

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## From Sweden to America

One hundred years ago my father, August H. Anderson, left Sweden with his family to make a new home in the United States. The family had lived on a small farm about 50 miles inland from Göteborg, in a community then known as Elsmansland, and located in Västergötland.

Times were hard in Sweden; famines were experienced following each especially dry summer. The famine of 1860 was particularly severe and led to much immigration from Sweden to the United States. Conditions were due in part to overpopulation. The clergy and governmental agencies were conscious of this difficulty and tried to restrain men from marrying until they were well past 30 years of age.

The area of Sweden covers about 175,000 square miles, or three times the area of Iowa. Some of Sweden actually lays north of the Arctic Circle and much of the country is in the same latitude as Alaska. Consequently, a great deal of Sweden is too cold and some of it too dry for good agricul-

ture. Then and now the Swedes were dependent upon home-grown crops for most of their food. A part of the people were engaged in fishing, ocean shipping, mining, and utilization of forest products. Matches and filter paper made in Sweden have had a good market in foreign countries for many years.

Swedes who were in the United States soon were writing to relatives and friends that they were pleased with the opportunities America afforded them. This caused many Swedish families to look forward to a better life in America than they could hope for in their homeland. Unfortunately, a long, arduous, and frequently dangerous ocean separated loved ones from each other.

A marked change in ocean transportation was taking place, however. Steamships were carrying most of the passenger traffic, but they were expensive, as viewed by village craftsmen or farmers. Owners of the older sailing vessels were hard pressed for passenger business. Their agents were sent through the countryside to tell people of the wonders of America, the great employment opportunities, and the very low passenger fares on the sailing vessels. This appealed to my grandfather, who, in 1864, had saved enough passage money to transport his family from Sweden to the United States by sailing vessel. The oldest member of the family had previously gone to Galesburg, Illinois. Now the rest of the family could

follow. They consisted of my grandfather and grandmother, two daughters and four sons, one of whom was my father, then nine years old.

Passengers on the vessel on which the family arranged to emigrate were called upon to furnish the major part of their food for the voyage. They were told to prepare barrels of dried herring and hard rye bread, the quantity to be sufficient to last for three months. The normal voyage from Göteborg to Quebec took about nine weeks. This particular voyage took eleven weeks.

In preparation for the long voyage, my grandfather caught, cleaned, salted, and dried a large quantity of herring. Grandmother prepared the second article of basic diet — hard, flat rye bread (*Knäckebröd*), a bread that was baked slowly all day and into the night. This was not difficult since it was customary to bake a three-month supply for use at home. In addition to herring and bread, potatoes and turnips were probably brought aboard.

A 50-mile trip from home to Göteborg, the port of embarkation, was made in a horse-drawn wagon. At the seaport, the family boarded an ocean-going sailing vessel, old and just barely seaworthy.

Although my father was only a boy, many events during the hazardous crossing made a deep impression upon him. He often shared these experiences with us years later when we were growing up on the Iowa farm. One story I remember particularly was about a storm at sea.

Father must have been a good sailor. He was never seasick and a fearless climber. During the crossing, he spent much of his time on the upper deck among the ship's crew. He watched the sailors climb the ropes, and he stood by the helmsman as he steered the vessel. He was there when the ship rode into a North Atlantic hurricane. The masts swayed farther and farther from side to side; the beams of the old wooden craft creaked; and the captain became apprehensive lest his ship founder in the most severe storm of his experience.

Fortunately, there was a ship's carpenter below deck who had spent much of his life as a steersman but who now, on account of his lameness, found it necessary to retire to a less active position. The captain asked the old carpenter if he would take over the guidance of the ship in this great emergency. The carpenter agreed and was strapped to the wheel. In no time the masts seemed not to sway so far to either side. He had a distinctive way of striking the bow of the ship into the mountainous waves. The ship rode through and my father was ready for another episode at sea.

Another of Father's sea stories that impressed me was when that same doughty old sea captain encountered a whale. Now a whale is of no danger to a modern ocean liner, but a century ago the crew of a sailing vessel knew that these enormous mammals sometimes swam under a vessel and, coming to the surface, would turn a craft onto its side. The

captain no doubt had had previous experiences with whales. He recognized the sea monster as playful as well as being intelligent. As the whale approached the vessel, he had several empty barrels tossed into the water to attract the attention of the great sea monster. The whale would place his head under a barrel and toss it high into the air. While this went on, the ship sailed away, leaving the sporting whale behind.

A sad experience occurred at sea. Among the many passengers who died was my father's two-year-old brother who was buried in the shark-infested waters. It is difficult today to understand how any child survived the rigors of an Atlantic crossing by sailing vessel. The principal meal of the day was usually herring, hard bread, and potatoes. Dysentery was common. There was no water for washing, toilet facilities were shocking, medical help unavailable. During storms the quarters were closed against both light and air, causing emigrants almost to suffocate.

The ocean voyage ended at Quebec. The family changed to a river steamer enroute to Montreal and thence proceeded to Galesburg, Illinois, where my father's oldest brother had previously settled. In the Galesburg area, the children of the family grew to maturity and took up different vocations — one became a shoe merchant, another a grocer, and my father and his older brother became farmers.

It was from this heritage that the writer traces back his lineage, a lineage which has its inception in far away Sweden but which was shaped and fashioned in the refining crucible of hard, unremitting labor on an Iowa farm almost a century ago.