

3-1-1999

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Anderson, Edith E. (1999) "Swedish Immigrants in a Rural Wisconsin Community," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 19 : No. 1 , Article 6.

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Swedish Immigrants in a Rural Wisconsin Community

Edith E. Anderson*

The importance of family and church affiliations to the Swedish-American immigrant becomes apparent when studying the lives of Swedish neighbors living in a small rural community of northeastern Wisconsin during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Near the town of Oconto Falls, Oconto County, Wisconsin, there is a community that began to spring up in the late 1800s. As Swedish settlers began opening the area to farming, and other Swedes joined them, it was natural that the developing community should begin to be called "Swedetown." Never a town, it was a collection of farms, a school and a cheese factory.

Just as it was never formally incorporated, its boundaries were somewhat fluid, depending upon who was living on which farm. Over the years the settlers have died, many of the Swedish families have moved out, and the names on the mailboxes show only a few Swedish surnames remaining. Yet the community retains the ethnically-based name. This paper examines where the Swedes of this small area came from, what drew them, what maintained the strength of their affiliation, and what has become of them.

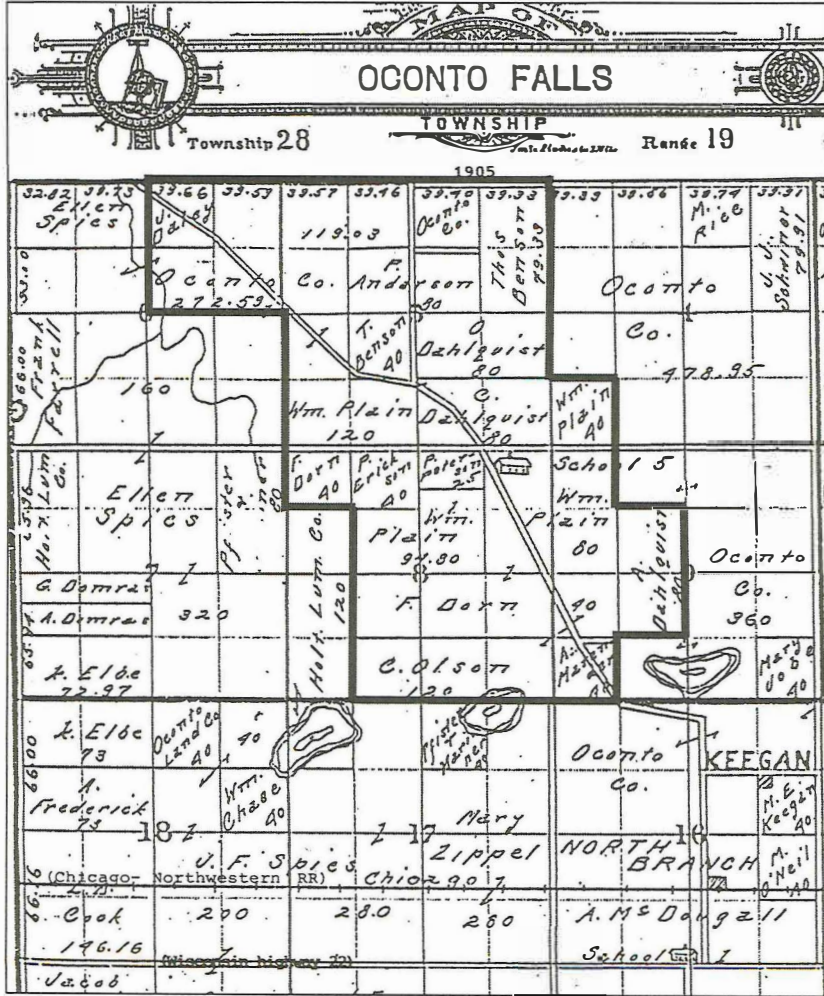
Historical Background

Wisconsin became a state in 1848. Oconto County was organized three years later and initially represented roughly half of northeastern Wisconsin. Virgin forest covered much of the county.

Timber cruisers and loggers facilitated the entry of the early settlers into what would become Swedetown. The Swedes came first to work as lumberjacks and other common laborers, then stayed to clear the opened forestland for farming. It was work with which marginal farmers and crofters, from northern Skåne and southern Småland, were very familiar. With a climate and landscape that suited them well, this new land was also ready to reward their toil.

* Edith E. Anderson is a granddaughter of Peter and Blenda Anderson. She grew up on her parents' dairy farm in Oconto County, Wisconsin. As a result of her mother's example, she has been interested in her family's history and in genealogy since secondary school. She now makes her home in Brownsville, Texas.

The Swedetown settlement began from the southeast, about a mile from what is now Wisconsin Highway 22, and about four miles north and west of what is now the city of Oconto Falls. It began just north of the farm developed and owned by the Oconto Company, one of the large lumbering companies that began their primary cutting of the great timber stands in the area a decade after the middle of the 19th century. Following the logging supply road, the settlement grew steadily toward the north town line of the Town of Oconto Falls.



Northwest corner of Oconto Falls Township, Wisconsin, with approximate boundaries of the Swedetown community indicated. (Map courtesy of Merlin Chester Anderson.)

Community Beginnings in the 1880s

Wisconsin's 1885 census lists six names of Scandinavian origin in what is believed to have been Swedetown.¹ The names of only the heads of households are included in this census. Four of these are known to have been Swedish and to have owned farmland, which they themselves cleared and then farmed. They are Charles *Oalson* (Olson), Ed (Anshelm) Dahlquist, August *McTender* (Metander), and Thomas *Bensin* (Bengtson, who changed his name to Benson). This paper addresses these individuals in some detail.

In addition to these names the 1885 census includes Thomas Johnson, a bachelor who is known to have purchased eighty acres of logged-over land from the Oconto Company in 1879² but is not known actually to have farmed it, and James Abrahamson, a Norwegian who immigrated to the U.S. in 1872 at the age of sixty-four and who is believed to have been the father of August Metander's first wife.³ Abrahamson was the seller in Metander's first Swedetown land purchase.⁴ A seventh name of Scandinavian origin is included in this census. Peter Larson is believed to have lived near, but not in, Swedetown. Although Johnson, Abrahamson, and Larson will be excluded from this discussion of early Swedetown settlers, five other Swedish farmers/settlers, who came to the area between 1888 and 1904, will be included (see Table 1a).

Family Origins

Several of Swedetown's early residents came from Örkened Parish (Krist.) on the northern border of the province of Skåne (see Table 1a). What brought them? The answer to this question may be found partly in kinship ties.

Oral history sources have reported that Charles Olson, an 1879 immigrant to the U.S., was one of the first of Swedetown's settlers.⁵ In 1882 he purchased forty acres in the area.⁶ The property is located not far from the former Oconto Company Farm, on what was the Oconto Company's logging supply road. His

¹ See 1885 Wisconsin census for Oconto County, Town of Gillett.

² Deeds, 1879, Vol. 30, 429; Oconto County, Wisconsin.

³ See 1900 U.S. census for Oconto County, Wisconsin, E.D. 142, 148A; and 1905 Wisconsin census for Oconto County, Town of Oconto Falls, 385.

⁴ Deeds, 1895; Vol. 57, 316; Oconto County, Wisconsin. Abrahamson bought his 40 acres of Swedetown property in April 1885. - Deeds, 1885, Vol. 44, 150; Oconto County, Wisconsin.

⁵ Swedetown native Oscar E. Anderson, born 1902, was the first individual from whom I heard this. Olson's U.S. Naturalization Record states that he arrived in the U.S. at Philadelphia in June 1879. He is believed to have been the thirty-year-old Swedish citizen, Carl Olson, who is registered as having arrived there 15 May 1879 from Liverpool, England, heading for Wisconsin. - See manifest of the SS *Lord Gough*, Port of Philadelphia, 15 May 1879.

⁶ Deeds, 1882; Vol. 36, 485; Oconto County, Wisconsin. The property was purchased from Marvin Peabody of Lorain County, Ohio.

wife, the former Bengta "Betty" Bengtson, was the first of those who came to the area from Örkened Parish. She arrived from Sweden in 1882. Many of those who became residents of Swedetown over the next thirty years were related in some way to Betty Bengtson Olson.

In 1883 her younger brother, Tomas (Thomas/Tom) Bengtson, left Örkened Parish and arrived in Oconto County. Four years later their parents and another sister, Tilda (Matilda), followed Betty and Thomas. Eventually the oldest brother, Bengt Bengtson, and his family also joined them. All of them had worked on farms in Sweden, and all of them made Swedetown their new home.

In 1885 Thomas Bengtson (Benson) married Ingrid Peterson. She had come the previous year from Virestad Parish, Kronoberg County, in southern Småland province. Soon Ingrid's brother Bengt "Peter" Peterson arrived, and he and Matilda Bengtson married and settled in Swedetown. What brought the Virestad family members is not certain. One report states that Matilda Bengtson and Peter Peterson had known each other in Sweden.⁷ This is quite possible, since the Peterson children and their parents lived in southern Virestad Parish, very near the Örkened Parish border. For ten years and more they resided within only a few miles of the Bengtson children.

From family sources it is known that a third Peterson sibling, Blenda, came to Swedetown to marry Peter Anderson. Anderson was an Oconto County acquaintance of Peter Peterson. A native of Glimåkra Parish, which is situated west of Örkened, Anderson is believed to have accepted Peterson's recommendation of his sister as a prospective wife. After their marriage, he bought property in Swedetown, and this couple moved there, also.

Peter Erickson,⁸ too, was a relative of Betty Bengtson Olson; and John Landin⁹ married into the Bengtson family. Gustaf Johnson was a relative of the Virestad Petersons. How important the strength of family and extended family ties must have been in deciding where one would settle in this new land! In addition to family relationships shown in Table 2, numerous other close relatives of some of those mentioned in this paper are known to have resided in, and in communities not far from, Swedetown.

⁷ "Celebrate Golden Wedding," *Gillett Times*, Gillett, WI, 13 November 1941.

⁸ Peter Erickson was born in Örkened Parish and moved some time later to Blekinge province. Erickson was married in Sweden prior to arriving in Oconto County in 1887. He returned to Sweden about 1891, then returned to the U.S. and settled in Swedetown. Around 1895 his wife and two oldest children arrived from Sweden to join him. - Parish records, Örkened Parish (Krist.); Norma Erickson Johnson, personal communication.

⁹ Landin married in Sweden; his wife and oldest child followed him to Swedetown in 1905. - U.S. Naturalization Records; 1905 Wisconsin census.

Church Affiliations

Only Swedetown settlers Anshelm Dahlquist¹⁰ and August Metander¹¹ seem to have been unrelated to the Örkened and Virestad natives. But for them, as for their other Swedish neighbors, there appears to have been another vital association in maintaining, and perhaps even in establishing, their community affiliation—the church to which they belonged.

Table 1b shows that the early settlers of Swedetown were buried in the churchyard of a Lutheran church in Maple Valley Township. Likewise, many of their immediate family members were buried there. This church is located eight miles from Swedetown. There were other churches and burial grounds closer. What motivated farm families to travel this lengthy distance to church at a time when roads, means of travel, and weather conditions all made travel potentially difficult?¹²

First, this was a Lutheran church. Apparently it was important to these families to maintain familiar practices they had grown up with in the Swedish state church. Secondly, this was a Scandinavian church. Organized by Swedes and Norwegians in 1875 and incorporated in 1876,¹³ it drew Scandinavians from several communities in Oconto County. No doubt the weekly church services provided important opportunity to meet and socialize with others of similar ethnic background. Finally, this was a church where the Swedish language was regularly used. This was true for keeping of written records, for worship, and for teaching Luther's Catechism to the children. Using the Swedish language in this manner was continued until 1925,¹⁴ through the pastoral tenure of J. P. Bugge.¹⁵

¹⁰ Dahlquist was married in Sweden and brought his wife and three oldest children to the U.S. in 1883, after he had built a house for them in Swedetown. - Selma Hanson Buseman, personal communication.

¹¹ Metander may have already been married when he came to the U.S. The 1885 Wisconsin census indicates that there was a Scandinavian-born female living in his household. His birth parish in Värmland *län* is about 50 miles from the Norwegian border, and it is known that his first wife was Norwegian. Metander may have moved to Swedetown because his father-in-law (the Norwegian James Abrahamson?) moved there ahead of him, but this has not been established.

¹² Swedetown native Viola Amond, born 1910, reports that, "Going to church took all day." Because the church was so far from Swedetown, a church service was held once a month at the Swedetown School; and members living in Maple Valley then traveled to Swedetown. - Viola Anderson Amond, personal communication.

¹³ Mrs. Herb Buseman. "A Brief History of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church," in service pamphlet in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the organization of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Town of Maple Valley, Oconto County, Wisconsin, 8 August 1976, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16. Swedish was used for religious instruction of children both in the church and in the Swedetown School. The Catechism materials were printed in Norwegian. For grammar school instruction, however, the Swedetown settlers required that their children speak English only. This was enforced until sometime after the mid-1920s, by hiring only teachers who were not themselves Swedish. - Oscar E. Anderson, personal communication.

¹⁵ Esther Anderson Paulson, personal communication.

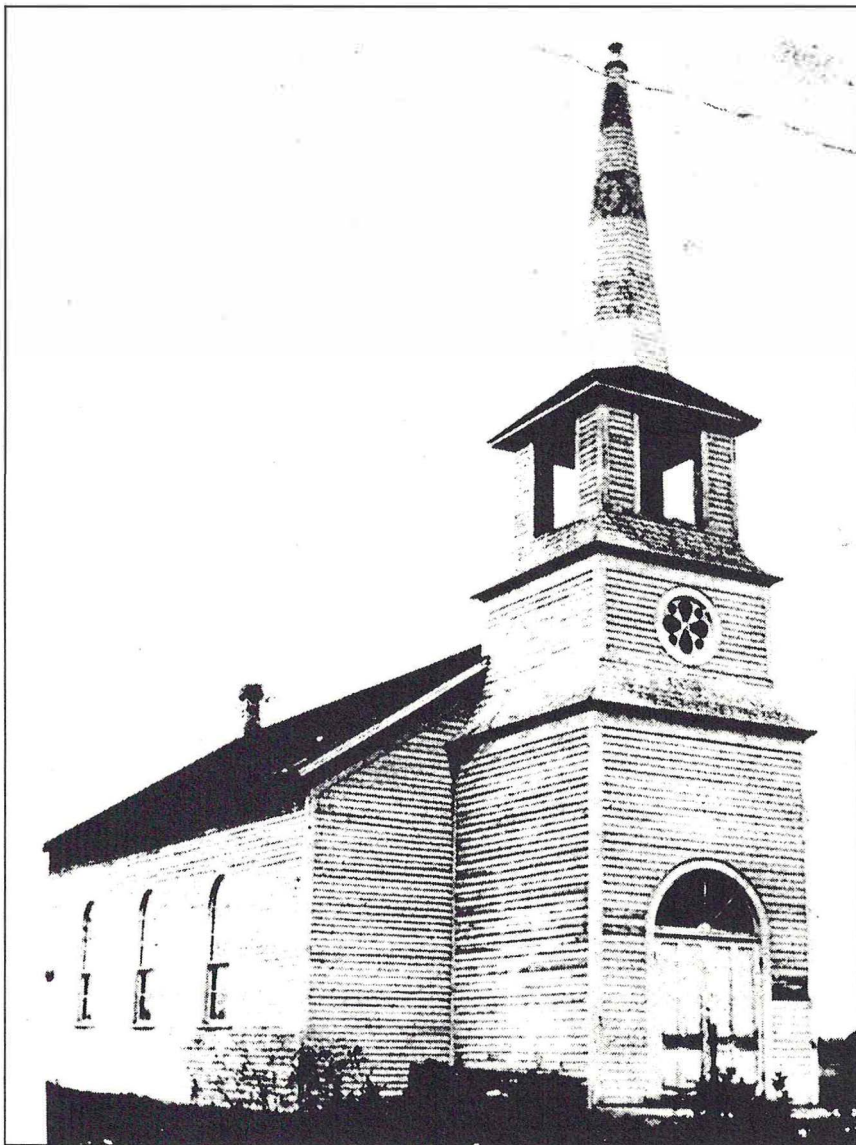
Today this church continues to play a role in maintaining ties between descendants of the Swedetown settlers. Within the current membership may be found representatives of at least six of those early Swedish families.

The last of the early Swedetown settlers addressed in Tables 1 and 2 died in 1963. A considerable number of their progeny are living, both in Swedetown and throughout Oconto County and the surrounding area.¹⁶ Information presented here documents some of the history of those who carved out this rural ethnic community and established its family farms.

Acknowledgements

The author appreciates that the following individuals contributed information that was used in this paper: Viola Anderson Amond, Oscar E. Anderson, Jenny Peterson Biersteker, Selma Hanson Buseman (daughter of Hulda Dahlquist Hanson), Clifford Hansen, Norma Erickson Johnson, Esther Anderson Paulson, Arlene Landin Sager, and Eleanor Pederson Stoviak (daughter of Emily Olson Pederson).

¹⁶ Together these nine settlers and their spouses had almost 70 children that lived beyond early childhood. From Peter Anderson and his spouse alone, over 350 individuals are known to have descended.



Maple Valley Scandinavian Lutheran Church, Maple Valley Township, Oconto County, Wisconsin. This building, built in 1887, was the home church of Swedetown's Scandinavian settlers. The congregation has been renamed Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church. (Photograph courtesy of Clifford Hansen.)

Table 1a. Demographic Data for Selected Early Swedetown Residents

Name	Place and Year of Birth	Date of Arrival in U.S.	1 st Property Purchase in Swedetown	Spouse's Name	Spouse's Home Parish
Charles Olson	Fulltofta (M)* 1846+	June 1879+	40 acres, 16 Oct. 1882‡	Betty Bengtson	Örkened (L)*
August Metander	Boda (S)+ 1853+	Aug. 1881+	40 acres, 27 July 1895‡	1. Bertha Johnson 2. Ingrid [---?]	Norway† Norway‡
Anshelm (Larson) Dahlquist	Frändefors (P)* 1847#	Mar. 1880+	40 acres, 18 June 1883‡	Lotta Jonasson	Frändefors (P)*
Thomas Ben[gt]son	Örkened (L)* 1860+	June 1883+	80 acres, 17 Sept. 1886‡	Ingrid Peterson	Virestad (G)*
Peter (Bengt) Peterson	Virestad (G)* 1867+	May 1888+	160 acres, 8 April 1892‡	Matilda Bengtson	Örkened (L)*
Peter Anderson	Glimåkra (L)* 1853+	June 1880+	40 acres, 26 May 1890‡	Blenda Peterson	Virestad (G)*
Peter Erickson	Örkened (L) 1850¶	April 1887+	40 acres, 13 Nov. 1895‡	Karna Munson	Blekinge län¶
Gustaf Johnson	Virestad (G)* 1883+	May 1902+	40 acres, 12 Jan. 1906‡	1. Eda Ben[gt]son 2. Elsa Ekman	Swedetown, WI Chicago, IL
John (Lundberg) Landin	Fulltofta (M)+ 1876+	April 1904+	40 acres, 14 March 1910‡	Anna Bengtson	Örkened (L)*

Abbreviations for Swedish counties (län):

G = Kronoberg; L = Kristianstad; M = Malmöhus; P = Älvsborg; S = Värmland

Sources:

* = Emigration and parish records for Kristianstad, Kronoberg, Malmöhus and Älvsborg Counties.

+ = U.S. Naturalization Records.

‡ = Property deeds, Oconto County, Wisconsin.

† = Death records, Oconto County, Wisconsin.

‡ = 1905 Wisconsin census and 1910 U.S. census.

= Filed citizenship "first papers" in Minnesota; birth year not available in naturalization records for Wisconsin or Minnesota; birth year 1847 according to 1900 U.S. census and 1905 Wisconsin census.

¶ = Norma Erickson Johnson, personal communication.

Table 1b. Demographic Data for Selected Early Swedetown Residents

Name	Filed Citizenship "First Papers"	Granted Citizenship	Date of Death	Burial Site
Charles Olson	12 Oct. 1888+	9 April 1895+	27 March 1926†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
August Metander	29 March 1884+	24 Sept. 1906+	7 Feb. 1925†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Anshelm (Larson) Dahlquist	27 March 1882+	17 April 1897+	14 May 1907†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Thomas Ben[gt]son	12 Oct. 1888+	9 April 1895+	4 Jan. 1926†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Peter (Bengt) Peterson	31 March 1894+	24 Sept. 1906+	15 Jan. 1953†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Peter Anderson	1 Nov. 1884+	14 Nov. 1888+	30 Sept. 1930†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Peter Erickson	30 Oct. 1896+	24 Sept. 1906+	31 May 1922†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
Gustaf Johnson	3 July 1907+	1 Feb. 1913+	31 Aug. 1963†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†
John (Lundberg) Landin	5 Nov. 1904+	1 Feb. 1913+	18 May 1944†	Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch.†

§§

Sources:

+ = U.S. Naturalization Records

† = Death records, Oconto County, Wisconsin; personal communication with living relatives. The abbreviation Tr. Ev. Luth. Ch. = Cemetery of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Maple Valley Township, Oconto County, Wisconsin;

§§ = Additional individuals living in the Swedetown area during the late 1800s and early 1900s were John Daley, who emigrated from Ireland in 1874; William Plain, who emigrated from Germany in 1853; and Frederick Dorn, who emigrated from Germany in 1875. Simon McTavish, an Englishman who emigrated from Canada in 1883, was manager of the Oconto Company Farm in 1910. - 1900, 1910, and 1920 U.S. census; 1885, 1895 and 1905 Wisconsin census.

Table 2. Family Relationships Among Early Swedetown Residents

Name	Relationship	Name of Relative
Charles Olson	Wife's siblings	Bengt Bengtson (emigr. 1916) Thomas Benson Matilda Bengtson Peterson
August Metander	Uncertain	
Anshelm Dahlquist	Closest relatives:	four adult children who settled in Swedetown ca. 1910
Thomas Benson	Siblings:	Bengt Bengtson (emigr. 1916) Betty Bengtson Olson Matilda Bengtson Peterson
	Parents:	Karna Svensdotter Trulsson (emigr. 1887) Bengt Trulsson (emigr. 1887)
	Wife's siblings:	Blenda Peterson Anderson Peter Peterson
	Wife's father:	Peter Jonsson (emigr. 1903)
Peter Peterson	Siblings:	Blenda Peterson Anderson Ingrid Peterson Benson
	Father:	Peter Jonsson (emigr. 1903)
	Wife's siblings:	Bengt Bengtson (emigr. 1916) Thomas Benson Betty Bengtson Olson
	Wife's parents	Karna Svensdotter Trulsson (emigr. 1887) Bengt Trulsson (emigr. 1887)
Peter Anderson	Sibling:	Lars Andersson (emigr. 1892; ret'd 1895)
	Wife's siblings:	Peter Peterson Ingrid Peterson Benson
	Wife's father:	Peter Jonsson (emigr. 1903)
Peter Erickson	Closest relatives were his first cousins	Betty Bengtson Olson, Thomas Benson, Matilda Bengtson Peterson, and Bengt Bengtson
Gustaf Johnson	Sibling:	Alma Johnson Anderson (emigr. ca. 1910)
	First wife's siblings:	Anna Benson Bengtson [<i>sic</i>] August T. Benson Edwin Benson
	First wife's parents:	Thomas Benson Ingrid Peterson Benson
	Second wife's sibling:	Lillian Ekman Anderson (moved to Swedetown 1932)
	Second wife's parents:	Nelly Pearson Ekman (to Swedetown 1932) Charles Ekman (to Swedetown 1932)
John Landin	Wife's siblings:	August Be. Bengtson [<i>sic</i>] (emigr. 1910) Hilda Bengtson Benson (emigr. 1914) Hilding Benson (emigr. 1914)
	Wife's parents:	Ingrid Svensdotter Bengtson (emigr. 1914) Bengt Bengtson (emigr. 1916)