

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 13 | Number 4

Article 4

12-1-1993

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

(1993) "Book Reviews," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 13 : No. 4 , Article 4.

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Book Reviews

History of the Swedes Who Settled in Clay County, South Dakota and Their Biographies by August Peterson. 1988 Reprint of the original 1947 Edition. vii + 383 pp. Cloth. \$19.00 + \$2.50 postage and handling. Discount with orders of 3 or more books (\$15.00/book + p. and h.); 6 or more books (\$10.00/book + p. and h.). Order from Ronald A. Johnson, Box 69, Route 1, Centerville, SD 57014.

By the author's own admission, what began in 1930 as an interest in his own ancestry burgeoned into an interest in the writing of historical biographies of neighbors and friends for local newspapers. Peterson eventually assembled his biographical sketches and published them in 1947 as *History of the Swedes Who Settled in Clay County, South Dakota and Their Biographies*. Clay County, for those of you who are unfamiliar with the geography of the upper Midwest, is located in the southeastern corner of South Dakota along the Iowa border, approximately equidistant from Sioux Falls, SD and Sioux City, IA. The author concentrates on those Swedish immigrants who were among the original homesteaders in Clay County which, at the time, was part of the Dakota Territory. In particular, he profiles "persons and their immediate families who first filed and actually obtained patents on their claims or both..." (p. 1).

Swedes Who Settled in Clay County has an enigmatic and potentially confusing organization, a condition that is further aggravated by the lack of a table of contents. Aside from a very brief foreword and introduction (pp. 1-6), the book is divided into two parts. Roughly eighty-five percent of the book (pp. 6-334) is devoted to "Biographies and Histories of the Swedes who First Settled in Clay County, Dakota Territory, in 1868 and Onward." Included in this section are sketches of 223 original pioneer Swedes and their families who arrived between 1868 and the mid-1870s. An index of these pioneers, arranged more-or-less alphabetically by surname, is found on pp. iii-vii under the heading "List of Biographies." A second, smaller section (pp. 336-383) entitled "Appendix or Supplement" contains biographical sketches of 30 families who settled in Clay County from the mid-1870s into the 1910s. An alphabetical index of these later arrivals appears on p. 336. The biographies included in *Swedes Who Settled in Clay County* vary in length from one-fourth of a page to six pages and, not surprisingly, tend to be uneven in scope. In general, however, they are replete with the requisite names, dates, places, and familial relationships.

The value of this book to the family historian probably lies as much in the folksy, almost gossipy, material accompanying many of the author's sketches as in the vital statistics, which one would expect to find included in this type of work. The following examples should serve to convey the richness of this wonderful, anecdotal material: (1) Greta Stina Jacobsdotter died in a prairie fire in the fall of 1870, the first such victim in the Swedish settlement (p. 298); (2) Nils "Five-Drops" Anderson was "a widely known salesman for a medicine that claimed to cure almost everything by taking

a dose of 5 drops" (p. 18); (3) John Peterson Eklund was not only the first midwife of the community but also "one of the finest men that ever lived in the settlement" and "one of the most honest and sincere gentlemen ever known" (pp. 80, 78); (4) Charles "Hog-Charley" Erickson, a bachelor who disliked children and became noted for his large hog farm, was "frugal and nigh a miser" and he "lived a tedious, penurious life..." (pp. 93-4); (5) Charles Isackson developed a reputation for going barefoot while doing his farm work and while walking to church (p. 164); (6) About thirty people who became members of the Dalesburg Baptist Church were baptized in February 1877, after a hole was cut in the ice of a creek (thereafter known as Baptist Creek) near the "dugout" of Lars Augustus Swedberg (p. 190); (7) The dugout built by Anders "Pol-Anders" Olson and his wife was "lined with home-woven linen and this caught fire and everything in it was consumed" (p. 244); (8) Carl Johan Polsson, who is alleged to have taken a pair of shoes from a store in Vermillion was subsequently saddled with the moniker "Shoe-Polsson" (p. 282); (9) Oleana Olson came to the United States in 1853 aboard a sailing vessel loaded with steel bars. During the voyage, a storm "tossed the ship so the steel rails wore a hole in the freighter, and [she] was the first to notice it, and stopped the leak while the captain and crew were notified, or the ship would have gone down" (pp. 321-322); and (10) On 7 October 1881, Katharine Norin Wahlberg, the wife of John Wahlberg, sued for divorce, an action that "stirred the people of the community...because it appears to have been the first divorce action among the Swedes...and it involved the most prominent people in the Lutheran church..." (p. 325).

A cursory analysis of the contents of this book (with reference to only the 253 Swedish pioneers highlighted in the biographies, not their spouses or children) revealed a great deal about its potential utility to family historians with specific research interests. No less that 123 different surnames are found among this group of pioneers and sixty-eight different parishes are listed as their birthplaces. The counties (*län*) with the largest number of these birth parishes include Kopparberg and Gävleborg with 9 parishes each; Östergötland with 7; Jämtland, Jönköping and Kristianstad with 4; and Halland, Kalmar and Malmöhus with 3. Interestingly, eighty-two (32.4%) of the pioneers were born in just four parishes. From three of these parishes in eastern Kopparberg *län*—Svärdsjö, Rättvik and Gagnef—came 27, 16 and 16 Clay County pioneers, respectively. An additional 23 Clay County pioneers were born in Gnarp parish in Gävleborg *län*. (In actuality, forty individuals emigrated from Gnarp Parish in June 1868. Their destinations included three cities in Iowa—Madrid, also known as Swede Point, Des Moines and Council Bluffs—as well as Clay County, SD. — pp. 121-122).

The two notable weaknesses of *Swedes Who Settled in Clay County*—lack of documentation and lack of an index—seem to be inherent in works of this vintage and genre (see my recent review of *Swedish Omaha—Past and Present* in *SAG*, 12(1992):154-155. These glaring omissions serve to detract from and/or severely restrict the usefulness of this book as a reference for the family historian. For example, I encountered the names of Lindsborg (KS), Omaha (NE) and Madrid [Swede Point] (IA) during my perusal of this book. How often and on what pages were they listed? Under what circumstances and with which individuals were these cities mentioned?

Unfortunately, information such as this must be painstakingly gleaned from the book by the reader. It goes without saying that the prudent researcher will also be required to double-check the veracity of any and all names, dates, places, etc. against original vital records.

In spite of these two obvious and regrettable systemic problems, *Swedes Who Settled in Clay County* fills a necessary and important niche in the discipline and should be part of any serious researcher's library. For many, it could prove to be a veritable gold mine of information. The Dalesburg Scandinavian Association (*Dalsborgs Skandinaviska Förening*) of Vermillion, SD, an associate of The American Swedish Institute of Minneapolis and the Swedish Council of America, is to be commended for sponsoring the reprinting of this valuable work.

James E. Erickson
Edina, MN

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