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The Dahlmans of Looking Glass, Nebraska

Donna Dahlman Cole*

My father, Carl Gustaf Dahlman, was born in Looking Glass, Nebraska, a place that is no longer printed on the map of Nebraska. My family knew very little of the Dahlmans in Nebraska. I began my genealogical research on the four Swedish families of my grandparents because I wanted my children as well as myself to know more about their ancestors.

Five years ago I found the Dahlmans in the 1880 U.S. Census Records, Walker Precinct, Platte County, Nebraska. In 1998, I visited Platte County and with the help of the Platte Valley Kinseekers, the records in the Platte County Court House, the United Methodist Church of Looking Glass, the Newman Grove Bicentennial Book, local newspaper articles, histories and residents of the area, the Internet, and the Dahlman homestead file records from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, I have tried to picture what life was like in Nebraska in the 1880s. Through this experience I feel that I have actually learned something about this family's life.

Sometime before 6 October 1877,¹ Gustaf Alfred and Mary Martha Anderson Dahlman and their three children—Oscar, age 9; Theresa, age 7; and Myrtle, age 1—arrived in Walker Precinct, Platte County, Nebraska, to try their hand at farming. It must have been a hard decision to leave their house in Jamestown, New York, and to come so far west. Maybe Gustaf Alfred's job in the piano factory was at an end. Gustaf Alfred's granddaughter, Ruth Nevins Erb, recalls her mother Amy telling of the Dahlmans coming West with a wagon train going to California and of their leaving the train and staying in Nebraska. The Dahlmans might have come by railroad instead of wagon train. The transcontinental railroad was completed through Nebraska in 1867, and many settlers came to Nebraska on the Union Pacific with the wife and children riding in the coach section while the husband rode in the baggage car with their possessions and livestock. Most settlers in the early days traveled through Nebraska on their way to Utah, Oregon, and California.

During the territorial days of the late 1850s and early 1860s to years beyond the Civil War, settlers of Nebraska were discouraged by a multitude of troubles and deprivations. The frontier's remoteness, the sicknesses, bad weather, pestilence, crop failure and lack of provisions drove those unwilling to contend

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¹ Final Affidavit Required of Homestead Claimants, U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

back to their beginnings in the East. Only the very hardy stayed, along with folks who had become too poor to go elsewhere.²

There still were herds of buffalo on this part of the prairie. Deer, antelope, and elk were plentiful. William Tecumseh Sherman later estimated over nine and a half million buffalo still existed between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains at this time. There was a wide variety of birds: prairie chickens, bob-white quail, red-tailed hawks, owls, crows, seagulls, pigeons, thrushes, turtledoves, meadowlarks, blackbirds, blue jays, cardinals, cowbirds, woodpeckers, orioles, and finches. Cranes, ducks, and geese followed the flow of the main rivers and their tributary branches. The clear sandy streams provided a water supply and a natural home for beavers, turtles, frogs, snails, crawfish, water striders, dragon flies and varieties of freshwater fish such as carp, sun perch, catfish and suckers.

Coyotes, foxes, raccoons, jackrabbits, opossums, skunks, groundhogs, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, field mice, toads, salamanders and a broad assortment of snakes competed with each other for existence amongst the prairie grasses, buck brush and woodlands. Settlers contended with pesky mosquitoes, gluttonous grasshoppers, stinging wasps, bumblebees and hornets, singing cicadas, annoying June bugs, crickets, horseflies and fruit flies. The settlers saw the honeybee as the only insect that wasn't a pest.

Nebraska was leveled long ago by ancient glaciers, and in the 1800s Nebraska soil was found to be very fertile for raising crops, even though the productive soil in some localities included a measure of clay commonly referred to as "gumbo." An excess of stones occasionally obstructed the plow in places; however, various locations bountifully provided quarried limestone and sandstone to satisfy building needs. As the pioneers watched their crops grow through the warm season, they were beset by weeds that ranged from a growth of sunflowers, cockleburs, burdock, to poison oak, poison ivy and nettles. The water table near the streams encouraged the denser concentration of trees, such as willow, cottonwood, oak, elm, maple, cedar, hickory, walnut, mulberry, and plum, along with sumac and cattails. Settlers planted orchards of fruit trees and grapevines, and years later they lined out barriers of hedge trees as boundary markers and windbreaks. Growing wild were gooseberry bushes, strawberry plants, and the vines of blackberries, raspberries and grapes.

Nebraska's variable climate could suddenly produce any selection of unforeseen natural disasters, such as an insect plague, blizzard, flood, damaging hailstorm, tornado, lightning strike, high winds, drought, or prairie fire. Every year, however, the settlers knowingly came to expect being baked in the stifling summertime heat of July and August, and frozen with the icy bite of deep winter's frigid chill.

² From an article written by Dick Taylor about early times in Nebraska that was found online at <www.ukans.edu/~kansite/hvn/articles/settlers.htm>.

On 4 January 1883, at 2:45 p.m., Alfred Dahlman went to the Homestead Receiver's Office in Grand Rapids, Nebraska, and filed a claim for the North West fourth of Section 11 in Township 19, North of Range 4, West of the 6th Principal Meridian, containing 160 acres. He paid a \$4.00 filing fee.

An interesting transaction in the records in the Platte County Courthouse shows Gustaf Alfred immediately sold the homestead land to Benjamin Hanson for the sum of \$1100. At 2:55 p.m. on 5 May 1883, Benjamin Hanson sold the same land (a quick claim) back to the Dahlmans for the same \$1100 with the only change in the ownership papers being that now the land was registered in the name of Mary Martha Dahlman as the primary owner. (Benjamin Hanson is listed as a boarder staying with the Dahlmans on the 1880 U.S. Census.) Mary Martha's sister Augusta also had title to all of her husband's lands in Cottage, Cattaragus County, New York, at this time. On 5 October 1883 the claim was recorded in the United States Land Office.

The Homestead Act was passed in 1862, giving a quarter section (160 acres) free to every head of a family who improved the tract upon which he filed. The homesteader was required to live on the land for five years. Much of the land had been claimed by the railroads for development of the railway lines and land agents were selling the railroad land for two, three and four dollars an acre to the homesteaders. Only the head of a family could file a homestead claim; so Gustaf Alfred applied for the Dahlman homestead claim.

The first home for many families in Looking Glass was a dugout or a soddy. A dugout was dug into the side of a hill, usually facing south with a couple of openings for the windows and a door. Then later a more substantial sod house was built. Ruth Nevins Erb tells of the Dahlmans living in a sod hut on their farm in Looking Glass.

Nebraska land was native grassland and the sod had to be broken or plowed by oxen or horses. Most wells were dug between one and two hundred feet. Farmers generally had a cow, a few hogs, chickens, and a dog and cat. They planted corn, wheat, oats, barley and rye and had a garden with potatoes and vegetables.

Between 1870 and 1900 the farmers tried to bring more and more land under cultivation. They had brought with them the ways of farming that they had known from Illinois, Wisconsin and Ohio, which were adapted to the rainy regions of the East. In Nebraska the varieties of spring wheat and oats burned and rusted. The varieties of corn usually needed a longer growing season. Sometimes grasshoppers came and destroyed the wheat just as it was heading. In 1886 there were few binders to cut and swath the small grains. Grain drills were invented. Some farmers were able to use threshing machines powered by steam engines to thresh the grain. With the coming of the railroad to Newman Grove, Fremont, Elkhorn Valley, and Missouri in 1887, the farmers were able to ship their grain and livestock to market by rail.³

³ *Newman Grove Centennial Book, 1888-1988*, Walsworth Publishing Company, Marceline, MO.

The pioneers who settled in the Looking Glass Valley of Walker Precinct were Swedish immigrants who came directly from Sweden or via the eastern United States. The new community was named Looking Glass after the creek by the same name that runs through this area. The creek was spring fed and so clear that native Americans could see their images in the water and called it Looking Glass.

The new residents started holding church services in homes and a schoolhouse (probably both sod buildings) as early as 1872.⁴ Meetings were held every other Sunday with visiting circuit riders conducting the services. In January 1877 a resident pastor was provided for both Looking Glass and West Hill (located 11 miles southeast along the Looking Glass Valley.) The Swedish Methodist congregation at Looking Glass signed a contract with their first pastor in the fall of 1877 for \$200 a year. The West Hills congregation also paid the pastor. Both congregations had separate church services each Sunday.

The Looking Glass Post Office was established in the winter of 1873 in the home of Bengt Olson and later in the Nils Olson home. Nils Olson was named postmaster five months later, a position he held for the thirty years it was open. This house is now owned by Clifford and Dorothy Olson and is across the road and south of the Looking Glass United Methodist Church. Clifford Olson is the grandson of A. P. Frederickson, the man to whom Mary Martha and Gustaf Alfred Dahlman eventually sold their farm.

Marvin and Lucille Stone recall the Looking Glass community as having four legs: Rosenborg store, the Danish Lutheran Church, School Districts 40 and 63, and the Looking Glass Swedish Methodist Church.⁵ The only sign of the Looking Glass community that remains today is the Looking Glass United Methodist Church. The Stones also remember that nearly every quarter section of land had a farm on it.

The first Looking Glass church building was built in 1881 and was used for approximately twenty years. It had a long hall built on the south end of the church building with doors at both ends. The pulpit was in the north end of the church with two heating stoves in the back. There was a short bench between them for the "keeper of the flames" to sit on, feed the stoves with wood, and keep the congregation as warm as possible.

Just as was their custom in Sweden, the men sat on the right side of the church and the women and children sat on the left. In 1907 the old church was torn down and much of the lumber was used on the new building. The new church was called the Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church.

Norma Larson recounts the following story about the celebration of *Julotta* when she was young.⁶ "You mean you go to church at six o'clock in the morning on Christmas?" More than one minister or "non Swede" has voiced

⁴ *Looking Glass United Methodist Church 125th Anniversary Book, 1872-1997.*

⁵ *Looking Glass United Methodist Church 125th Anniversary Book, 1872-1997.*

⁶ *Looking Glass United Methodist Church 125th Anniversary Book, 1872-1997.*

such sentiment. And many more have thought it. *Jul* stands for Christmas and *otta* roughly means “to be up in the early morning.” It has been a tradition in predominantly Swedish churches, although there are probably few churches in the U.S. that still observe this tradition.

Norma also tells of a person born in the 1800s who remembered as a young person hearing the sleigh bells penetrating the Christmas pre-dawn cold crisp air. The bells were fastened to the horses’ harnesses for the season. Church members who arrived early could hear from all directions people approaching in the intense dark, before light, getting closer and closer. I like to imagine that this was a tradition for the Dahlmans as well.

The Dahlmans were fortunate in that the school their children would attend, School District 40, as well as their church, was near their quarter section of land. The schoolhouse was called the Looking Glass School and started in a sod house on the present Myron Borg farm in 1874. Later a frame school building was moved to the present site nine miles southeast of Newman Grove. In 1998 the District 40 Schoolhouse was no longer open for classes.

On 22 October 1884 Martin “Robert” Dahlman was born. Robert’s brother Earl was born 20 October 1886 and died 11 February 1887. The Dahlman family increased with the birth of Laura Elfrida on 28 May 1888, Carl Gustaf, my father, on 2 September 1890, and Betsy Jeannette Amybelle, “Amy,” on 25 April 1893. The five youngest children were all born in Looking Glass.

Gustaf Alfred and Mary Martha took out mortgages to pay for their land improvements and crops. They borrowed \$500 on 14 December 1883 from Caleb W. Day. On 1 October 1885 they received a loan of \$300 from Gus G. Becher. On 30 October 1891 they received a mortgage from the Farmland, Mortgage & Debenture Co. for \$600. All mortgages and loans used their homestead 160 acres as collateral.⁷

The Dahlmans finished repaying Gus G. Becher on 25 October 1888 and repaid Caleb W. Day on 5 November 1888. The Farmland Mortgage & Debenture Co. was repaid on 1 November 1899. Note that this debt was not repaid until after the Dahlmans had moved back to the state of New York.

One Dahlman mortgage stated that the payment was due 1 October 1896. With six months written notice it could be paid on 1 October 1894. The interest on this debt was 8%. The interest on the first mortgage (\$500 from Caleb W. Day) was for 10%.

The Homestead Proof signed by Gustaf Alfred Dahlman and attested to by Ben Hanson and Nils Olson in 1882 stated that Gustaf Alfred had met the homestead requirements and had 70 acres under cultivation.⁸ It also stated that prior to 6 October 1877, improvements on the land consisted of one sod house, a stable, a frame granary and chicken house, a well of water, a pig pen and a forest of 9,000 trees.

⁷ Platte County Records.

⁸ Final Affidavit Required of Homestead Claimants, U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

In Sweden and in Jamestown, New York, where Gustaf Alfred settled upon arriving from Sweden, farmers had areas of their land set aside as timberland. It would seem that Gustaf Alfred tried to create his own forest on the plains of Nebraska. In 1998 when I visited the Dahlman homestead area, all one hundred and sixty acres were under cultivation. I would have liked to have seen Gustaf Alfred's forest.

G. A. Dohlman [*sic*], Looking Glass, is listed in The 1890 Nebraska State Gazetteer Farmer List for Platte County, Walker Precinct. There are two other Dohlmans [*sic*] listed—Joseph and Nick of St. Bernard, the precinct directly to the east of Walker. Not only was Gustaf Alfred's name misspelled, but Joseph and Nick's names were misspelled as well. Immigrants from Germany settled St. Bernard's Precinct. Joseph and Nick *Dohman* resided there and Gustaf Alfred *Dahlman* resided in Walker Precinct with the rest of the Swedish immigrants.

People started building frame houses about 1890 after having lived for several years in sod houses or dugouts. The lumber for a frame house had to be hauled from about 35 miles away. After a few homes were built, churches, schools and post offices with a general store were built. Rosenborg was the general store in the Looking Glass area. Each community spoke its native language until the children attended public school where English was taught and spoken.

The blizzard of 1888 is remembered as the most famous in Great Plains history, stretching from the Rocky Mountains eastward to the Mississippi River and from Canada all the way down to Texas. When that storm hit Nebraska, Mary Martha was pregnant with Laura Elfrida and was probably still grieving over the death of Earl the summer before. The early hours of 12 January were unseasonably warm. Cattle were out in the fields and school children played outside during noon recess without coats. Then the wind suddenly turned to the north driving before it a great mass of thick, blinding snow. It became very dark and men and animals alike were trapped in a freezing wasteland as the temperatures plummeted to 34 degrees below zero. It lasted from 12 to 18 hours over most of the area.

Dick Taylor's article, "The Big Brash Blizzard of 1888," maintains that modern chroniclers, while ignoring the U.S. heartland, seem to prefer to refer to a blizzard in New York and Pennsylvania only as the "Blizzard of 1888."⁹ But that snowstorm was significantly smaller when compared to 1888's earlier blast striking right down the country's mid-section. A more precise contemporary description from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1893, only five years after the event, provides no mention at all of the East:

In one [blizzard] which visited Dakota and the states of Montana, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas and Texas in January 1888, the mercury fell

⁹ From Dick Taylor article on the World Wide Web (see Web site address in footnote 2).

within twenty-four hours from 74 degrees above zero to 28 degrees below it in some places, and in Dakota went down to 40 degrees below zero. In fine clear weather, with little or no warning, the sky darkened and the air was filled with snow, or ice-dust, as fine as flour, driven before a wind so furious and roaring that men's voices were inaudible at a distance of six feet. Men in the fields and children on their way from school died before they could reach shelter; some of them having been not frozen, but suffocated from the impossibility of breathing the blizzard. Some 235 persons lost their lives. This was the worst storm since 1864. The Colorado River in Texas was frozen with ice a foot thick, for the first time in the memory of man.

Hard times began to develop in 1892, followed by a great financial panic of 1893, and a statewide crop failure in 1894 caused by drought and high winds. Succeeding years brought good crops, but the livestock had been taken from the county and corn was worth only 9 to 11 cents a bushel.

Gustaf Alfred and Mary Martha may have escaped the severity of this panic and crop failure as they sold their land to Andrew P. Fredrickson on 27 October 1893 for \$5200. On the following Deed Record, this final sale was subject to the repayment of the mortgage of \$600 to Farmland Mortgage & Debenture Co.

Ruth Nevins Erb recalls her mother saying that Mary Martha left the sod house with her youngest children, who were very ill, and went back to New York. We know that the Dahlman family was in Cottage, Cattaraugus County, New York, the place where Mary Martha's sister Augusta lived before 1900. It is likely that Mary Martha went directly to Cottage from Looking Glass.

Perhaps all of the family illnesses and the Nebraska life had just gotten too hard. Gustaf Alfred and the older children left Nebraska at a later time and reunited with the family in New York. By the 1900 U.S. Census, the Dahlman family was living on their own farm in Silver Creek, Chautauqua County, New York.

All of the children of Samuel Petter Dahlman and Maja Greta Anderson Ekman were born in Sweden in the Göteborg/Trollhättan area (see Appendix: Descendants of Samuel Petter Dahlman).

Carl Leonard and Martin Conrad remained in Sweden. The others signed out of their Swedish parishes to come to America as follows: 4 October 1864, Axel Mauritz; 2 April 1867, Gustaf Alfred (my grandfather); 7 April 1867, Charlotta Justina; 8 April 1868, Frans Theodor, wife and two children; and 8 September 1875, widower Samuel Petter and Josephina Nathalia.

I have researched the American families of Gustaf Alfred, Frans Theodor, and Charlotta Justina, who all came to Jamestown, Chautauqua County, New York. The father, Samuel Petter, also came to Jamestown and lived there until his death in 1876. I have not found an American presence for Axel Mauritz and Josephina Nathalia.

Appendix.
Descendants of Samuel Petter Dahlman

Tab. 1

Samuel Petter Dahlman, b. Göteborg's Marieberg Parish (Vägö.) 15 Aug. 1806; d. Jamestown, NY 8 Dec. 1876. Married Maja Greta Andersdotter Ekman, b. Högås Parish (Bohu.) 15 Jan. 1804; d. Göteborg's Kristine Parish (Vägö.) 7 Feb. 1875. Children:

1. **Frans Theodor** (1831-1888), see Tab. 2.
2. **Axel Mauritz**, b. Vänersborg Parish (Vägö.) 9 May 1834.
3. **Carl Leonard** (1836-1920), see Tab. 3.
4. **Maria Charlotta**, b. Vänersborg 7 March 1839; d. Vänersborg 14 Nov. 1840.
5. **Martin Conrad**, (1841/42-1890), see Tab. 4.
6. **infant son**, b. Vänersborg 21 Feb. 1841; d. Vänersborg 21 Feb. 1841.
7. **Gustaf Alfred** (1843-1917), see Tab. 5.
8. **Charlotta Justina** (1845-?), see Tab. 6.
9. **Josefina Nathalia**, b. Gärdhem Parish (Vägö.) 23 Dec. 1847.
10. **Johan Leonard**, b. Västerlanda Parish (Bohu.) 17 Nov. 1850; d. Sweden 25 Feb. 1854.
11. **Evelina Mathilda**, b. Sweden 10 Oct. 1852; d. Sweden 1 Sept. 1855.

Tab. 2

Frans Theodor Dahlman, b. Vänersborg 1 Oct. 1831; d. Jamestown, NY 26 Aug. 1888. Married **Marianna Charlotta Wetterström**, b. Göteborg 1831; d. Jamestown, NY 1909. Children:

1. **Agnes Gothilda**, b. Göteborg 15 Feb. 1865; d. Jamestown, NY 1919.
2. **Gothilda Charlotta**, b. Göteborg 1867; d. Jamestown, NY 1868.

Tab. 3

Carl Leonard Dahlman, b. Vänersborg 10 Sept. 1836; d. Jamestown, NY 25 Aug. 1920. Married **Mathilda Olofsdotter**, b. Uddevalla Parish (Bohu.) 1 Dec. 1833; d. Göteborg 29 March 1908. Children:

1. **Carl Robert**, b. Göteborg 13 March 1865; d. Göteborg's Kristine 20 April 1865.

2. **Elvira Mathilda**, b. Göteborg 18 Sept. 1866; d. Kungälv Parish (Bohu.) 24 June 1945.
3. **Christina Charlotta**, b. Göteborg's Kristine 4 Aug. 1869; d. Göteborg 29 Aug. 1941.
4. **Axel Mauritz**, b. Göteborg's Kristine 27 Aug. 1872; d. Göteborg 27 July 1952.
5. **Carl Robert**, b. Göteborg 24 Sept. 1877; d. 26 Sept. 1877.

Tab. 4

Martin Conrad Dahlman, b. Vänersborg 23 Oct. 1841/42; d. Göteborg 26 Feb. 1890. Married (1st) **Anna Sophia Asp**, b. Gudhem Parish (Vägö.) 24 Oct. 1848; d. Göteborg 9 Sept. 1877. Married (2nd) **Carolina Carlsdotter**, b. Herrestad Parish (Bohu.) 8 Oct. 1855; d. 1903.

Children (1st marriage):

1. **Charles Robert**, b. Göteborg 27 March 1875; d. Göteborg 26 Sept. 1878.
2. **Son Dahlman**, b. Göteborg 5 Feb. 1877; d. Göteborg 1877.

Children (2nd marriage):

1. **Hildur Victoria**, b. Göteborg 6 June 1885; d. Göteborg 3 Feb. 1948.
2. **Maria Sabina**, b. 27 Oct. 1893; d. Göteborg 2 March 1954.

Tab. 5

Gustaf Alfred Dahlman, b. Vänersborg 10 Sept. 1843; d. Silver Creek, NY 25 April 1917. Married **Mary Martha Anderson**, b. New York 25 Dec. 1852; d. Silver Creek, NY 16 Aug. 1916. Children:

1. **Theresa Amelia**, b. United States 22 Dec. 1870; d. Silver Creek, NY 4 Nov. 1940.
2. **Oscar Julius**, b. New York 30 Nov. 1872; d. 25 Sept. 1928.
3. **Myrtle M.**, b. Looking Glass, NE 26 Oct. 1878; d. New York 27 Aug. 1905.
4. **Martin Robert**, b. Looking Glass, NE 22 Oct. 1884; d. Franklin, PA 20 May 1955.
5. **Earl**, b. Looking Glass, NE 20 Oct. 1886; d. Looking Glass, NE 14 July 1887.
6. **Laura Elfrida**, b. Looking Glass, NE 26 May 1888; d. New York 11 Feb. 1907.
7. **Carl Gustaf**, b. Looking Glass, NE 2 Sept. 1890; d. Sacramento, CA 7 June 1972.

8. **Betsy Jeannette Amybelle**, b. Looking Glass, NE 25 April 1893; d. Ft. Pierce, FL 8 Jan. 1965.

Tab. 6

Charlotta Justina Dahlman, b. Trollhättan Parish (Vägö.) 2 Sept. 1845; d. Jamestown, NY. Married **Albert Ludvic Lundin**, b. Stockholm 2 Oct. 1844; d. Smethport, PA 26 Oct. 1880. Children:

1. **Archie Sam**, b. 1873.
2. **Hilda**, b. 1877.
3. **William**, b. 1879.