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A Swedish-American Drama

Ann Johnson Barton*

The story of Swedish migration is a drama rooted in economics on both sides of the Atlantic. Cheap, plentiful, and fertile land was begging to be settled on this side of the ocean; whereas in Sweden three consecutive droughts in the late 1860s made it nearly impossible for farmers to feed their families on the small, rocky, and hilly farms where the growing season was short. Most of the early immigrants were farmers, reacting both to the frustrating conditions in Sweden and the promise of large, productive fields in this country.

THE CAST

Too numerous to list. All are real people.

ACT I — THE DILEMMA

Scene 1 Time: 1862 Place: Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Congress, now composed entirely of Northerners, is debating for about the twelfth year how to open up the vast unsettled lands of the Midwest and beyond. The cantankerous Southerners are gone, but the image problem persists.

Nebraska, for instance, was known as the Great American Desert. It had few trees for either shade or construction—sod dug from the ground was the only natural building material. Just an occasional river or creek watered its land. There was little to stop a raging prairie fire or a howling blizzard. Summers were long, hot, and obsessively humid; winters were long, cold, and unrelentingly snowy. No air-conditioning or central heating offered comfort in 1862. As for electricity, it came only in the form of lightning. Nebraska was, quite frankly, written off by those venerable senators and representatives as being “uninhabitable.”

And it wasn't just image! There was no transportation to that enormous wasteland. Congress had wanted to connect the country's two coasts by rail, but was unable to justify the expense. Could it possibly be, mused those legislators

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from northern states, that the railroads would take some of that useless land as compensation for laying the rails? If the railroads were able to sell that land to prospective settlers, two goals could be accomplished. And they were.

Two legislative acts passed within six weeks of one another would permanently change the face of the American Midwest. The land would be settled and the United States would catapult to the role of major player on the world agricultural markets.

The Homestead Act

Passed on 20 May 1862, the Homestead Act gave 160 acres of public land to any person who was both head of a household (or at least 21 years of age) and was a U.S. citizen (or had filed for naturalization). A fee of \$14 was imposed when a Nebraska settler applied for homestead land and an additional \$4 was collected when he fulfilled all the Homestead Act conditions. This was free land, for the token payments simply defrayed the administrative costs incurred by the land office. Because convenient access to markets was recognized as a significant advantage, homesteads of only 80 acres could be taken near a railroad grant.

The Homestead Act stipulated that ground be broken within six months. The homesteader was required to build a dwelling and to live in that house, with his family, for at least five years. He was obligated to cultivate the land.

After a minimum of five years, when all conditions of the Act had been met, the homesteader appeared at the local land office in the company of two of his neighbors who would testify to his continuous residence upon, and cultivation of, his land. Once his proof was accepted and the final \$4 paid, the homesteader was issued a U.S. Patent Deed by the general land office in Washington, D.C. A person could apply for homestead land only once in his lifetime. If he couldn't prove his claim on one piece of land, he was not permitted to try on another.

Union Pacific Railway Act

On 1 July 1862 Congress passed the second act pertinent to the immigration story. This act granted to the Union Pacific Railroad every odd-numbered section of land for twenty miles on either side of the proposed track westward from the Missouri River. In exchange for building a roadbed, the Union Pacific was allowed—actually encouraged—to sell this land.

Railroad land was not free. Prices ranged from \$3 to \$5 an acre. A 10 percent down payment was required, but credit was extended up to eleven years. Interest was generally computed at 4 to 6 percent and, for the first three years, a purchaser was allowed to pay interest only. All the Union Pacific contracts were for 40 acres, and many grantees bought two or more contiguous 40-acre plots.

The purchaser could occupy the land immediately after signing the contract, but he didn't receive a warranty deed until full payment had been made, including any outstanding interest and taxes back to the contract date. He had no obligation to either develop the land or to live on it.

Other railroads were granted odd-numbered sections by amendment to the Union Pacific Act. All railroads with public land mounted aggressive advertising campaigns to lure potential buyers to their properties. They were hard-nosed about this, for the sale of their land was the only way to recoup the costs of track construction. In its promotional effort, the Union Pacific set the standards for modern-day advertising. Nebraska suddenly became the "Garden of the West"! With that sweep of the pen, Nebraska's image was reversed.

You might ask why a farmer would want to buy railroad land when homesteads were essentially free. Actually, there were two major groups who were candidates for railroad land.

The first group didn't qualify for homestead sites. My paternal grandfather, Andrew Johnson, was seventeen and single when he bought his first 40 acres of railroad land directly across the road from his homesteading parents in Polk County, Nebraska. He didn't qualify for a homestead under the age/head of household requirement and he didn't want to build a house. Other farmers couldn't claim a homestead because they chose not to become a citizen or hadn't gotten around to filing for naturalization. Still others already had a homestead site and wanted to expand their crop land.

The second group came to Nebraska after the best homestead land had been taken. The Union Pacific didn't complete its track in Nebraska until after 1867 and, consequently, didn't begin to sell its land for five years after homesteads were offered to the public. Prime railroad land became available after the homestead market had stalled. And, of course, the purchaser was assured reasonable proximity to the railroad. But why would a Swede make that expensive ocean passage, leaving a familiar way of life behind, when there was no guarantee that American land and weather would prove economically beneficial on any sort of predictable basis?

Scene 2 Time: 1860s Place: Sweden, particularly southern Sweden

Families were large and farms were small. Division of family land among several sons over the generations resulted in plots too small to provide a sustainable living. Often only the eldest of several sons inherited the family farm, leaving the younger ones to work for others as paid hands. The future, for many, was bleak. But there was opportunity in "Amerika."

Swedes were generally ambitious and possessed a drive to succeed. They were hard-working and honest, and the young people, in particular, had a yen for adventure. They were experienced in moving from place to place, for as farm hands or dairy maids, they spent just a year or so in each assignment. And they were not afraid of snow! Swedes were ideal candidates for the challenge.

Even before 1862, enormous excitement about the New World was created in the motherland by Swedes who had already made the break. They wrote letters back home extolling the abundance and fertility of American farm land as well as the friendliness of the American people. When a letter from the American Midwest arrived in a Swedish rural area, it initiated a social event. The letter was passed around the parish from one household to another accompanied by much chatter and speculation. Some were published in the local newspapers and were widely read. Known in Sweden under the column heading *Amerikabrev* (America letters), these testimonies from their own kin aroused the interest, and dispelled some of the apprehensions, of Swedes who viewed their future as less than economically bright.

The "pull" of free, fertile land and a friendly reception was complemented by the "push" element of the small Swedish farms. With the three-year drought, the "push" gained momentum. The first major wave of Swedish emigration occurred during the years immediately following the crop failures of 1866 to 1868.

Scene 3 Time: Early 1880s Place: Sweden

The 1880s brought two agricultural crises to Sweden. Overpopulation, created mostly by a substantial drop in the death rate, resulted in a surplus of manpower. Farm jobs became harder to find and wages became mercilessly depressed for the landless farm laborers. In addition, Sweden experienced a dramatic loss of share in the agricultural grain market, which drastically affected the country's economy. This was a direct repercussion of the U.S. Homestead Act. The rocky Swedish soil and its small farms could not compete with the ever-enlarging, cost-effective farms of the fertile American Midwest. Sweden actually became an importer of American rye and wheat.

The emigrants of the 1870s had contributed to their motherland's agricultural predicament! And that new crisis provoked a second wave of emigration to the United States. In the 1880s, the economic reasons for Swedes to emigrate were compelling and, by that time, there was considerable confidence in the financial prospects in the New World. Minnesota had recently been opened for homesteading, and many Swedes of this era chose that state as their new home.

ACT II — THE VOYAGE

Scene 1 Time: Late 1860s Place: England

Sensing an opportunity for market expansion, the British steamship lines built new ships expressly for the emigrant trade. The National Line fleet was organized in 1863 and, in the following year, launched the SS *Helvetia* intended exclusively for the emigrant market. The SS *Helvetia* had a single propeller

capable of moving the ship at twelve knots under steam and was also fitted with square sails to take advantage of any wind power the ship encountered on its transatlantic journey.

Other ships of similar construction also serviced the emigrant traffic. So tightly bound was the National Line to its original mission that the company was dissolved after the U.S. financial panic of 1893 brought emigration to a near halt. In April 1894 the SS *Helvetia* was abandoned off Cape Finisterre after her passengers and crew landed safely at Gibraltar.

The transatlantic ships left Liverpool, typically on a Friday, and made one stop in Queenstown (modern-day Cobh), Ireland. To get to Liverpool the Swedes first traveled by train, wagon, or on foot to the port of Göteborg, sailed across the North Sea to Hull in England, and then took a train to Liverpool. Special emigrant ships were built for the North Sea passage.

The SS *Orlando* was constructed in Hull in 1869. It was the largest emigrant ship to date, capable of carrying 900 passengers across the North Sea. A sister ship, the SS *Rollo* was built the following year. The *Rollo* served until 1881, when the SS *Romeo* replaced her.

With their fleets ready for business, the steamship lines relocated their finest agents to the primary Scandinavian ports and placed sub-agents in the smaller towns and even in rural areas. They often publicized their respective passenger lines in cooperation with the American railroads, selling package deals all the way to the inland destination in the United States.

Without leaving his home parish, a Scandinavian could secure information about travel arrangements and actually book passage from a northern European port to the United States. Göteborg was the most popular Swedish port, but Stockholm and Malmö also processed emigrants.

In 1869 the cost of travel from Göteborg to Chicago was 165 *riksdaler* or \$41. Adjusted for inflation, that would be about \$500 today. Most Swedish farmers booked steerage accommodations. Before a Swede could legally leave his country, however, it was necessary to get permission from the church. This free, official document was called an exit permit (*flyttningsbetyg*).

When an entire family contemplated emigration, often a son would come to this country first to make his own assessment on behalf of the family. He would be young, adventurous, and open-minded about prospects in the new land. The family might come in segments, depending upon its finances. Often the wife and daughters would not be called to this country until the man had procured farm land.

Scene 2 Time: 1855 to 1891 Place: New York Harbor

When a foreign ship arrived in New York harbor, its first stop was at Staten Island for medical inspection. Then it docked in either the Hudson or East River. After passing customs on the dock, the passengers were taken by barge to the immigration center at Castle Garden, where they registered with immigration

authorities, changed money, bathed, and ate. Because Castle Garden had no sleeping facilities, the immigrants departed for their American home by barge or train within hours after their arrival in this country.

Castle Garden was originally built as a fort in 1807-09 and served as Fort Clinton in the War of 1812. In 1823 it was converted to an opera house where the famous Swedish singer, Jenny Lind, performed in 1823. It was 600 feet in diameter, the largest auditorium in the world at that time. On 1 August 1855, Castle Garden opened as an immigration center. It would not be until 1 January 1892 that Ellis Island would receive newcomers from foreign lands.

ACT III — THE IMMIGRANT FARMER

Scene 1 Time: 1870s Place: The American Midwest

It took about \$500 in 1870's currency to establish an economically viable homestead—that is, to build a house, barn and corn crib, to bore a well, buy some animals, and plant the first crops. Most Swedes heading for homestead land did not have that kind of money under the mattress. But the new world financially rewarded those who would work hard. In Moline, Illinois, for instance, the John Deere Company favored Scandinavians for employment in its factory. Many of our ancestors took advantage of this opportunity, or similar ones, to earn the capital needed to develop a farm.

What did a Swede bound for Nebraska find when he arrived in that "Garden of the West"? Nebraska was the complete antithesis of Sweden. There were no trees, few lakes, no rocks, no hills, and very little in the way of construction materials. But the land was fertile! And to the Swedish eye, the farms were large—very large. Several of their neighbors spoke their language and shared their culture as well as their work ethic. They helped each other.

Yes, there were grasshopper epidemics in 1874-75, with heart-wrenching crop destruction. Yes, there were historic blizzards and one would rage in 1888 with extraordinary loss of life and property. In the decade of the 1890s, a financial panic would rip the country and a drought would devastate the Nebraska corn crop so essential for both animal feed and stove fuel.

National statistics claim that 25 percent of those who applied for homestead land would give up in despair. The rugged Scandinavians mostly toughed it out. They built churches and cemeteries and planted trees for shade. By and large, their children were successful. Many became prosperous farmers and others were educated for professional careers. Those first years in the new land were arduous, to be sure. But for those who persevered, there was undreamed of reward.

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