

The Scandinavians Come to Iowa

The Dane, Norwegian, and Swede each has a character distinctly his own, and, furthermore, he cherishes the differences that set him apart from his fellow-Scandinavian. But in the aggregate they do form a unit. Their histories have been intertwined for centuries; they have shared rulers; they have spoken virtually the same language and observed similar traditions. They were reared in the Lutheran faith, and the unifying force of a similar church background and organization is not to be underestimated. It may not always make people act together, but it frequently makes them act alike. In spite of some traditional animosity among the Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes, they have been in some sense in America a cohesive and nationally-conscious group, forming "Scandinavian" political and cultural organizations. They can thus justifiably be approached as a homogeneous group.

Scandinavians have figured in the history of America since the days of the Vikings when, it is alleged by some historians, a colony of Norsemen spent three winters on our eastern shores. In the seventeenth century the Swedes had thriving settlements in Delaware, while Danes and Norwe-

gians were sprinkled among the Dutch in New York.

Our present story, however, picks up the threads of history in the nineteenth century, when emigration from Scandinavia became a mass movement, reaching deep into the lower levels of the social structure. Economic conditions in these countries had long been unsatisfactory for these people, particularly in Norway where an incredibly small amount of tillable land was the major source of support for a large proportion of the population, which at mid-century was about a million and a half. Though land conditions in Sweden were far better, the population was far greater, close to four and a half million. Reports of vast areas of cheap land in America sounded like promise of salvation to the disenchanted Norwegian and Swedish peasants, and by the hundreds of thousands they gathered up their families and belongings and sailed off to the new land. Because of relatively favorable economic conditions in Denmark, emigration from that country was always considerably less than in the other two.

Norway was the first of these countries to see the spectacle of hundreds of families, sometimes a whole valley of people, setting off for America. The first boatload left in 1825, but steady emigration did not begin until the 1840's. From Sweden the exodus began in the 1850's. Until 1875 more Norwegians than Swedes came; after that, al-

though there was a sharp increase in the numbers of both, the Swedes exceeded the Norwegians. Both reached their peak in 1882. In that year alone, almost 65,000 Swedes and nearly 30,000 Norwegians entered the United States. In the 1860's the Danes succumbed to the "America fever," precipitated then by the war with Germany over Schleswig-Holstein. The Schleswig Danes preferred America to German rule. The curve of Danish migration, like that of Norway and Sweden, reached its high point in 1882 but in numbers was far smaller, only about 12,000 entering the United States.

Until the last two decades of the nineteenth century the emigrants' journey to America was a pause between tilling the soil of Scandinavia and tilling the soil of America. The Middle West was their destination, and although they spread over the entire region, each group seemed to favor certain states. The Norwegians settled most heavily in Wisconsin and Minnesota, later in the Dakotas, particularly North Dakota. The Swedes concentrated in Illinois and southern Minnesota. The Danes, spreading more evenly over the Midwestern states, showed a slight preference for Iowa, fanning from here into Nebraska, where neither the Swedes nor the Norwegians settled in very large numbers.

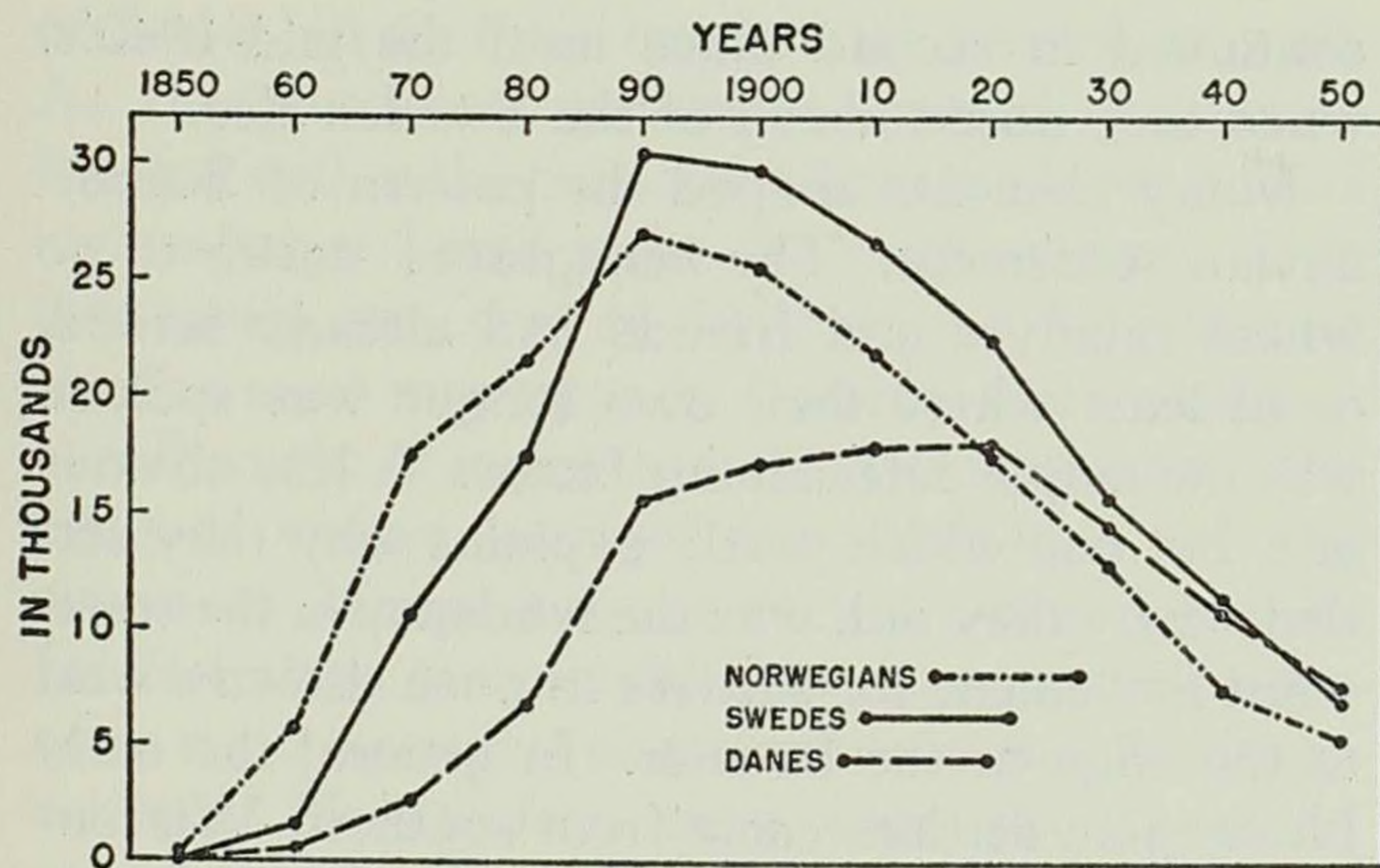
Toward the end of the nineteenth century the character of emigration changed from the rural

family type of movement to that of the individual laborer and professional emigrant whose training and interests propelled him to urban centers. Emigration for him was an extension of the general drift within his own country from soil to city, but cities were few and opportunities limited. America, short on skilled labor and professionally trained people, gladly took all the bricklayers, toolmakers, mechanics, engineers, and tailors Europe could spare. Her cities soon bulged with immigrants. Thus while the foreign-born population of the agricultural states reached a plateau, then declined as the twentieth century progressed, that of states with large metropolitan centers rapidly rose. The Scandinavian immigrant became part of the American cityscape. Today the picture is still the same. Urban areas are the reservoirs of the remaining immigrant population, as is evident from the following figures of Scandinavian-born in 1950.

<i>Sweden</i>		<i>Norway</i>		<i>Denmark</i>	
Illinois	56,128	Minn.	33,477	Calif.	18,053
Minn.	43,933	N. Y.	33,073	N. Y.	11,627
N. Y.	36,747	Wash.	23,304	Illinois	10,425
Calif.	31,067	Calif.	15,780	Iowa	7,625
Mass.	21,333	Illinois	15,684	Minn.	7,374
Wash.	20,906	Wisc.	14,663	Wisc.	6,537

In many respects the shape of the curve for Iowa parallels the national picture. First to enter the country, the Norwegians were also the

THE SCANDINAVIANS COME TO IOWA 149



Iowa's Scandinavian-born Population, 1850-1950

first of the three to come into Iowa and until the 1880's were the most numerous. The Swedes then gained the lead to hold it for some time. The census of 1890, ending a decade of enormous yearly arrivals, is the high point for both Norwegians and Swedes. After 1900, in spite of the continuing influx, newcomers did not replace the fast-disappearing generation of pioneers of the fifties and sixties; consequently, the decline in numbers was steady and rather rapid. For the Danes the picture is somewhat different. After a late and slow start, they began to increase noticeably only in the eighties, rising in numbers as the other two fell. At their peak in 1920, they outnumbered the Norwegians by a few hundred and

continued in second place until the mid-1940's, when they nosed ahead of the Swedes also.

Many elements shaped the pattern of Scandinavian settlement. The immigrants' desire to go where relatives and friends had already settled, or at least where their own tongue was spoken, was the major determining factor. A less obvious one, but one which partly explains why they settled where they did, was the tendency in the westward movement for settlers to push directly west to the edge of the frontier. In general the early Norwegian settlers came from southern Wisconsin and settled in northern Iowa; the Swedes came from northern Illinois and settled in southern Iowa. Each started in the eastern part of the state and moved in a westerly direction. When the Danes arrived the frontier had reached the Missouri River, and in communities along its borders one most frequently sees the Dannebrog.

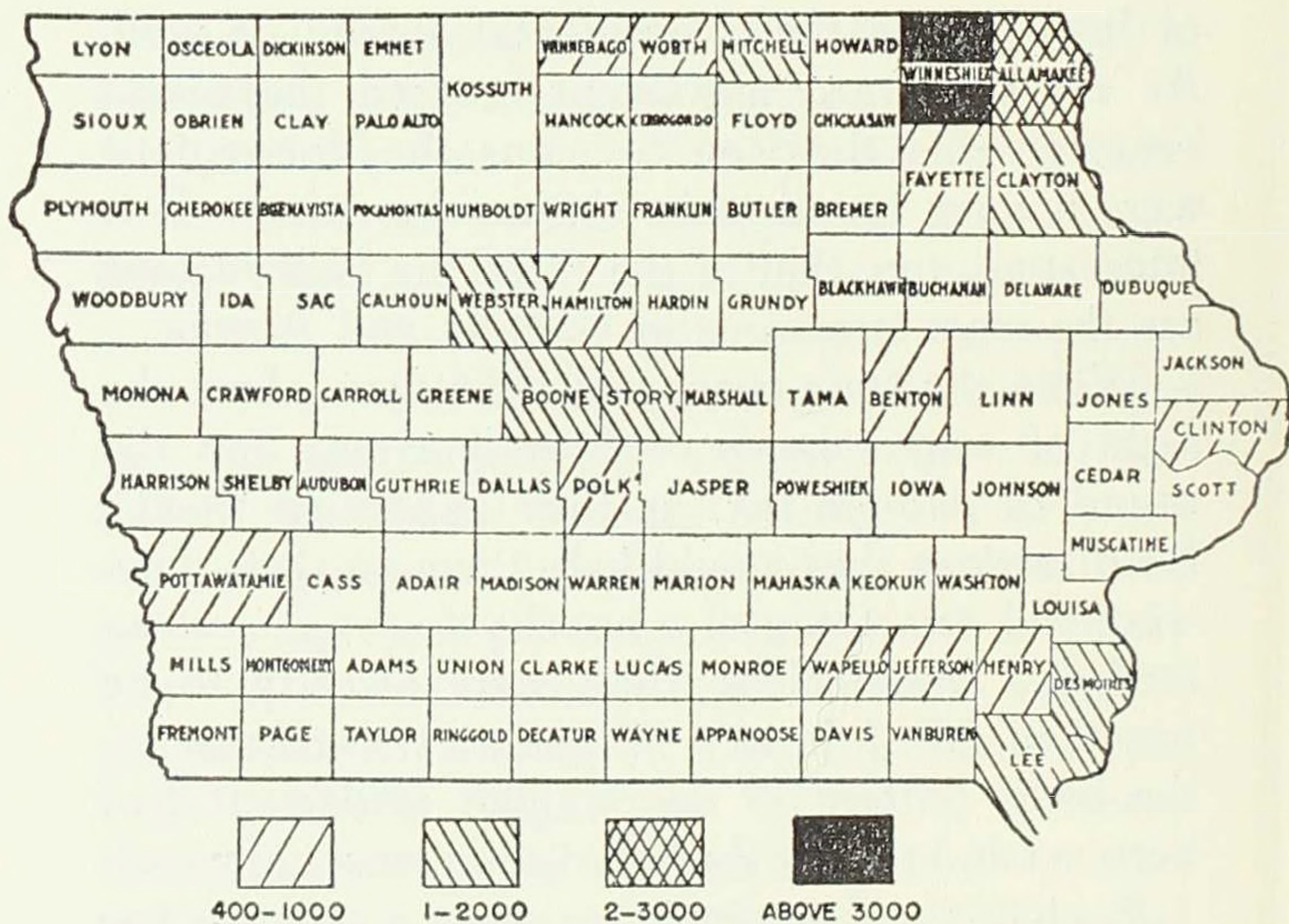
Topography and climate, too, seem to have played a part in their choice of homes. The Norwegians, coming from a mountainous terrain, preferred the cooler, wooded hill country of northern Iowa. The Swedes and Danes, on the other hand, accustomed to rolling meadowlands, chose the flatter areas of southern and western Iowa where the weather is somewhat more benign. Unwittingly, the three groups maintained in the new world the same geographical relationship they had had to each other in the old world, not only in the state

of Iowa but in their continental spread as well. As the westward movement crossed the plains bearing with it the Scandinavians, the Norwegians were always found to be the northernmost. It is interesting, too, that of the three the Norwegians are the most numerous in Canada and Alaska.

When the state census of 1856 was taken, the sight of wagon loads of Scandinavians and the sound of *Mange tak*, as they expressed thanks for directions that would help them on their way, were still something of a novelty to the American settlers. Nonetheless, they were already to be found in 56 of Iowa's 97 counties; furthermore, the basic pattern of Norwegian settlement had been set and that of the Swedish at least indicated.

Each of the Scandinavians made a separate entrance into Iowa. Coming from older colonies in southern Wisconsin, the first large contingents of Norwegians entered Iowa at a northeastern point and established settlements in the northern corner in Allamakee, Clayton, Winneshiek, and Fayette counties. Another settlement was founded farther to the west in Mitchell County. A third group, coming from northern Illinois, established themselves in Story County in central Iowa.

The Swedes, with parent colonies mostly in northern Illinois, entered Iowa at Burlington and founded their first settlements in Jefferson and Des Moines counties, betokening the more southern pattern of their colonization. The 1856 figures

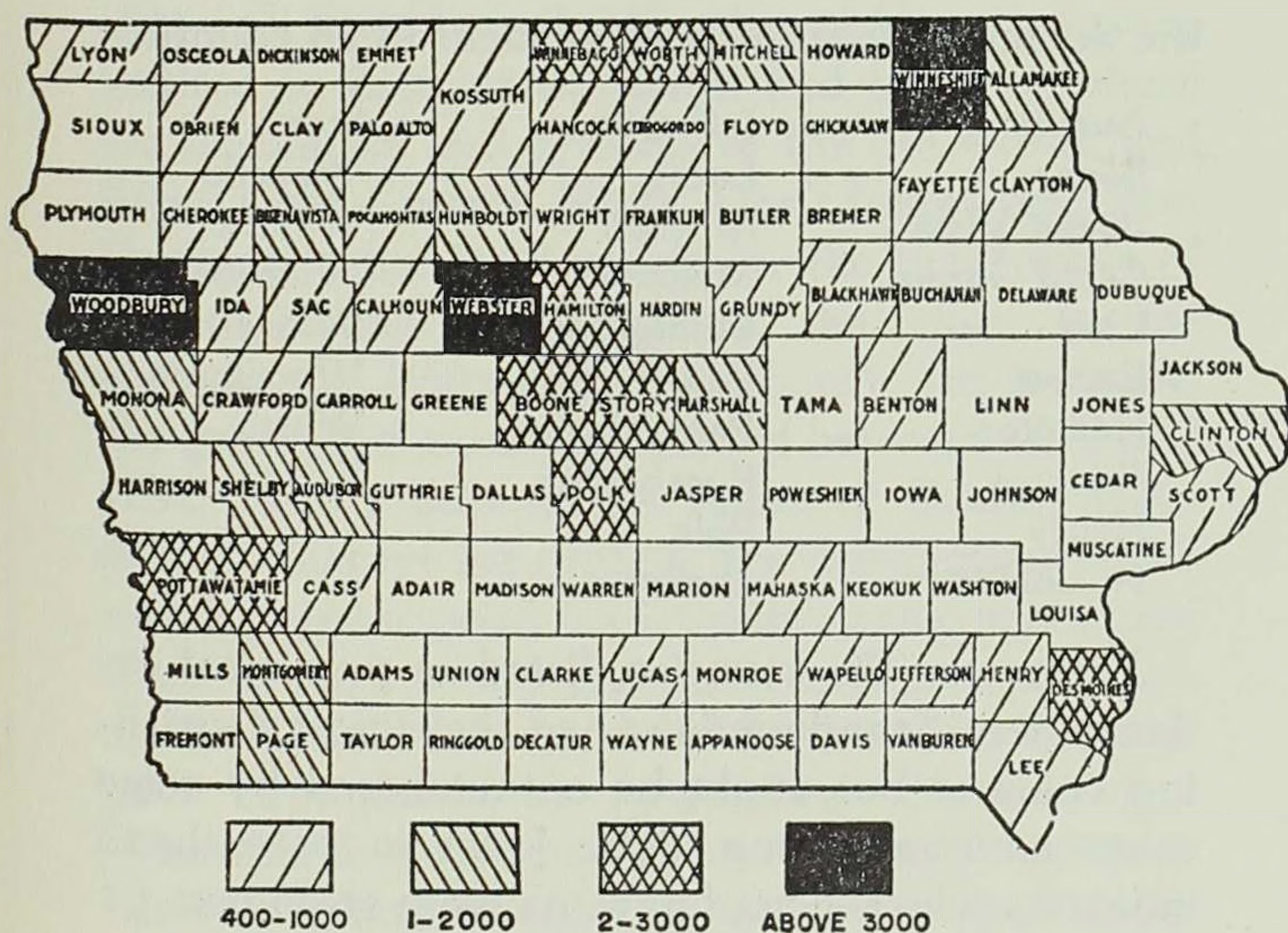


Scandinavian-born in Iowa, 1870

also give a hint of the later Webster-Boone-Polk concentration.

So few Danes had come to the state at this time that there is no discernible pattern. However, by 1870, although they numbered less than three thousand, three small clusters had formed: the Clinton-Scott and Benton-Black Hawk-Grundy areas in the east and in the west the Pottawattamie-Shelby sector, which was to develop so extensively in years to come. Meanwhile, the Norwegians in the northeast, the Swedes in the southeast, and both in central Iowa were consolidating

THE SCANDINAVIANS COME TO IOWA 153



Scandinavian-born in Iowa, 1890

their older settlements. The largest Scandinavian populations were still in three northeastern counties where Norwegians first had settled.

By 1890, when the Scandinavians reached their peak, Iowa's foreign stock (the immigrants and their children) represented a little over 40 per cent of the total population, then somewhat under two million. Within that segment the Germans comprised slightly over a third, the Scandinavians slightly under a third, and the rest of the foreign groups the other third. The Scandinavians and their children numbered 210,105. They formed

the dominant foreign-born element in 28 counties:

Audubon	Jefferson	Story
Boone	Lucas	Wapello
Buena Vista	Mitchell	Webster
Cerro Gordo	Monona	Winnebago
Clay	Montgomery	Winneshiek
Emmet	Page	Woodbury
Hamilton	Palo Alto	Worth
Hancock	Pocahontas	Wright
Henry	Polk	
Humboldt	Shelby	

Below are the counties, listed in numerical order, where Scandinavians had their most flourishing colonies but might be outnumbered by some other national group. The letter in parenthesis indicates which Scandinavians were strongest.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Woodbury (S) | 14. Shelby (D) |
| 2. Winneshiek (N) | 15. Montgomery (S) |
| 3. Webster (S) | 16. Allamakee (N) |
| 4. Polk (S) | 17. Humboldt (N) |
| 5. Boone (S) | 18. Page (S) |
| 6. Pottawattamie (D) | 19. Marshall (N) |
| 7. Hamilton (N) | 20. Audubon (D) |
| 8. Story (N) | 21. Monona (N) |
| 9. Winnebago (N) | 22. Mitchell (N) |
| 10. Des Moines (S) | 23. Kossuth (S) |
| 11. Worth (N) | 24. Wapello (S) |
| 12. Buena Vista (S) | 25. Pocahontas (D) |
| 13. Clinton (D) | |

The over-all shift in strength from the east to the central and western part of the state is notice-

able (cf. maps), with Woodbury County having vaulted to first place. Cities had begun to draw the mechanics and artisans of the old world, and Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Des Moines, and Fort Dodge became focal points for the great wave of Scandinavians who entered the state in the eighties. In Pottawattamie County, for example, the group had more than tripled between 1870 and 1890, mainly through the influx of Danish immigrants. Except for centers like Burlington, which was a popular point for Swedish newcomers, and Clinton, particularly attractive to Danes, the eastern areas had lost ground. In the older Norwegian strongholds in Allamakee, Clayton, and Winneshiek counties this is especially marked. Many a pioneer settler of the fifties and sixties had moved west to Emmet, Buena Vista, or Lyon County in the seventies or eighties, and certainly the majority of the nearly 20,000 new immigrants in these two decades settled closer to the Missouri than to the Mississippi River. By 1890, however, the pattern of settlement was set.

In this general outline of the Scandinavian people and their settlement in Iowa no attention has been paid to the social structure of the groups, their special talents and contributions, or their absorption into the American pattern of living. These larger subjects will be treated later in separate and more detailed studies of each group.

LEOLA NELSON BERGMANN