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150 Years Since First Swedes Arrived in Wisconsin

Axel Friman*

This year it will be exactly 150 years since the Friman family emigrated to the U.S. from Stenhammar in Varnhem Parish (Skar.) and settled in September 1838 in the town of Salem, Racine County, Wisconsin Territory. These were the first Swedes to settle in Wisconsin and pre-dated the arrival of the Gustaf Unonius group to Wisconsin in 1841 and the Bishop Hill group which arrived in Illinois in 1846.

Six years ago the Friman Family Association was organized in Sweden for the purpose of preserving the knowledge of this unusual and early emigration and as well to preserve the family memorabilia, particularly the letters exchanged between Sweden and the United States. Some of the members of the association are therefore flying to Chicago this year to visit the places connected to the Friman venture and to participate in the festivities arranged by the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin as well as Westgöta Gille of Chicago, a gathering of persons whose origin in Sweden is the province of Västergötland.

The Friman contingent at the time of emigrating 1838 consisted of a newly retired regimental clerk at the Skaraborg Regiment, the 56 year-old Carl Friman (1781-1862) and five of his six sons (the wife and one son remained in Sweden). The sons and their ages were—Carl Johan, 17; Wilhelm, 14; Adolf, 11; Herman, 9; and Otto, 6. They arrived in New York 9 July 1838 aboard the vessel *Rosen* from Göteborg.¹

Already the following year, in 1839, the father and the son Herman had to return to Sweden, travelling back aboard the Swedish brig *Svea*, J.E. Nissen, captain. The vessel departed from New York ca. 20 June and arrived back in Göteborg ca. 10 August.

This separation caused a break in the communications for the father in Sweden and the young sons, left behind in Salem. The father was of course anxious to know how his four sons were doing in a strange land and they in turn needed all the support and encouragement from the parents and the rest of the clan in the old country. It has not been possible to determine when the first attempts were made to achieve contact by mail, or who initiated the procedure.

The publication of emigrant letters in Swedish newspapers has been quite helpful in mapping the letter exchange. In the Stockholm newspaper *Aftonbladet*,

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published 6 April 1842, we find a headline which reads "Letters from Swedish Colonists in the United States" as well as a very interesting and informative introduction of Carl Friman, the father, and the two first letters from the sons in Wisconsin. These letters were dated Salem 18 Jan. 1841 and Salem 11 Aug. and 6 Sept. 1841. These have been labeled by the father when he later made them available to *Aftonbladet* as "The first letter" and "The second letter."

How long did it take for mail contact to be established between Sweden and the U.S. after the father and Herman had departed for Sweden in the early summer of 1839?

The first letter from the sons, dated 18 Jan. 1841 begins with the following commentary: "Today we received Father's beloved and long desired letter of 26 July (1840)." This was the first letter sent westward to reach the addressees, and had presumably been on the road close to six months. Obviously it was long overdue, from the time of the farewell, during the early summer of 1839, to the middle of January 1841, a period of close to twenty months. It is easy to understand how lonely and abandoned these young lads must have felt at various times during this long period of waiting. The father had, of course, attempted at various times to contact the sons by letter. In a note to the second letter the sons wrote, the father says: "I have written to them twice, before I received their first letter, which had been on the road a total of five months (their letter had been in transit only two months)."

In Carl Friman's introduction, mentioned earlier, he writes that "They were the first Swedes, which settled in that region, and the first to have corresponded with us." There seems to be no reason to dispute this statement. So far as we know, the "first letter" cannot be located in the original version. Perhaps it was forwarded to the newspaper for verification when it appeared in *Aftonbladet*.²

The original version of "the second letter," however, is extant.³ It is a beautiful example of an early letter sent before the introduction of postage stamps. It was mailed from North America via Southport, WI to New York, Le Havre, Hamburg, Stralsund to Skövde in Sweden and finally to Lidköping. It is easy to understand how a letter could be enroute months at a time. The letter is also a good example from the point of view of content, particularly when one realizes that the ages of the correspondents ranged from 20 years to nine years. It is presented here as an example of an early emigrant letter from Wisconsin.

"Salem, 14 August and 6 September 1841.

Dear Father:

Last Sunday we were happy to receive your letter of 25 March, telling us that you and our friends were in good health. What a pleasure it is to be able to communicate, even though we are so widely separated by the ocean. We are all well, thank God. But the unhealthful season is approaching, so we are not yet safe from the ague, which is the most prevalent sickness among the immigrants from Europe who are not accustomed to the climate and the work; but we hope the country will be healthful when it is more densely populated and the swamps have

been drained. Wilhelm, Adolf and I had malaria for three months in the summer of 1839. Last summer I had Bileet (?) fever for about three months, but my brothers were well. Wilhelm, who next to Adolf, was the most sickly in Sweden, is now the healthiest and strongest among us and has to work the hardest. As you know, I perspire profusely when I work and have to drink so much, which can be very dangerous. Adolf is a splendid boy, but he is still small and weak and unable to be of much help. As you know, he has a good mind and under my tutelage has arrived at the stage where he can read newspapers and books. Otto is still short but rather quick and wiry. He stays at home.

We have had many misfortunes since you were here. First of all, our Lane cow⁴ got mired in the swamp and was dead when we found her the next day; then our hay and corn crop burned in a prairie fire and last spring during a severe storm a tree fell on one of our oxen and crushed his back. He is still alive and we intend to butcher him for Christmas.

Through all of this, if God grants us health, we see hopes for a comfortable living in the future. We have worked and have bought another calf, a bull calf and an ox to replace the injured one. We have pigs and five acres of good corn. Next fall we intend to sow five acres of wheat on new land. As yet we have not cultivated much of our own farm, since we have had to work for the Yankees to get money for clothes, which here are exorbitantly expensive. The clothes we brought from Sweden wore out a long time ago. A coat costs twelve dollars, a pair of trousers five, and a pair of boots four dollars. If we only had strong Swedish worsted. We are kept at work all the time in order to clothe ourselves. Clothes are the most expensive things here. If we had clothes, we could live quite comfortably. We are glad to hear that the Swedes are beginning to awaken from their slumber. Here there is still an abundance of land, but they must come soon, because it is selling fast. The Swedes ought to come next summer if possible, for the best land is bought up first. It would be a good chance to send some clothes with them. Our greatest need is woolen clothes and stockings. If they measured our items on Pelle,⁵ I am sure that they would be large enough for Wilhelm and me. Adolf is about your size. Do not send hardware, because it is too heavy.

In case there should be no Swedes leaving for America next summer, could you send a trunk of clothes with a Swedish sea captain, addressed to us in care of Mr. Ernst Zachrison⁶ or some other trustworthy person who could arrange with a company in New York to forward a shipment to Detroit, or still better, to Southport. I do not know, however, if the latter can be done. In such case we should probably have to pay the freight from Detroit.

About one hundred Norwegian families reside ca. sixteen miles north of here. They are a very industrious people and some are quite prosperous. We have been invited there but as yet have not had time to go. We intend to visit there soon. A young minister from Stockholm has also come. His name is Linblom or Lindblom.⁷ Was there such a person in Stockholm? He left for Norway to learn the Norwegian language, came to New York last fall, and is now a clergyman among the Norwegians and intends to marry a Norwegian girl.

I wish that a considerable number of Swedes would come over together and buy enough land in order to prevent the Yankees from separating us. It is better to live in a group. Next spring I intend to build a house so that we can receive the Swedes upon their arrival. If we have good health, we hope to buy more land and

build on a hill. We would be happy if you could come over and live near us. Can't you get your pension transferred to the U.S.? I don't know what the conditions would be.

Rittbrock,⁸ as you know, expected money. He has now received 700 dollars and expects more. He is now erecting a large house and next year intends to construct a large barn. Wilhelm and I are at the present time working the harvest for Mr. Perkins⁹ in Burlington. Together we must cut eight acres a day. In Sweden we did not do that much. It is quite hard work. The Yankees are a strong and quick people and work extremely hard. Wages are low and so is the price of wheat, but it is also the best time for emigrants to come. Last fall one hundred families from Pomerania arrived in Milwaukee, and a large group is expected next spring. Milwaukee is growing quite rapidly and has now 2,500 inhabitants; Southport has about 1,200; Burlington with its new factories is destined to become an important place; Geneva is a flourishing town—this summer thirty new houses are going up there and in the near future we shall have a railroad from Southport to Geneva.

The Yankees are not like the Swedes, who would rather go up the street for a drink or waste their money on fancy food. The Yankees live well, but they do not put on large dinners. On the other hand they proceed building their railroads and canals. Money, however, has been tight for some time, causing work on the railroads and canals to stop, but we trust that conditions will improve.

This fall we are to build a bridge across the Fox River on Rittbrock's land at a cost of \$600.00. I have contributed ten dollars toward the project, Rittbrock forty and Bondy¹⁰ fifty. The road will thus be four miles shorter than the one past Bullen's.¹¹ The road will cross our land and there will be much traffic.

If we are well next winter, we intend to attempt the splitting of rail from our hardwood oaks in order to fence in 120 acres and then next year plow up twenty acres, if possible.

This summer we had to work for others so that we were not in the position to cultivate much of our farm. The soil here is quite fertile, yielding from 30 to 60 bushels of corn to the acre without the benefit of fertilizer. The crops are generally of good quality.

An accident occurred last week in that a steamboat, *Erie*, caught fire and burned on Lake Erie. The fire began when bottles of spirits of turpentine had been placed too close to the fire and exploded. About 200 of the 230 passengers lost their lives, including 100 Swiss emigrants who were going to Illinois to settle. They belonged to the upper classes and had brought with them \$300,000.00 in gold. There were about 200 life preservers on board, but there was no time to make use of them. Since such accidents seldom occur, this should not frighten the Swedes from coming. They should come next summer, if there is any possible way. They must bring plenty of clothes, for, as you know, the excess weight (beyond the 100 pounds allowed each passenger) is taxed at the rate of one dollar per hundred pounds. We wish you could send us some fur caps like those Anders bought in Uppsala. Here they cost eight to twelve dollars each. We need them, for, as you know, our winters are quite cold. We had a late and cold spring, but a rather warm summer. We produce everything but apples in Wisconsin, but we shall soon have them also. Our neighbor Bondy has apple trees which will bear next year, so the Swedes will not miss old Sweden at all.

P.S. 6 September

We have only one authority here, whom we have elected ourselves. General Harrison,¹² as you probably heard, is dead, having been president only one month. We thereby lost a grand general as well as president. His widow received the salary for the whole year. He was not wealthy until he became president. He lived on a farm consisting of 1,500 acres in North Bend near Cincinnati in Ohio. If he had lived we would have had a U.S. Bank, but our present president John Tyler, who was vice president, has rejected the idea of a bank, which has made the people quite unhappy. He is what we here call a turncoat, who plays both political parties. It will be three more years before we elect another president and I hope then that the Whigs will defeat the Democrats and so that we shall have either Daniel Webster or Henry Clay. The Democrats wish to elect Van Buren¹³ once more. All the governors and federal employees appointed by Jackson¹⁴ and Van Buren will then be dismissed and new Whigs be appointed in their stead.

We are not very afraid of a war with England, since Jonathan can whip old John Bull on land and at sea. They could not come as far as we are, since there are the narrow straits at Mackinac, and there we have two strong forts, so that they could never enter Lake Michigan. If England declares war on America, she will be certain to lose Canada, which is the last foothold she has in America. We still have some old generals who could whip her as decisively as Jackson and Harrison once did.

I see that there is quite a bit of unrest in Turkey, where the Turks are being quite barbarian toward the Christians. We receive fresh news from Europe. The steamships go from Liverpool to New York in twelve days. We receive our newspapers from Southport, which has two—one Whig and one Democrat. I have read many interesting books about the Revolution and the last war. I wish that you, Father, had them, because I know that you would like them. I have even read *The Life of Charles XII*.¹⁵ The Yankees believe that he was just as great a general as Washington. Napoleon is also well known here. Almost all the Yankees have read Walter Scott's works. Lindsay¹⁶ has Scott's *The Life of Bonaparte*.¹⁷ Each township or district in the older states have libraries, some containing 1,000 volumes, where young people may borrow books and read them free of charge. Thus the people here become quite well-mannered and cultured. The people here have better manners here than the middle classes in Europe. The Irish and the Scots are the worst which arrive from Europe. The Irish emigrate more than any other nation.

Fourth of July was celebrated here in a festive manner. The people in Geneva prepared a free dinner for 300 persons. I was also present. Songs were sung, which were very good. How do the Swedes celebrate Carl's Day?¹⁸ Are they able to shout hurrah! voluntarily?

Last winter I read a letter from an American¹⁹ in a temperance journal, dated Stockholm in October, who said that 'he is attempting to steer the Swedes away from the use of aquavit and that Bishop Franzén²⁰ and Archbishop Wallin²¹ were working with him and that a temperance society was being organized in every *län*.' I should be very glad if this were so. He said that there had been a crowd of 3,000 in Jämtland who had blessed him and America which had sent such a man.

This summer has been quite healthy. Not one person has been ailing. We

believe that this area should be quite healthy. Here it is more healthful than in Sweden.

My address is—Town of Salem, Racine County, Wisconsin Territory and the United States of North America.

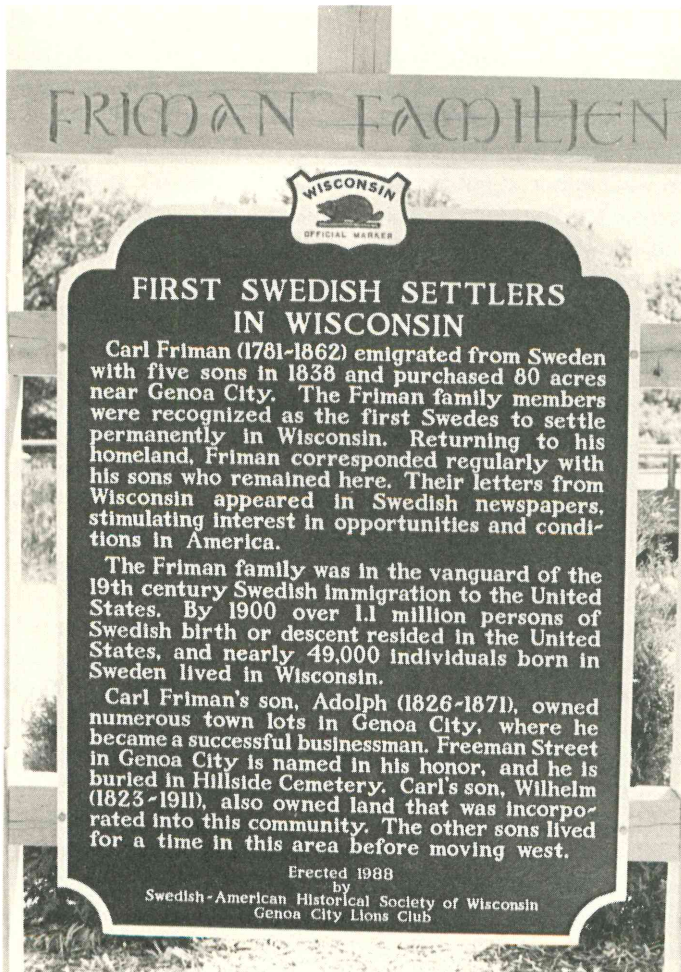
I sent you a letter in February, Father. Did you receive it? Greet all relatives and friends!

Dear Father - write soon and don't forget your devoted sons. Many greetings.

From Father's Brave Sons
W. Freeman C.J.Friman

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- ¹ Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* (Stockholm and Chicago 1967) (*SPANY*), pp. 26-27.
- ² For a translation of the first letter see the *Aftonbladet* version as edited by George M. Stephenson, *Letters Relating to Gustaf Unonius and the Early Swedish Settlers in Wisconsin*, Augustana Historical Publications, Vol. VII (Rock Island, IL 1937), pp. 55-59. See also H. Arnold Barton, ed., *Letters from the Promised Land*. Swedes in America, 1840-1914 (Minneapolis and Chicago 1975), pp. 22-23.
- ³ The second letter is also contained in Stephenson's edition, pp. 59-64.
- ⁴ The Lane cow received its name from the fact that the cow had been bought from a shoemaker named Samuel Lane for \$35.00. —Note in *Aftonbladet*, 6 April 1842.
- ⁵ Pehr Magnus Friman (1816-1874), the sixth of the Friman boys, who stayed in Sweden, my great-great grandfather.
- ⁶ Ernst Zachrisson (1809-1872), a Swedish merchant in New York, where he became a U.S. citizen 25 July 1845. He also served as Norwegian-Swedish consul. In 1847 he became acting consul in Panama but because he refused to take the Swedish consular oath, being a U.S. citizen, he was asked to resign 9 Dec. 1853. —*SPANY*, p. 7, n. 30.
- ⁷ He is unknown in this role. A Swedish student named Ossian Lindblom, born in Ronneby 4 Oct. 1816, was the son of Johan Christer (not Christian) Lindblom and Märta Christina Martinsdotter, who arrived in New York 17 July 1838 aboard the Swedish brig *Elizabeth*. He returned to Sweden in 1841 and received a passport to America there 1 May 1841, at which time he is listed as Oscar (sic!) Lindblom. He arrived in Boston 2 Aug. 1841 on board the vessel *William* from Göteborg. On the manifest he is listed as Oscar Lundblad, a naval officer. He owned a farm near Cumminsville on the outskirts of Cincinnati, which he sold in 1848 to a merchant named Ross. On 10 July 1850 Lindblom went to Panama, where he died the same year, not 1852. —*SPANY*, pp. 26-27, 268; Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports (except New York)* (Stockholm and St. Paul, MN 1979), pp. 10-11; Carl Sjöström, *Blekingska nationen 1697-1900* (Lund 1901), p. 231; information courtesy Erik Wikén.
- ⁸ Adolph Rietbrock had arrived in the U.S. from Germany in 1837 and became one of the early successful pioneers in Racine Co. —*The Grass Roots History of Racine County* (Racine 1978), p. 545; information courtesy Ruth Trower, Racine, WI.
- ⁹ Probably Pliny M. Perkins, who had arrived in Racine County in 1837 and at one time owned 1,200 acres of land in Burlington. —*Commemorative Biographical Record of Racine and Kenosha Counties* (Chicago 1906), pp. 136-137; information courtesy Ruth Trower, Racine, WI.
- ¹⁰ Possibly either Horatio A. Bundy or Schuyler Bundy, who were both neighbors of the Friman boys. —*U.S. Sixth Census*, 1840, Wisconsin, RG 312, Microcopy M704, Microfilm roll No. 580.
- ¹¹ Possibly William Bullen, who was a neighbor of the Frimans. —*U.S. Sixth Census*, 1840, Wisconsin, RG 312, Microcopy M704, Microfilm roll No. 580.
- ¹² William Henry Harrison (1773-1841). Ninth President of the U.S. He died in office one month after his inauguration. —*The American Heritage Dictionary* (New York 1973).
- ¹³ Martin Van Buren (1782-1862). Eighth President of the U.S. (1837-1841). —*The American Heritage Dictionary*.
- ¹⁴ Andrew Jackson (1767-1845). Seventh President of the U.S. (1767- 1845). —*The American Heritage Dictionary*.
- ¹⁵ Possibly Francois Marie de Voltaire's work, *The History of Charles XII, King of Sweden*, published in France 1731 and in London 1732. In 1785 it was translated into Swedish. In its original version it was much used in the Swedish schools, particularly in the French classes.
- ¹⁶ Possibly Gilbert R. Lindsley, who was a close neighbor of the Frimans. —*U.S. Sixth Census*, 1840, Wisconsin, RG 312, Microcopy M704, Microfilm roll No. 580.
- ¹⁷ Sir Walter Scott's *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* in nine volumes was published in Edinburgh, Scotland in June 1827.
- ¹⁸ Carl's Day is probably the same as 28 January, the namesday of the then reigning monarch in Sweden, Carl XIV Johan.

- ¹⁹Probably Robert Baird (1798-1863), an American Presbyterian minister and champion of temperance, who in 1840 had made his second visit to Sweden (he had also visited Sweden in 1836). In August of 1840 he had appeared in Hudiksvall where he had spoken to 5,000 persons including 34 Swedish Lutheran clergymen. —Gunnar Westin, *Emigranterna och kyrkan* (Stockholm 1932), pp. 9-10.
- ²⁰Frans Michael Franzén (1772-1847), Bishop in Härnösand Diocese 1834-1847. —*Svenska män och kvinnor*, I-VIII (Stockholm 1942-1955), II, pp. 586-588.
- ²¹Johan Olof Wallin (1779-1839), Archbishop of Sweden 1837-1839. The reference to Baird's having worked with Wallin in 1840 is in error, since Wallin had died the year before. Possibly the reference should be to the cooperation between Baird and Wallin during Baird's first visit to Sweden 1836. —*Svenska män och kvinnor*, Vol. VIII, pp. 199-200.



Photograph by Lennart Setterdahl

Plaque honoring First Swedish Settlers in Wisconsin, erected in Genoa City, WI by the Swedish-American Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Genoa City Lions Club.