

Settlement in Iowa

My father would have preferred staying in Illinois but he wanted a farm of his own. However, because of high land values, there was little hope of owning a farm in Illinois. The only alternative was to move west. It was a period when many young farmers were on the move. They were looking for productive, well-watered land with reasonably good access to railroad transportation, and fairly close to native timber. By 1850 a few Swedes had penetrated Iowa as far west as the Des Moines River.

Information concerning the growth and development of central Iowa had reached my father in Illinois. While working on a farm, he had met the niece of the owner. They were anxious to marry and buy a farm of their own. This was about 1881. Meanwhile, rumors had reached my father that a branch of the Chicago and North Western Railroad running from Toledo, Iowa, in a northwesterly direction toward Sioux City would be built. This interested him and he decided to cast his lot in Iowa, where a number of young Swedes had already moved.

In 1881 Father left Illinois with a team of horses and a wagon for Iowa. In the wagon he had,

among other items, a plow for breaking sod, a conventional type plow, and a Brown corn planter which had been made in Galesburg. His intention was to buy a small farm on which to make his future home. He found such a place one mile west and one mile south of the point where the town of Stanhope was later located. The farm consisted of 120 acres of unimproved land. The price was \$10 per acre, or a total cost of \$1,200. Farm loans were difficult to obtain in those days, but Father found someone who had money to loan — at 10 percent interest.

The rumor of the railroad became a reality. In February 1884, Father went back to Illinois by train to claim his bride, Frances Elizabeth Sallee. She was of New England ancestry and spoke no Swedish. Father had learned English quickly after arriving in Illinois.

In Iowa they set up housekeeping in a four-room cottage, which was built by a local carpenter. It was surrounded partly by unbroken prairie, with no trees to break the stormy winds of winter. Willows, soft maples, and a few other varieties of fast growing trees were set out as a windbreak. Some apple trees were also planted.

The farm, as well as the surrounding country, was potentially excellent land. Originally ponds and other poorly drained areas were in evidence, but these were tiled and several community ditches excavated. Some of the ditches followed the di-

rection of natural creeks, while others cut across fields where no drainage line had previously appeared. Individual ponds were drained by tile, which ranged in diameter from four to twelve inches.

The poorly drained slough areas of central Iowa, when properly located, often served a useful purpose during early times. Good water, available within reach of a well boring rig, was sometimes inadequate for livestock during prolonged dry periods. At the edge of a poorly drained area, the water table usually remained high even when surface water disappeared. It was a common practice to dig what was known as a slough well. Such excavations were often about six feet across and about eight feet deep. They were curbed with boards held in place by horizontal two-by-fours as braces. It was hard work to draw enough water for a herd of cows, but it had to be done. As artificial drainage proceeded, the water table of the area was lowered, and many farmers found it necessary to establish wells from 275 to 550 feet deep.

The farmers who came to central Iowa experienced no severe soil deficiencies when they followed good farming practices. With the great capacity of the land for growing crops, livestock production followed as a natural association. Therefore, it became increasingly necessary to have railroad transportation accessible. The Chi-

chicago and North Western Railroad had built sections of road year-by-year during the Sixties, reaching Marshalltown in 1862 and Boone in 1865. The main line from Chicago to Council Bluffs was completed on January 22, 1867.

The railroad of the greatest importance to the Swedish settlement, however, was the branch passing through Stratford and Gowrie. Freight traffic of animals and grain going east and lumber and farm equipment coming west were enormous for several decades. Special livestock trains that ran on Sunday and Wednesday carried the animals to Chicago for processing. On a Sunday forenoon, it was not uncommon to see four or five of these trains of about 20 cars each, going east. The local stockyards had a capacity of four or five carloads; sometimes additional animals were brought in during the morning for shipment. Cars of corn and oats moved toward Chicago almost every week.

The first generation of Swedes often remarked that they liked to live in Iowa because the climate reminded them of their native homes. Some features were similar while others were markedly different. In the area between Göteborg and Stockholm, winter temperatures were about the same as in central Iowa. Summers in the Hawkeye State, however, were definitely much warmer than in Sweden.

Annual rainfall in Iowa of about 32 inches was

much higher than in central Sweden, but the humidity of Sweden was much higher. Summer rainfall was favorable for crop growth in both countries. In their homeland the Swedes had grown rye, oats, potatoes, and root crops, all of which can be grown in Iowa. A difference is that corn, the most important crop in Iowa, cannot be profitably grown in Scandinavian countries. Early settlers sometimes grew a few hard yellow turnips known as "Swedes." These were for use as a vegetable. Many immigrants saw tomatoes for the first time in the United States. As a rule the tomatoes were disliked at first but after a few trials the Swedes learned to enjoy them.

Flat rye bread was often made by Swedish settlers, but their basic diet soon included bread made from wheat flour. They did not need to change their habits with respect to potatoes. These have had an important place in the food of nearly all people of Iowa, in fact, throughout the United States.

Settlers who came to central Iowa found animals characteristic of the prairie land as well as those found only in the timbered portion. On the prairie the tall grass sheltered wildlife, but also brought the prairie fires sometimes started by lightning. Deer and buffalo had disappeared before the Swedish settlers came, but the prairie chicken, which is a grouse adapted to grass lands, was there in abundance. They somewhat resem-

bled the domestic guinea, but were moderately smaller, with dark breast meat. The prairie chickens were excellent food.

Canadian geese were plentiful before the large ponds were drained. One of these great game birds was enough for a family meal. Wild ducks were present in the spring and fall. Although the main flyway for migratory water fowl lay west of the Swedish settlement, many ducks went that way. In the spring, if ice were on the water, ducks frequently landed in fields that had been cultivated the previous summer.

The cottontail rabbit, that is found in many parts of the United States, was in Iowa to greet the early Swedish settlers. The muzzle-loading shotgun was frequently a means of transferring the rabbit from his native habitat to the frying pan. Then, there were a few jack rabbits, but these were less favored as food than were the cottontails.

Several predatory animals were present to cause some trouble. The gray timber wolf stayed in such wooded areas as those found along the Des Moines River and its tributaries. A reddish-brown wolf was occasionally seen on the prairie, and coyotes were there also. These animals had a bad reputation for preying upon chickens, sheep, and other small farm animals.

Skunks were in great abundance in the early days. They would decimate a flock of chickens rapidly when they entered the poultry house.

When an old woodshed of my grandfather's was moved in mid-winter, 17 skunks were in hibernation under the wood floor. These were dispatched and their hides tanned and converted into a lap robe. Mink and weasel also preyed on farm poultry.

A publication issued in Lund, Sweden, provides a map showing the locations of various Swedish settlements in Iowa. The map is reproduced herein. It does not fully cover the area east of Stratford where several Swedes settled within a mile of Stanhope. This eastern area was definitely within the Swedish settlement. Two other maps show the Swedish-born population in Iowa by counties at different times.

There are five Swedish towns in the section most familiar to me. They are: Gowrie, Harcourt, Boxholm, Dayton, and Stratford.

Gowrie

The town of Gowrie lies near the western edge of the Swedish settlement. As stated before, timber was important to early settlers. An isolated grove of trees was located about 15 miles west of the more extensive timberland along the Des Moines River. This tree area which was called "Lost Grove" was not far from the present site of Gowrie. It was near this group of trees that the first white settlers located. A considerable number of them came directly from Illinois but were Swedish emigrant families. Among the first set-

tlers were E. J. Lynd, Jonas P. Liljegren, Frank Youngdahl, J. F. Jacobson, S. P. and Adolph Lindquist, Sven and Isak Svenson, Victor and August Nelson, and three Blomgren brothers.

Gowrie was well served by railroads during the years when passenger traffic by rail was popular. In addition to the Chicago and North Western running east and west, there was the Minneapolis and St. Louis essentially north and south, which reached Gowrie in 1879. A branch of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific reached the town a little later. In 1899 a short line from the great coal fields near Frazer was extended to Gowrie. The Fort Dodge, Des Moines and Southern, an electric or interurban service, was established in 1906.

Harcourt

Harcourt was the junction of two railroads — the Chicago and North Western and the Fort Dodge, Des Moines, and Southern. Fine, nearly level, farm land surrounded the town.

Boxholm

Boxholm was located southward from a point midway between Dayton and Harcourt. It is sometimes considered to be the most distinctly Swedish town of the group. John B. Anderson, the first postmaster, was instrumental in having the town name changed to Boxholm, in honor of his native home in Sweden.

A considerable number of farmers of the area took advantage of the U.S. Homestead Act of

1862 as a means of acquiring their home farms. The first store of the town was in the blacksmith shop of Axel Westrum. A little later a building was put up by Mr. Lindvall to house a general store.

Dayton

Dayton was in hilly country a short distance west of the Des Moines River. Very gently rolling land lies to the west. A population of about 800 has remained constant for a good many years.

Stratford

Stratford was located on prairie land about a mile from timbered country on the east side of the Des Moines River. Many local Swedish farmers retired to this town. A picture shows a group of these first-generation Swedes taken in 1909. In the lives of such Swedes in many Iowa communities one has mirrored the vibrant story of men who helped build our great Hawkeye State.