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Hans Mattson—The Önnestad Lad Who Became Immigrant, Colonel and Minnesota Politician

Georg Bengtsson*

In the beginning of May 1851 a nineteen year-old youth by the name of Hans Mattson from Önnestad Parish in Skåne stepped into a horse-drawn buggy which was to take him to Helsingborg and from there to continue to the land of opportunity—the United States of America.

The father was Mattis Hansson, a farmer residing at Önnestad farm No. 4, also known as the Kjellsa Farm, who drove the carriage. This must have been a disappointing journey for the father. He had worked hard in order to give the oldest son a good education, possibly he might have studied for the ministry in the Lutheran Church. And now the son was on his way—to a future of uncertainty.

Mattis Hansson came from the parish of Fjälkinge in the same county. His wife, Elna Larsdotter, was born in Ivö Parish, nearby. Both of them had their roots in stable and well-known farm families. They had arrived in Önnestad in 1828, where they first worked a small farm in the village of Skoglösa. The living quarters still remain. Here is where Hans, their eldest son, was born 23 Dec. 1832 and here is where Hans Mattson spent his first five years until the family moved to Önnestad village, first to a farm, numbered 17, and then to No.4, which they rented. The farm's name was Kjellsagården and was located due east of the Önnestad Church, where today two white residences are located.

Already in the elementary school Hans demonstrated his interest in studies and after the family had improved its financial position, the fifteen year-old was sent to the Latin Secondary School in nearby Kristianstad.

But after two years of studies the strong-willed youth suddenly decided that he wanted to join the military, no doubt abetted by the then ongoing war between the Germans and the Danes in Schleswig-Holstein. The parents gave their consent grudgingly and in 1849 Hans became a volunteer cadet in the Royal Vendes Artillery Regiment.

Here he was given the surname Kjellgren, no doubt taken from the name of the family farm—Kjellsagården—a surname which he never used once he left the regiment.¹

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During his time in the military he received a solid education in mathematics, physical education, fencing and horsemanship, studies that were to be of great use to him later in life.

After barely two years in the military he suddenly resigned in April 1851. His reason for this was as he put it—"he realized that as a descendant of a farmer family, he had little chance of being promoted in the Swedish Army."

The following month he was on his way to America. As a send-off from his mother he received the advice—"Always do the right thing, and don't be afraid of anyone." From Helsingborg he traveled by sea to Göteborg and in the middle of May he departed from Sweden aboard the brig *Ambrosius*, destined for the great country in the West together with a large group of emigrants.²

After six weeks of journeying Hans Mattson arrived in Boston and from there continued to Buffalo on the Great Lakes and then on to Illinois. The first two years in the new land were difficult with hard work on farms and in the forests. Part of the time he was ill and at times was forced to beg for his food. The first winter he froze his hands. A doctor was called, who advised that several fingers be amputated, but a woman, having knowledge of the healing arts, intervened and coupled with his intensive desire to survive, Mattson recovered. During his first years in the United States he also spent a great deal of time learning English. In the Latin School in Kristianstad he had only learned German and French.

Hans Mattson soon understood, that despite the difficulties at the outset, that the United States was the country of great possibilities. Soon he was able to bring over his entire family—his parents, his brother, his sister, brother-in-law and their little son.

The parents bought a farm in western Illinois, near the Mississippi River. From this place Hans Mattson together with other immigrants, among them his brother-in-law, Sven Johansson Willard,³ who had been schoolmaster in Skoglösa village, traveled north on a river steamer to Minnesota to search for suitable land. The enormous area of Minnesota Territory had been opened in 1849 for settling. They went ashore at the tiny market place of Red Wing and journeyed westward about fifteen miles where they found rich, virgin land. Here, approximately 55 miles south of present-day Minneapolis, they founded the first settlement in 1853, which at first was named Mattson's Settlement. Here they built the first little log cabin and began tilling the soil.

At first they lived here as lonely settlers together with the Indians. These were members of the Sioux tribe and coexistence was very friendly. Hans Mattson mentions that the Indian squaws competed with each other to mind the children of his sister.

It was not long before other settlers arrived at Mattson's place and during the fall of 1854 a small colony had been formed. Already the following year Mattson organized a small Lutheran congregation which he gave the name Vasa. Soon Vasa became a school district and its own township.

In 1855 Hans Mattson married Kerstin Persdotter, who hailed from Ballingslöv in Stoby Parish (Krist.).⁴ With her he had several children.

But Hans Mattson was always full of ideas and it did not take long for him to tire of farming. Already a year after his marriage he and his wife moved to Red Wing, now a city along the shores of the Mississippi. Here he began the study of law and entered the offices of a local lawyer. When he had finished his studies he opened his own office and joined the Republican Party, ready to throw himself into political life.

Already in 1858 he was elected justice of the peace as well as county auditor, and three years later he was appointed chairman of a legislative committee with the objective of revising the taxation laws of Minnesota.

He had barely begun this task when the Civil War broke out in April of 1861.

Alert as he was, it did not take him long to round up about 100 Scandinavians who volunteered in the Union Army to do battle against slavery. His group became Company D in the Third Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment and Mattson was appointed company commander and captain.

After eight months of fighting, among other places in Kentucky and on the well-known march over the Cumberland Mountains, he was given more responsibilities in the regiment and was promoted to major.

Soon afterwards Providence intervened in a peculiar way. Mattson became ill and was sent home to recuperate for a couple of weeks. During this time his regiment fared badly. Several officers were captured by Confederate troops and were sent to prison camps in the South.

Eventually the regiment was reorganized and Hans Mattson was given a higher rank in this unit. During the first half of 1863 his regiment became a part of the army corps which under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant laid siege to Vicksburg in the South. The battles around Vicksburg resulted in a victory for the North and paved the way for the final conclusion of the war. It was a bloody battle with more than 32,000 prisoners captured, including 2,000 officers.

After the battle, Hans Mattson was given the full command of Minnesota's Third Volunteer Regiment, was promoted to lieutenant colonel and was given the task of occupying the city. The following year he became a full colonel. He was then only 31 years old. During the spring of 1865 he was given the command of the First Brigade of the Seventh Army Corps. It was at this time that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, which was a hard blow for the North, but by this time the war was practically over.

Soon thereafter Hans Mattson was once again a civilian but far from unemployed. He founded the legal firm of Mattson and Webster in Red Wing and became the chief editor of the Swedish American newspaper in Chicago, *Svenska Amerikanaren*.

The losses in the war had been heavy and these had to be replaced by increased immigration. Added to this was the fact that large land areas were yet to be settled. Hans Mattson suggested to the State Legislature of Minnesota that a state immigration bureau be organized and Hans Mattson became the head of this new organization.

In December 1868 Mattson traveled to Sweden to recruit emigrants and took the opportunity at this time to visit his home community. He found that the

railroad had come to his village and that a folk high school had been established there. During one of his visits to Önnestad he donated the sum of 1,000 riksdaler (about \$250.00) to the fund for the newly organized institution, a large sum at that time.

He also watched as his old regiment, the Royal Vendes Artillery Regiment paraded on the main square in Kristianstad. He mentions in his *Memoirs*⁵ that he was particularly "fascinated by the many gala uniforms of the officers, many of them graying from age and long service, with their chests covered with various decorations and beautiful military orders." He must have compared them with his own simple uniform from the late war.

He also tells how he visited the Free Masons in Kristianstad, where he was received with the greatest enthusiasm and ceremonies.

In the spring of 1869 he returned to America in the company of several hundred emigrants, of which . . . many were his own relatives. This fact is especially noticeable in the parish records of the churches located around the area of Kristianstad.

Thus the parish records of Önnestad show that during 1869 the emigration from this parish hit its peak, no less than 78 persons left the parish that year to emigrate to America. Mattson's propaganda for his new country had certainly paid off, especially since the previous year had been one of failed crops and much hunger. But the propaganda for emigration was not popular with some people, "particularly by the higher officials," as Mattson puts it.

After his return to the United States in 1869 Mattson was elected Secretary of State of Minnesota by a great majority. This post was to be compared to that of a cabinet minister, according to his *Memoirs* and meant that he was the presiding officer in the State Legislature. At the same time he was engaged in the tremendous expansion of the American railway system. During the Spring of 1871 he was given the major responsibility for the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad's program in recruiting emigrants and he was dispatched to Europe not only to secure capital for the railroads, particularly in the Netherlands, but also to Sweden to secure additional emigrants. This meant that he had to resign from his post as Secretary of State. Dr. Lars Ljungmark, one of Sweden's leading emigration scholars, who has written a book about Hans Mattson,⁶ construes this step of Hans Mattson to have been ill-conceived since it was interpreted by the Scandinavians in Minnesota to have been a sign of failed trust. His ambition later to again enter a political career and perhaps to become Minnesota's first Swedish-born governor therefore failed.

Hans Mattson's visit to Sweden was to last no less than four years. He had brought his entire family with him for the purpose of having his children learn Swedish.

During his visit in Sweden Hans Mattson also visited Russia. It is interesting to note how Mattson in his prophetic vision viewed this country. He writes in his *Memoirs* the following: "What is the reason why Russia and the United States in a political sense are so friendly toward each other? How can freedom and the greatest tyranny have anything in common? There is no hope for the people in such a country except through revolution." This expression is typical for Hans Mattson,

his allegiance to human rights and his willingness to throw his support to the oppressed. During the spring of 1873 he went back to Minnesota alone in order to straighten out some family affairs. In January of 1876 he returned to his home state for good with his family and again entered the arena of newspaper work. He became the owner and chief editor of *Minnesota Stats Tidning* in Minneapolis as well as part owner and business manager of *Svenska Tribunen* in Chicago. Mattson was a good writer and through his newspapers he became a very good contact person for the Swedish Americans in the Middle West. He also played a key role in dispensing advice and information to the new settlers in order that they should adjust well in the new land.

After some years he sold his share in the newspapers and bought a farm of 2,200 acres in the Red River Valley in northwestern Minnesota. He owned and worked this farm until his death.

In 1881 new travel opportunities opened up for Mattson. He was appointed consul general in Calcutta, India by President James A. Garfield. In his *Memoirs* Hans Mattson gives a superb and full account of his years there. He described India's geography, its political life, its many religions, its culture and caste system. He is quite critical of the British regime in India. He writes among other things that "India has a civil service that is writing its own death sentence." He continues by saying that "the British civil servants rule the country with an iron fist . . . and that the British look down upon the lower classes in India with the greatest contempt."

Hans Mattson stayed in India two years before the restless traveller returned to the United States in order to begin a new career involving real estate in New Mexico. When this venture did not please him he returned to Minnesota, where he again entered politics and in 1886 he was elected Secretary of State. After two years he was again re-elected to the same post.

It was during this time that he became one of the organizers of the 250th anniversary of the first Swedish settlements on the Delaware in 1638, held in Minneapolis 14 Sept. 1888.⁷

Colonel Hans Mattson's active life has meant much for the development of Minnesota. He was inordinately proud of his adopted country. At the same time he never ceased loving his native land. The final words in his *Memoirs* demonstrate this: "There is no spot in this world as dear to me as my childhood place, to which I long to make a pilgrimage, to the place where my simple home stood in the venerable old country of Sweden . . . the areas which appear to me to be most beautiful in my memory are the fields my father plowed, the orchard which my mother planted, the simple home they built—I love it all, these places where I wandered by their side—the trees, the bushes, the stones, the rivulets, where I played, as well as the simple folk of farm background, whom I first learned to appreciate and love."

Col. Mattson's longing to once more visit his native place became a reality in 1892. One day in May of that year he came to Önnestad. He visited the old manse, where he asked to see the old parish register. He looked up his own birth date in the baptismal book and there he added a footnote—"Önnestad 23 May 1892. A greeting

from the New World and many thanks for the memories of the Old World—Hans Mattson.”

Scarcely a year later—5 March 1893—Hans Mattson died in Minneapolis, not having reached his 61st year. He was buried in Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis, honored and beloved by his family, his Swedish American compatriots and the people of his adopted state.

This is the story of the simple farm lad from Önnestad who became an outstanding and important Swedish American.

His memory lives on not only in Minnesota but also in Sweden. One of the persons who has meant much for this day and for the preservation of Hans Mattson's accomplishments in America is Prof. Wesley Matson of Minneapolis who was instrumental in the creation of the Mattson Settlement Day in Vasa, Minnesota on 9 July this year, at which time a monument was unveiled in Vasa to mark the place where Hans Mattson's simple emigrant cabin once stood.

¹Actually he received his passport in Kristianstad 5 May 1851 under the name of Hans Mattson Kjellgren. — *Svenska flottans pensionskassas verifikationer 1851* (Swedish Passport Lists for 1851), Royal Swedish War Archives, Stockholm.

²The *Ambrosius* landed in Boston 27 June 1851 with a cargo of Swedish iron and 118 passengers, of which 25 were young bachelors, Hans Mattson one of them. The manifest gives his name as Hans Kilgren. So far as we know he never used this surname again. — Nils William Olsson, "The Arrival in Boston June 27 1851 of the Swedish brig *Ambrosius*" in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (now *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*), Vol. XII, No.2, April 1961, pp. 47-57.

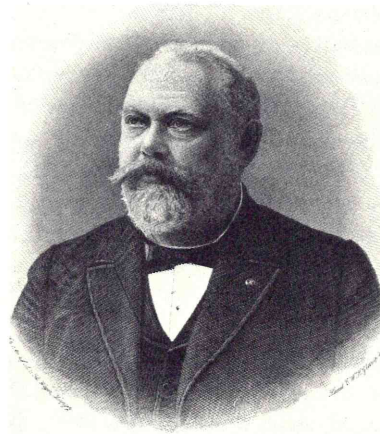
³Sven Johansson Willard was born in Fjälkinge Parish (Krist.) and was married to Hans Mattson's sister Anna. He and his family had arrived in Boston in 1853. — Erik Norelius, *Vasa Illustrata* (Rock Island, IL 1905), p. 193.

⁴Kerstin Persdotter had arrived in America the same year (1855) in company with her parents, Per Nilsson and his wife. — *Ibid.*

⁵Hans Mattson, *Minnen* (Lund 1890); second edition (Lund 1891); in English translation *Reminiscences* (St. Paul, MN 1891).

⁶Lars Ljungmark, *For Sale - Minnesota* (Chicago 1971).

⁷Hans Mattson, *250th Anniversary of the First Swedish Settlement in America September 14, 1888* (Minneapolis 1889).



Hans Mattson