



# Madison County Genealogical Society



Madison County Genealogical Society  
P.O. Box 1031, Norfolk, NE 68702-1031  
mcgs@telebeep.com

[www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nemcgs/](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nemcgs/) [www.nesgs.org/~mcgs](http://www.nesgs.org/~mcgs)

## Swedish Research

When I was assembling all the pictures and information booklets that my husband and I collected on our trip to Sweden in May, I realized that I wanted some more information on why the Swedes emigrated en mass. So I did some research in library books, the Internet, the informational booklets, and interviewed people who immigrated to America. The following is some of the information that I discovered.

Swedes started coming to America in 1638, that is just 18 years after the landing of the "Mayflower." The first Swedes were not religious protesters, but rather an organized group of Colonizers. They were sent by the government in Stockholm to establish a colony under the Swedish crown in Delaware. The era of New Sweden ended in 1655 when the colony was lost to the Dutch. The original settlers remained and kept up their language and culture for a long time. Many of the descendants of the Delaware Swedes became distinguished fighters for freedom in the war against England in 1776.

An increase in Sweden's population influenced a rise in emigration. The population rose from 2.3 million in 1800 to more than double that a hundred years later. The tidal wave of Swedish emigration began in the mid-1840's, when the first organized emigrant groups began to arrive in New York. These farmers who settled mainly in Illinois and Iowa were followed during the period up to 1930 by almost 1.3 million countrymen. The Swedes still rank number seven among our European immigrant groups. In proportion to the population of their home countries, only the British Isles and Norway surpassed Sweden in the number of immigrants. The effect of the exodus from Sweden reached its climax around 1910, when 1.4 million Swedish first and second-generation immigrants were listed as living in the U.S.

Comparing this to Sweden's population at the time, which was 5.5 million, means that roughly one-fifth of all Swedes had their homes in America right before WW1.

At the beginning of the 19th century three important changes took place:

- 1, Sweden had not been involved in any wars since 1814.
2. Potatoes became a nutritious supplement to the poor man's bread.
3. Smallpox vaccinations became mandatory.

The combined benefits resulted in a growth of population, but which in turn resulted in

other problems for society. The Cathedral Chapter of Vaxjo characterizes the problems of population growth in the following statement: "With the assistance of peace, vaccination and potatoes the population has increased considerably. But since this development is not matched by new jobs the result is one-sided and a badly planned system has come forth all over the society. The land is filled with dugouts inhabited by people with no other capital than their hands." The large number of children could have also been mentioned. Because of the large families and generations of divided inheritances, the farms became tiny land holdings. Poor soil was laid under the plow, and the cottages of tenant farmers and landless laborers multiplied. The population of some of the parishes doubled three times over. In the middle of the 19th century, Sweden was a land of poverty, want, and social frustration.

The second half of the 19th century experienced an increasing series of technical inventions and improvements, which quickly transformed small-scale workshops into modern industries causing the old cities to develop faster than ever before. A network of railroads reached the far ends of the country. That and the use of steam power shortened the huge distances between the ore mines in the North and the export harbors that were further South. As new railroads were built, new industrial centers were created around the railroads and the mouths of the rivers. Compulsory elementary schools, a modern welfare program and liberal economic reforms pointed toward a way out of poverty and distress. However, as urbanization increased, cities became overcrowded with unskilled workers hoping for a new life. It was very easy to buy a train ticket to Stockholm, but where does one find housing and a job in a city suddenly overcrowded with job-hungry unskilled laborers? Since the labor market was so small, many of the young people were drawn down into the social swamp, ending as beggars or prostitutes.

The population growth brought with it intensive use of all available land in central and southern Sweden. The woods were cleared of trees and underbrush to give a few new furrows to the plow and more pasture to the animals. Hay, mosses, herbs, and berries were harvested from the ground while bark for bread and leafy branches for animal feed were collected from the trees. The axe was in constant work since nearly all basic commodities were based on wood: the fuel in the stoves, the logs in the buildings, the furniture, kitchen utensils and even the plates one ate from. Nineteenth century agriculture was balanced on a sharp edge between well being and starvation. This was the case in the late 1860's, when there was a series of crop failures due to extreme weather conditions. 1867 became a year with much rain and rotted crops. The following year was very dry; as a result, the farmer had to combat burnt fields. But the worst was yet to come. 1869 became a year of diseases and unbelievable miseries.

Most of the emigrants were farmers. They took their servants and relatives with them. Considering the difficulties that the first emigrants had to face, it was only natural that they chose to go in groups. The group offered protection and help during the difficult early period. When the group arrived in America, they often stayed together and established colonies.

The individuals, families, or emigrant parties who left Sweden before the Civil War did not have access to the “modern” Atlantic Liners. They were allowed to sail “on top of the cargo” after having bargained with the skipper about transport and accommodation. Most of the emigrants of 1840-1850’s sailed on creaking barges, brigs, and other sailing ships carrying typical Swedish cargo like bar iron, lumber or tar. The only advantage of these non-passenger vessels was that when they left a Swedish harbor, they went directly to America. After spending months at sea, they arrived in New York, some more dead than alive.

Newspapers in the 1850’s were filled with articles and advertisements about America and the immigration there. Approximately one person in every village received a paper and it was shared and read by every family. American letters written by the immigrants were overwhelming in praise of America and very positive toward American immigration. The immigrants’ highest desire was that people from their home area would come and join them in their New World settlements. The letters told of fertile land, gold, endless forests, strange animals, Indians, and free land. The optimistic tenor of most American letters made them effective and significant carriers of the American fever. As many as sixty thousand people left Sweden during the first years because of starvation. In contrast, the people who emigrated later on were not escaping from something, but rather, going to something. The offer of free land and fertile soil was very tempting for the land-less people of Sweden. President Lincoln’s Homestead Act of 1862 was an important factor in the Swedish emigration to the US.

The Swedish mass emigration would not have been possible without the Swedish railroads and the organized traffic over the Atlantic. At this time, no Swedish steamship line carried passengers directly from Gothenburg to America. They, therefore, had to use British or German ships. The emigrant route started with the train ride, horse, or walk to the big port of Gothenburg. The emigrants from the southern part of Sweden found it more convenient to emigrate from Copenhagen or Bremen. There were 2000 active immigrant agents on the West Coast of Sweden in the 1880’s. The emigrant agents housed their offices in large homes. Their offices would be on the ground floor and the upper levels would be rooms to house the emigrants waiting for the steamer to get a full load. While they were waiting, the emigrants would sign contracts for the voyage. They would take a British or German ship to Hull, England, where, all too often, they would be cheated by hotel owners, salon keepers, and brothel madams. A train then took them to Liverpool or Glasgow, from there they sailed to New York. The whole voyage Gothenburg-New York need not take more than three weeks in 1870.

The Free land was a major drawing card to America. The second factor was the employment opportunities: farming, working on the building of railroads, work in the iron ranges, lumber jacking around Duluth and Tacoma. Still others were attracted to the expanding cities like Minneapolis and Chicago, which had quickly evolved to Swedish centers, each with their own Main Street or Snoose Blvd. Although the classic image of the Swedish immigrant is the sunburnt farmer, the city dwellers and industrial workers soon surpassed the farmers in numbers. Young Swedish women also found employment opportunities in the cities. To be the housemaid of a wealthy American

family was the dream of many a brow beaten servant girl from Sweden. Or they could be hired as seamstresses in the sweatshops. Lots of times there was a surplus of women in Swede town which naturally encouraged marriages within the Swede group. During the early immigration, only 1 in 10 Swedish men in America were married to a non-Swede.

It is hard to imagine modern America without the influence of the Swedish immigrants, just as modern Sweden would have been different without impulses and innovations from America. This is our common heritage of the fantastic immigration era, a heritage that forever links our two countries together. The emigration divided the Swedish people into two branches, one in Sweden and one in America. About 1/5th of all Swedes lived in America at the beginning of this century. It is an estimate, that there are as many Americans of Swedish descent today as there are inhabitants of Sweden, or a little more than eight million.

Compiled and submitted by Karen Rogat

Tack sa mycket. Var sa god. (Thank you very much. You are welcome).