

“SWEDES FORMED TIGHT-KNIT COMMUNITIES...”

The History of Swedes in Minnesota

By Karen R. Nelson

Since the era of mass Swedish emigration to North America, no other ethnic group has been so closely identified with a single state as Swedes are with Minnesota.

Between 1850 and 1930, about 1.3 million Swedes arrived in the U.S. By around 1910, Swedes were the largest ethnic group in Minneapolis. Northwest of the Twin Cities, in Chisago or Isanti counties, Swedish Americans were almost 70 percent of the population. In neighboring Illinois, about 10 percent lived in Chicago, making it the second largest Swedish city in the world, only after Stockholm.

It is partly a myth that Swedes moved to Minnesota because it looked like Sweden. There were “push and pull” factors on both sides. Religious and political reasons were certainly factors, but famine and a lack of land in an agricultural-based society were most important. Many were lured by the promise of a better life. Young and healthy men



and women were encouraged by letters home or by land agents. The Homestead Act of 1862 made public land available cheaply to any “citizen or intending citizen,” provided they lived on the land for at least five years. Railroad lines delayed by the Civil War were completed, making travel easier.

Swedes formed tight-knit communities and intermarried. A cultural life quickly developed, much of it centered on religion or the Swedish language. Newspapers were important, including the Minnesota-based *Svenska amerikanska posten*, published by American Swedish Institute’s immigrant founder Swan Turnblad. Theater and singing were a vibrant part of community life, with *Midsummer* celebrations as early as the 1870s.

Swedish-Minnesotans managed to leave their mark on the state. They founded colleges, including

Gustavus Adolphus and Bethel, churches, hospitals, newspapers, businesses, lodges, neighborhood associations and cultural institutions. Scandinavian immigrants became involved in politics, attaining the state Governorship multiple times. We like to think they brought good values, civility and a belief in education. They strove to become American, yet maintained ties to Sweden.

Not all Swedish immigrants were successful. As Dr. Rudolph Vecoli, scholar-director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, observed: “Discussions of current immigration are often colored by a mythological view of the immigrant past... Industrial accidents, unemployment, exploitation, alcoholism, familial abuse, crime and vice were facts of immigrant life in the Twin Cities a hundred years ago, just as they are today...”

Immigration was often a mixed bag. John Rice, an historical geographer, has called the emigrants “movers”... people willing to accept the challenges of uprooting themselves and moving to another world. It has also been said (by an unnamed source) that it was “the best Swedes” who left. Minnesota perhaps got a certain type of person who contributed with important energy.

Regardless, Minnesota remains the state that, with an estimated 587,000, is the most dense with Swedish Americans. There are a lot of Swedes in Minnesota, and a lot of Minnesota Americans with Swedish roots who are very proud of their heritage and of Sweden.



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