

THE STORY OF  
TWO FAMILIES  
AND THEIR  
TIMES



CHAPTER TEN

THE CANNON RIVER YEARS

This period in the life of the Chilstroms and Nelsons is nearly a vacuum. With no journals from the family, only two letters, and scant church records to verify family history, I can only guess at many aspects of their lives. As before, I will try to fill out the picture by, first, reviewing the history of the area, and then reconstructing what life may have been like for the Nelsons and the Chilstroms.

Prehistoric Southeastern Minnesota

It's important to know a bit about the history of the area. The Native Americans who inhabited southeastern Minnesota were somewhat different from the Ojibwa (Chippewa) in the north and the Dakota (Sioux) in the west of Minnesota. Here the roots can be traced back some 12,000 years.

The most remarkable period was between 1000 and 1400 A.D. when the Cannon River/Red Wing territory was the northern border of a thriving civilization that pre-dated the coming of the Europeans. Known as the "Mississippians", many of these Indians could trace their ancestry to a tribe whose center was a place called "Cahokia" near present day St. Louis, Missouri. Once a city of more than 20,000, Cahokia was one of the world's largest metropolitan centers in its heyday. Its influence stretched all the way from the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes. At its peak Cahokia culture reached as far north as the present day city of Red Wing and Goodhue County, Minnesota.

In what is now Goodhue County the woodland Indians -- mainly the Dakota -- intermingled with the Mississippians, forming the base for the Indian community that was there when the Europeans arrived. Frederick Johnson summarizes his description of these peoples in these words:

*From Goodhue County's amateur archaeologists of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the painstaking researchers of the 21<sup>st</sup> runs a common thread of respect for the people who first lived in this area. For thousands of years these ancients persevered in an often-harsh climate. They developed stone tools for every kind of need, designed pottery for storage, cooking and ceremonial purposes, and developed tools for*

*gardening. They exhibited respect for their dead in their carefully built and uniformly shaped burial mounds next to every village. These intelligent, adaptable, resourceful prehistoric people prepared the way for those who later lived in Goodhue County.*

*“Goodhue County Minnesota” p. 7-8*



*A permanent Sioux residence from a water color by Seth Eastman, a Sioux Indian.*

### The Coming of Settlers from the East and from Europe

The present day city of Red Wing takes its name from the most prominent Indian chief. Chief Red Wing lived sometime in the late 1700s and into the early 1800s. He was revered as a brave warrior who was reputed to have never lost a battle. He and his son were involved in many of the treaties that were enacted with the white explorers. By the time the whites arrived in larger numbers there was tribal diffusion, with several being represented in the area. Trading with the whites changed their way of life. By the 1830s women were wearing colorful skirts and men often wore cotton shirts. Frederick Johnson cites a comment from a visitor from New England in 1855:

*The men were all young and most of them really fine looking fellows and the girls rather handsome; a very different looking set from those of La Crosse.*

*p. 18*

White settlers often misunderstood the Indians, believing for example, that the Indian women were forced to work too hard. For the Indians, however, this was tradition. The men were the hunters, gatherers and protectors of the village. The women were the work force on the home front. Again, from Frederick Johnson's account:

*Men treated (women) as equals in most respects, and though women had no formal voice in tribal politics, they did have considerable influence. The women owned the home and all that was inside it. After living and working in a Dakota village, Samuel Pond wrote that 'but a slight acquaintance' with the Santee would show that 'the women were not afraid of their husbands and are not the right material to be made slaves.'*

*p 19*

There was continuous conflict between tribes as they vied for hunting territory. Prior to 1840 Indians in Minnesota fought each other but never attacked the whites. But as the whites settled the land and reduced hunting prospects for the Indians it was inevitable that tensions would mount.

Father Louis Hennepin visited the Lake Pepin area in 1680, was taken captive by the Indians and brought to the Lake Mille Lacs area. He was later released. Other white Europeans who were among the first to arrive were missionaries, including Swiss Presbyterians. They wanted to make Christians of the Indians and, at the same time, teach them European farming practices. Their efforts, though well-intended, were not very successful in either religion or agriculture. Johnson reports the story of a missionary's cow that broke loose and swam across the Mississippi. The missionary's wife wrote in her diary:

*I really don't blame her (the cow) for being frightened. I am frightened myself at the thought of living in a village of 300 Indians. I shall be the only white woman here for some time.*

*pp. 23-23*

As was true all along the frontier, the sale of whiskey to the Indians proved to be a huge problem. There was constant conflict between the missionaries in the Red Wing area and the whiskey sellers who came across from Wisconsin.

And, as was also common wherever whites settled, the diseases they brought with them decimated the Indian communities. Epidemics of cholera in 1847, 1847 and 1852 left many dead in its wake.

Goodhue County was officially established by the Minnesota Territorial Legislature in March of 1853.

#### The Cannon River Area in the 1860s and Following

The Cannon River gets its name from the French who called it "River Aux Canots," meaning, "Canoe River." The Indians and fur traders often hid their canoes along the banks of the river while they went off in search of animals in the surrounding woods and prairies.

As I've noted earlier, and as might be expected, the aftermath of the Sioux Uprising caused a massive abandonment of the frontier. Countless families and pioneering individuals fled to the eastern part of Minnesota. Those who fled to Goodhue County, like the Nelsons and Chilstroms, were joined by those who had come up the Mississippi River by steamboat and disembarked at Red Wing.

Although they felt more sheltered from the threat of the native people, all of the other "giants in the earth" that plagued them in the Eagle Lake/Twin Lakes area, except the Indians, were waiting for them in Goodhue County: Human disease, crop failure from draught or disease, the challenge of finding good land on which to stake a claim, loneliness and much more. One woman spewed

out her anguish in these plaintive words:

*Back of the cabin is the forest, and in front of it stretches the wearisome prairie;  
half a mile off is the nearest neighbor.*

*Frederick Johnson, "Goodhue County", p. 48*

Another settler expressed his sense of isolation in these sad words: "*The sun no longer looks bright to me. I am lonesome, forsaken and I fear forgotten.*" *Ibid.*

And often, there were second thoughts about having come. Swen Olson wrote to his family in Sweden: "*You have to ponder it hard -- all of you who have it good in Sweden.*" *Ibid. p. 49*

Isolation was especially profound during the long winter months. One man wrote:

*... the silence of death rests on the vast landscape, save when it is swept by cruel winds that search out every chink and cranny of the buildings, and drive through each unguarded aperture the dry, powdery snow... Neighborly calls are infrequent because of the long distances which separate farmhouses... An alarming amount of insanity occurs in the new prairie states among farmers and their wives.*

*Ibid. p. 56*

We like to think of the frontier as settled by happy families. The true picture was quite different. Some men simply gave up and abandoned wife and children. Accidents and disease took a high toll. And there were, of course, divorces even in those times. It's startling to learn that in a sampling of homestead certificates in 1863 one in five was held by an unmarried woman.

In spite of these obstacles, those who survived found that the land in the Cannon River/Vasa area was good and produced abundant crops. According to Charles Flandrau,

*The soil (in southeastern Minnesota) was exceptionally fertile, and produced wheat in unusual abundance. Their lands were excellent for pasturing purposes and hay raising. They began in a small way, with cows and butter-making, but from lack of experience and knowledge of the business their progress was slow...*

*Charles E. Flandrau in The History of Minnesota, p. 200-201*

As has been noted elsewhere, this part of Minnesota was known as "The Big Woods." Except for a few open prairie areas, every acre of land had to be wrested from timber land. Trees included huge, old white oak, red oak, elm, cherry, hickory, sugar maple, poplar, ironwood, basswood, hackberry and black walnut. The woods also teemed with an abundance of wild game, including deer, prairie chicken, partridge and grouse.

As tragic as the Civil War was for the country as a whole, it produced some economic advantages for some. With many able-bodied men off to war there was a shortage of farm help. Before the War a field hand made about 50 to 65 cents per day. As the fighting wore on the rate climbed to

as much as three and four dollars a day. Wheat prices jumped from prewar rates of 35 cents a bushel to more than \$2.50 in the last days of the War.

As I mentioned earlier, another important “cash crop” during those years was the wild ginseng root that was found in abundance in the Big Woods. Ginseng was in high demand in China where it was used for medicinal purposes.

### The First Swedes in Goodhue County

What was this part of Minnesota like when the Chilstroms and Nelsons arrived after fleeing the Eagle Lake/New London area in 1862?

They soon learned that many other Swedish families had already settled in the area. In 1853, nine years before the Chilstroms and Nelsons came to Goodhue County, Hans Mattson and a group of Swedes arrived in Minnesota from Skåne, the southernmost province in Sweden. Mattson was only 20 at the time but already exhibited the marks of leadership that would make him a formidable personality in all of Minnesota for decades to come. He and his fellow travelers were advised that there was some good land available near the newly-established city of Red Wing. They first explored the area along the Cannon River but were not satisfied until, as Mattson later wrote,

*We came upon the large prairie where Vasa is now situated. On this prairie we saw good soil and good oak woods in all directions.*

Mattson was also concerned for the spiritual welfare of those who came with him from Sweden. As a layperson he conducted worship services until young Pastor Eric Norelius arrived in 1856.

The Swedish settlement continued to expand over the next years as more families arrived from Sweden and other parts of the United States. Eventually, Swedish farms encompassed parts of nine contiguous townships in north-central Goodhue County.

As might be expected, the homes of the settlers were simple in design. There were usually one or two rooms. Sometimes a family could afford an upstairs room or two. Because nails were



prohibitively expensive, wooden pegs were used to hold boards together. A cellar was often dug under the home to preserve food in the winter and keep it from freezing. Because prairie and forest fires were always a threat, settlers usually plowed a fire break around their homes and other buildings and grain stacks. Plows were fashioned of wood and pulled by oxen. Soap was made from leached wood ashes combined with grease from meat scraps.

*A reconstructed settler's home at the Rice County Museum in Faribault, MN.*

### The Cannon River Lutheran Church

Swedes living in the village of Cannon Falls intended to organize a congregation and build a church. But when the economy soured many of them moved to the countryside to the east along the Cannon River. It was there that the “Cannon River Swedish Lutheran Church” was organized in 1857 by Pastor Eric Norelius from the Vasa congregation. They adopted a constitution based on “*the Chicago and Mississippi United Conference Constitution, worked out by the synod of Northern Illinois.*” Among its provisions was the following:

*In reference to the conduct of members, it was agreed upon that members live sober and honest lives, as Christians should, and that no one who lives in open sin and lust should be received as a member, according to 1 Corinthians 5: 9-13.*

For the first years they met in homes. Pastor Peter Beckman, the same pastor who had served scattered congregations in the Eagle Lake/Twin Lakes area, arrived in 1859 and was pastor at Cannon River and Spring Garden Lutheran Churches until 1971. In 1862, the year the Chilstroms arrived, the first small church building was erected -- 26 X 20 X 12 feet high. It was located less than a mile north of Magnus and Katrina’s homestead. The inside was not finished until 1865. In 1867 the cemetery behind the church was laid out. The “Psalm Modicum”, a simple board with one string and played like a violin, was their sole instrument to lead the singing

The original church building was later moved to the site of the current Cannon River Lutheran Church, a few miles northeast of the original site. It still stands today, attached to a somewhat larger building. It is used for education and fellowship functions.

I visited the original cemetery in August, 2004, hoping to find the gravesite of Katrina, Magnus’ wife and my great grandmother, who died in 1869. There is no marker that exists for her. There are some illegible markers that could be for her, or the marker may be gone. The cemetery was neglected for many years, overgrown with brambles and trees. Several years ago volunteers cleaned it up and now give it good care.

And what about Svenning August, the son who died at the Cannon River farm in 1866 when he was 20 years old? I have no idea where he may have been buried.

### The Role of Pastor Eric Norelius

This may be a good place to say a bit about the ministry of Pastor Eric Norelius in Goodhue County and beyond. Indeed, he could be called “the father of Swedish Lutheranism in Minnesota.” In the chapter about the voyage to America I referred to Norelius’ departure from



Sweden and his arduous ship voyage across the Atlantic. And as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Norelius visited the scattered Lutheran settlers in the Eagle Lake/New London area in 1861 in his role as a missionary on the frontier. It’s very likely, as I indicated, that the Nelsons had contact with him at that time.

Norelius arrived in Minnesota in 1855, coming first to Red Wing. He wrote to a friend, “*Here we are now, without house and home, without goods and*

*almost without money.*” There was a shortage of housing in Red Wing as new residents arrived daily. His first sermon was preached in a partially completed store building that later became a saloon. It was not long before the congregation erected a small building for worship. In early summer he preached his first sermon in the Vasa area west of Red Wing. He and his wife moved into a small room in the home of one of the settlers. The next spring a small log building was erected at Vasa for a school and it was also used for a church.

We like to think that all of the Swedish immigrants were people with deep spiritual piety. Unfortunately, that was not the case. In the book “Goodhue County - First Hundred Years” a more realistic picture emerges:

*The spiritual conditions at the close of the year 1856, were not very encouraging. There were but few people who had any genuine spirituality and the people were slow to attend services. No one wanted to submit to the disciplines of the church. The salary the congregations were able to pay him that year amounted to about \$200 in cash and some farm produce.*

*p. 96*

In one of his writings Norelius complains:

*The prospects in spiritual matters in Cannon Falls were not bright. There were some very fine and devout women, but in those days the men were given to strong drink and during the holiday had caroused merrily.*

*“The Pioneer Swedish Settlements...”*

In spite of these discouraging conditions Norelius labored on in faithful ministry. For a time he was appointed by the church to be a missionary to the scattered settlers on the frontier. It was in that capacity, as noted earlier, that he visited the Eagle Lake/New London area in 1861. In the next year, however, he returned to his parish at Vasa and continued to serve them for most of his ministry. During his first years there he also organized an orphanage that became the Vasa Children Home. In 1862 he established an academy which was first relocated to East Union and finally to St. Peter and became Gustavus Adolphus College.

It was also during his time as pastor at Vasa that he organized the congregation at Spring Garden, southeast of Cannon Falls – where the John Nelson family belonged when they first arrived in 1862 -- and the Cannon River congregation northeast of Cannon Falls, where both the Nelsons and Chilstroms were members for many years.

Norelius was instrumental in the formation of the Augustana Lutheran Church in 1860 and in later years served as its president.

Norelius was truly a pioneer missionary pastor. We can be thankful that this great leader touched the lives of our families when they first came to Minnesota.

The Ministry of Pastor Peter Beckman

One of the greatest visionaries among the pioneer pastors was Peter Beckman. (Ironically, his great grandson, another Pastor Peter Beckman -- a retired professor of religion at Augustana



College, Rock Island, IL -- serves with me on the board of the Augustana Heritage Association.) Like Norelius, he was a pastor to the early settlers in Minnesota in many settings. In at least four of the congregations that the Nelsons and Chilstroms attended, Beckman had a role to play. He served in the Eagle Lake/New London area. He was their pastor for several years when he was the pastor at both Cannon River and Spring Garden Churches near Cannon Falls. And, as we shall see later, he was the founding pastor at Beckville Lutheran Church near Litchfield where John and Hattie Chilstrom would eventually settle.

Beckman's family roots were in the same area of Sweden as those of Eric Norelius. It was during confirmation time that he began to experience a deep spiritual awakening that continued until his mid-twenties when he came to have peace with God as a result of the ministry of the lay evangelist Carl O. Rosenius. He sailed for America in 1856, eventually reaching Red Wing and coming under the influence of Norelius. Recognizing his gifts, Norelius encouraged him to begin to do some preaching, first across the Mississippi River in Wisconsin and then at Spring Garden.

The Spring Garden community was first settled in 1856, six years before the Nelsons arrived. Norelius visited the first settlers. Beckman came as a lay minister in 1858 and organized the congregation in 1858. At first they met in homes. They were linked to Cannon River Lutheran Church in a two point parish. Beckman was ordained in 1859. The first small church building was erected in 1862, the same year the Nelsons arrived. Beckman walked between the two congregations since, as he wrote in his diary, "*horses were not to be found among our people, and no roads because everything was new.*" Eventually he was able to secure a small red pony to take him from place to place. Beckman tells of one Sunday when he was traveling from the Cannon River Church north of the River to Spring Garden Church south of the River. Because the River was flooded he had to leave his horse at the shore and try to walk through the river. His clothing was frozen to his body. Somehow he survived without dire consequences to his health.

Beckman's home was a stone cellar. When the congregation decided not to build a parsonage, Beckman decided that his family could no longer tolerate the circumstances and resigned in 1869.

Another pastor wrote about Beckman:

*Brother Beckman with his unsteady and mean horse, was nevertheless always happy. He was cheerful and good-natured, however badly things seemed to go, and always thanked God that it didn't go worse. He was never at a loss as to what to do.... His presence was always cheering and pleasant. Preaching God's Word was his uppermost desire and seeking to find our countryman and gather them around God's Word was his constant task.*

Of himself Beckman wrote:

*As long as the Lord gives me health and strength, I have no place to be at ease but*

*I must move on, to find my countrymen and bring them the Word of God.  
“Spring Garden’s First Century” p. 19*

That is exactly what he did, moving to the frontier and establishing congregations at Atwater, Grove City, Beckville, Svea, Sacred Heart, Strombeck, Murdock, Benson, Starbuck, before moving to the Red River Valley area where he continued to organize congregations among the scattered Swedish settlers.

I must add this interesting footnote. Lest we think too highly of our ancestors, we find reminders now and then that they were very ordinary folks. In 1871 the Spring Garden congregation passed a resolution that reads:

*Resolved, that no tobacco chewing that necessitates expectorating be allowed in the church during services.*

*“Spring Garden... Seventy-fifth Anniversary” p. 25*

Apparently the problem persisted among those stubborn Swedes. In 1877 the following action was taken:

*Resolved, that we heartily exhort each and every one to observe cleanliness, etc., in the church, not to spit tobacco on the floor, and to care for their children in the church and not allow them to sit alone in the gallery.*

*Ibid, p. 26*

### The “Minnesota Anden”

This is a good point to say a brief word about what has been called the “Minnesota Anden” or “Minnesota spirit.” As the Swedish Lutheran tradition developed in the U.S. it became apparent that the pastors in Minnesota -- like Jackson, Norelius and Beckman -- were of a different “spirit” than those in other parts of the country, such as Illinois where Swedish Lutheranism was more established than in Minnesota. Dr. Bernhard Erling, retired professor of religion at Gustavus Adolphus College, has written about these pastors and this “spirit”. He describes them as products of the pietistic movement that swept over Sweden in the mid-eighteenth century. The accent was on the importance of a personal relationship with God. Thus, in their preaching the Minnesota pastors, more than those in other places, tended to call for their hearers to make a commitment of faith to Jesus Christ. The writings of the Swedish lay evangelist Carl Rosenius were encouraged. One of the major points in those writings was that we can have peace with God only through trust in Jesus Christ. While the Holy Sacraments were not played down, believers were encouraged to combine their confidence in them with a personal piety.

The other element in the “Minnesota anden” was that these pastors resisted pressure to think of themselves as part of a national Swedish church. They thought they should have their own Minnesota church newspaper, for example, as well as their own regional organization. The fact that Minnesota was a more rural setting than was the case in other states also played into this accent. Eventually a “Minnesota Conference” was organized. But it was not a separatist movement. Under the leadership of Norelius it became one of several conferences in what

became the Augustan Lutheran Church, the national church for Swedish Lutherans.

### Securing Land in Goodhue County

I have no idea how the Nelsons and Chilstroms managed to secure land. As far as I can tell the Nelsons did not own land in the Spring Garden area where they first settled. It was not until they moved to the north, a mile or two south of the Cannon River, that they staked a claim. If what Hans Mattson said about the land along the Cannon River is correct, it's clear that the Chilstrom homestead along the River was not choice acreage. The Nelson land on higher ground, though probably not as good as that in the Vasa area, may have been somewhat better.

Government survey teams set township and claim boundaries. Townships were typically six square miles. A square mile consisted of 640 acres. For measurement they used what was called a "Gunter's chain." One chain was 66 feet long, with 80 chains equaling a mile. Ten square chains made an acre. A homestead usually consisted of 160 acres, though many were only 80 acres.

How did settlers secure funds to establish a claim? Undoubtedly it was through the Homestead Act. Though President Lincoln's most important act as president was the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves, surely his signing of the Homestead was nearly as significant. Through this single act of Congress and the President, millions of acres of free land were released to land-hungry settlers.

As I have noted elsewhere, though the land was "free" there were certain costs involved. Money was scarce. Most settlers had to borrow the \$240 needed to register their claim. Interest rates began at a standard 25% and ran as high as 40%.

If land needed to be cleared, a farmer would use or borrow an ox to pull the stumps after the trees had been felled. After clearing some land a farmer might hire a "breaking rig" consisting of three to five teams of oxen hitched in pairs to pull a large plow. One man would control the oxen while the other handled the plow. The normal charge was \$5 per acre.

### Life in Goodhue County for the Chilstroms

Like their new neighbors, the Chilstroms were undoubtedly relieved to be living in a safer place. In "A Minnesota History" William Watts Folwell describes the unwillingness of many pioneers to venture back into the hinterlands:

*...settlers were reluctant to move out on the prairie and preferred the long and costly task of converting forested sections into farms. They feared the fierce winds and the terrible prairie fires. There was no timber for fuel or building except in the slight fringes along the watercourses. In some districts very deep wells had to be dug or bored or driven. Because the prairie was bare of trees, many believed the soil was so poor that trees could not grow; they did not conceive that a soil which could yield such rich grass and so splendid a show of wildflowers was not barren.*



These were good years to be farming in Goodhue County. Rhoda Gilman describes how grateful these new settlers were when they discovered the assets of this part of Minnesota:

*They found that wheat grew well in the fertile new soil. With luck, a settler could pay for the land by raising one crop. The rich uplands of Goodhue County west of Red Wing filled with farms in the 1860s. For a while they grew more wheat than any county in the nation. Without railroads, farmers had to haul their grain in wagons to river towns. There it was stored until it could be loaded on steamboats. Red Wing boomed. At one time its warehouses could hold a million bushels of grain.*

*“The Story of Minnesota’s Past” p. 12-13*

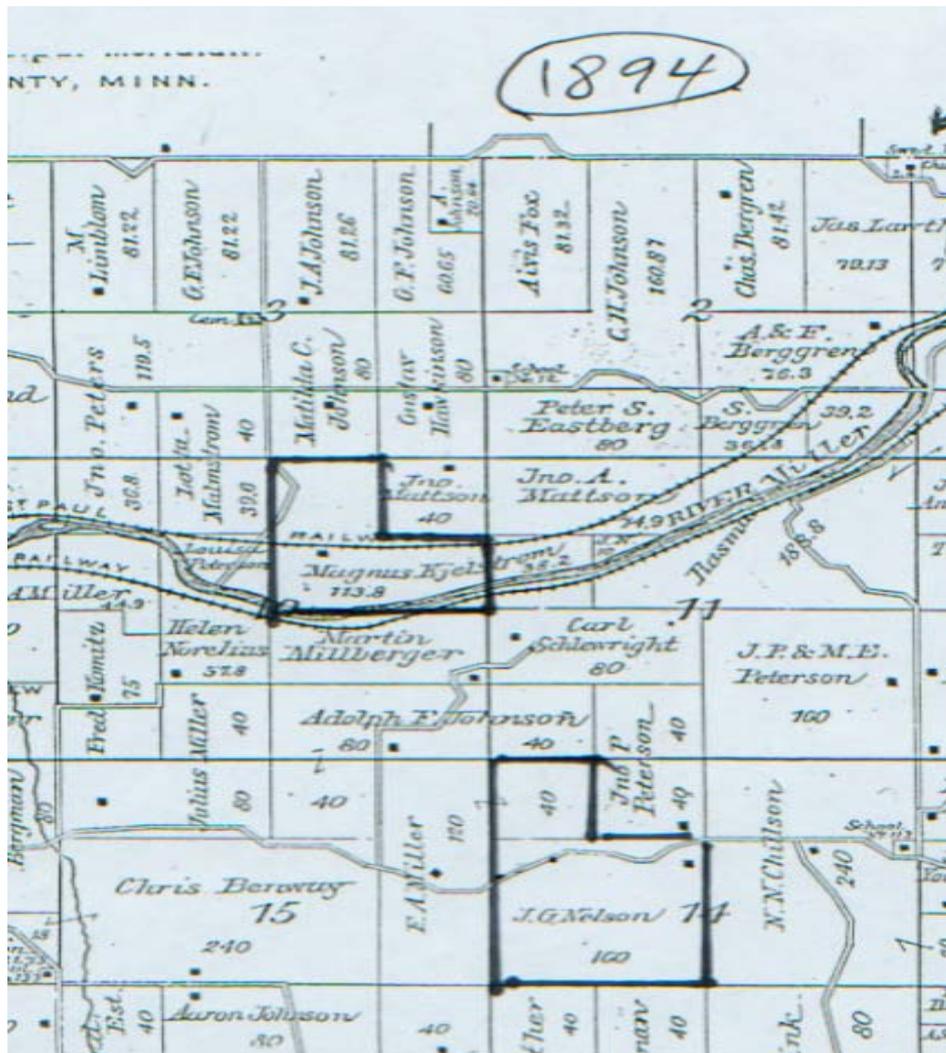
Unfortunately, the good times did not last for the city of Red Wing.

*In 1873 Red Wing led the whole country in the amount of wheat sold by farmers. But the bonanza soon ended. Railroads were built through southeastern Minnesota, and farmers began taking their grain to inland towns. Immigrants, too, traveled by train to the places they wanted to settle. The great days of the Mississippi were over.*

*“The Story of Minnesota’s Past” p. 13*

As I noted above, the Cannon Falls Township plat book for 1870 shows that they owned homesteaded property along the north side of the Cannon River, three or four miles east and one or two miles north of Cannon Falls.

The 1894 plat map shows that Magnus still owned the same piece of land in Cannon Falls Township. We have to assume, I think, that he kept it until he died.



*The only photograph we have of Magnus Chilstrom (Kjöllerström). An inscription on the back reads: "Tribune Printing Co.; Willmar, MN." There is no date, but we can assume it was taken late in his life. We have no photograph of his wife Katrina who predeceased him by 26 years. She and their son Svenning lie in unmarked graves in the Cannon River area. He lies in a grave at Beckville Cemetery near Litchfield -- nearly 100 miles away.*

In the record book of the Cannon River Lutheran Church the name "Magnus Kjöllerström" appears -- with the Swedish spelling. Under his name it simply

says “*wife*”, but her name is not listed. Under the category of children only “*Emil*” appears, but nothing else. This, of course, was Charles Emil.

I know nothing more about the years Magnus and Katrina lived on the Cannon River. There is one story about Magnus that was told to me by my aunt Malvina Chilstrom Nygren and that is corroborated in a note left by Ethel Chilstrom. Malvina said that her grandfather was an enthusiastic outdoorsman. Though the land along the river was poor, it was great for hunting and fishing. She reported that on one winter hunting venture he shot a deer and followed it out on to the ice. He broke through the ice and suffered severe frost bite, necessitating amputation of his toes and leaving him somewhat crippled for the rest of his life. He had to be fitted with special shoes. The note in Ethel Chilstrom’s comments about her grandfather says, “*Grandfather fished ice...club feet.*”

Pictured here in the right part of the photograph is the tiny Cannon River Lutheran Church, built in the 1862. As I mentioned earlier, the building is only 26 feet long, 20 feet wide, with a 12 foot



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location of the Cannon River Lutheran Church, a few miles to the northeast. It is attached to another building and now serves as an education and fellowship hall. At one time both the Chilstroms and Nelsons belonged to the little congregation. Later the Nelsons joined St. Ansgar’s Lutheran Church in Cannon Falls. Since the Nelsons lived on the south side of the Cannon River, this makes sense. Magnus and Katrina continued to belong to the Cannon River Lutheran Church for the remainder of their lives. We can assume that in this small building baptisms were held for Mina, Edward and Anton (Malvina was baptized at the Red Wing Hospital by a nurse). Funeral services were also undoubtedly held here for Katrina and Svenning.

Magnus lived to the age of 86. Though, as I mentioned above, it appears that the farm on the Cannon River was owned by him until he died, it’s not certain that he actually lived there until then. He was either visiting or staying with his son Charles in Minneapolis at the time of his death. According to Aunt Malvina, he was walking a young heifer near a gravel pit when the critter bolted and pulled Magnus to the ground. He broke a leg and some ribs. The breaks did not heal properly and he died a short time later.



*The “old” Cannon River Lutheran Church Cemetery is near the original site for the congregation. Here is where Magnus’ wife Katrina and her son Svenning may be buried in unmarked graves. The cemetery was neglected for years, overgrown with brush. In recent years several members of the congregation have cleared the area and now give it good care.*

### The Children of Magnus and Katrina Chilstrom

Before I zero in on my grandparents, John and Hattie Chilstrom, let me write a bit about the other children of Magnus and Kartina.

#### Daughter Eva Kjöllström Olafson

As we noted earlier, the eldest daughter Eva stayed in Sweden.

#### Daughters Inga Sophia, Anna Catrina and Louisa Fredrika Chilstrom Morris

The next three daughters, Inga, Anna and Louisa, as we learned in the previous chapter, married Morris brothers.

#### Son Svenning August Chilstrom

Magnus’s Bible indicates that Svenning August, born in August 1848, died in November of 1866, four years after they arrived in Goodhue County, at the age of 18. No cause of death is given.

#### Son Charles Emil Chilstrom

The youngest in the family was Charles Emil. Sometime in the 1860s he decided that life in the city of Minneapolis should be his destiny. He probably traveled to the city by stagecoach. Established in 1854, the St. Paul-to-Dubuque stagecoach made a stop in Cannon Falls. The stage was pulled by four horses, with frequent stops to get a fresh team. It could accommodate six people, three facing forward and three facing back. The coach body rested on two long straps of bullhide that extended from front to back. It was a very bumpy ride. Present day U.S. Highway 52 follows this same route.

In the report cited earlier, James Chillstrom, relying on Charles’ daughter Ethel as his source, tells the story this way:

*At the age of fifteen, with his mother dying and money scarce, Charles asked permission to go to Minneapolis with his flock of turkeys and sell them, as this was*

*the week before Thanksgiving and the market prices would be at their peak. He sold his turkeys, sent the money home, and got a job as errand boy at the store of an elderly druggist on a deserted corner on Washington Avenue. As he proceeded to tell the old apothecary of his plight and his turkeys, the old man offered him a permanent position at a salary of seventy-five cents per day, plus room and board. He readily accepted the job! On Sunday, his only free day, he went to the Tabernacle Mission Church. There he met the woman who seven years later became his wife.*

*Through the years, Charles Emil worked at any job offered him and eventually earned and saved enough money to fulfill his life ambition: become a druggist. He always credited his first employer, the old apothecary, for the invaluable experience he received. He founded the C. E. Chilstrom Drug Store on the (southwest) corner of Lake and Nicollet in Minneapolis. When he died, he was the oldest independent druggist in Minneapolis, dying just before the 'chain' stores got their start. The Chilstrom name appeared in the first telephone book ever printed in Minneapolis, that name being: "C.E. Chilstrom, Druggist."*

There is some doubt in my mind that Charles was only fifteen when he left home. The 1970 census shows that he is living at home and is age 19. It's possible, of course, that he still considered this as his primary residence, even if he was living in Minneapolis at the time.

Records from the Minneapolis telephone directory for 1877 show that Charles was a "clerk" at Young, Patterson and Co. and that he boarded at the Commercial Hotel. The next year he had moved to the National Hotel. The following year he was living at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 4<sup>th</sup> Street. In 1881 the phone book shows that he is now a partner with Patterson. The listing reads: "PATTERSON & CHILSTROM (L.N. Patterson and C.E. Chilstrom) druggists, 1207 3d av. S." Eventually, he went on his own and established the drugstore at the southwest corner of the intersection of Nicollet and Lake.



*Charles Emil Chilstrom with his granddaughter Kathryn.*

In a note left by Ethel Chilstrom, she describes her father Charles as "a kindly, loveable, deeply religious man."

*Ethel Chilstrom*

And speaking of Ethel, this good place to insert a word her. She became a well-teacher of speech and dramatics in the Twin She had Minneapolis area politicians as students. cousin Don Chillstrom has a song written during War II, the words by Ethel



may be a about known Cities. Second a copy of World and the

music by her niece Kathryn Swedell. Its title is “We’re going to Hit, Hit, Hit, HIT, HITLER.”

*We’re going to hit, hit, hit, hit Hitler, We’re going to set the rising sun,  
We’re going to black out all the black shirts, and tho our work has just begun,  
It’s down, down, down with traitors, and up, up, up with Liberty,  
We’ll pull the hair off old Herr Hitler,  
Until the whole wide world is free.  
We’re working, and thinking,  
We’re building ship and plane  
Together, Forever, with all one might and main.  
We’re out to hit, hit, hit, hit Hitler, We’re going to sink the Rising Sun,  
We’re out to black out all the black shirts,  
Until our victory is won.*

The “Black Shirts” refer to those worn by the Nazis and the Rising Sun to the Japanese flag.

#### Son John Chilstrom and Hedda (Hattie) Nelson

What was life like for Hattie Nelson, my grandmother, during her youth? I can only guess. She would have been 15 years old when the Nelson family came to Goodhue County and the Spring Garden area southeast of Cannon Falls. And she would have been somewhere between 18 and 20 when her parents moved to the farm straight east of Cannon Falls. I have a faint recollection of hearing that Hedda spent some time working in Minneapolis as a domestic maid. It was not uncommon for young Swedish women to work for wealthy families in the Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The Chilstroms lived only a short distance to the north of the Nelsons. Since, as we will see later, John and Hattie were married at about the time her family moved to the farm east of Cannon Falls, we would have to assume that this relationship had been in the making for some time. (I will have much to say about my grandmother in the next chapter.)

Exactly when and how the relationship between my grandparents developed we may never know. Did it start already in the Pine Lake, Wisconsin years when they were both very young children? Or did they begin to notice each other during the year when the “Kyllerstoms” lived at Twin Lakes and the Nelsons a few miles away at Eagle Lake? Or did it begin after both families had fled the Sioux Uprising and settled in the Cannon River area?

When did John and Hattie marry? So far I don’t know. There are no church records to indicate an exact date. My educated guess is that it must have been sometime between mid-1867 and early 1868, since the eldest child, Mina (Minnie)



*John and Hedda (Hattie) Chilstrom. This is probably their wedding picture. On the back is printed: "James A. Brush. Photographer. 223 Nicollet Avenue. Minneapolis, Minnesota." Also this note: "Mr. & Mrs. John Chilstrom (Hedda Nelson). John was the oldest son. Mrs. David Swedell. 3038 Harriet Av. Mpls. Min*

was born November 5, 1868. If that's a safe assumption, John was about 23 and Hattie was 20 or 21 at the time of their marriage. It also seems clear that John farmed with his father for a few years since I found no record of land ownership for him in the 1870 plat book and the birth records for the oldest children list him as "farmer". The 1870 census record shows that Magnus, John, Hedda (Hattie), Mina (Minnie) and Charles were all living in the same home along the Cannon River at that time. I'm also guessing that John and Hattie and their children moved to Red Wing sometime after 1874 since the birth record for Malvina lists John as a "laborer" and her baptism is recorded at First Lutheran Church in Red Wing, though there is no record that John and Hattie actually joined that congregation. Malvina was the last child to be born in Goodhue County. I could find no birth record for Mina (Minnie) at the Goodhue County Government Center. The records for the next three children read as follows:

*Chilstrom, Albert E. Feb. 23, 1872. Book 1 p. 37. Feb. 23, 1872. Albert Edward, male while, Cannon Falls (township) John and Hilda Chilstrom - Swedes. Farmer - Reg. 4/15/1872*

(Note that Chilstrom is spelled with both two "l"s and one "l" in the same record! Also, "Albert" should be "Algot" and "Hilda" should be "Hedda". Was this carelessness on the part of the county clerk? Or was it a case of misunderstanding because of language differences? I suspect it was the latter.)

*.Kyllstrom, Anton T. July 7, 1874. Book 1, p. 78, line 15. July 7, 1874 Anton*

*Theodore, male, white, Cannon Falls (township) John and Hedda Kyllstrom, Sweden, Farmer. Reg. 9/25/1874*

(Note that the name is now spelled with a “K”! Another illustration of how difficult it is to trace this family’s history.)

The following information for Malvina is entered in red ink and from the handwriting it’s clear that the entry was made at a later time:

*Chilstrom, Christina K. M. (No birth date is given.) Book 1, p. 180, line 134. (“Remarks - 16-112”) Christina Katharina Malvina Chilstrom. (“Kjellstrom” is crossed out and “Chilstrom” is recorded in its place.) Female, white, Red Wing. John & Hedda (“Hilda” is recorded and then crossed out.) Sweden, Laborer. Reg. 1/9/1878.*

The note “Remarks - 16-112” refers to an amendment of the birth record in another volume at the County office. That reads:

*Information is amended on 9/16/1958:*

*Christina Katharina Malvina Chilstrom’. Witness - Anton Chilstrom. Born 10/22/1877 at Red Wing. ‘No given name (Kjellstrom). Amends records from Kjellstrom to John Chilstrom. Hilda - ‘Hedda’.*

The gap between birth dates and the registration dates probably reflects the fact that the children were born at home with the help of a midwife and not recorded until a convenient time when the family was in Red Wing. I also learned that Malvina was baptized by a nurse, indicating that it was probably an emergency baptism at a hospital.

Why did John Chilstrom quit farming -- probably around 1876 or 1877? There may have been two causes. First, there was a national financial panic, precipitated by the failure of Jay Cooke and Company, the country’s largest bank, in 1873. The impact lasted for years and touched every part of the nation.

That was followed in the late 1878 by a near complete failure of the wheat crops in Goodhue County from rust and mildew. According to one report, the devastation was worst in the lower fields -- as would be the case with the Chilstroms along the Cannon River. It’s only a guess, but my hunch is that when wheat failed the Chilstrom farm could not support the family and John and Hattie and their children moved to Red Wing.

What kind of “laborer” was John when they moved to Red Wing? It may have been any of a number of kinds of work. Red Wing had been a “boom town” between 1870 and 1873 when several new industries were founded -- a stone quarry, a barrel factory, a furniture factory and a tannery. And though the quantity was greatly reduced, Red Wing continued to ship grain down the Mississippi. Or it may have been any kind of common labor.

In the meantime, when wheat failed in Goodhue County, production shifted to the western parts

of Minnesota. When they heard about new opportunities in the west, including free land, John and Hattie no doubt concluded that this was to be the direction for their next move.

### John and Hedda (Hattie) Chilstrom Move to Beckville/Litchfield

After all these years with their parents -- from childhood in Sweden, to America across the Atlantic Ocean, to Wisconsin, to Eagle Lake/Twin Lakes, to the Cannon River area -- John and Hattie conclude that it's time for them to move west. Katrina, John's mother, and Svenning, his brother, are dead. John's three sisters are gone -- two have died and one has moved to Colorado. Charles Emil is in Minneapolis.

In 1879, when John was 35 and Hattie was 32, they set aside any reservation they may have had about moving back near the place they had lived as children and from which they had fled in terror some seventeen years earlier. No, they would not go as far as the Eagle Lake/Twin Lakes area. Their destination would be the Beckville settlement near Litchfield. There they will homestead a farm about five miles southwest of the city. By this time they have three children -- Edward, Minnie and Malvina. Beckville Lutheran Church will become the center of their religious and social life. And along with them will go Mathilda, Hedda's sister, and her husband Gustav Coleman and their family. Hattie and Mathilda will be living on adjacent farms.

The elder Nelsons, John and Kristina, their son Gustav and his wife, and their single daughter Louisa, will remain in the Cannon Falls community.

The Kjällerströms were a family of nine in Sweden.

Now, twenty-six years later, Magnus is completely alone.

### Footnotes:

#### The Northfield Bank Robbery

An historical footnote about the infamous "Northfield Bank Robbery" is in order. It took place on September 7, 1876. We can only surmise that the Chilstrom and Nelson families, along with every family in the area, must have heard of it soon after it happened and may have spent some nervous days wondering if this band of robbers might emerge from the woods to rob them, too. A Swede from an area northwest of Cannon Falls happened to be in Northfield that day and was killed by one of the Younger brothers, possibly because he didn't understand English and failed to run for cover when Younger demanded he do so.

#### The Orphan Trains

Although it did not directly affect either the Chilstrom or Nelson family, a word also needs to be said about "The Orphan Trains." Beginning in 1854 and continuing until the 1920s thousands of children from the eastern part of the U.S. were transported by train to the Midwest. They came mostly from the slums. Some were orphans who had lost one or both parents. Others had been abandoned by their families. Still others were children that were taken from their parents because

of neglect.

The trains made their way to cities like Red Wing and small towns like Cannon Falls where local folk would meet the children and give them a new home. The children, accompanied by chaperones, would wait on the platform until their names were called. Childless couples, farmers who wanted more help, families who simply wanted to give them a new start in life -- there were many different reasons for taking these children into their homes. Most were treated well. Unfortunately, some were abused and further neglected. I think it safe to assume that the Nelsons and Chilstroms knew about these children and may have had neighbors who had adopted them.

Bonnie Beatson Palmquist puts the feelings of the children into plaintive poetic form, imagining the feelings of a young girl who is the last to be chosen and about to be separated from her little brother:

*'Don't cry,' I said.  
We knew we probably  
wouldn't be together.  
But I had so hoped we would.  
Then another stop,  
this time in Milltown,  
and we got off,  
lined up in a row,  
and a woman rushed  
toward Willie  
crying, 'That's my Henry!'  
'But that's not his name,'  
I cried softly.  
With a backward look  
with those sad eyes,  
he followed them.*

*"Voices of Minnesota History" p. 87*