



Eighty-Ninth Street Chicago

*G. A. Brownson*

# ANNALS OF IOWA.

---

VOL. VIII, No. 1. DES MOINES, IOWA, APRIL, 1907.

3D SERIES.

---

## MEMORIES OF A SWEDISH IMMIGRANT OF 1852.

BY HON. C. J. A. ERICSON.\*

My father's name was Erik Nilson, born August 2d, 1804. My mother was Catherine Clemetson Nilson, born October 9th, 1803. There were three boys born to them, namely: Nils P. Peterson (surname adopted, he, having learned the paper manufacturer's trade, was by custom entitled to take his patron's name) who was born in 1825; Gustaf Adolf Ericson, born in 1829, and the writer, Charles John Alfred Ericson, born March 8th, 1840.

We take our surname from our father's Christian name, as is the custom in Sweden. My father was a farmer and freeholder in the Province of Calmar and Sodra vi Parish in southern Sweden.

In 1845 the first immigrants left that part of the country for America. An uncle of mine, S. P. Svenson, came from Horn Parish to New Sweden, Jefferson county, Iowa, in the

---

\*It is seldom, indeed, that an immigrant from a foreign land—unable to speak a word of our language—rises from the laboring class to such an enviable position in his new home as that so fittingly occupied by Senator Ericson. His life has been one of business success and filled with useful public labors. He has given timely aid to poor and struggling young people, especially in their efforts to secure thorough education. He has for many years been a strong supporter of the Augustana Lutheran College at Rock Island, Ill. He is a member of the committee which has labored with much success in securing a permanent endowment for the institution. It has been largely due to his efforts that valuable real estate has been acquired for the benefit of the College. In this work he has been a liberal giver. He erected entirely at his own cost the beautiful and commodious public library building in the city of Boone. He served one term (1872, including the extra session in 1873), in the Iowa House of Representatives, and is now serving his ninth year in the State Senate. Schools, public libraries and the Historical Department have always found an intelligent, progressive and influential friend in Senator Ericson. His life is a record of sterling honesty which is absolutely unimpeachable.—EDITOR OF THE ANNALS.

year 1849; and the following year another uncle, O. Clemetson, came to Andover, Henry county, Ill. They wrote letters home in the most glowing terms describing the country and the opportunities for poor men in this New World, as it was called.

These letters contained such sentences as the following: "The farmers here do not know how many chickens or how many hogs they own, as these run at large. We are allowed to go and gather all the eggs we want; likewise they let us milk their cows and keep all the milk we want. As soon as we can buy a cow it can run at large in grass two feet high! We can mow all the hay we want—all free! All our bread is white, being made from bolted wheat flour. We get two kroner (fifty-four cents) for a day's work, and in harvest time four kroner and all you want to eat! This is surely the Promised Land!"

In 1849 my brother G. A., and in 1850 brother N. P., emigrated to America and settled near Moline, Ill. The letters we received from them were full of hope and great expectations for the future, and people came from far and near to read these letters. Copies were made and read to crowds of people upon public occasions in the surrounding country. All the information about America, then, was gained from letters received from those who had emigrated.

In the spring of 1852 father made up his mind to migrate to America. He sold his farm and began preparations for the long journey. Large iron-bound chests were made, clothing and shoes had to be made. Mother baked a quantity of bread from rye flour, unbolted. The loaves as big as a dinner-plate with a hole in the center so they could be strung on a pole and hung up to dry. Being only a quarter of an inch thick, they became very hard and would keep for months.

On the 4th day of April, 1852, we bid farewell to our relatives and friends and loaded our belongings in two wagons drawn by single horses. On the second day we arrived at a station called Berg, on the Gotha canal, where we boarded a small steamer and in a few days arrived at the seaport of Gothenburg.

Here we found out there was no vessel in port bound for America, and no one could tell when there would be one. In about six weeks the three-masted sailing ship "Virginia," Captain Janson commanding, arrived and would shortly sail for New York.

A bargain was made for passage at \$20.00 per head, we to board ourselves. We were required to take on board the ship a prescribed amount of provisions for each person, which was inspected. If, therefore, the passage should be prolonged until our provisions were consumed, it devolved upon the captain to supply the deficiency. We sailed June 6th, there being one hundred and fifty immigrants.

The fresh water was carried in huge wooden casks and every morning the drinking water (one quart to each person) was measured out. The process of distilling salt water was not then known. The potatoes had to be boiled in salt water. As there was only one ordinary-sized range to cook on, you can better imagine than I describe the situation when forty women all wanted to cook at the same time!

Temporary two-storied bunks were constructed along the sides of the ship. These were curtained off as best they could be, as otherwise it would have been but a single room for all the immigrants. The health on board was fairly good, although one adult and one infant died during the passage. They were buried at sea and received Christian rites, the captain officiating.

We did not encounter any severe storms, but these small wooden sailing vessels rocked a great deal more than the modern steel greyhounds. Bear in mind that at the time no regular lines of ocean steamships were in existence. We saw but few ships during the passage; nor did we see land until we came in sight of New York harbor on July 19th, having made the trip in forty-five days, which was considered fast time. A two-masted schooner, the "Minona," was out eighty-four days the same year, with immigrants on board from that port. In our case you may be sure the sight of land was hailed with delight.

Landing at a pier on East river at noon, two hours later a dozen men and women, including father and myself, started

for the city to "see the sights!" The first thing which attracted our attention was a fruit stand on which was a pile of big red tomatoes. They looked tempting and some were purchased, but proved a disappointment to our taste.

We proceeded up the city wondering at the big buildings, until all at once we were attracted by music from a brass band heading a regiment of cavalry. The bright uniforms of the officers and men proved too attractive and we followed through many streets. We kept in mind that we must find our way back to our ship and we noted a bronze lion in front of a corner store; perhaps at the next corner was a gilded clock hung out for a sign; next we turn to the right and then to the left, all to be remembered on our return. But upon endeavoring to retrace our steps, we found too many "lions and gilded clocks," and soon became bewildered and lost in a great city.

No one of the party could speak a word of English. We knew but one name or place and that was the "Bethel Ship," an old dismantled vessel fitted up as a Mission chapel for seamen and immigrants by a Swedish Methodist minister named Olof G. Hedstrom, but we could not make ourselves understood. When we found we were lost we became excited and left the sidewalk, taking the middle of the street. We had crossed the city to North or Hudson river, where there were also ships and piers. We traveled up and down this street many times looking for our ship, not knowing it was on the other side of the city. A kindly looking gentleman who had noticed us all in a flock racing up and down the same street, came and motioned for us to follow him. We did so, he bringing us on the sidewalk the first thing. He then took us into a grocery store where they gave us crackers and cheese and water to drink. The women were crying, saying, "We will no doubt be taken and made slaves of and will never see our people again!" This kind gentleman took us to half a dozen places before he found a man who could speak our language and as soon as he had done so took us to our ship in fifteen minutes.

It was now ten o'clock at night, we having walked constantly for eight hours dressed in heavy linsey-woolsey on a

hot July day. Imagine our welcome on board ship again! But we had certainly had an experience which we never could forget.

On the following morning we boarded a Hudson river steamer for Albany, where we landed at midnight. Our train was waiting to take us via the Erie railway to Buffalo; but, for fear some of us would get lost in the dark, two ropes were stretched from the steamer to the cars and we marched to the train thus guided. The cars were ordinary freight cars, having temporary benches made of lumber with no back-rest. Our conductor knew but a single word in Swedish which was "bilget" (ticket).

On arrival at Buffalo, all tired out, we were herded on board a lake steamer and taken to Dunkirk. Here we were again put into freight cars, with benches as before, and started by rail for Chicago. We suffered greatly on this journey for want of rest and sleep, which could not be had in these cars. Besides they were poorly ventilated and we were only supplied with drinking water at long intervals.

On reaching Chicago we found that cholera had broken out there and many people were dying; hence we must move on. There being no railroads west of Chicago, we boarded a canal-boat drawn by horses which conveyed us to Peru, La Salle county, Illinois. Here we hired teams to take us to Andover, Henry county, Illinois, twenty miles from Rock Island. There we found the first Swedish settlement. The pioneer Lutheran minister, Rev. L. P. Espbjorn, had come over in 1849 and located there. Workmen were erecting a brick church and we were allowed to sleep on the floor of the basement one night, spreading quilts over the shavings for a mattress.

Here I met my uncle, O. Clemetson, heretofore mentioned, who emigrated in 1849. We also met an old acquaintance, Mr. Stenholm, who came over in 1850. He had taken the precaution to bring a light wagon with him from Sweden and now offered to convey us in this same wagon to Moline. We accepted his kind offer and loaded our belongings on it, but had great difficulty in keeping it right side up, because it was not nearly as wide tracked as the American wagons; and

where the road was sideling it required one man on each side to keep it from tipping over.

We arrived at our destination near Moline, Illinois, on August 1st, 1852, at the home of my two older brothers, where we received a hearty welcome. We had been on the journey nearly four months. Twelve days of the time from New York to the Mississippi river, which is now accomplished in twenty-four hours.

I remained with my brothers the next few years, working on their farm for my board and clothes. I remember the first thing my brother told me to do. It was to go to our neighbor, Mr. Smith, and request the loan of his spade. I protested that I could not make him understand, not knowing a word of English. Brother said, "You repeat after me, 'Mr. Ericson sent me here to get your spade.'" I kept repeating this all the time while walking a mile and did not stub my toe on the way. I got the spade and returned highly elated over my success.

I was next taught how to drive three yoke of oxen to a breaking-plow, hauling logs to the sawmill and cord-wood to town. I ran a ferry-boat two seasons across Rock river, worked for an American on his farm, as soon as I could do a man's full day's work, for six dollars per month. Later learned to run a stationary engine in a sawmill and a flouring-mill. Then I clerked in a store in Altona, Ill., where I first got my business experience.

In 1858 my brother, G. A. Ericson, moved to the south part of Webster county, Iowa, and advised me to come the following year. I left Altona, Ill., in the spring of 1859 and came by way of Burlington to Agency City, the terminus of the B. & M. Ry. There I boarded a small steamboat, the "John Rogers," to Des Moines. My wife accompanied me and we had a few articles of furniture, a barrel of flour and a Prince & Co. melodion (organ), the first so far as I know that was brought to Boone county. I also had some remnants of dry-goods and notions to the value of \$400.00 and less than \$100.00 in money.

On arrival in Des Moines I called on the wholesale firm of Keyes & Crawford and purchased a few staple articles

needed, as far as my money would go. Mr. C. W. Keyes waited on me personally. I always liked him; he is pleasant and honorable and a gentleman wherever you meet him, as well as a shrewd Yankee, be it said to his credit. After paying for my purchases he said, "Is there not something more you would like to buy?" I said, "I can see a number of articles I think I could make use of, but as my ready cash is exhausted I have reached my limit."

He kept looking at me very critically, evidently studying my character, and as I was only in my 20th year it was not easy for him to make up his mind. Finally he said, "If I should sell you a small bill how soon can you pay for it?" I answered, "My dear sir, I am going into Boone county to a cross-road placè called Ridgeport, fifty miles north of Des Moines. It is a new country, with but few settlers, and I do not know what I can do. Should you trust me for anything I can make but one promise and that is that you shall never lose anything by me." The result was I selected another bill of goods amounting to \$120.00 on credit. He did not ask for any references, nor where I came from, and for all he knew he might never have seen me again.

I then hired a team to take me to Ridgeport. On arriving at this place I met my brother and we traded a yoke of oxen, ten acres of timber land which he owned and a due-bill payable in merchandise for a remnant stock of goods amounting to \$250.00 from W. L. DeFore and Richard Green. So, on opening for business my stock amounted to about eight hundred and fifty dollars, on which I was in debt three hundred and seventy dollars. I rented the store building, sixteen by twenty-two feet, from Allen T. Silver, a former merchant of the place, for three dollars per month. I also hired a two-room log house for my residence, at one dollar and fifty cents per month. I had some wood in the log hauled from the timber which I chopped myself. I was now ready for business and opened the store.

People came in to see the new storekeeper and see what he had to sell. They priced his wares hesitatingly, but only made small purchases. It soon developed that the people had but little money to purchase goods with, and the question was



asked, "Could we swap you some maple-sugar or some beeswax for some blue denim and hickory shirting?" In this way the business developed into what was known as "barter" more than "cash."

In this way the following native products became current in the trade at the store: Furs of all descriptions, dry hides, maple-sugar, honey, beeswax, eggs, ginseng and feathers. A month after opening the store I hired a team with which I hauled an assortment of the above described products of the country to Des Moines, and with what money I had was enabled to liquidate my indebtedness to Messrs. Keyes & Crawford, who then trusted me for a larger bill of goods. Thus my credit was fully established with that firm.

My business increased, but the country was new and the settlers had but little that I could make use of to exchange for goods.

Hence it became, of necessity, a study with me what I could do to encourage the production of something which would sell for cash. I began to urge the farmers to raise corn and hogs for market, saying I would be in a position to pay cash for live hogs the following year. In the fall of 1860 I got a contract to buy fat hogs for a party at \$1.75 per hundred pounds, for which I received a commission of ten cents per head. I succeeded in buying over six hundred head.

The same fall I bought two car-loads of dry, fat cows off grass, paying ten dollars per head regardless of weight or condition. With a young man to help, we drove these cows to Iowa City, the nearest railway, 150 miles away and shipped them to Chicago. I made no money in this new venture, but I learned one thing to my advantage in future cattle deals: that a 700 pound cow would not bring as much in the market as a 1,200 pound cow would.

Early in 1860 a vacancy occurred in the village post-office and though not yet of age I was appointed by President Buchanan's administration to be the "Nasby" to preside at this cross-road. It was said at the time the reason for my appointment was that no Democrat could be found in the village who could read and write.

Postage-stamps then as now were cash on delivery. But perplexing as this was to my customers who brought in some barter but had no cash, their letters must have stamps, and the first question to settle in the trade was, "I must have stamps for these letters out of it." This was a hardship on the postmaster, but they had to come. Domestic postage was then three cents and foreign forty-two cents. As frequently happened double-weight unpaid letters came to the office from Europe, which would be eighty-four cents to collect in gold. Then during the civil war when gold was at two hundred per cent. premium the amount would be two dollars and fifty-two cents.

In the fall of 1860 I took a contract from Messrs. Hand & Cusey of Humboldt county, Iowa, to buy hogs at from \$1.50 to \$2.00 per hundred pounds according to weight. My commission was ten cents per head. In those days hogs were only fattened for winter market. During September I went out among the farmers and made written contracts for the number of hogs they had to sell, to be delivered December 1st. On that day Jesse Funk, of Bloomington, Ill., came out to receive them, bringing the money in his satchel to pay for them. I weighed in 1,500 head in two days. These had to be driven on foot to Otter Creek (now Chelsea) in Tama county, a distance of ninety miles, that being the terminus of the Chicago & Northwestern railway at that time.

By this time business had increased beyond my expectations, so that I had to build a store twenty-five by sixty feet and later added to its length. I also built a new residence the following year. I had now taken up the question of butter-making and the marketing of the same. Prior to this time there was no sale for butter. It required firkins to pack the butter in, which held one hundred and ten pounds. We had no coopers in the country and all these things had to be provided for. I sent men into the timber to fell trees, cut them into proper lengths, split into staves and made a drying kiln to season them. I also sent other men to cut hoop poles. I sent east for a cooper and soon had a supply of firkins on hand and sent out word about a week before the day I was ready to take in butter.

I placed four firkins and a barrel in a row and as the butter came in it was sorted according to color, freshness and quality to make each firkin as near uniform in quality and color as possible.

Few people had any conveniences for, or any experience in farm dairying, and at first some of the butter went into the barrel which was labeled "soap grease." You can easily imagine the difficulty that would arise in the grading of the butter among a dozen women, all present at the same time! But there was no one else in the country buying butter, so I could be independent.

This branch of the business soon developed into large proportions and also practically doubled my merchandise sales. On account of the civil war, prices of every commodity began to advance rapidly. I began to buy certain lines of staple goods far in advance of my needs, which proved to be very profitable.

In 1864 I formed a partnership with Joseph F. Alexander in buying and shipping live stock. We were quite successful and for several years it was said we were the largest shippers on the C. & N. W. railway in Iowa. In the spring of 1867 I made the mistake of my life, and I mention it here only to show that "honesty is the best policy." Two stock buyers from a northern county came down and proposed a partnership with Alexander & Ericson in order to handle and ship live stock on a large scale. We had known them for some years. They owned farms and were apparently well-to-do, so we entered into partnership with them.

Each of the four partners put in what money he could and the firm borrowed the rest as needed, until we had purchased twelve hundred head of steers (an investment of about sixty thousand dollars). We herded these on the prairies between the Des Moines river and Sioux City through the summer, intending to sell in the fall to the feeders. Unfortunately for us an early frost and the grasshopper plague came and ruined the corn crop to such an extent that no one in northwestern Iowa could feed cattle that year. Prices on cattle dropped one-half in a short time. We had sold some on contract, but the ones who contracted for them failed to

take them. So we had to ship them to Chicago as rapidly as possible, at a great sacrifice. When all were sold we still found ourselves in debt in the sum of twenty thousand dollars.

In trying to arrange for the payment of this large indebtedness I soon discovered that instead of four of us as paymasters, it devolved on two only. I pleaded and reasoned with our new partners to stand with us and do what they could and act honestly and we could all save our credit and pay our debts. But I could make no impression on them. Their wives owned the farms and the sons owned the personal property and *they owned nothing!* Soon after they sold their farms and emigrated to Kansas, but never prospered. This was a tough lesson at twenty-eight years of age; but it served to bring out all the energy and determination I possessed to get from under this load, and in due course of time it was all paid and my credit maintained.

In 1868 I built five schoolhouses in Dodge township, Boone county, receiving school orders bearing 10 per cent. interest in payment, there being no money in the school treasury. It was nine years before all the orders were paid. The houses were all built of native lumber kiln dried, basswood (linden) siding, white walnut finishing lumber, hard maple flooring and oak shingles, doors and window-sashes made by hand.

About this time I admitted one of my clerks, Mr. Swen M. Ferlien, to a partnership in my store, he having clerked for me about ten years. In 1870 Jackson Orr received the Republican nomination for Congress. He was at that time conducting a general store in the city of Boone. Meeting him on the street one day, he said, "Charley, I want to sell you my stock of goods." I said, "I have not thought of coming to Boone. I have a good business where I am." But he insisted, so I spent about four hours in his store going over his stock and making an approximate estimate of its value; after which I said I would think about it. He said, "I make my opening campaign speech in Jefferson to-morrow afternoon. You come down and see me in the morning." I did so and offered to pay his merchandise bills to a certain amount, give him a house and lot and two hundred acres of land that would

make good farms, provided he could get the water off of it, for his stock just as it was. We walked to the depot together and as his train whistled he said to his young son who was with us, "You tell Chris. Meidell (his head clerk) to give Charley the key to the store!" Thus a five thousand dollar trade was made without the payment of a dollar down or the scratch of a pen to show for it.

The store in Ridgeport was then sold to my cousins, P. A. & A. M. Swanson, the first having clerked for me for several years, and the firm of Ericson & Ferlien continued in business in Boone successfully for five years, when the business was disposed of to L. D. Cook & Co.

Upon the organization of the First National Bank of Boone, No. 2051, in 1872, I became one of the stockholders and was elected its first vice-president. Three years later, when failing health necessitated the retirement of the cashier, Mr. Vincent Wood, I was elected to take his place and as cashier entered upon active duties in the bank. In 1878 we voluntarily surrendered the government charter and reorganized as a private bank under the name of "The City Bank" with the same stockholders and officers.

In 1880 the president, W. F. Clark, died and from this time the management devolved on the cashier. The second president of the bank, Mr. Frank Champlin, passed away June 20th, 1905. Whereupon, I was elected to succeed him as president and Mr. C. E. Rice is my successor as cashier.

We started with a capital of \$50,000.00, which was later increased to \$100,000.00, and in addition we now have \$150,000.00 surplus.

I am now the only surviving charter member of the bank; which as it is the oldest bank in the city, has always been the leading bank. It has successfully gone through panics and hard times in all these years and retains the confidence and good-will of the people.

What little success I have attained in business I attribute to three things: First, honest and fair dealing with every man; second, refraining from speculations and investments in outside enterprises, but attending strictly to my own business; and third, making my word as good as my bond.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.