

The Dayton Swedish Settlement

In the late sixties and early seventies a Swedish settlement was made on the joint border of Boone and Webster counties in Iowa, covering an area roughly twelve miles square and touching the sites of the present towns of Gowrie, Harcourt, Pilot Mound, and Boxholm. The settlement had a focal center around Dayton, then known as West Dayton, and thinned out gradually toward the margins of the area. Within this region there were also some small Norwegian and Danish groups.

We, who came from families of small land owners or land laborers in Sweden, had one objective — to become independent farmers. We were called prairie chickens because we turned to the open prairie for farm land. In this we were distinguished from the timber coons, mixed immigrants of other nations who settled in the timber on the banks of the Des Moines River. They came mainly from large European cities, mining areas, and industrial centers and were afraid of the open spaces. The timber coons gradually abandoned the river area because the wooded land was less valuable and the facilities for mining

were negligible. The prairie chickens became the permanent and substantial settlers of one of the most prosperous farm areas in Iowa. Each of these two constituencies had little respect for, or commerce with, the other. I shall speak only of the prairie chickens, particularly the Swedes.

The year 1868 is known in Sweden as the need year, there having been a very serious crop failure leading to great suffering among small farmers. This led to a wave of migration to the land of promise. Sweden was then, as it is today, among the foremost countries in Europe in its adaptation to the soil, provisions for social security, freedom for democratic living, respect for government, sane religious attitude, sanctity of the home, temperance, and ability to budget its incomes and living according to its means in modesty and self-respect.

Here was a group from the southern provinces of Sweden which came over with similar hopes and aspirations, similar backgrounds: a healthy, honest, industrious stock, enthusiastic about the possibilities of room for expansion and the building of homes. Many of them had been acquainted in the home land and had invited friends to follow. Our family came over in 1869. There was a remarkable homogeneity and stability of character in the pioneer population of this settlement. The

only industry in the community was farming. The inceptive towns were small trading centers. The land was good and cheap — as low as six dollars an acre for good land in the sixties. Each family established a homestead, built a respectable house, broke the land for farming, and carried on a sort of barter trade and coöperative labor in the community.

Before they had learned to read or write English, they took out their naturalization papers and became United States citizens; but since there were very few English-speaking people in the community, the current language in the social, religious, political, and business life was Swedish. Every effort was made to learn English, so that the whole community soon became bi-lingual, which was easy enough for the children as soon as the schools were established, but a hardship for the older people.

Politically they were all solidly Republican and intensely proud of it. In my extensive acquaintance there, I knew of only one Democrat, and he was a horse thief. It was not until I went to the larger cities and met respectable Democrats that I realized any good people belonged to that party. One typical farmer is quoted as saying, "I thank my God that I am a Republican and a Lutheran."

The people were nearly all Lutherans, although

there was a dribbling of Mission Friends and Methodists. The church services and religious literature of Sweden were currently used. Relatively large Swedish churches were first built at Dayton and Gowrie. All religious instruction was in Swedish, and a very adequate system it was for the religious education of the youth.

The language situation created some difficulties for us. For example, until I was twelve years old the Swedish Lutheran catechism was used, and I had committed to memory every word in both Luther's small and large catechisms and had read the entire Bible, including the Apocrypha in Swedish. At that time the Lutheran church in America put out its own catechism so that in training for my confirmation, which was very thorough, I also had to commit this to memory. Soon after, the same church authority introduced an English translation of the catechism, and I committed both the short and long versions of it to memory. This constituted a very substantial training in theology and was the almost universally recognized sanction for right living. It was far more sweeping and effective than a constitution or civil laws because it emanated from the fountainhead of the church in a solidly religious constituency. Having command of both the Swedish and the English versions was a vital step in fitting the religion of

the Swedish church to the American soil and atmosphere. I can think of no type of preparation for American citizenship that has been more vivifying than this grafting of the new culture upon the well established old culture.

Orthodoxy was general, and the Bible was accepted and read intensively as the word of God and the basis for law and order and good fellowship. Theology was a common topic for conversation in church and home circles and was very effective in promoting the bi-lingual development. The Lutherans, however, were intolerant of other denominations as, like the Germans, they had "die reine Lehre".

In those days practically every home had its Bible with English and Swedish printed in parallel columns. It was customary in morning and evening devotions to have one member of the family read a section in Swedish and another member read the same in English. It was no small task to learn that a person could be religious in English when all the church services up to the beginning of the present century were conducted in Swedish.

The community was law-abiding and self-administering. For several decades there was no jail within this area, and I was quite grown before I saw a constable. Naturally we viewed with

pride, as I do even now, our wholesome Americanism grafted on this Swedish stock.

Pioneer hospitality appeared at its best. During my entire childhood I did not hear of any one in serious want even in such stark pioneer life. Farm machinery, such as reapers, corn planters, and threshing machines, was introduced through coöperation of groups of these small farmers. It was four or five decades before these Swedish farmers on their well-cultivated homesteads were bitten by the bug of big farming. With the cooperative use of machinery, division of labor in specific skills became effective. At the age of twelve I was selected to follow the first corn planter in our circuit throughout the corn-planting season to drop the corn, because I was light in weight and early gained a reputation for skill in dropping the corn accurately in straight rows.

In this settlement there was but little harvesting of grain with a cradle, men swinging the scythe and women doing the binding. Because of my light weight and ability to handle horses, I was selected as a driver of the Marsh harvester. It was drawn by three to five horses, which were changed every three hours, and was not only a horse killer but a man killer, as two men stood on a platform and did all the binding that had previously been done by seven men who followed the

reaper on the ground. The women served a hearty lunch in mid-morning and mid-afternoon in addition to the regular meals.

The threshing machine was a monstrous affair, driven by a five-team "horse-power", which required a gang of about a dozen helpers who followed it through the community for the season, exchanging labor. Boys were often relegated to the straw pile, but I escaped that by becoming an expert band cutter.

Even the Fourth of July celebration was a cooperative affair. The first one I attended was in 1876. We joined our neighbors, hitched four horses to a lumber wagon, and piled the two families in to drive six miles to Dayton through seemingly bottomless mud. The oratory of the celebration was long and bi-lingual, but the activities were solidly Swedish: the calithumpians, greased flag pole, barrel races and foot races, and sumptuous basket dinners which were the heart of this social affair. I distinctly remember two innovations — peanuts and firecrackers. I feasted on peanuts to such an extent that I have never cared for them since; and I joined with a neighbor boy in buying a ten-cent package of firecrackers which was perhaps my first extravagance in luxury. There was one entertainment introduced by a "Yankee" but it received very little patronage be-

cause it was a game of chance and therefore sinful. All in all, this centennial celebration in our primitive community was a great success, and although on the return trip many got stuck in mud holes and had to get out and help the mired horses, they all returned home feeling that they had had a rollicking good time.

The first generation of these settlers consisted of young couples who settled down to build homes and raise large families. The first generation of children took up the conduct of the farm in fine physical health, well organized community life, and industrial competence. All children were useful and a decided asset to the farm. The sports consisted mostly of wrangling livestock, raising all kinds of animals, planting orchards, beautifying the home, and participating in simple social gatherings, all approached in a play attitude of venture, conquest, and thrills of success. This conquest on the farm and all that went with it was a great education, a great sport, and a most wholesome means of motivating American citizenship.

As the population of boys and girls between the ages of five and twenty-one grew to satisfy the legal requirements for the establishment of a school, white schoolhouses were built at distances two miles apart throughout the settlement. I was eight years old before our district had the legally

required population. Adult education came through the school of hard knocks and largely through school training of the children. My father served as director of our school district before he could read or write English, but the first rule he enforced was that English alone should be spoken in the schoolhouse and on the school grounds. I feel with some sense of guilt that we often violated this rule by jumping the fence and playing in Hansen's pasture, yelling loudly in our native tongue.

Roads were built by a certain amount of roadwork required of each farmer, but this was supplemented by volunteer labor by the farmers on adjoining property who were concerned with community pride as well as their own convenience. Markets for farm products were slow to develop, and the prices current in the early days would seem pitiful now. But fortunately the settlement was largely self-contained. The farmers had no need for handling large amounts of money, and tastes for the sustaining of life and the enjoyment of comforts were tempered by the means at hand for a wholesome and contented life.

One can easily recognize two types of immigrants: those who are ashamed of their origin and want to forget it, and those who are proud of their origin and nurse the good factors of the old world

into the culture of the new. Our community was of the second type, and its American loyalty has never been questioned. There are still many Swedish papers published in America, but so far as I know not one of them has ever been un-American. Thus I write with pride and self-praise of this type of contribution to the American melting pot.

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