town by Stina.

The Design

The design of the first stage of the new house was very similar to the simple Swedish cottages of the period. There were two rooms downstairs and two rooms upstairs, with a stair near the center. There was a porch in the front, possibly open at first like all Swedish porches, but later closed in against the bitter cold Minnesota winters. But there were some differences brought about by different customs in America. Narrow ship lap siding painted white was most common, rather than the board and batten vertical siding, or sometimes painted stucco found in Sweden. Swedish houses were most often the dark "Swedish Red," often used for barns in the U.S. because this was the cheapest paint. Or sometimes stucco was painted in

pastel ochre, blue, or yellow if the owners were a little more affluent. Typically Swedish casement windows gave way to double hung windows in the U.S., already being massproduced in factories in Chicago or Minneapolis.

The kitchen was where most time was spent, much of it occupied with food preparation and because it was warmest around the stove in the winter. The other rooms got what heat they could through the doorways and rising up the stair to the second floor. The other downstairs room, two windows facing the front, was probably Jonas and Stina's bedroom at first, with the boys sharing one upstairs room and the girls sharing the other. Small rooms had attic eaves on either side and a window at the end. Little Otto most likely slept in his mother and father's bedroom, in a crib. On cold winter mornings, everyone came to the kitchen to get dressed in the warmth of the stove fed by kindling and corncobs. A cold trip to the outhouse, also supplied with corncobs, was a morning ritual, followed by a big breakfast in the kitchen. Bathing was infrequent, water had to be heated on the stove and a washtub on the kitchen floor allowed little privacy. Stina and the girls had to wash their hair regularly, however, together with a Saturday night bath to look their best at church on Sunday morning.

Barely 500 square feet (45 sq. meters), the house was crowded for a family of five children, several of whom were grown or nearly so. It is likely that within a few years the addition to the house was decided on to make more room. It was a time when needs were great, but a good crop would bring cash.

The yield in wheat was about 20 bushels per acre in those years, and there was a ready market in St. Peter for barges of wheat to go down the Minnesota River to Minneapolis/St. Paul. Flour mills there would mill the wheat into flour to feed a growing and hungry nation. But Jonas and Stina also needed their own team of horses for farm work, plows, harrows, and other implements of their own, and a wagon to get to town now and then. Chickens provided eggs and meat for the table, but a fine cow or two would add milk, butter, and cheese to vary the fare. And they needed a barn to keep the horses and cow in. All required money.

The addition to the farmhouse was to the rear, or west side. They added two new rooms downstairs, and over these two rooms, another bedroom upstairs. They built a new chimney for another stove in the new parlor, facing the road, and a room rarely used except when company came to visit. They also added a separate living room downstairs where the kitchen was, and a better kitchen at the rear. The house was now up to

nearly a thousand square feet (90 sq. meters), and allowed the family to spread out in more luxury. (Today, new houses average 2,000 to 2,500 square feet in typical moderate income neighborhoods, with "Executive Homes" likely to be 3,500 to 5,000 square feet.) There was still no inside bathroom or plumbing; that was to be added many years later. The well was down near the barn, and the outhouse remained about 30 steps in back of the house.

The Wedding

Later in 1866, the same year that Jonas and Stina began their farm, a new neighbor settled across the road. A young man from Sweden, Carl (Charles) Hed arrived with his family in November of that year, and soon became acquainted with the Jansson family. He was 18 years old, and no doubt caught the eye of Wilhelmina, 16, and Mathilda, now 14. It was not until January 31 of 1873, only a few months after the new church was completed, that Charles, now 24, and Mathilda, 20, were married. This was the same January that had brought one of the worst blizzards ever experienced by the new settlers.

The wedding of Charles Hed and Mathilda Jansson was possibly one of the first weddings to take place in the brand-new, but still incomplete church, and all the neighbors gathered on that cold winter day to celebrate this marriage. The first wedding for the Janssons, Jonas no doubt felt as all fathers do when giving away their daughters in marriage, both proud and a little sad to see their little girl now grown up. She was to be close by, however, living just across the road from her family. Mathilda and Charles were to farm near both their parents all their lives, raise 11 children, and later would care for Jonas and Stina when they became too old to continue with the farm work.

The Hed family had lived in a dugout house for 3 years until they, too, were able to build a house in 1869. By 1870, Charles' father, Johan-

nes (John) Hed, had 2 horses, 7 cows, 4 oxen, 5 head of cattle, and 2 pigs. That year, with his son's help, John had planted 30 acres of spring wheat, Indian corn, oats, and barley. Mathilda moved into the Hed family house with Charles after their marriage, and some years later Charles bought his own land nearby. He later became one of the first farmers in the area to own a newly invented threshing machine, and hired it out to other farmers for miles around at harvest time.

My wife tapped the horn in the motor home to indicate lunch was ready. I snapped the last few photos on my roll of film, and walked out the farm road to join her for a sandwich and cup of tea. I had to step over a rusty harrow that the current owner had placed in the road to keep out the cars of local teenagers, who found the old homestead a place to party and vandalize. How would today's young people have fared in the pioneer life, I wondered, having grown up in a different world? A world of dawn-to-dark constant work from an early age, little chance to roam, no radio, no TV, no rock music, no ready access to beer and more harmful substances, no air conditioning, never a restaurant meal, and little variety in their food. I sat down in the dinette and began to eat my sandwich with a few potato chips and a cold glass of pop (soda), gazing around at the countryside. There was not a soul in sight; one car passed by in the entire time we were there.

Troubles

Despite hard work and slow improvements at the farm, life was a struggle for the new settlers. Some no doubt looked back with longing to their homes in Sweden, others only remembered the poverty, the hunger, and the hopelessness of a life with little opportunity and too many people on not enough land. Most had little desire to return home, their struggle and their opportunity was here on the Minnesota prairie.

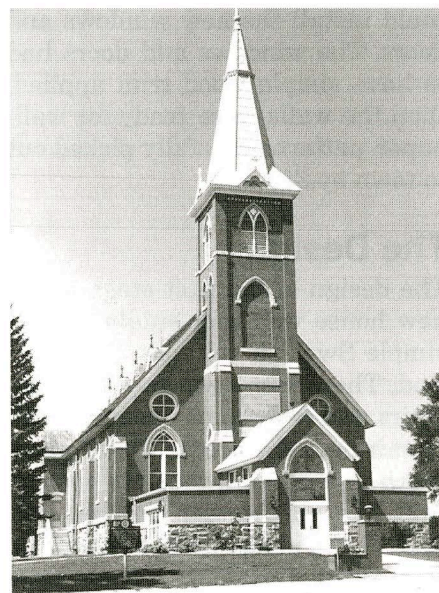
Jonas became a naturalized citizen on November 21, 1871, renoun-

cing his allegiance to the King of Norway and Sweden in favor of allegiance to the Constitution of the United States of America. In this paper, he signed "Jonas Jansson," but the clerk of court of Nicollet County wrote the name as Jonas Johnson. From that time, the family name was now Johnson.

A Growing Community

The new Lutheran Church was finally fully completed in June, 1873, including all the interior decorative woodwork and new wooden pews. At Mathilda's wedding in January, it had still been bare and makeshift, with temporary benches. She had been married by the new pastor, Swedish-born Mr. C.M. Ryden, 48 years old, and called by the church in June, 1871, even though he had just finished seminary. Assisted by his wife, he led services for a time in the schoolhouse until the church was ready.

(to be continued)



The second Swedish American Lutheran Church in Bernadotte, Nicollet County, Minnesota. This church was built in 1877.

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