

THE STORY OF  
TWO FAMILIES  
AND THEIR  
TIMES

CHAPTER FIVE



WILL THE JOURNEY NEVER END?

FROM BUFFALO TO MILWAUKEE

Waterway to the Interior

The earliest Europeans to come down the St. Lawrence River and into the five Great Lakes were the French. They arrived in the early 1600s. Their motivation was to extract natural riches from this virgin territory. First it was fur; then, with the coming of others, it was ore and lumber. Many adapted themselves to Indian ways and even married some of their women.

Along with those seeking riches came the Roman Catholic missionaries, specifically, the Jesuits. They were not welcomed with open arms, either by the fur traders or the native Indians. Many missionaries died as martyrs. Their mission stations were often burned to the ground. But they persisted. Names like Fathers Nicollet and Marquette are part of our common vocabulary in Minnesota. Though they did not welcome them, the missionaries proved to be an asset to the traders. Over time the missionaries, like the fur traders, also adopted Indian ways and made friends with them. They explored new routes to the interior of the country which the fur traders used to their advantage.

The Great Lakes area was populated with many Indian tribes. When French explorers first came to the area they found people who had mastered their environment and were self-sustaining. When they brought iron implements -- fish hooks, needles, hatches, traps and guns -- the Indians were happy to trade them for furs. Beaver pelts were especially valuable. As trade with the Indians increased it encouraged independence among them and a breakdown of traditional Indian ways of interdependence. Indians would travel hundreds of miles to port cities like present day Sault Ste. Marie, Mackinaw, Green Bay and Chicago to trade furs for implements and strong drink. Some of these well-established trails became the routes for our major highways of today.

After the War of 1812 the population along and around the Great Lakes exploded. Alida Malcus pictures it well:

*... all during the mid-nineteenth century, and through the snow-drifted winters, the sudden squalls of summer, the raging three-day equinoxes of spring and autumn, the water-twisting tornadoes, settlers kept coming, flowing West with the irresistible urge of the migratory. They came from Ireland, from England, from*

*Scotland, from Sweden and Germany. They poured into this new land, with their meager savings hidden in their boots, or in their stout leather trunks. ...decks were covered with farm implements, (the) hold stacked with the bedsteads and chests of... passengers, and fast to the shrouds were the wagon wheels, like Viking shields along the gunnels.*

*The immigrants flowed into the New World and took it with a vitality and an energy that paid no heed to hardship, illness, disaster. The lower decks were fitted for steerage passengers with cookstoves, tables, and cupboards, thus making fares cheaper.*

*“Blue-Water Boundary” p. 162*

Although steam engines were common by this time, more than 90% of the vessels on the Great Lakes were wind-driven. As one man put it, they need “no fuel but the wind.” Some combined sail and steam. By 1850 there were more than 1100 vessels traversing the Great Lakes with every kind of cargo imaginable -- skins, hides, lard, iron, shingles, fish, lumber, butter, ham, corn, immigrants, and yes, whiskey.

#### The Great Lakes Journeys of the Nilssons (Nelsons) and Kjöllerström (Chilstroms)

In the vanguard of the Swedes who came between 1845-1855 were the Nilssons (Nelsons) in 1852 and the Kjöllerströms (Chilstroms) in 1853. Yes, what a feeling of ecstasy these families

must have had when they got off the ships in Boston and New York! Finally, at long last, they were done with the uncertainties of an ocean voyage. If they had maps at all, they had to be very simple and crude. After what may well have been a leisurely voyage through the Erie Canal, they may have thought they were coming close to their final destination.



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I wonder if they had heard stories in Sweden about the dangers of Great Lakes travel. Records show that between 1818 and 1853, fourteen ships burned, 4 exploded, and 26 were wrecked in storms or when running on rocks. More than a fourth of all ships that were launched were eventually destroyed in one way or another. In 1856, just three and four years after the Nilssons and Kjöllerströms sailed the Great Lakes, 417 people lost their lives on the Great Lakes waterways.



*Buffalo, NY as it appeared in 1852. Ships loaded passengers and cargo on the Buffalo River in the foreground.*

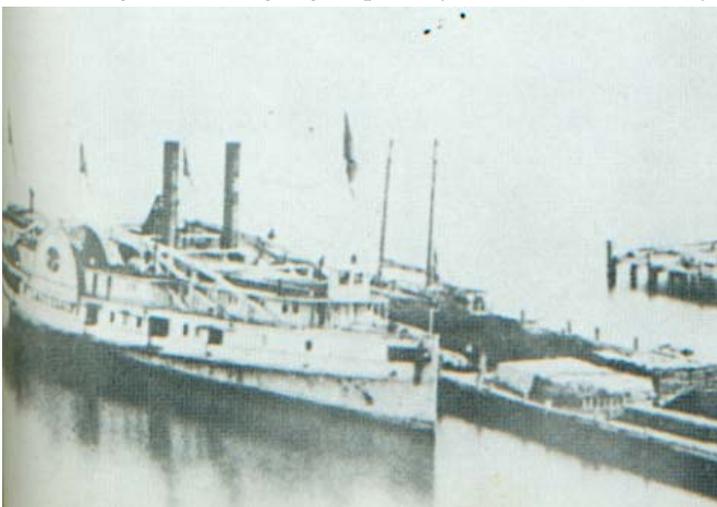
We have no record of the name of the boat on which either family sailed the Great Lakes.

But what we know

of this leg of their journey can be imagined, again, from the journal that Eric Norelius kept when he traveled this way in 1850, two years before the Nilssons (Nelsons) and three years before the Kjällerströms (Chilstroms):

*We stood on the railroad platform (in Buffalo) huddled together like a flock of bewildered sheep, not knowing where to go to present our transportation contracts so that we could proceed with our journey. ... we started off toward town, trooping like a flock of geese, drenched to the skin in the downpour of rain. There was a good deal of grumbling and complaining, and some wondered if we would ever survive our ordeals.*

*Late in the afternoon... we left Buffalo bound for Chicago, a journey which was very trying and difficult for all of us because our boat... was a wretched, ramshackle, old hulk without comforts or conveniences. We had no rooms except the filthy, open deck, even though the weather was very cold. Both decks were crowded with disorderly Irishmen who behaved more like animals than human beings. Those of our party who had small children were compelled to rent the two available rooms on the upper decks for an extra payment of forty dollars, which they could ill afford. The water was rough and our boat pitched and rolled its way through the turbulent waves, and some days we saw no sign of land at all. On Sunday... our little boat ran around on a sandbar in Lake St. Clair, between Lake Erie and Lake Huron. There we sat for half a day trying to get loose. Now and then we stopped at cities and villages on both sides of the lake. From Lake Michigan we caught glimpses of Wisconsin, a beautiful region apparently covered with dense growth of pine forests.*



*(“The Journals of Eric Norelius” pp.58-59)*

*The “Lady Elgin”, typical of Great Lakes ships in the 1850s.*

In “Augustana Heritage” Everett Arden paints an equally grim picture of the Great Lakes voyage:

*Crowded and unsanitary facilities, coupled with a siege of the dreaded cholera, turned the inland journey into a nightmare. Men, women, and children died, one after another, and were hastily buried in the sand along the route.*

*p.31*

The famous author Charles Dickens also made a trip on Lake Erie just a decade before the Nilssons and Kjällerströms arrived. He made this sober observation:

*It's all very fine talking about Lake Erie, but it won't do for persons who are liable to seasickness. We were all sick. It's almost as bad in that respect as the Atlantic. The waves are very short and constant.*

*“Ships of the Great Lakes” p. 55*



*The “Great Western” steamer from the 1850s. Wealthy passengers occupied the upper deck; poor folks the lower deck. It's very likely that the boat carrying the Nilson and Kjällerström families visited several port cities on its way through the Great Lakes, affording them an opportunity to stretch their legs and walk*

the streets of the new frontier cities. As for the boats, they were likely sailing vessels.

Whether fair or foul weather, no matter how fascinating to the eye, I have to believe that the Nilssons and Kjällerströms must have felt unimaginable relief when they finally reached their destination, the port of Milwaukee. I can hear them saying, “Never, never again will we set foot on a sailing vessel!”

And, as we will learn, they never did.

