

THE STORY OF
TWO FAMILIES'
AND THEIR
TIMES



CHAPTER TWO

SAILING TO A NEW LAND

According to the book "They Came In Ships," the time it took for a sailing ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean in the 1850s varied greatly, from a minimum of four weeks up to twelve weeks. Persistent adverse winds or storms on the sea could extend the time even more.

As I noted earlier, the obituary of Gustav Nelson, the eldest son of Johan and Christina, states that they were on the high seas for ten weeks in 1852. I do not know the port from which they left Sweden or the name of the ship. Since most ships left from Göteborg (Gothenburg), we can assume that was their departure port.

As for the Kjöllersströms, we know that they sailed on the ship *Lodebar*. I have no details about the size of the ship. They lifted anchor in Göteborg (Gothenburg) on April 1, 1853 and arrived in New York City on July 26, a journey of more than 16 weeks!. We have to conclude that weather conditions were at their worst in the summer of 1853.

Emigration in the 1850s

It needs to be emphasized at this point that there was only a small trickle of emigrants from Sweden to America prior to 1854. Until 1840 a Swede needed approval from the Swedish government to leave the country. Yet, even when they were free to leave, few Swedes ventured to the new lands in the West. In the decade between 1844 and 1854, for example, a total of only about 14,500 left Sweden for America. The great flood that began in the late 1860s and reached its peak in decades of the 1880s and 1890s witnessed as many as 35,000 to 40,000 coming in a single year. Only Ireland and Norway lost a higher percentage of their population in the 1800s. When put into this perspective, the Nilssons and Kjöllersströms were truly pioneer emigrants. They were part of an advance group. And, as we will see later, they were also pioneers on the American frontier.

Another interesting aspect of the early emigration was that the emigrants tended to come as families, in contrast to later periods when many came as single individuals.

What the Voyage Was Like

The only way we can imagine what their sea voyage was like is to rely on sources such as the journals of Eric Norelius, who sailed to America in 1850, and the careful research that Moberg did for his novel “The Emigrants.”

Norelius says that seasickness was a plague for many emigrants almost as soon as they left Sweden, and especially when they crossed the stormy North Sea.

For several days I was sick, and to make matters worse suffered an acute attack of homesickness. I was so miserable that I seriously thought about returning home again, but soon I felt better. ... nearly everyone was seasick, and we lay in our bunks trying to do what we could to relieve one another during this unpleasant experience. The next day was even worse, and I was heartily sorry that I had ventured out on this journey, but it was now too late to turn back.

Turning to Moberg’s novel, his description of the ship “Charlotta” is an attempt at a realistic recreation of life on the Atlantic voyage. Moberg envisions her as 124 feet long and 20 feet wide. She carries a crew of 15 with 78 passengers and some cargo.

The emigrants were people of the soil; their whole lives had been lived on solid ground. On the day when they boarded the brig Charlotta they first encountered the sea. For an indefinite period they were to be settled on a ship, exchanging their accustomed existence for one new and alien to them.

Their feet stepped for the first time on a ship’s deck, having hitherto always tramped solid ground. With awkward, fumbling movements and clumsy, unsure steps they walked the deck. They found themselves on a plank floor, yet it was not the safe, solid floor of the peasant cottage; these planks were laid lower at the rail, higher toward the center of the deck. And the water under them heaved constantly -- a wave fell, a wave rose. No longer could they control their movements independently, they must obey the sea.

They were accustomed to walk freely in the fields, unhampered. Now they were on a small crowded ship, fenced in like prisoners behind the rail. For months to come earth’s people must live at sea.

The emigrants came from a kingdom of stones and junipers, their muscles and sinews hardened and strengthened from breaking stones and twisting the juniper branches to wattles. But their strong arms and powerful backs were of little use on the sea. Here all of them stood equally helpless, the most capable farmers and the hardest farm wives. The earth was known to them, intimate, reliable, but they mistrusted the sea; it was unknown and dangerous, and their mistrust was ingrown and inherited through generations.

Moberg; The Emigrants, p. 197.

Their Destination: Part of a Group, or Alone?

In his book “Swedish Exodus” Lars Ljungmark states that those who came prior to the mass emigration that started in the late 1860s often came as part of distinct groups of people rather than as individuals or a single family. Some were religious visionaries who planned to start a new colony in America with lofty ideals on how the community should be organized and operated. Between 1845 and 1847 several hundred Swedes followed Erik Jansson to Illinois and established the famous Bishop Hill colony.

I have no reason to believe that the Kjällerströms or Nilssons were part of religious groups.

Other groups came with equally lofty visions of forming an economic community that would prosper in the free air of America. A prime example was Gustaf Unonius, a student at Uppsala University, who, with his wife, a servant girl and two other young men emigrated to America in 1841 without a specific destination in mind. On the way they decided that they would make the Milwaukee area their goal. They settled a few miles west of Milwaukee in what became known as the Pine Lake colony in present day Waukesha County. Unonius wrote letters and articles for newspapers in Scandinavia which resulted in others joining them in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, their venture did not prosper as they had hoped.

The Pine Lake colony did not last long. This group of former university students, merchants, and military officers lacked the physical stamina needed for frontier life. The land was hard to cultivate and gave little in return. In time the colony's residents went their separate ways. Only six Swedish families were still living in the area when Fredricka Bremer, the famous Swedish author, visited the colony in September, 1850. She described what she saw:

‘We sailed along the tree-lined shores which reflected their gladsome autumn colors in the looking-glass lake. Here, on a high promontory, ablaze with foliage, New Uppsala would stand! These were words of Unonius and his friends when they first set foot on this wild, untamed place and were taken by its beauty. Alas -- the wilderness would not bear Uppsala's sons! I saw abandoned homes where Unonius and Schneidau had struggled against all odds, in vain.’

Ljungmark p. 15

I mention this at this point because, as we shall see later, the Nilssons and Kjällerströms apparently went directly to the Pine Lake area west of Milwaukee after each family arrived in America.

So it's fair to ask: Were the Nilssons and Kjällerströms part of such groups? Or did they come as isolated families? Had they heard of the Pine Lake colony before embarking for America? And had they heard that the early, optimistic expectations had ended in failure? Did they have friends there who encouraged them to come? And since the Nilssons arrived first, was there some contact between the two families, with the Nilssons urging the Kjällerströms to come to Wisconsin? For now, we can only guess. And we may never have an answer to these questions. I will have much more to say about this when I write about the years the Nilssons and Kjällerströms lived in

Wisconsin.

The “Pull” and “Push” Factors in Emigration

So I go back to the question, Why did these two families emigrate to America? Why did any families embark on that treacherous journey?

What is known for certain is that there were both “pull” and “push” factors that led Swedes to sail to the West.

The “pull” factors were the promise of land and prosperity. To peasants who had neither property nor money, this “pull” had to be enormous, in spite of the dangers. Letters from earlier emigrants -- so-called “America letters” -- and fliers that were widely disseminated in Sweden gave an often exaggerated picture of the New World. Ljungmark cites one flier from this period:

The ease of making a living here and the increasing prosperity of the farmers, year by year and day by day, exceeds anything we anticipated. If only half of the work expended on the soil in the fatherland were utilized here, the yield would reach the wildest imaginations... All crops thrive and grow to an astonishing degree. Cornfields are more like woods than grain fields...

“Freedom and equality are the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the United States. There is no such thing as class distinction here, no courts, batons, lords, or lordly estates. The one is as good as another, and everyone lives in the unrestricted enjoyment of personal liberty.

Ljungmark, p. 18

What about the “push” factors -- those things that made many want to leave Sweden? Moberg suggests that there were many. He imagines these kinds of conversations among the emigrants as they catch their last glimpse of Sweden::

I had a farm, foreclosed last fall. It hurt me to go but a farmer once fallen here at home can never rise again. I could never have got out of debt, not in a thousand years. Let the sheriff keep the place.

I had nothing to lose. What could there have been? I slaved on the manor until I spit blood. Let them do the dirty work themselves.

I couldn't stand the minister. We became enemies. I couldn't stay at home. Now the minister can watch his sheep running off; he won't be able to shear them anymore; he'll get less income, and a good thing, too.

I'll never regret it. I couldn't advance. It was hopeless; however I slaved, I stood in the same place.

Moberg, The Emigrants, pp. 198-199

Landowners were overburdened with taxes. After a string of crop failures in the 1830s many farmers were so deep in debt that they saw no hope for recovery. Interest rates on borrowed money were made all the more burdensome by what was called an “official fee” -- a fee that often reached as high as 10% of the principal. Beyond that was the “tithe,” a fee from which public officials and the clergy were paid.

We know that the Church of Sweden was repressive toward any religious expression other than the Lutheran faith. The Conventical Act (*konventikelplakatet*), in place from 1726 to 1858, even forbid private religious gatherings if an ordained minister was not present. People who disobeyed the Act were tried, jailed and even expelled from the country. I have no evidence whatever that this was a factor for either the Kjällerström or Nilssons.

Some may also have been running from a bad past, fleeing a difficult family relationship, or avoiding military service. We have no clue that any of these were factors in the Nilsson or Kjällerström reasons for leaving Sweden. It seems most likely that it was the “push” of bad economic conditions in Sweden and the “pull” of the promise of land and opportunity in America.

Whatever their reasons for leaving the emigration of Swedes for America caused mixed feelings in the homeland. H. Arnold Barton summarizes it in these words:

This mass exodus aroused both indignation and sorrow in Sweden. In a celebrated poem from 1883, Carl Snoilsky likened it to

*‘our own heart’s blood that now is gushing
from open wounds toward the West.’*

It caused much soul-searching, for it seemed to prove that something was grievously wrong, either with Swedish society or with the Swedes themselves.

Sweden & America Autumn 1995 p. 8

Another perspective comes from Per Clemensson and Kjell Andersson in their book “*Your Swedish Roots*”:

Emigration was... a relief to the Swedish society where an overpopulated countryside and unemployment were a strain on the economy. In the long run, however, emigration was perceived as a threat by many politicians and intellectuals in Sweden. A countermovement developed to try to persuade people to stay in their mother country.

p. 17

Conditions Aboard Ship

Moberg also gives us an idea about conditions on ships of that time. No realistic person who came aboard and who thought about the voyage ahead could assume that they would make it to their destination.

Ships like this often carried a cargo of bars, with limited space for passengers.



iron

There was disease, and especially cholera. One might be healthy one day buried at sea the next. Out of one group that sailed in August of 1850, ten died at sea. They also knew that seasickness would plague most of them on their journey, leaving them listless and without an appetite for days. In crowded conditions, the filth of the minimal sanitary facilities, the meager medical supplies -- all would contribute to the spread of any illness that someone may have brought on board or contracted on the voyage.

and
of 100
sea.
plague
them
The

to the
have

Death at sea was a constant worry, both for crew and passengers. Norelius describes one especially pathetic incident:

...that evening between ten and eleven o'clock, the cabin boy fell from the top of the main mast into the seas as he was trying to fasten the main sail. We heard him crying for help for about ten minutes, but it was pitch dark and the wind was strong, so there was nothing we could do to rescue him.

Because few pastors came to America with the early emigrants, it was the duty of the ship's captain to conduct burial at sea. Moberg gives this description:

A group of passengers were gathered on...the afterdeck. The men stood bareheaded, the women's covered heads were bowed. A human body was wrapped in the white canvas; the bier leaned toward the water, the feet touching the rail. The captain went to the head of the bier. Under his arm he held the prayer book. As he opened it the emigrants folded their hands and their faces took on...a more serious mien. ...at the captain's feet...stood the wooden bushel measure half filled with earth. In it was a small shovel, resembling a winnowing scoop. He turned the page in the prayer book and began to read. 'O Lord God! Thou Who for the sake of sin lettest people die and return to earth again, teach us to remember that we must die, and thereby gain understanding....' With the last words someone was heard sobbing, but the sound was quickly drowned in the captain's powerful voice.

Moberg, The Emigrants, p. 351

As for the ship itself, Moberg gives this description:

...the family bunks were toward the stern, partitioned off by bulkheads of rough boards nailed together. The small cells looked like cattle pens or horses' stalls. Dust rose from unaired mattresses, blankets and skins as the emigrants spread

their bedding and made their bunks in the hold.... Each passenger kept his belongings at the foot of his bunk. The overhead was low, and the air thick and choking. Only through the main hatch did light filter into the hold. After dark a few weak, smoking, kerosene lamps were lit and hung along the sides of the ship.

Moberg, The Emigrants, p. 208

In addition to what little the passengers were able to bring with them, basic food stuffs were provided by the ship's company and were parceled out at the beginning of the voyage. Included were bread, biscuits, salt pork, salt beef, butter, rice, barley grains, peas, salt herring, flour, sugar, syrup, mustard, salt and pepper. Everyone was forewarned to economize so that the food would last for the entire voyage.

Storms at sea, especially on the early part of the voyage across the North Sea, were a test for those who had known only firm ground under foot.

Mighty masses of water came rushing, crashing tumultuously, and falling. When a wave broke against the deck the sound increased to a thunder-roar, deadening as a big box on (Karl Oskar's) ear. Surging and splashing, the water ran in small runnels over the deck planks, flowing like a swollen spring back to its home. A wave rose, broke itself against the ship, and fell back into the sea. The next one followed -- a hard thud, the water threw itself over the deck, then followed the roar, the coughing, the purl of running water. He lay there and listened to wave after wave, and each time he could hear how the ship freed herself from the lashing tongue of the sea, and escaped the yawn of the wild beast.

All the hundred people inside the hulk of the ship were forced to lie and wait, they could do nothing else. The ship might sink with them all, and no trace would be left on the water's surface, no one in the whole world would know how they had died, no one would be able to find their grave. In the space of a few minutes they would all disappear from the world, remain lost for eternity, and soon it would be as if they had never existed. And not a soul could do a thing about it. No one could bend a finger to help them. Here they could lie, inside the sack when the sea broke in, filling their mouths with water, filling their eyes, their ears and throats, choking them

His breathing came in short gasps. But suddenly his nose and mouth felt clogged; a slimy, slick fluid was covering his face; something from the bunk above him dripped onto him. In the dark he could not see what it was, nor need he see it -- the smell told him all.

The stench of the vomit overwhelmed him. He rose, and tumbling over...he got out of his bunk. Out..Out! He would die, this very minute if he didn't get out at once. He skidded in the vomit, it splashed in his face, he spat, he dried himself with his hands, he groaned. Out -- out in the open! Here he would die. The filthy stench forced itself into him, it went deeper into his throat, it filled and choked him. Up -- up to the deck!

He reached the ladder to the hatchway, he tried to crawl up on hands and feet. But the hatch was fastened solidly, he could not move it, he could get no further. The sack was well sewn together, he could not get out, he must choke to death down here.

Moberg The Emigrants, p. 270-271

But, as Moberg reminds us, it was not only heavy winds that brought distress; eerie calm could do the same:

The fog enwrapped the brig... like a thick, gray woolen shawl, so that the passengers range of vision narrowed down to a few yards. Now they could see nothing outside the ship's world; no other world existed. They could not see the masts and the sails above them, the wall (of fog) moved in on the deck, it crept into the ship. It increased their irritation to the same degree as it narrowed their space. The downy fog was soft and light, yet it weighed heavily on their minds and caused them to become depressed and short of temper. The world seemed ever more gray and more sad. The emigrants were easily angered now, and quarreled about inconsequential matters.

... an anxiety began to spread from one to the other among the emigrants: Hadn't they sailed astray? They began to count: six weeks, seven weeks -- soon their voyage was in the eighth week. The year had passed into the month of June. How great a distance is still left to America? They had oftentimes asked the seamen, and equally often they had received indecisive answers: about halfway, nearly halfway, a little over halfway. Now they were tired of this halfway and wanted to pass it. ... week was added to week, and the anxiety spread. No one could tell them how far they had sailed, or definitely tell them their location. Perhaps they were lost? Perhaps they had already passed the shores of America? Perhaps they would never arrive?

The Emigrants, p.327

How Times Have Changed

I have traveled by air over the Atlantic Ocean more times than I can remember. I often get impatient, thinking that I'd like to shorten the hours it takes to fly from Europe to the United States. But then I look down at that vast body of restless water and think long and hard of the weeks it took my great grandparents to sail those treacherous waters in a tiny sailing ship -- yes, ten *weeks* for the Nilssons and sixteen *weeks* for the Kjällerströms -- and I wonder how they could have survived.

And I also wonder if they opened their Bibles on the journey or in the years that followed and found reassurance from these words of the Psalmist:

*"Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;*

*they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised his stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.”*

Psalm 107: 23-31