

RAMSEY COUNTY
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Spring, 1994

Volume 29, Number 1

**The 'Fighting Saint' —
The U.S.S. St. Paul and Its Minnesota Connection** *Page 4*



Women from the Yokosuka, Japan, Folk Dance Association perform Japanese folk dances for U. S. S. St. Paul crewmembers as the heavy cruiser prepares to leave Yokosuka for the United States on July 6, 1962. See article beginning on page 4.

D-Day Remembered By Seven Who Were There

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RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

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A Message from the Editorial Board

The Ramsey County Historical Society recently lost a loyal and long-time supporter when Lester B. LeVesconte, a grandson of Heman and Jane Gibbs, died in Illinois. In 1849 the Gibbs family established the pioneer farmstead that today we know as the Gibbs Farm Museum. Lester LeVesconte, whose mother was the Gibbs's daughter, Lillie, was instrumental in working out in 1949 the arrangements by which the Gibbs farm became a museum under the auspices of the Ramsey County Historical Society.

The Society's debt to Lester LeVesconte extends beyond the Gibbs Farm Museum because over many years Mr. LeVesconte actively promoted the publication of historical material about the Gibbs family and Ramsey County. Thus he helped support financially the Society's publication of his mother's book, *Little Bird That Was Caught*, about Jane Gibbs's experiences as a young pioneer in the wilderness that became Minnesota. His advocacy of the publication of Ram-



Lester LeVesconte

sey County history extended to the Society's broader plans, which included this quarterly magazine, *Ramsey County History*.

We honor Lester LeVesconte's memory and his many contributions to the Ramsey County Historical Society. We are inspired by his example and his vision for history.

—John M. Lindley, chairman,
Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

Yankeedom: Goal of the 19th Century Immigrant

John W. Larson

Among the family rituals of my childhood were the annual Memorial Day visits with my grandmother Alma to Union Cemetery, the predominantly Swedish graveyard on St. Paul's far East Side. Thinking back, these outings always seem to have been accompanied by sunny Minnesota spring weather. We rode out on the East Seventh Street streetcar and then hiked the final mile or so.

In the oldest section of the cemetery, grandmother planted flowers on the graves of her parents, Martin and Hanna Johnson. Nearby, a crowd gathered quietly for Memorial Day ceremonies that ended with rifle salutes and the blowing of Taps. My father would wander off into the nearby woods to collect wild flowers, or so he said. My mother snapped pictures with a rectangular black box camera.

I especially remember the Memorial Day of May 30, 1927, shortly after Lindbergh's transatlantic flight to Paris. I had just turned four. My mother dressed me in a sailor suit for the trip to the cemetery. I was embarrassed because it made me conspicuous, or so I thought.

The legitimate centers of our attention on that sun-filled Memorial Day were my great grandparents' graves. As a child, I knew that graves had to do with the long ago past. It was only when I was a bit older that I realized that Martin and Hanna actually were my Swedish grandmother's "Mama" and "Papa." Hanna had died in 1891 when grandmother was only twelve, but Martin had lived on until 1916 and once had been a familiar figure in the Larson household. As a child I sometimes heard stories about him.

On weekends in the early years of this century, my great grandfather, known simply as "Grandpa Johnson," regularly took the Seventh Street trolley from his home in the neighborhood then known as Hazel Park on St. Paul's East Side. He



Martin and Hanna Johnson. These family photographs are from the author.

transferred downtown at Eighth and Jackson, and rode out past Oakland Cemetery to the North End to visit his daughter Alma and the Larson family on Jessamine Street. Around Christmas, when transferring streetcars downtown, he would walk to Eisenminger's meat market on Wabasha Street to buy an eel, a Swedish holiday delicacy little appreciated by his grandchildren.

My father could not remember eating the eel or how it was prepared, but he remembered that Grandpa Johnson nailed the eel skin to the barn door. When it had dried, he carefully cut it into long, thin strips that he used for shoelaces. Grandpa usually brought something more appropriate for the children.

On Sunday in early September, 1910, Grandpa Johnson arrived with a satchel of plums from his garden. The family gathered in the back yard because their small house was being enlarged and

modernized, a major project. Meanwhile, they lived in the barn and the barn was unsuitable for receiving even such a familiar and welcome guest as Grandpa Johnson.

In my childhood, family legend was alive with stories about Grandpa Johnson. Old photos round out the picture. Short, as Swedes go, he was solidly built. In photos, his broad face suggests an open, straightforward temperament without a trace of moodiness or introspection. Looking at you, Grandpa Johnson habitually turned his head slightly to the side to hear. He was somewhat deaf. The neat trim of his full beard suggests a touch of vanity, or merely self-respect. Grandpa Johnson and his son-in-law, my grandfather Joel Larson, understood one another, but were different both in temperament and appearance.

My grandfather Joel was broad shouldered and tall, with dark reddish hair and matching mustache. A big, slim man, he was slow and deliberate. On this particular

Sunday in 1910, both men dressed in their best dark suits and wore dark hats. Immigrant Swedes, they dressed like gentlemen because they were to take my father Walter, then nine, skinny and red headed, to the Minnesota State Fair. Maybelle, my father's younger sister, was only six and had to stay home.

An auburn-haired tomboy with spirit, Maybelle was angry at not being allowed to accompany the menfolk. When they had left, she sat down in the back yard and began to eat the entire satchel of plums. Before finishing, she became frightfully sick, which was her intent, but she also broke out all over with hives that lasted for weeks.

As a child, I was drawn to family stories like this. I always enjoyed nostalgia, even when I was too small to have anything to be nostalgic about. Curiously, when my Swedish grandparents reminisced, they never talked about Sweden. Later, when I tried to trace family origins back to the Old Country, I encountered formidable barriers. My ancestors appeared to have forgotten their past on the journey to America.

Eventually I realized that blaming the Atlantic Ocean for the loss of the family's Swedish past was too simple. The amnesia-producing process was more complex. I had only wanted to mend the chords of memory broken by an America-induced forgetfulness and to re-discover my Swedish ancestors. I ended by becoming curious as to just how my family became so American. Alma, I concluded, was the key. She, it turned out, knew many things that she never passed on to her children.

Alma did not deny her Swedish past. She held the memory of her Swedish parents in high esteem and was proud of having been born near Swede Hollow on Commercial Street and having been confirmed in the Swedish language in St. Paul's First Lutheran Church. She seemed to know nothing of her parents' lives in Sweden, except their birth dates in Skane, Sweden's southernmost province.

Alma made it difficult for subsequent generations to trace the family back to Sweden. She didn't know, forgot, or didn't think it important to tell her children that their Grandpa Martin Johnson's Swedish name was neither Martin nor Johnson, that



Union Cemetery, St. Paul, 1890-1892. Union Cemetery Association photo.

he, like so many Swedish immigrants, had changed his name when he arrived in this country. Fortunately, the Swedish pastor of St. Paul's First Lutheran Church, A. P. Monten, who married Martin to Hanna Anderson on September 5, 1878, thought differently. In filling out the marriage certificate, the Old World pastor used Martin's name as it had been given him in Sweden, Marten Goransson, pronounced, more or less, Morten Yourenson. One can't say it without sounding Swedish, and that's probably why Martin changed it.

Martin, I eventually learned, was born in Sovde parish in the province of Skane on December 24, 1847. He was the first of four offspring of Goran Martensson and Eljena Nilsson. Little is known of the family's circumstances, but they most certainly were not well off. Before he emigrated, Martin was employed as a "Drang," a farm hand accustomed to the drudgery of doing menial work for others. In Skane, family farms were mostly small, forty acres or less. It was seldom necessary to hire outside help. As a hired man, Martin's chances of getting ahead, marrying and establishing a family of his own could not have been good.

Martin, his brother Nils and a sister Anna left Sweden. Nils went no further than Copenhagen where he found employment as a custom's official. Martin and eventually Anna came to St. Paul. In the early years of this century, an occasional postcard arrived at Jessamine Street from Nils in Copenhagen. Alma dutifully pasted them into her scrapbooks with the comment, "From Grandpa Johnson's brother, Nils Johnson." Perhaps Alma really did not know her father's family name was Goransson. In Denmark Nils had felt no need to change it. Goransson was no obstacle there to getting a job and improving one's lot.

The Goransson children emigrated with the expectation of eventually living in more comfortable circumstances than Sweden then offered poor and disenfranchised people like themselves. There is nothing to suggest that political, social or religious considerations were primary factors in Martin's decision to come to America. On the contrary, everything known about Martin suggests a determination to get ahead, not for himself alone but for the family he eventually established in St. Paul.

Martin was a literate and well-informed person. The parish of Sovde where he grew up must have provided him with a decent elementary education. Either this or special circumstances must be posited to explain how Martin, once settled in St. Paul, regularly read Swedish-American newspapers, collected a small library of Swedish books and managed complicated transactions requiring considerable understanding of English. Whether his modest success was due to education, inborn astuteness or good luck is difficult to measure. Certainly it helped that he had a reputation for temperance.

In abstaining from alcohol, Martin probably was an exception among the unmarried Swedes who drifted into St. Paul and other urban areas looking for work or relaxation between jobs. He may have brought his anti-alcohol convictions with him from Sweden where temperance movements were in full swing during his youth. Sober, hard working and thrifty, Martin was a model immigrant. He had all the Yankee virtues.

Since the founding of St. Paul in the 1840s, the influence of New England-born Americans had been out of proportion to their numbers. By the 1850s New Englanders were providing the influential core around which the city's political, social and economic life revolved. Outsiders, such as early German immigrants, were successful to the extent that they embraced Yankee values of thrift, industry and enterprise. It helped if they were Puritan and Protestant.

The flood of Swedish immigrants in the 1870s and 1880s did not threaten the city's status quo. Beneath their droll surface, the immigrant Swedes looked acceptable to older American stock. Besides, if the city was to prosper, it was essential to have people who were willing to do the back-breaking pick-and-shovel work. Once they had settled in and had learned the language, the Swedes might easily fuse with the original Yankees.

Multicultural diversity was a nineteenth century reality, not its ideal. The ideal was to become a Yankee. My Swedish grandmother Alma fashioned her life on this premise. Her father Martin may not have thought it through, but on an intuitive level, he made the right moves. He took

steps to assure that, if not he, then at least his children would have all the advantages of being truly American

St. Paul was no poor choice for a newcomer like Martin Johnson. Despite setbacks and economic depressions, the city and the opportunities it offered immigrants grew like magic with each post-Civil War decade. When Martin arrived in St. Paul by train from Chicago in the early summer of 1873, he found a city of more than 20,000 inhabitants. Of these, perhaps a thousand or more were Swedish immigrants. Most of them lived within a mile of the city's center, in or around the rim of a broad ravine called Swede Hollow. Martin's first move was to establish contact with fellow countrymen, not Swedes as such but people from Skane, his native province.

Martin was deliberate and well organized, not the kind to leap off into the unknown without preparation. Even before leaving Sweden, he informed himself about St. Paul and knew that among the Swedes gathering there were a good number from Skane. Martin was simply a Swede to Americans, but to himself and other Swedes he was a "Skaning," a Swede to be sure, but with a difference readily discernible in his speech and in such customary routines of every-day life as wearing shoelaces made from eel skins.

Once in St. Paul, Martin lost no time in locating the Swedish Lutheran Church at the corner of John and Woodward Streets. It was the center of the city's Swedish community, the place where Swedes met to worship, but also to socialize and exchange information. Its pastor, Jonas Auslund, knew the strengths and weaknesses of most of his parishioners. He had retained the Swedish pastoral practice of making periodic home visits to parish families. He recommended that Martin get in touch with Per Andersson, another Skaning, who, after arriving at St. Paul in 1868, was already established.

Born in 1825 of a farming family in the parish of Sodra Rorum, Per was already forty-three years old when he left Sweden. Although a little too old to adapt easily, Per made up his mind to create a better life for his family in the New World. What he lacked in youthful vigor, he made up for in perseverance.

Per spurned the city and settled across the Mississippi river from St. Paul in what was then rural Dakota County. He avoided the low flood-prone flats along the river. They already were filling up with German, Irish and other newcomers. Instead, he chose a more isolated location on the high plateau and further back from the river. There he made his living by growing the vegetables that he peddled in Swede Hollow and sold at the city market. Later, along with truck farming, he raised pigs.

Back in Sweden, 1868 was the second year of unusually poor crops. People spoke of famine. An unsympathetic Horby pastor noted that Per Andersson had abandoned his poverty stricken family and run off to America. But Per had no intention of abandoning his family. One by one, as money and circumstances permitted, he brought them all to Minnesota. Anna, Hanna and Else were the first to arrive. All three were Per's daughters born of his first wife, Elna Akeddotter, who had died in 1857.

Still in Sweden, in 1858 Per had married again. He and his second wife, Anna Jonasdatter of Horby, started a second family. When Anna arrived in Minnesota to join Per in the spring of 1871, she brought their four children—three girls, Marie, Emelie, Elise, and a boy, Anders. This family settled with Per while the older girls from his first marriage lived and worked as domestics in some of the better St. Paul homes. Later, Martin would meet and eventually marry Hanna and it was she who would become my grandmother Alma's mother and my great grandmother.

After a bitter winter remembered for a freezing January blizzard that had taken dozens of lives, in May of 1873 Per Andersson was ready to begin spring planting. No longer as young as he would like to have been, Per sometimes hired a recently arrived Skaning to help with the gardening while he concentrated on selling the products of their labors. With his horse-drawn cart, Per was already a Swede Hollow institution.

Pastor Auslund recommended Per to Martin Johnson. With Per, Martin could do familiar work, could earn a few dollars beyond his keep and could speak his native dialect while learning English. The pastor drew Martin a map showing the way from



The First Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church at John and Woodward, St. Paul, in 1902. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

the church back to Third Street, up Third to Wabasha and from there across the Mississippi by means of a wooden toll bridge. Then he was to walk west and south and up the steep hill. It was five or six miles in all to Per Andersson's place.

Martin set out at once on what might very well have been a glorious, sweet-smelling spring day. After two weeks of shipboard confinement and the long train journey west, it must have been liberating to at last walk freely in the open. Once across the river, Martin would have passed houses with small gardens and apple trees heavy with blossoms. One day, he perhaps thought, he would own such a house.

While trudging up the wagon trail to the plateau above the river, Martin's thoughts might have returned to his first impressions of the city across the river. He had seen the city's center with its brick and limestone buildings, many stories high, along the length of Third Street. He may have marveled that this main thoroughfare was being newly paved, not with gold, of course, nor with the familiar cobblestones he knew from Sweden, but with closely fit, hand-sized blocks of pine wood. A good cloudburst, he perhaps thought, and all that wood paving would go floating down the river. The gas street lights were another matter. They might have suggested to Martin that the innovations being in-

troduced in the grander cities of Europe would not be long in arriving in the far-off American West.

From a resting place that broke his climb to Per Andersson's place, Martin could look back and see the entire city spread out on a rise enclosed by bluffs and hills that opened generously to a flat area that followed the river's edge. There, near a train station, steamboats were being loaded and unloaded at a busy levee. He could count half-a-dozen railroad lines approaching the city along low lying routes that followed the courses of larger and smaller waterways. Perhaps he wondered how he would find his place in all of this.

Still, he must have been satisfied to be welcomed by Per Andersson, to find work in Per's truck garden and a place to stay until he felt sufficiently sure of himself to venture back to the city. Meanwhile, he got to know Anna Jonasdotter and their children. Anna ran her rural household much as she would have done back in Skane. Martin had no trouble adjusting to the routine. He also heard of Per's other daughters, those born of his first wife, who had found work in the city, were learning its language and ways and already becoming American.

Martin spent the spring and summer turning soil, planting, weeding, cultivating and eventually helping to harvest the vegetables Per raised for the St. Paul market. He was well treated, but it was not for this that he had come to America. He was impatient to learn English and to make his own way.

Before dawn one morning in early September, Martin put his few belongings in his small trunk and rode down to the city in the cart along with Per and a load of late maturing vegetables. With the few dollars saved from his summer earnings, he hoped to find an inexpensive place to board and room while looking for some kind of employment. He took leave of Per never dreaming that one day this quiet but determined man would become his father-in-law.

Per Andersson was my great great grandfather, but he was a shadowy figure, even to my father's generation. He hung on to his Swedishness, preferred the isolation of rural life and, except to sell his produce, was seldom in the city. Nevertheless, as

the years went by the city approached closer and closer. In 1874 the residents of Ramsey and Dakota counties voted to move the Dakota boundary to the south, so that Per's side of the river became part of Ramsey County and St. Paul's West Side.

That same year Per, now nearly fifty, and his wife Anna had still another child, John Frank. When John Frank was old enough, he took over his father's work in the truck garden. Per lived on until 1908, Anna until 1910. Both died, as the newspapers said, "at the old family residence, 935 Cherokee Avenue."

Alma pasted Per's and Anna's obituaries in her scrapbooks, but she never had been close to either of them and little note was taken of their passing by the rest of Alma's family. Alma was intensely loyal to her father Martin and to the memory of her mother Hanna and to the other daughters from Per's first marriage but, so far as she was concerned, Per and his second wife might as well have stayed in Sweden.

Indeed, by the time the elderly Anderssons died in the first decade of this century, my grandmother Alma already had cultivated a Yankee lifestyle fashioned on what she had learned of the habits, traditions and attitudes of urban Americans of the older and better sort. The Andersson relatives on the West Side belonged to another, no longer relevant generation.

Significantly, my father, born in 1901, had no memory of the deaths of his great grandparents and generally knew little about them. However, his father Joel once told him of a time in the 1890s when Per Andersson emerged from his relative obscurity to become the central figure in a heated public debate. It happened after Per began raising pigs. He knew all about pigs from his childhood in Skane.

Per was old enough to remember a time in Skane when poor farmers kept pigs in their homes. Not only pigs but kids, lambs, hens and calves were allowed to walk in and out of the house like members of the family. Animal odors were considered a natural accompaniment to rural life and not worth making a fuss about. An old Skane proverb maintained that "He who scorns the pig dung smell, can live without the pork as well."

In the second half of the nineteenth century, genteel city dwellers in America and

Sweden fought against rural indifference to dirt and obnoxious odors. They associated them with uncleanness and disease. Science supported this view. By the 1890s all but the most unenlightened had heard that disease was caused by microorganisms invisible to the naked eye and able to float about in the atmosphere.

In November, 1895, an elegant new City and County Hospital was opened across the river from Per Andersson's place. Its superintendent, Dr. Arthur B. Ancker, was among the first hospital administrators in the country to appreciate the value of cleanliness in maintaining a healthy patient environment. Cleanliness had been a major consideration in designing the new hospital building.

Dr. Ancker used the press to win support for his cleanliness concept. The press co-operated by describing to readers the hospital's immaculate, white germ-proof operating room, its six spacious and well-scrubbed wards and its large fan so constructed as to draw fresh air from outside and push it through air ducts into every room in the building.

But now, whenever a gentle southeasterly breeze blew over the heights of St. Paul's West Side and Per Andersson's place, it wafted pig farm odors across the river valley to the hospital site. There the hospital's specially designed ventilating fan picked up these odors and distributed them into the immaculate interior. On such days Dr. Ancker was hard pressed to explain why his modern, sterile hospital should have such an offensive smell.

Humiliated hospital authorities brought the malodorous pig farm problem to the attention of the press and the city fathers. Per Andersson could not understand the fuss and would not budge on the issue. Finally, the city of St. Paul bought his pig farm and closed it down. My grandmother Anna, a teenager then, doubtless sided with the hospital authorities and against her Swedish grandfather. She never spoke of the event, but the men in our family saw humor in the story and passed it on from generation to generation.

Back in St. Paul in September of 1873, Martin settled in with another Skane family, one living on Commercial Street, nearer the river but close to Swede Hollow. There he was almost entirely sur-

rounded by Swedes. Most families took in bachelor boarders. Like them, Martin became a day laborer, employed with other Swedes in gangs building roads, laying railroad track and digging ditches. As such, Martin still had almost no contact with Americans and little opportunity to learn English.

At home, among friends and relatives in his native Skane, Martin had had no occasion to think about his "Swedishness." Now, working in the gangs, he began to learn what it was to be a "Swede," a term that seemed to be practically inseparable with "dumb." The experience sharpened his determination to emerge from Swede Hollow's anonymous crowd of Anderssons, Olsons and other Johnsons. He didn't yet know how this might be done, but he saved every penny he possibly could while waiting and keeping an open eye for promising opportunities. Ahead of him, but not yet glimpsed, lay the twenty-seven years he would work for the city as janitor of the Fisher Ames School, built in 1889 in Hazel Park. It was work that as an employee of the city gave him a measure of security and even a kind of status in the New World. (As janitor, he was called Mr. Johnson by the educated young American women who taught at the school.)

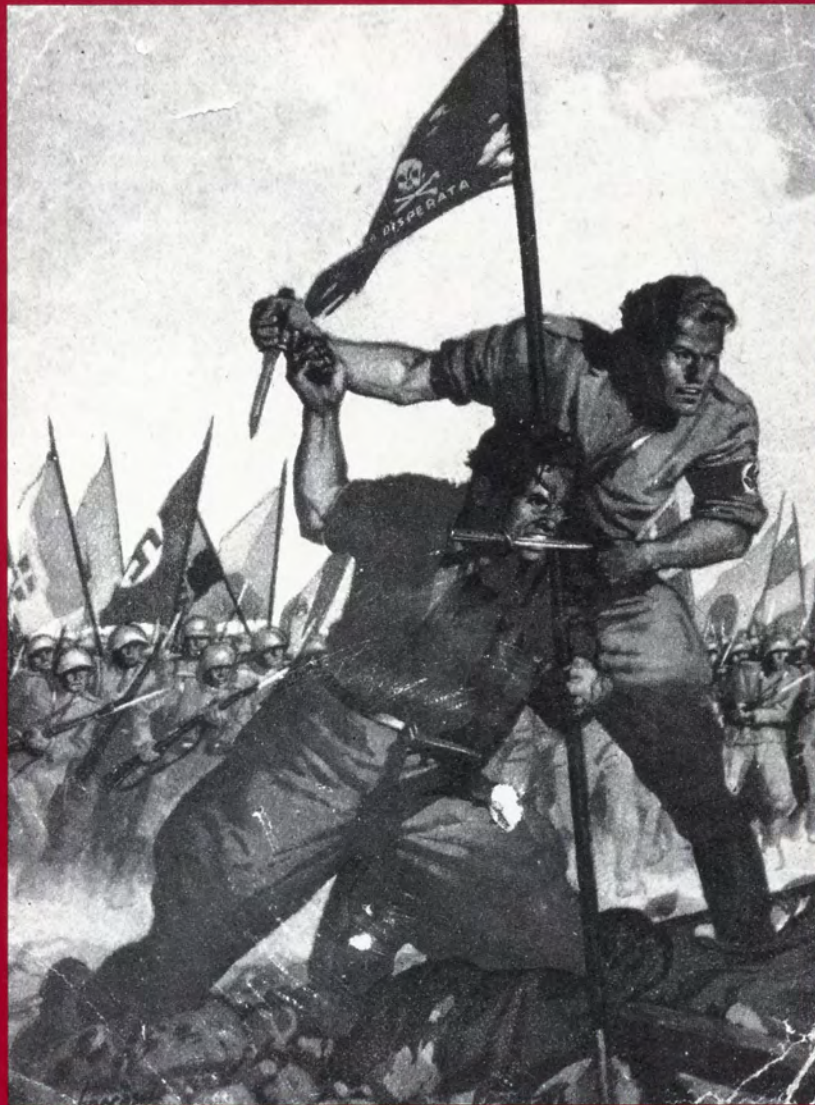
Meanwhile, Hanna, Per Andersson's daughter and Martin's still-to-be-discovered future wife, was better off. As a girl at home in Sweden, she had led a restricted, hard and unrewarding life. In St. Paul she had easily assumed the role of live-in Swedish maid and domestic. As such she enjoyed greater freedom than she had known in Sweden, had a room of her own and was better paid for less demeaning work. What is more, she was learning proper English and American middle class ways. Hanna had no regrets about leaving Sweden.

Unlike some Swedish girls in St. Paul, Hanna was not frivolous. She was practical and frankly plain, she dressed modestly and she, too, saved her money. In April, 1874, when she was nineteen, Hanna and her sister Else, then seventeen, joined the Swedish church. She and Else, along with other girls, most of them domestics like themselves, would gather there for Vespers on Sunday evenings and to socialize and drink coffee.

When, in January of 1876, Martin also joined the Swedish church, he began attending the Sunday evening Vespers and finally met Hanna. Else also met someone, a Swedish man about whom little is known except that he called himself John Lord. Before long they married. Hanna and Martin were more prudent and waited to marry until September 9, 1878. The two couples settled near one another on Commercial Street. On December 20, 1877, Else and John Lord had a son who was baptized Walter John Lord. Sometime later, on August 7, 1879, Hanna and Martin had a daughter, my grandmother Anna Elvida Johnson. The baby cousins often shared a single crib and in later years a curious bond developed between them. They might have grown up together, had fate not intervened. After a long illness, Else died on January 21, 1880, of a streptococci infection. Her husband, John Lord, disappeared soon after the funeral. Hanna and Martin were left with the couple's infant son.

When he was three years old, Walter was adopted by an American couple, Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Stacy. Stacy had been born in New York state in 1839 and had met his Indiana-born wife, Angellina, while serving in the 124th Regiment of the New York Volunteers during the Civil War. After the war, the couple came to Minnesota, married and settled into a large and comfortable house in Newport, a few miles down the Mississippi from St. Paul. When they adopted Walter John Lord, the abandoned son of a Swedish immigrant, he became Walter Stacy, and before long was indistinguishable from a genuine Yankee. Once old enough to understand, the lesson was not lost on my grandmother Alma, but she, together with her parents Martin and Hanna, had a long way to go before they would feel themselves American.

John Larson of Taylors Falls, a retired public relations officer for the United States department of defense, is the author of an earlier account of his Swedish family which appeared in the Winter, 1994, issue of Ramsey County History.



A German propaganda card given to Russell W. Anderson by a German soldier taken prisoner during the Normandy landings. "He was a nice guy," Anderson remembers. See the article beginning on Page 9: "D-Day Remembered by Seven Who Were There."

R.C.H.S.
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