IOWA OF THE EARLY SEVENTIES AS SEEN BY A SWEDISH TRAVELER

[The following selections from the book written by the Swedish traveler, Hugo Nisbeth, in 1874, have been translated by Roy W. Swanson of the University of Minnesota, who has also written the brief introduction and most of the footnotes.— THE EDITOR.]

Hugo Nisbeth, Swedish gentleman, journalist, and globe-trotter, visited Iowa on his tour through the western States in the early seventies and devoted a few chapters to that State in his travel account published in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1874, and entitled *Två År i Amerika, (1872–1874)*; *Reseskildringar,* or, in translation, *Two Years in America, (1872–1874); Accounts of Travel.* As the author repeatedly tells us in his text, one of his purposes in visiting Iowa and the other western States was to hunt out and make observations on the communities of Swedish settlers in both town and country in America. Although all parts of the Union were included in his journey, Nisbeth recorded only his western impressions because, as he writes in his introduction, "it was my intention chiefly to visit those regions of the country little known to the Swedish reader." In such a plan, of course, he could not very well omit Iowa, which was a western State and contained many Swedes.

In the following pages an English translation is presented of Nisbeth's narrative of his travels in Iowa, drawn from scattered chapters in his book, beginning with chapter seven.

After visiting for two months among the Swedes of Minnesota in the country as well as in the cities and admiring their simple customs and straightforward manners, their morals creditable to the Swedish name, as well as that

unmistakable Swedish tone which seems to run through their private and public life; after visiting in this "land of ten thousand lakes" beautified by a nature so purely Swedish in some portions that one imagines oneself at home again in the fatherland; after meeting people everywhere to whom the mere fact of being a newly arrived countryman was a sufficient excuse for the most overwhelming kindness; in short, after all this it was not without a feeling of sorrow and regret that I took my seat in the train coach to set out for yet other western states and there to make further observations of the pioneer life among the Swedish settlers.

So, at least, it seemed to me on that day in early August when I left Minnesota's friendly capital city of St. Paul on the Chicago and Burlington. Now I was bound for Iowa and Nebraska, two states where a not insignificant Swedish population is already to be found and where the immigration of our countrymen is in progress at the present time.[1]

Chicago, when I passed through it, was anything but a prepossessing city — if not, possibly, for the student of the very latest styles of architecture! That is, the confusion and ruin that was brought about by the great fire of 1871 still prevailed. I tarried there only a few hours, long enough to permit me to have breakfast and tend to the transportation of my baggage from one railroad station to the other.

I arrived in Burlington, the principal city of Iowa, in the afternoon of the second day after my departure from St. Paul. Like St. Paul this city lies on the banks of the mighty Mississippi that here presents itself in water equally as yellow, but also in a natural scenery equally as rich in beauty and enchantment as up in Minnesota. Iowa went through many hands before it finally on December 28, 1846,

[1] According to the 1870 census, Iowa had within her borders at that time 10,796 Swedes. The number of Swedes in Minnesota was 20,987, nearly twice as great.

was admitted into the Union. It has belonged in turn to Spain, France, and England.[2] Iowa is an Indian name supposed to mean "the beautiful land". Tradition says that once when an Indian tribe, the first to pass through Iowa, came to "the Father of Waters" that forms the eastern boundary of the state, the chief of the tribe, struck with the natural beauty that met him, cried, "Iowa" (the beautiful land). In English the name is pronounced "Ejowa".[3]

In 1840 the state had a population of 43,114; in 1850, 101,982; in 1860, 674,913; and at this time is said to have over 1,100,000. Of this number about 10,000 are Swedes. No doubt some Norwegians and Danes are included in this census. Burlington lies on the left bank of the Mississippi, sloping toward the river, and can be considered a very pretty town, although as far as some of the streets are concerned there remains much to be desired. In this respect, however, it is like most of the young American towns. It is thirty-nine years old and has about 20,000 inhabitants, of which some five or six hundred are Swedes, the most of these being artisans and laborers, and all of them — at least those whom I met — appeared to be in good circumstances. In Burlington I had the pleasure of being introduced to two American gentlemen, Messrs. Harris and Touzalin, both heads of their departments in the great railroad company, the Burlington & Mississippi River Railroad. This vast undertaking connects, via Burlington, Chicago with Fort Kearney — a point in Nebraska on the Union Pacific Railroad — by which the distance from Chicago to San Francisco is somewhat shortened. The Burlington-Mississippi railroad is considered by those who

[2] The Iowa country was claimed by England but was never actually under that country.

[3] Swedish phonetics.

know to be one of the best railroads in America as far as good construction is concerned — something which is not so common — and its coaches are equipped with a comfort and elegance not offered by any of the best European railroads. Since Swedes are more scarce here I doubtless would have had considerable difficulties to overcome in my travels in these states had not the generous courtesy that always distinguishes the higher class American furnished me with a pleasant and instructive traveling companion for a period of fourteen days along the entire line. This was Professor I. D. Butler, an elderly gentleman who occupied the chair of professor of dead languages in the University of Madison.[4] The delightful days I spent in the company of this well-bred and widely traveled man I shall not soon forget. True we sometimes suffered considerably during our tours in the Far West and our stopping places were not always of the most convenient kind, but we were both blessed with a singularly good humor and had in addition so many interesting observations to make that the small discomforts served to divert rather than to annoy us. We left Burlington at seven o'clock one evening and after spending a night in one of Pullman's very ingeniously arranged sleeping cars we arrived at Stanton the next morning. A considerable number of Swedes live near this station, something over three hundred and fifty families, who constitute, moreover, the parish of a Swedish pastor, Mr. Halland.[5] I did not have the pleasure of making his personal acquaintance, for at the time he was away preaching in a nearby Swedish settlement. He had, by the way, to minister to the souls of three such places. I met instead a so-called "Pax-

[4] The catalogs of the University of Wisconsin for these years do not list this name among the faculty.

[5] This was Rev. B. M. Halland, founder of the "Halland settlement", as this place was called.— Emil Lund's *Iowa-Konferensens af Augustana-Synodens Historia* (Rock Island, Ill., 1916), p. 119ff.

ton student''[6] who showed us the neat little church that served as a schoolhouse between divine services. The ''student'' who took care of the school teaching under the pastor's supervision stated that the Swedes, who were to be found in considerable numbers for a distance of ten and fifteen miles around, were on the average in good circumstances and that although those who arrived most recently had their hardships, true enough, to overcome, in general after two or three years of work and sacrifice they too were comfortable and independent.

I questioned him as to the subjects in which the children were given instruction and discovered them to be the usual ones, namely, the catechism and the Bible, sparingly garnished with a little history, geography, and arithmetic.

''But what of the English language, then?'' I burst out astonished.

''No instruction is given in English.''

''But, my God'', I exclaimed, ''how is it possible that instruction can be considered adequate which does not give the child the slightest knowledge of the language that is so necessary to it if it is to succeed in its new fatherland? It is indeed cruel that just when the child can learn most readily it should be denied this important branch of study.''

''Ah, well, Swedish is spoken everywhere hereabouts and they get along with that alone. Anyway, they will pick up English little by little.''

Such, approximately, was the answer I received. I translated our conversation for Professor Butler, who became no less astonished than I. This was the first expression that I had experienced of the deplorable influence of the graduates of the Paxton Seminary in these states. One scarcely expects better results, however, when one reflects that the

[6] The author here refers to the products of the Augustana College and Theological Seminary located at this period in Paxton, Illinois.

Seminary students are for the most part composed of young farmhands who, having not the slightest preparatory education, in three years are stuffed with a lot of indigestible matter with the help of which they are afterward expected to go out and enlighten the world. Nor can one imagine anything more disgusting than having to listen to the illogical hodge-podge they give out from the pulpit.

Small, neat-looking houses were built around the little church as well as in the vicinity of the station. All of them were occupied by Swedes, two of whom owned well-stocked stores while the rest were employed as permanent railroad laborers, that is to say, those whose duty it was to see to it that the roadbed was always kept in good shape. [A "section gang"] They possessed a bit of ground and garden with their houses and earned besides from thirty to fifty dollars a month, the last wage being that of the foreman. They lived happily and contentedly, they assured me, and could put by something every month. Many of them calculated that after a certain number of years they would be able to return to Sweden with a small, saved-up capital. They praised unanimously the fertility of the soil. Fertilizing is not necessary for fifteen to eighteen years, and the production is in general from twenty to thirty-four bushels per acre. Wood is very scarce, but on the other hand there is plenty of coal at a cost of but fifteen cents a bushel. The water is good and the winters not any more severe but that the cattle can be outdoors the year round. Although these people live close by the church, none belong to it because as they said, they "did not like the way it was run." To my question if they realized that no instruction in English was given in the school, they answered "yes" and added, "It is this way — the ministers here are afraid to let the children learn English because if they know English when young they will soon go over to some English

congregation and that would diminish the pastor's income for he is paid according to the number of his congregation!''

After a four or five hour visit in Stanton we went to Red Oak, a small town of twenty-five hundred inhabitants thirty miles farther along the line. A pretty little brook with luxuriant foliage on either bank bounded the town on one side. All the way from Stanton to Red Oak the eye was met everywhere by the luxuriant waving fields of corn, sometimes reaching a height of eleven and twelve feet.

I set out from Red Oak by wagon on some trips to the Swedish settlers living in the vicinity. They had been in this state only two or three years, but were already in good circumstances. They were largely made up of persons who had previously tried their fortunes in Wisconsin and Illinois but were not satisfied there. A pretty schoolhouse had already been built and they were just in the process of collecting money for a church. Everyone praised the climate and the water, the latter especially was better, they said, than in Illinois where the well water was so hard that one could not wash in it nor could it be used for cooking. From three to four hundred Swedes were found in the town, a large number of them laborers and hired girls, and all of them receiving good wages. Moreover, the town's largest grocery store was owned by one Swede and its largest furniture factory by two others, besides which there were many Swedish clerks employed in the larger stores. The surrounding country is composed of ''rolling prairie'', and everywhere was seen waving fields of grain while pretty little groves frequently occurred.

The next day we left Red Oak and after a four or five hours ride were near Iowa's western border, formed largely by the mighty Missouri River. The railroad ended here and we had to cross to the other side of the river — where

the railroad is resumed — on one of those huge river boats three and four stories high that are found here in America. The waters of the Missouri are just as muddy, if not muddier, than those of the Mississippi, while the Platte River, which at this point empties into the Missouri, carried with it a water perfectly clean and clear. It was very strange to see when this flowed into the muddy, yellow waters of the main stream. It took quite a long time before any thorough mingling had taken place, and before this was completed it seemed almost as if one were sailing through whey that had been hastily stirred. The eye sought in vain for canoes filled with painted and feathered warriors or for smoke pillars rising up from wigwams. That day is long past! The smoke we saw rising came from pretty farmhouses scattered here and there, or from snorting locomotives that rushed along both banks of the river, and in place of the light, oblong canoes propelled by the paddles of tattooed redskins with scalps in their belts we saw instead ordinary, capacious wooden cargo boats filled with farm products and rowed by white men, and to crown it all, when we came to the farther side the eye was met by an entire town peopled with white men who went about their peaceful pursuits setting little or no store by the arts of war and only rarely indulging in the noble hunt, but all the more eagerly devoting themselves to the practical and profitable trades scorned by the banished Indian. But so it goes! The irresistible wave of civilization rolls farther and farther westward, sweeping aside all the poetry that is believed to exist in a wild and primitive life, and it will doubtless not be many years more before the last real Indian has found a refuge in those hunting-grounds where he will be troubled no more[7] . . . .

[7] Here the visitor turns his attention to the Swedish settlements in Nebraska. In chapter ten the story comes back to Iowa.

As I mentioned above, I went directly from Omaha to Corning, Iowa, to visit the French communistic society in the neighborhood.[8] At the station I was met by Mr. Frank, whom I mentioned in the previous chapter,[9] and who, with the customary courtesy of the American, begged to be my host during the time I planned to remain there.

Corning is a pretty town of two thousand inhabitants, still quite young, surrounded by lovely groves and traversed by a small stream. It was the first town I came across in the West where no Swedes in anything near a considerable number were to be found. Here there was but one Swede — a woman — to represent our nationality and, as chance would have it, she was employed at the house of my host. What it was that influenced her to leave her position at home in Stockholm she did not know definitely herself, but that she was homesick I saw plainly and she explained to me that it was only her attachment to the family she was working for that caused her to remain, for her savings were already so large that if she went to Sweden she could consider herself in good circumstances there. Her employers on their side were equally as anxious to keep her and offered to pay her passage to Stockholm if she would stay one more year. Her wage was three dollars a week, which is the price commonly paid in the West for good hired girls. During the first part, at least, of their stay in America all Swedish women belong to this class, but after they have been here awhile and learned the language of the country they are not slow to seize upon all the inso-

[8] There are several accounts of the Icarian Community. William Alfred Hind's *American Communities and Co-operative Colonies* (Chicago, 1908), contains a bibliography. Other references on this community are the following: Shaw's *Icaria*; Prudhommaux's *Icarie et son Fondeteur Etienne Cabet*; Nordhoff's *The Communistic Societies of the United States*; and Gallaher's *Icaria and the Icarians* in *The Palimpsest*, April, 1921.

[9] ''Geo. V. Frank who conducts a real estate and banking business in Corning''.—Nisbeth's *Två År i Amerika*, p. 107.

lent ways that characterize the American working class woman. In California, on the other hand, hired girls receive twenty-five and thirty dollars in gold per month.

The following day I undertook a journey to the communistic colony situated four English miles from Corning. The road thither was unusually beautiful. Pretty little brooks, fringed with luxuriantly leaved trees, meandered here and there between the many hills. These hills were not so high and steep, however, but that they could readily be cultivated. The grain fields that were not yet harvested stood drooping under full heads. There were also plenty of trees to save the landscape from monotony. As one could see, these people who were dissatisfied with ordinary society had not illy chosen the setting for their social experiments. When I drew near and climbed a small hillock from which the little community's dwellings and gardens could be seen I felt overwhelmed with delight at the picture of friendliness and industry that met my eye. It would be wonderful, I thought, if these people really succeeded in solving the social problem and if peace and happiness could reign here undisturbed. I soon learned that peace with the outside world was not a distinctive nor a general characteristic. A dog that followed my carriage and by means of his friendly barking seemed to wish to say that he shared my first discovery had not gotten very far in his utterances of joy before a large-limbed, swarthy Frenchman came rushing out of one of the small houses and began to throw stones at the poor beast who, completely taken by surprise and terrified at such an unexpected reception, put his tail between his legs and broke away, leaving me alone to take care of myself the best way I could. After the Frenchman had in that manner dispatched the dog he greeted me with a cold, sharp look — that took away any desire I might have had to ask any questions of him — and so turned back into his house.

As one can see, the first reception was not exactly the pleasantest, but I in no wise allowed this to discourage me. Now that I am here, thought I, I am not going to let anything frighten me away from my purpose of finding out the formula for the new earthly paradise. Accordingly I drove bravely up to the façade of the largest house — or better, the only large house — and tied my horses to a spreading tree that shaded the balcony running along the side of the house that faced a sort of market square. I looked about me in the hope of finding some person I could talk to. I did not see a soul except some children who, at least as far as clothing was concerned, vividly recalled the state of innocence of the first paradise. It seemed almost as if the members of the little colony had already tired of happiness and had moved away. However, I ascended the stairs of the house before which I found myself in order to carry out my investigation. Upon entering a large room on the first floor I found there three or four women busy with the washing. I approached them politely, hat in hand, and asked them if they could give me some information as to where I could meet *monsieur le president.* They, too, regarded me with a scarce hospitable look and answered very shortly that they could not give me any information, but referred me to the ''library building'' where surely somebody could be found who could answer my question. It was about fifty paces away and looked anything but imposing, but thither I bent my steps. Through a low, narrow, wobbly door I entered a small room with no other roof than that which rested on the rafters and with no other floor than that which the hard tramped earth offered. Along the walls shelves were built containing a considerable number of books, among which I saw the works of Rousseau, Michelet, Dumas, and others, and in the center of the floor stood a round table covered with newspapers and periodicals,

among the former of which I noticed *La République Francais*. In a farther corner of the room was another table with writing materials and at this table sat two men to whom I addressed myself with the question whether they thought it was possible for me to have a talk with the president.

"Is it something special you wish to see him about?" answered one of them, a young man with a fine, intelligent face, politely offering me a chair. "In that case", he continued, "I am sorry the president is not at hand for the present. If it is, however, something which concerns the colony's business you can address yourself to me."

I explained to him that I was a stranger traveling to see the country, that only curiosity had brought me here, and that I would be grateful if the gentleman I had the honor of addressing would satisfy my curiosity by answering some of the questions I wished to ask.

"I shall take great pleasure", he replied, "but if your time permits you to wait the president will be here in a half hour or so, and he is without doubt the right man to give you the information you desire. Meanwhile, if you wish, I shall conduct you about the colony."

I thanked him, of course, and followed my cicerone, who first took me up to the large house. We entered the first floor which was composed of a large room. Rectangular tables with wooden benches on either side were placed end to end along the walls.

"This," he said, "is our general assembly house and in this room we take our meals."

"All the members of the colony?" I asked.

"Yes, all, with the exception of those who because of illness are obliged to have their food brought to their houses. And this", he continued as he led me up a spiral staircase to the upper floor, also a large room, "is our consultation

room, or where the common business of the colony is transacted. By the word 'common' ", he added smiling, "I wish to have it understood that no private business is transacted here, for among us is to be found but one interest."

It was a good-looking room, high in the ceiling, and reminding one very much of a plain country church. At one end of the room stood an oblong table with a large armchair at either end and along the sides three smaller chairs were placed. Several portraits, some of them in oils, some of them photographs, hung about the walls. There were no names under them, but I surmised that they represented persons who were working or had worked at the founding of communities such as this one in which I found myself. One face seemed familiar to me and I soon recalled clearly that I had seen it sometime in Stockholm. I turned, therefore, to my guide with a questioning glance.

"That is Monsieur Bakunin",[10] said the Frenchman, adding, "but I fear he is pushing things too far. The others", he said, "are some of them portraits of former presidents, some of them of persons who supported the colony when it was first organized."

We went down again and he showed me the common kitchen, the common bakery, the common stables, and other common institutions — all appeared clean and practical.

"I suppose you are happy here?" I asked suddenly, turning to the young Frenchman.

"Happy?" said he in a tone that implied that he was not pleasantly moved by the question, "Of course, why shouldn't I be happy? I have everything I want here."

"And you never long to be back again in the world outside? Don't you ever feel any desire to take part in the moving, workaday world outside of the little community or to enjoy the pleasures that are to be had there?"

[10] This was perhaps Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876,) the Russian anarchist.

"We lead a useful life here, and as far as pleasures are concerned, we arrange them ourselves within our own circle. For instance, once a week we have amateur theatricals in our general assembly room."

"But you never have the satisfaction of knowing how the fruits of your labor grow in your own hands. In other words, you never have the satisfaction of knowing that labor is a means of gaining wealth and independence — for I presume that it is not permitted anyone here to make private savings?"

"No, you are right in that. None of the members of the colony has any right to a private income, but all that we earn by our labors goes to the common treasury. But it is, of course, a satisfaction to work for such a purpose."

"Consequently you can never give your wife anything that will make her happy nor give your children any encouraging gratuity."

"No, for as I told you, we never have any money. But you must not suppose, therefore, that our wives and children suffer want, for if my wife needs a new dress or any household article or the like she has only to turn to the directory who thereupon determine whether her requisition has any grounds and thus grant her request. Our children receive the rewards from the school committee that they deserve. I am convinced", he continued in a tone that seemed to show that my inquisitiveness had disconcerted him, "that many in the world outside can have reason to envy us our privileges. But look", he went on as if glad to break off the conversation, "there comes the president and it will be a pleasure for me to introduce you to him."

I thanked him and we repaired to the little house before which the president's vehicle stood. The presentation took place and the president, Mr. A. A. Marchand, received me with extreme politeness. He was a large, dignified man,

probably about forty-five years old. His long hair, slightly streaked with gray, fell down to his shoulders. He had a round face adorned with a pair of beautiful mustaches, and all together he gave the impression of prosperity and contentment.

"You come all the way from Sweden, my young friend?" he asked, pressing my hand firmly. "Perhaps you traveled here with the purpose of joining our little community", he added, laughing.

"Thus far, at least, I have not decided. Meanwhile I should appreciate very much the opportunity of learning a little more about the origin and organization of the colony."

"With great pleasure! Our laws are simple and natural. This constitutes the sole secret of why the colony, in spite of all malignant prophecies, still exists, and, it is supposed, will continue to do so. But I hope you will excuse me a second", he interrupted, "I have some business to attend to."

After a while he returned and when we had seated ourselves in a couple of comfortable chairs, he told the following story.

"This colony about which you inquire seems quite young to judge from the mean condition in which most of the houses are found" (this was undeniably true), "but such is not the case, for it is over twenty-four years of age. But many costly removals, that for various reasons we have been obliged to make, have weakened our resources. These losses we are now well on the road to repairing. Originally the colony consisted of sixty-nine Frenchmen dissatisfied with the political conditions in France during the years 1847 and 1848, who on the third day of February of the last named year sailed from Havre for Texas where they planned to settle. There these men organized an alliance which they called the Icarian Community, a name that

we have since retained. The colony moved from Texas to Illinois and thence to this place where we have been for about seven years and where we hope to remain. The act that first incorporated our community as independent in the state of Illinois and that was ratified by the government of that state at the wishes of the members, E. Cabet, J. Prudent, J. Witzig, P. I. Favard, A. Thibault, and A. Piqvenard,[11] stipulated that the said community's capital should consist of a hundred thousand dollars with the right to increase it to five hundred thousand dollars divided into shares of one hundred dollars each. No member had the right to own more than one share. The act further safeguarded the colony with the protection of the laws of the federal government. In spite of the hardships we had to combat in the beginning everything went smoothly until 1850 when the existing president, Mr. E. Cabet, violated our laws and secured himself absolute power. So powerful was the party he gathered about him that he remained in power more than a year beyond the time set for the expiration of his term of office. After that he and his followers left the community".[12]

"And this little book of laws is sufficient?" I asked the president after I had completed my notes.

"Yes, entirely", he answered.

"But there must be a lot of by-laws rising under different circumstances and for different purposes."

[11] A. Picquenard became an architect and the designer of the capitol at Springfield, Illinois, and at Des Moines, Iowa. The act gives P. J. Favard.

[12] The remainder of this chapter is obviously taken from the literature of the Icarian Community and chapter eleven begins with transcriptions from the constitution of Icaria, which is omitted. A brief history of the community and a translation of its constitution may be found in THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS, Vol. XV, pp. 214–286, taken from *The History of the Colony or Republic of Icaria in the United States of America*, by Etienne Cabet.

"Very few, and those that are to be found are only of slight importance in that they chiefly have to do with questions of form. The whole secret lies in that the council is permanent and the conscience of the juryman is the only law paragraph we appeal to when any misdemeanor is to be punished."

Afterward the president conducted me about the little colony and introduced me to some of the members. Handsome, dignified men most of them with long beards streaked with gray, and all dressed alike in blue cotton overalls. They were not very communicative and seemed to prefer solitude, for they were met here and there, one sitting on a stump and another on a stone at a distance from one another sufficient to permit them to be alone with their thoughts.

But did these men appear happy, these men who did not have to worry about paying the rent, providing food and clothing, educating their children, and security for old age? To this I can answer a definite *no*. There was something indifferent and absent in their manner and they seemed to me to be more like martyrs than human beings lapped in peace and happiness. No doubt they have already found out how impractical and impossible of carrying out their social theories are, and there is nothing that better reveals this than the fact that the colony after seventeen years, in spite of the strict laws of marriage, has not increased by more than one inhabitant, for it now has only seventy members. Furthermore the original founders who still remain have not the satisfaction of seeing the colony's own younger generation remain faithful, for after being sent out by the executive committee to carry on their studies in some American or European universities several of them have declared, after a few years visit outside the colony, that they do not care to leave the outside world. It was, there-

fore, curiosity and poverty for the most part that filled the thin ranks with men who when they left France were obsessed with the extravagant idea of "building a new world in place of the old".

It was as if a stone had been lifted from my heart when I at last got out of the bounds of the little community. And when I got back to Corning and saw the people there busy, contented, and interested in their work, I vowed that whatever happened I would never be a member of the Icarian Community!

Roy W. Swanson

University of Minnesota
Minneapolis Minnesota