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Edward James Nelander
1855-1915

Paul G. Hayes†

By the time the wave of Swedish immigration crested in the 1890s, forty years after it began, Swedes had spread out from the communities that served as staging areas in the Midwest to both coasts, in some instances following by only a few years the very frontier as it moved westward through the Great Plains. Not far behind these early settlers came their religious and educational institutions, centered largely in the Augustana Synod of the Lutheran Church, which had its birth and headquarters in northwestern Illinois. On call were young graduates from Augustana College, ordained ministers and scholars, eager to take positions as pastors and educators in the pioneer Swedish-American communities, giving them cultural shape and substance that remain intact more than a century later.

The story is embodied in a small way in the life of the Rev. Edward James Nelander, educator, pastor, author, and first president of Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. Nelander was born Edward James Nilson in Knoxville, Illinois, 16 September 1855, the first child of Ola C. and Christina Nilson.†

Ola C. Nilsson (which became Nilson or Nelson in the U.S.) was born in Västra Vram Parish (Krist.) 13 March 1824. He had emigrated from Stoby Parish (Krist.) to the U.S. in 1853 with his first wife, Johanna (Anna) Pehrsson, who was born in Linderöd Parish (Krist.) 7 September 1813. They settled in a growing but impoverished Swedish immigrant neighborhood along a creek on the east side of Knoxville, where sanitation was lacking. Cholera broke out the next summer and Johanna, then forty years old, was among forty Swedes to die in the epidemic. On 22 December 1854, Ola C. Nilson married eighteen-year-old Christina Svensdotter, who was born in Vankiva Parish (Krist.) 28 April 1836 and had emigrated from Ignaberga Parish (Krist.) in 1854. The

† Paul G. Hayes, a free lance writer and retired science and environment writer for the Milwaukee Journal, resides at N63 W5795 Columbia Road, Cedarburg, WI 53012. Edward J. Nelander was his great, great uncle.

† The author wishes to express his sincere gratitude to Jill Seabold, head of genealogical services at the Svensson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, and her student assistant, Jessica Werners, for their assistance in securing the Swedish-American church records cited hereinafter.

Nilsons eventually produced the following children (all born in Knoxville): Edward, b. 16 September 1855; Pernilla, b. 18 March 1857; Nils Samuel, b. 23 February 1859; Fredric, b. 26 December 1862; and Henry Oscar Ignatius, b. 2 November 1870.2

The cholera epidemic intensified the already strong religious feelings among the Swedes in the Knoxville-Galesburg area, where Rev. Tuve N. Hasselquist, who had come to the U.S. from Skåne in 1852, was busy organizing the pioneer parishes that were to become the heart of the Augustana Synod of the Lutheran Church.3 The Nilsons were active members of Grace Lutheran Church in Knoxville, which Hasselquist had organized in 1853 and continued to serve through 1863.4 Christina Nilson was said to be especially committed to her faith, and she may have greatly influenced her oldest son in this regard.

Edward Nilson was said to be of slight stature, and photographs taken at various times during his adult life bear this out.5 It may have been his mother’s recognition of his delicate construction, as well as his quick mind, that opened the way for Edward’s extensive education. Most of the other Swedish men in Knox County at the time were working as day laborers or farm hands. It is likely that young Edward attended local Knoxville schools through the primary grades. In 1871, at the age of sixteen, he was enrolled in Knox Academy (then the equivalent of a high school and now Knox College) in nearby Galesburg, Illinois. He completed three years at the academy and graduated in 1874.6

The next years were to bring immense change to the Nilson family. On 19 August 1875 the second child and only daughter, Pernilla (Nellie), married Hokey Holcomb (born Häkan Håkansson in Jämsö parish [Blek.] 14 February 1851), who had been brought to the U.S as a toddler in 1852.7 In the spring of 1876, Ola Nilson led his family, including his daughter and new son-in-law, and a number of other Swedish families from Knoxville, Illinois, and Swedesburg, Iowa, to Kearney County, Nebraska, where they took 160-acre homesteads near what was to become the community of Axtell.8

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2 Membership Book No. 1, 14; Membership Book No. 2, 8; and Alphabetical Membership Book, 65. grace Lutheran Church, Knoxville, IL (microfilm reel 114).
4 Ola C. and Christina Nilson joined the church in 1854. - Membership Books No. 1, 14 and No. 2, 8; Alphabetical Membership Book, 65. - Grace Lutheran Church, Knoxville, IL (microfilm reel 114).
7 Membership Book, 9, Bethany Lutheran Church, Axtell, NE (microfilm reel S-371).
8 Church records state that the Nilson family left for (arrived in) Nebraska in 1875. - Membership Book No. 2, 8, Grace Lutheran Church, Knoxville, IL (microfilm reel 114); Membership Book, 9, Bethany Lutheran Church, Axtell, NE (microfilm reel S-371).
The first year on the treeless plains was horrid. The settlers lived in dugouts or sod houses, which they had dug or constructed, but only after planting the first season’s crops. Clouds of grasshoppers began to arrive on 6 August 1876, and when they dissipated on 24 August, all of the crops were stripped of grain and leaves. On 4 September, as fall approached, thirty-six Swedes gathered in Ola Nilson’s home, where, with the help of the Rev. A. G. Setterdahl from Moline, Illinois, the Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized.⁹ It was the first church of any denomination in Kearney County.¹⁰ Ola C. Nilson was one of three original trustees and his son, Edward Nilson, was elected recording secretary.

That winter was bitterly cold and the women and children were forced to pull cornstalks up through the snow to be burned as fuel for cooking. Young Edward Nilson was to spend part of only one winter in Axtell. In January of 1877 he enrolled at Augusta College in Rock Island, Illinois, one of twenty-six freshmen that year. As a theology student in a small college, Nilson certainly would have come into frequent contact with the Rev. Olof Olsson, who had left his parish at Bethany Lutheran Church in Lindsborg, Kansas, the year before to become professor of theology at Augustana. In the environment of a small college, Nilson also would have encountered Carl Aaron Swenson, an upperclassman at Augustana, who, at the urging of Olsson, was to leave for Lindsborg after graduating in 1879 to succeed Olsson as pastor of Bethany.

By 1880 Edward Nilson had changed his name to Edward Nelder, and so he was listed in a class of fourteen juniors.¹¹ Changing names—in this case shedding the patronymic “Nilson” and assuming the surname “Nelder,” meaning “person of the new land”—was a widespread practice among Swedish immigrants. Some Swedes took the names of prominent Americans of their time. This may explain why the Grants and Lincolns of McPherson County, Kansas, in the 1870s, were Swedes. Nelder was graduated with a class of nine seniors in 1881.

On 6 January 1882, perhaps in Omaha, Nebraska, Nelder married Anna Elizabeth Larson, the daughter of the Rev. and Mrs. S. G. Larsson.¹² Seven children would be born as a result of this marriage, including six sons and a daughter.¹³ The stay in Omaha, where Nelder taught at the high school level, was brief. By the autumn of 1882, Nelder and his wife moved to Lindsborg,

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⁹ Membership Book, 9, Bethany Lutheran Church, Axtell, NE (microfilm reel S-371).
¹⁰ Roy C. Bang, Heroes Without Medals, A Pioneer History of Kearney County, Nebraska (Minden, NE, 1952), 183.
¹¹ Lucile G. Fryxell, director of records, Augustana College, letter to author, 10 November 1966.
¹² Marriage date listed in the Church Register, 12, Angelica Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA (microfilm reel S-640).
Kansas, where Nelander became one of a faculty of four at Bethany Academy, which had been founded the previous year by Carl A. Swensson. Nelander taught mathematics and natural sciences in his first year.

It should be said that, while Nelander became the first president of the college, the driving personality behind first its founding and then its rapid growth was Swensson’s. Their personal relationship had the cordiality of close friends and confidants. Their professional relationship seemed to be an unspoken agreement that Nelander would take on much of the day-to-day administrative work to free Swensson to undertake the long-range thinking and planning necessary to keep the fledgling institution flourishing. The casual process by which Nelander assumed the presidency of Bethany from 1882 through 1889 was described by J. A. Udden, fellow faculty member:

After two months had elapsed, something happened that required attention. I don’t remember what it was but apparently a discipline problem needed consideration. Swensson said that we must meet to discuss the matter. The meeting was held in Nelander’s home. Mr. Carl Norman had recently been hired as an assistant teacher....Present were Swensson, Nelander, Norman and I. “Well, who shall we elect to serve as chairman?” was Swensson’s introductory question. After brief reflection, I proposed Professor Nelander. I have forgotten who seconded the motion but it must have been either Swensson or Norman. I asked for a vote, which when taken immediately was unanimous (for Nelander).14

Nelander served under successive titles of rector, principal and president over the next few years, during which time he also taught church history, Latin, algebra, “mental science,” Christian science and pedagogics.15 Although Nelander plunged into the work of education with all of the energy he could muster, his efforts were probably always exceeded by those of his indefatigable, inspired and sturdy friend, Swensson. Starting in 1882, Nelander, Udden and Swensson edited the Kansas Posten, the only Swedish language newspaper in the state at the time.16 In 1884 Nelander was the first leader of Bethany’s Linnean Association, named for the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus and established to promote interest in science and to collect specimens for the Bethany Museum.17

The Nelanders provided rooms for students in their home. In a letter written 30 December 1885 to C. A. Johnson of McPherson, Kansas, welcoming Johnson’s son to Bethany Academy, Nelander said: “It is advisable that he

15 Ingrid Lofgren, secretary to the president, Bethany College, letter to the author, 8 December 1966.
16 A. T. Andreas, History of the State of Kansas (Chicago, 1883), 817.
17 Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, 11.
furnish bedclothes, etc.” Such were the tasks attended to by the “President of the Faculty, also the Managing Editor of Pedagogen, a Christian Educational Journal,” as revealed by the Nelander letterhead.¹⁸

Anna Nelander gave birth to four children in Lindsborg: David Ansrifrd, b. 25 October 1882; Carl Ebenezer, b. 16 November 1884; Anna Olivia, b. 11 September 1886; and Edward Julius, b. 5 April 1889. Nelander took a leave during the summer months of 1885 to sail to Europe. Before he left, he visited

¹⁸ Bethany College Archives, Lindsborg, KS.
his relatives in Axtell, Nebraska, and asked Hokey and Pernilla Holcomb if they
would allow their seven-year-old son, John Edward, to accompany him on the
trip. The parents declined, but the young boy never forgot the invitation. Eighty
years later, John Edward Holcomb still rued his not being able to see Europe
with his uncle.19 Young John Edward received a post card written by Nelander
from Stockholm, the first piece of mail the boy had ever received, which so
impressed him that he preserved it all of his life. During his trip, Nelander
apparently undertook a course of study at the University of Berlin, so indicated
by published references to Nelander after this time.

A four-page letter written by Swenson on 11 July 1885, addressed “Dear
Brother Nelander,” proceeded for more than a page in Swedish before it slipped
into English in mid-paragraph. “Make the most of your European trip!”
Swenson admonished his friend and colleague. Swenson’s letter shared gossip
of the academy staff and told of progress in the growing community of
Lindborg: “Plow-factory talk very strong and enthusiastic. Several new houses
are going up—among others one for Mr. Rosburg.” After kind regards, he
signed the letter “Yours etc. C. A. Swenson,” and added this postscript: “I
notice that I have switched off into English, excuse!”20

Meanwhile, the institution evolved from Bethany Academy through 1885,
to Bethany Normal Institute in 1886, to Bethany College and Normal Institute
in 1887, to Bethany College in 1889. What began in 1881 with nine students in a
modest frame building had become a mature college (offering bachelor of arts
degrees) that was housed in an imposing brick “Main Building” of five stories,
with classrooms, a dining hall, a chapel with seating for 850 persons, 103
student rooms and a basement museum. In eight years, Bethany College had
become solidly rooted in central Kansas and was looking forward to a century of
academic achievement.21

Unfortunately, the frail Nelander was exhausted. He told Swenson that his
health was impaired, but Swenson nevertheless persuaded him to stay. During
the 1888-1889 academic year, however, Nelander made final his decision to
leave. Although a resolution emanating from a mass student meeting asking him
to stay must have pleased him, it did not dissuade him from resigning.

It may have been through the good influence of his friend Swenson that the
Kansas Conference of the Augustana Lutheran Church recommended that the
Augustana Synod ordain Nelander without his being graduated from a
seminary.22 The Augustana Synod minutes of 1889 state that ordination was

19 John Edward Holcomb (1878-1971), conversation with the author (J. E. Holcomb’s grandson).
20 Carl Aaron Swenson Papers, Bethany College Archives, Lindborg, KS.
21 Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, 16.
22 Nelander was ordained in Moline, IL, 16 June 1889. - Bergendoff, The Augustana Ministerium, 45.
conferred upon Nelander that year, having demonstrated “exceptional abilities and being a mature person.”

Nelander accepted his first pastorate in 1889 at the Swedish Lutheran Church, 1238 Penn St., Kansas City, Missouri. Nelander’s busy schedule was unrelenting. A memorandum of services from that time reveals that Nelander preached at 10:30 a.m. and 7:45 p.m. each Sunday, with the sermons on the second Sunday evening of each month delivered in English. He held services at 8 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and a church bulletin noted “Seats free. Strangers welcome” at the church. Frequently, he would deliver a public lecture. A posted announcement for one such event read:

**Grand Entertainment**

Tuesday, May 17th. This evening at Swedish Luth. Church.
A Fine Concert Program.
Lecture by Rev. Prof. E. Nelander, of Kansas City, Mo., on SUCCESS IN LIFE
Prof. Nelander is capable of producing more wit and pathos
in five minutes than most speakers do in an hour—*Smoky Valley News.*

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**ADMISSION 25 & 15c.**

Meanwhile, a fifth Nelander child, Roy Clarence, was born in Westport (Kansas City), Missouri, 21 August 1891. Nelander remained in Kansas City for three years, until his fragile health again intervened. An 1892 issue of the *Alumnus* of Augustana College noted:

Edw. Nelander, ‘81, is at Galveston, Texas, for the sake of his health, which has been failing for some time. His church at Kansas City, Mo., refused to accept his resignation, tendered some time ago, and granted him, instead, six months’ leave of absence.24

Nelander did not return to Kansas City, but remained in Galveston until 1894. According to Diehl:

Living just one block from the beach (on the Gulf of Mexico), Dr. Nelander spent much of his time lying on the sand soaking up the health-giving rays of the sun. Here, for the first time, he had leisure to devote to his family. During the long, hot afternoons, he told stories of the past; and, in the evenings, he read aloud to his children. He built kites for the younger boys, made doll furniture for his little girl and swam with the older sons. Once a week he preached a sermon in the Swedish church but carried none of the

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23 Joel W. Lundeen, associate archivist, Lutheran Church of America, Lutheran School of Theology, letter to author, 21 November 1966.

24 *Alumnus* (Augustana College, Rock Island, IL) 1, no. 4 (1892): 91.
other ministerial duties. During this year of rest his health improved steadily until misfortune struck again in the form of typhoid fever. It was a narrow escape and his convalescence was prolonged.25

Nelander did recover sufficiently to accept a call from the Swedish Lutheran Church of Riverside, California, and the family moved to the West Coast in 1894. Here, in an ideal climate, in the midst of a congenial congregation, and with a relatively light workload, Nelander fully regained his health. A sixth child, Martin Luther Nelander, was born in Riverside 13 May 1894. Rev. Nelander stayed a year, and then, after filling in for a few weeks as pastor, moved permanently to serve Ebenezer Lutheran Church in San Francisco.26

The Rev. Edward and Anna Nelander family listed in the Church Register, Ebenezer Lutheran Church, San Francisco, California. (Microfilm copy courtesy Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center).

Nelander greatly enjoyed the Ebenezer congregation and church attendance swelled in response to his eloquent preaching. Diehl notes: "The records further state that...the pastor's efforts were largely directed toward straightening out the church finances which were in dire shape when the Nelanders arrived. In this respect, your author [Diehl] has reason to believe any credit for improvement should rightly be directed, not to Dr. Nelander, but to his very capable and practical-minded wife, Anna. Although it is known that the pastor was a capable

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26 The Nelanders were received into membership 26 January 1895. - Church Register, 91, Ebenezer Lutheran Church, San Francisco, CA (microfilm reel S-6182).
teacher of mathematics during his teaching career, somehow the practical application of these principles to everyday life escaped him.\footnote{27}

The large Nelander family struggled on his salary of forty dollars a month. Meanwhile, the Nelters managed to send their oldest son, David, back to Kansas to attend Bethany College. Later, Roy, the fourth son, would follow. The sixth son (and seventh and final child), Eugene Theodore, was born in San Francisco, CA 8 August 1896. In 1896 Nelander received a call from a larger church in San Francisco, the First English-Lutheran Church, which required that, for the first time in his life, he preach to a congregation not associated with the Augustana Synod. Nelander accepted.\footnote{28} The size of the congregation, already large, again swelled under Nelander's eloquent preaching. This and a busy schedule of public lectures lifted the family to a new, but evidently temporary, level of prosperity. Nelander remained at the First English-Lutheran Church for eight years. During this time, the older boys matured and left home. Anna's sister, Julia Larson, who had lived with the Nelters while studying medicine at Stanford, was graduated and joined the staff at Children's Hospital as resident physician and surgeon. With the household growing smaller, so did expenses. Life became comfortable.

In April of 1905, the Rev. Nelander received a call from the Angelica Lutheran Church of Los Angeles, a congregation of Augustana Swedes, and the Nelters moved to Los Angeles in July.\footnote{29} He served this parish for nine years, taking time out in 1908 to fulfill a lifelong dream to visit Jerusalem, a trip made possible partly by gifts of money from past friends and parishioners. Meanwhile, Edward Nelander's elderly parents and his brother, Samuel Nelson, had moved to Stevinson, Merced County, California.\footnote{30} As it happened, Nelander left for his trip to the Holy Land eight days before his mother, Christina, died at the age of seventy-two.\footnote{31} Nelander returned to the United States and directly wrote a book about his travels. The Swedish edition was entitled \textit{Till Jerusalem}; the English version, \textit{All Aboard for Jerusalem}. He dedicated the book to his mother.

Nelander finished his life's work as a pastor in 1914, when he retired from Angelica Lutheran Church. Meanwhile, the first of eight grandchildren, a boy, was born to Carl and Louise Nelson in 1910. In 1911 Nelander officiated at the marriage of his daughter, Anna Olivia, to Eric George, Baron Friedorff, of

\footnotetext{27}{Diehl, "Edward James Nelander," 7.}
\footnotetext{28}{Nelander was removed to the "14" Eng. Ch., San Francisco, Cal. July 6, '97." - Church Register, 91, Ebenezer Lutheran Church, San Francisco, CA (microfilm reel S-618/2).}
\footnotetext{29}{Church Register, 12, Angelica Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA (microfilm reel S-640); \textit{Golden Anniversary Book} (Los Angeles: Angelica Lutheran Church, 1938), 17-18.}
\footnotetext{30}{Olof C. and Christina Nelson, S. N. Nelson, and Lulu Nelson (S. N.'s dau.) were charter members of Berea Lutheran Church. - Minutes, Berea Lutheran Church, Hilmar, CA (microfilm reel S-627).}
\footnotetext{31}{Christina Nelson died 7 January 1908. - Membership Book, 2, Berea Lutheran Church, Hilmar, CA (microfilm reel S-627).}
Stockholm, Sweden. Their daughter, Dorothy Olivia (later to become Dorothy Diehl) was born in Los Angeles 10 November 1912. She was baptized by her grandfather, with water from the river Jordan that he had brought to the U.S. After retirement, the Nelanders moved to a small farm near Turlock (Stanislaus County), in the San Joaquin Valley east of San Francisco.\(^{32}\)

Having suffered a stroke in 1914, Nelander died in his sleep on 4 February 1915. He was not yet 60 years old. He was buried in the churchyard of Berea Lutheran Church in Hilmar, Merced County, California. Ironically, his father, Ola Nelson, the powerful farmer and stone mason, died in Stevinson 3 December 1916 at the age of ninety-two.\(^{33}\)

It seems the Nelander family coffers again were less than full. In the 12 April 1919 issue of the Lutheran Companion, the following notice appeared:

A Tombstone to Be Placed on the Grave of Rev. Dr. E. Nelander. Mrs. Edward Nelander, residing near Turlock, Calif., is desirous of placing a tombstone on the grave of her husband, the late Dr. E. Nelander, for many years pastor in San Francisco and Los Angeles. She hopes to raise the funds necessary through the sale of her husband’s book, Till Jerusalem, of which there still are 1,000 copies unsold. By sending one dollar to Mr. A. G. Anderson, 954 W. 20th St., Los Angeles, Calif., you will receive a copy of the book well bound and at the same time help the widow to realize her purpose.

Evidently, the community responded. On Tuesday, 31 October 1922, an impressive stone monument was unveiled and presented to Mrs. Edward Nelander in a ceremony attended by about 50 persons, mostly from the Angelica Lutheran Congregation.\(^{34}\) Anna (Mrs. Edward) Nelander died 25 September 1936.\(^{35}\)

\(^{32}\) Church Register, 51, Angelica Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA (microfilm reel S-640); Diehl, “Edward James Nelander,” 13.

\(^{33}\) Membership Book, 2, Berea Lutheran Church, Hilmar, CA (microfilm reel S-627).

\(^{34}\) Golden Anniversary Book (Los Angeles: Angelica Lutheran Church, 1938), 17-18.

\(^{35}\) Berea Lutheran Church records also note that Mrs. Dr. Anna Nelander (née) Larson, Member No. 26, was born in Knoxville, IL 9 December 1863; was married 6 January 1882; and was received into membership in April 1916. - Membership Book, 2, Berea Lutheran Church, Hilmar, CA (microfilm reel S-627).