RAMSEY COUNTY
History
A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society

Winter, 1998 Volume 32, Number 4

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A cartoon in the St. Paul Daily News *celebrating the tenth anniversary of the beginning of publication on March 1, 1900. Photo from the newspaper collection at the Minnesota Historical Society. See the history of the* Daily News *beginning on page 4.*

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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RAMSEY COUNTY

History

Volume 32, Number 4 **Winter, 1998**

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Publication of *Ramsey County History* is supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H.Cowie, Jr. and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon

A Message from the Executive Director

In this issue the Ramsey County Historical Society is honoring Elsie Wildung as a true friend of local history. Born in St. Paul a century ago—on April 30, 1898—and raised there, she and her family are examples of the extraordinary ordinary people who have built our community, the people local history celebrates. Although she remembered the Society in her will with the largest bequest in its history, she was a modest person who lived an unpretentious life and cherished her community. Her fortune came from the community and she has returned most of it to the community. Her legacy will perpetuate the sense of continuity she inherited from those who went before her.

Preserving our history is a way of preserving our common identity, of guiding us as we chart our future. In 1999, the society will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary and the thirty-fifth year of the continuous publication of *Ramsey County History*. And Ramsey County and the Gibbs farm together will celebrate the 150th anniversary of their establishment in 1849, the year Minnesota became a territory. Much of our heritage is kept alive in this magazine, in our archives, and at the Gibbs Farm Museum. We truly are the Society of people like Elsie Wildung; we have much worth preserving.

The Society has just completed a new strategic plan committing us once again to maintaining a tradition of excellence in all we do. There is no better way to secure the heritage we all share than by a bequest or gift to the endowment the Society has established. We are ready to assist any of you who wish to remember the Society in your will, or during your lifetime. Even modest amounts will grow to make a major impact on the future far beyond a modest beginning.

History is a powerful legacy to leave to future generations. Please consider this wonderful opportunity to make a lasting gift to our community by remembering the Ramsey County Historical Society in your will.

Priscilla Farnham

Elsie Wildung Remembers The Society in Her Will

Elsie Wildung
1898-1996

Elsie Wildung was a lifelong resident of St. Paul and her roots stretch deep into the city's history. She was born just a century ago, on April 30, 1898, the youngest of nine children, and she grew up on Dayton's Bluff. All her life she maintained a strong sense of family.

Her parents, Friedrich William Wille and Emma Sophia Volkert Wille, were of German and Alsace Lorraine ancestry, and it was a religious family. Her grandfather, Johann Nicolas Volkert, who was born on February 19, 1822, in Nuremberg, Germany, decided at the age of fifeen that he would like to become a missionary. Accepted by his local Mission Society, he sailed for the United States in 1847 to study for the ministry in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After ordination in the Lutheran church two years later, he served a number of congregations before becoming minister of Emmanuel Congregation, now known as Trinity Lone Oak Lutheran Church of Eagan, Dakota County, Minnesota.

Elsie Wildung's father was a farmer who also worked as a carpenter to help support his family. Her mother was a homemaker. The family attended St. John's Lutheran Church in St. Paul where the Wille children also attended the church school. After she graduated from Johnson High School, and with her brothers no longer at home, Elsie Wille remained there to help her mother with the housekeeping. She was active in

Growing Up in St. Paul

From Amerika to America: Alma Crosses the Border

John W. Larson

Remnants of a Swedish and immigrant past survived in my grandparents' home during the 1920s and 30s. I did not always recognize them as such, except, of course, when the family gathered for lutefisk suppers on Christmas and New Year's Eves. As a child, I ate this traditional dish. Wiener sausages were served to guests who preferred them. On one or two memorable holidays grandfather Joel, in good spirits, began to sing the popular Swedish-American ballad "Nicolina", a comic song about unfullfilled love. He remembered it, I expect, from his bachelor years in Chicago. Grandmother Alma would always intervene to shut him up. I was left with no more than a tantalizing glimpse into the family's past, all the more reason to be curious about it.

As a child I was drawn to family stories about the past. I always enjoyed nostalgia even when I was too small to have anything to be nostalgic about. Yet, curiously, when Joel and Alma talked about by-gone days they seldom mentioned Sweden. Alma was born here of immigrant Swedish parents. If she heard stories about her parents' lives in the old country she never passed them on. Joel, who had come to this country when he was barely eighteen, almost never talked about his childhood and youth back home in Sweden. An America-induced forgetfulness, a host of factors, some deliberate, others pure chance, must have gradually eroded my grandparents' recollection of Sweden, or at the very least, discouraged any desire to perpetuate these memories by passing them on to their children and grandchildren.

I took my family for granted while I was growing up in St. Paul during the 1920s and '30s; later I wondered how Alma managed to become so American. She didn't leave a journal from which I might pry her secrets but she did leave old documents, letters, memory albums, and her scrapbooks, dozens of them. When I look at the scrapbooks today certain images strike me as being typically her.

Just inside the front cover of Alma's earliest scrapbooks are different versions of the same patriotic theme, always a blond girl, or young woman, holding an American flag. In one such image, dating from the Spanish-American War, a smiling, round-faced girl clutches an American flag to her breast. In another, from 1918, the flag is being unfurled by a carefully groomed woman. She is about to hang it from the corner post of a broad white porch overlooking a long and well kept lawn.

Alma clearly saw herself in these patriotic women. On holidays she never forgot to mount the flag at the corner of the front porch of the big white house at 83 East Jessamine Street in St. Paul's North End. Next door in the little house where I lived with my parents, we didn't fly the flag. Grandmother was patriotic enough for all of us.

Grandmother's patriotism didn't stop with the flag. She was fond of presidents, any president. She began clipping articles about presidents with the inauguration of Grover Cleveland in 1893. But the death of Cleveland's successor, William McKinley, from an assassin's bullet in September, 1901, set him apart and reminded Alma of another presidential martyr, Abraham Lincoln.

When the hundreth anniversary of the Civil War president's birth was celebrated in 1909, Alma faithfully clipped all the Lincoln articles she could find and pasted them in her scrapbooks. As Lincoln's birthday returned year after year she clipped and pasted again, throughout her life. Alma's patriotic passion was fed by the popular press, and her enthusiasm was not unusual for her day. Still, her being so at home in America is remarkable, considering her beginnings as a child of Swedish immigrants. She made no effort to hide her Swedish-American origins, her birth next door to St. Paul's Swede Hollow, or her confirmation in St. Paul's Swedish First Evangelical Lutheran Church. She was faithful, too, to the memory of her immigrant parents, Martin and Hanna Johnson.

* * *

On June 1, 1880, grandmother's parents, Hanna and Martin Johnson, were visited by Alice Williams, a federal census taker. Miss Williams noted that Martin was thirty-three years old, Hanna twenty-five, that they both were born in Sweden and that they lived near Swede Hollow on Commercial Street, along with their Minnesota-born, nine-month-old daughter Alma, and a toddler, Walter John Lord, the son of Hanna's sister Else. Else had died six months earlier and the boy's father had disappeared, presumably by returning to Sweden. Walter was soon to be adopted by an American couple, Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Stacy of Newport and so disappeared from my grandmother's life until he reappeared, significantly, during Alma's teens.

The census taker noted that Martin worked as a day laborer. Except for a German grocer, William Gieseking, and his wife Eliza, Martin and Hanna's neighbors were all born in Sweden. All their children were born in Minnesota. Like Hanna, the other wives stayed at home and kept house. Like Martin, most of the husbands and bachelor boarders worked as day laborers.

Romanticized later into a cozy ethnic community, Swede Hollow and nearby Commercial Street were overcrowded, unsanitary, and living there reduced op-

portunities for contact with English speaking Americans, contact essential for getting ahead. As Swedish families could afford it, they moved away from Swede Hollow and Commercial Street. Many resettled nearby, on St. Paul's near East Side, and seldom very far from their Swedish Lutheran Church. In 1883, after Martin found permanent employment as a laborer with the St. Paul Harvester Works, he and Hanna moved away from other Swedish families into a neighborhood settled by Yankees.

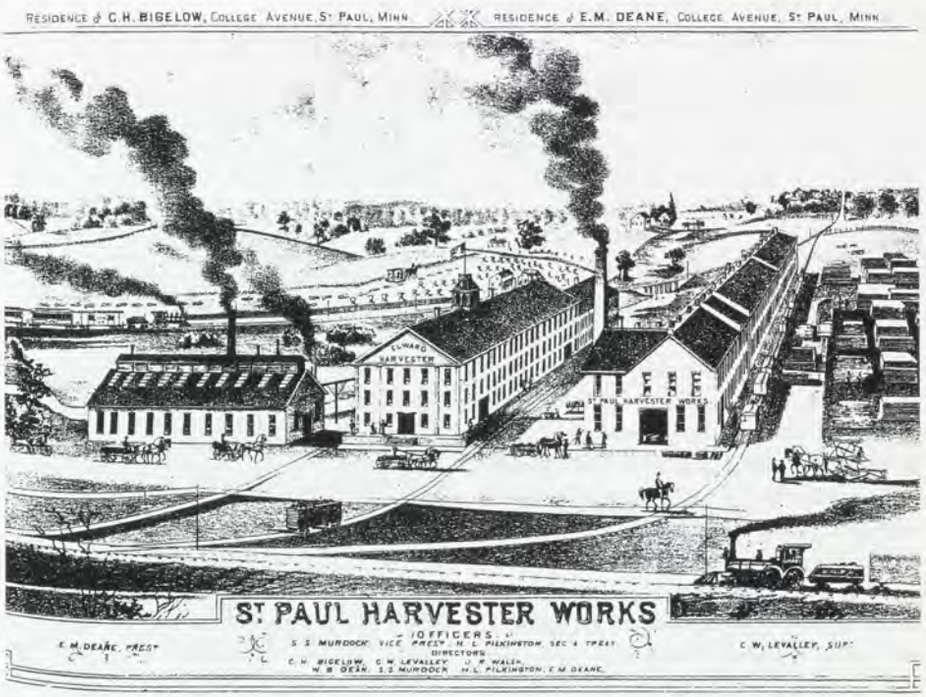
Walking to Work

When Martin started working at the Harvester plant he joined others of the factory's 200 or so workers who walked to the plant from their homes nearer the center of town. Although an Omaha Railroad commuter train took passengers from the Union Depot to the Harvester Works station for five cents, workers like Martin seldom took the train. It was used by the middle class business and professional men who by the 1880s were settling in Victorian homes to the east of the Harvester Works.

While still a day laborer, Martin occasionally worked at a 2,000-acre farm not far from the Harvester Works station and owned by William Leonard Ames, Jr. Ames was a Yankee, the descendant of a prominent Massachusetts family. Martin, as a hard working, serious and sober immigrant, had qualities the Yankee could admire.

When Martin Johnson first met William Ames, the latter was about to turn the Ames farm into a real estate venture. He began with a relatively small development along Harvester Avenue (now Case), just west of its juncture with White Bear Avenue. He named the development "Oak Park." When he began to promote Oak Park in the summer of 1882, improved transportation made it possible for more and more families to move to the suburbs. As the decade wore on, Ames competed with promoters of a number of "parks" being developed at the outer fringes of the city. Many of these suburban developments catered to families who were, at the very least, moderately well off.

Ames had a different approach. While



"Martin and Hanna moved further away from downtown than most Swedish famillies. This happened in 1883 after Martin found permanent work as a laborer with the St. Paul Harvester Works." Minnesota Historical Society photo. All other photographs are from the author.

he made much of the business and professional men who already had settled in the area, he saw greater potential for selling Oak Park lots to the many thousands of working-class and largely immigrant families who were renting houses in cramped quarters close to the city center. To attract such people, Ames told them that anyone who could afford to pay $15 to $20 a month for rent could afford to own a house in Oak Park. It was demoralizing, Ames told prospective buyers, for a man to live from year to year in a rented house. Such a man always would feel himself a mere sojourner, a pilgrim, a stranger.

Martin's modest command of English probably prevented him from understanding all of the Yankee's loftier arguments for buying property in Oak Park. But Martin could understand basic economics. Ames maintained, and Martin confirmed, that lots were cheaper in Oak Park than in the other suburban areas. In Oak Park a man could buy a lot and build a modest home for the price of a naked lot in other areas. In fact he could save enough money by purchasing property in Oak Park to be able to afford several lots, have a lawn in front of the house and a garden in back, keep a cow and raise chickens, in short, have a real home.

A House of His Own

Swedish neighbors would be few and far apart in Oak Park but Martin and Hanna saw no problem in this. At the eastern outskirts of the city they could finally realize Martin's dream of having a house and garden of his own, they would not live very far from families of older American stock, and little Alma would go to school and speak English with the neighborhood children.

Martin was the first person to purchase Oak Park property. On September 30, 1882, he met with Ames, paid $450 in cash, signed the necessary papers, and became the owner of lots one, two and three in the Oak Park development. Martin now owned a sizable piece of land. Buying it had required considerable optimism. There were as yet no dwellings in Oak Park. It was all hills and woods and Harvester Avenue, which formed the southern boundary of Martin's 150- by 450-foot plot, was no more than a dirt track. But the north Martin's property

bordered on the right-of-way of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Omaha Railroad. This proved advantageous when, in 1903, the railroad widened its right-of-way, and paid Martin $1,000 for the northern fifty feet of his property. By then Martin's lots were worth several times what he had paid for them some twenty years earlier.

Back in 1882, money was a problem for Martin. To build a house on his newly-acquired property he borrowed money from the East Seventh Street Building Society, money he managed to pay off by December, 1894. Martin and Hanna were prompt in paying off their debts. Orderliness in such matters came as naturally to them as the careful management of the small amounts of money at their disposal.

Martin built a simple but solid one-and-one-half story frame house on a hill from where he could look over the tops of nearby oak trees and across gradually sloping terrain to the city below. The house was a modest affair, nothing like the Victorian home Ames was building at the same time not far away at 1667 Stillwater Avenue. Martin and Hanna's house was heated with coal and wood burning stoves and on winter evenings was lit with kerosene lamps. Water had to be fetched from the backyard well before dishes could be washed in the dry sink in Hanna's kitchen.

The Johnsons had not yet moved into their new home when, in August, 1883, Alma acquired a brother, Ernest, and two years later a little sister, Selma. Alma started going to the Harvester Works School (later the Deane School) a one room affair, but only a short walk from home, at the corner of Brand Street and Tracy Avenue. Alma was fortunate in her teacher Mary E. Gray, a young woman whose parents and grandparents had been teachers before her. Miss Gray was a solid but mild-mannered and considerate teacher who made an unforgettable impression on several generations of children before she retired in 1917. From gentle Miss Gray, Alma learned about things unfamiliar to her Swedish parents.

Alma learned, for example, how Americans viewed their past. For them America was not only the *Framtidslandet*, the land of the future, as Swedish immigrants thought of it, but a country with a long history. America's past, Alma learned, was filled with noble people and ennobling events. At the very beginning of American history were the Pilgrim fathers who first settled in America in 1620. Of most recent and still powerful memory was the Civil War.

Miss Gray's memories of American history and the Civil War were accompanied by a bitter-sweet note of nostalgia. Since Alma was born in America these were her memories too and she clung to them. Later in life Alma's idea of bygone days never included the Sweden her parents had left. By some mysterious New World magic Sweden had all but vanished and the Pilgrim fathers became her ancestors. Alma embraced, what for lack of a better name might be called "civic piety," a secular fidelity involving the nation's past, one open to all who were, or wished to become, Americans.

Learning was exciting under Miss Gray's tutelage and the atmosphere such that the girls in particular developed sentimental friendships. Among Alma's girlhood friends at the Harvester Works School were Elsie Dunn and Stella Carling. Elsie was the daughter of Winslow Whitman Dunn, a prominent St. Paul citizen and member of the state legislature. The Dunns lived in a fine big house at 1007 Flandrau Street, not very far from Alma's home. Stella Carling also lived near by. Her father, Henry Carling, was an artist remembered in St. Paul for his portrait of James J. Hill which used to hang in the First National Bank building and is still in the First Bank System's art collection. Carling also painted a portrait of William Ames. Today it hangs in the entrance hall of the Ames School.

Sentiment in Verses

These and other of Alma's friends at the Harvester Works School came from well established American families thoroughly engaged in the life of the city. It didn't appear to matter that Alma was only the daughter of a Swedish immigrant employed as a laborer in the nearby Harvester Works. The girls idealized their friendships, called one another "chums," and wrote sentimental verse in each other's memory albums.

In later years it was not distant lands but differences in background and opportunity that kept Stella and Alma apart. Both women spent most of their lives in St. Paul. Stella became an active business woman, was secretary of the St. Paul Committee on Industrial Relations, and a charter member of the St. Paul Business and Professional Women's club. Alma followed her schoolmate's career from a distance and, of course, cut and pasted references to Stella as they appeared in the *St. Paul Daily News*.

Grandmother approved of women with active careers in public life. Women prominent in any field, wives of presidents, heads of the Daughters of the American Revolution, leaders of the various women's auxiliaries, even women who may have accomplished no more than being mothers and grandmothers but who lived to be a hundred years old, all were honored with space in Alma's scrapbooks. But when Stella Carling died her obituary was not pasted into a scrap book. Alma placed it in the memory album from her school days.

Alma's adult patriotism had its beginnings during the five or six years she spent with Miss Gray in the one-room Harvester Works School. Every morning Alma placed her right hand over her heart and together with the other pupils pledged allegiance to a flag presented to the school by the Daughters of the American Revolution. This daily ritual gave Alma a sense of belonging in America, something her parents never quite achieved. In its place Alma's parents looked for stability in the familiar Swedish language of their church, in the unshakable tenets of the Bible and in the teachings of Martin Luther.

St. Paul's original Swedish Lutheran Church at the corner of John Street and Stillwater Avenue had been built to accommodate a few dozen members. It was a frame building of only 28 by 50 feet. As membership grew the church was enlarged. But in the late 1870s and early '80s, as many thousands of Swedes came west, either directly from Sweden or from Eastern states, many of them passed through St. Paul, and some stayed on. The congregation expanded so rapidly that often there was not enough room for

The Johnson family in 1898. Grandmother Alma, lower left, is nineteen; her sister Selma is on the right. Between them is a photograph of their mother Hanna who died in 1892. Standing are great grandfather Martin, left, and Alma's brother, Ernest.

everybody. "It's a joyful sign," Pastor A. P. Monten reported, "but we must have a larger church."

Martin and Hanna were present when, on January 1, 1882, the congregation voted unanimously in favor of a new building. A lot already had been purchased next to the old church which eventually was sold and removed. Work on the new church was completed in stages as funds became available. A loan of $8,000 from James J. Hill made it possible in May of 1882 to let a general construction contract amounting to $17,000, a large sum in those days.

The new church also was large, an 85- by 90- foot building, with an enormous auditorium-like sanctuary and a spacious U-shaped balcony. Alma was four years old when her parents brought her along to the first services in the new building. These were held in the church basement on November 4, 1883. When the upstairs sanctuary was completed the basement was used for the children's Sunday School.

Alma began attending Sunday school in 1886 when some 200 children gathered in the church basement each Sunday afternoon at 2:30. Among themselves many of the children spoke English but Swedish was the language of instruction. The children sang Swedish hymns together and then separated into classes according to their age for Bible lessons, stories, and instruction in the Lutheran catechism, all in Swedish.

Each year the Sunday school sponsored special programs at Christmas and Easter as well as an annual outing. For the outings trains of up to ten or eleven cars were chartered and the entire congregation turned out to visit places like Bald Eagle Lake, Chisago Lake, or Lake Minnetonka. Later, annual steamboat excursions on the Mississippi River were popular, as were picnics at Phalen or Como Parks. In her childhood, Grandmother acquired an easy familiarity with St. Paul and its surroundings.

A Bilingual Child

At Sunday School Alma had plenty of opportunity to socialize with children of the Swedish community. But Sunday School met only once a week and lacked the intimate atmosphere of Alma's little one room Harvester Works School. There she came together each week-day with neighborhood friends. If she had special friendships at the Swedish Sunday School there is no record of them. None appear in her memory album.

Hanna and Martin agreed that Alma should grow up in the faith and be fluent in Swedish. Still, Hanna was pleased that her daughter was becoming an American. Hanna had been no more than sixteen when she arrived in St. Paul from Sweden in 1871. From then on and until her marriage in 1878 she had worked as a domestic servant in American homes. Bright and quick to learn English, she felt comfortable with Americans and their ways. After Alma was born Hanna spoke English with her daughter. But it would have seemed unnatural for her to speak English with her Swedish husband. Alma also spoke Swedish with her father and grew up bilingual.

As a child Alma successfully coped with two languages, in two worlds and with dual loyalties. At home and in school her mother's hopes and Miss Gray's teaching urged her towards English, gentility, and Americanization. On the other hand, her parents' church in Lowertown put her in touch with the robust life and language of St. Paul's Swedish immigrant population. To outsiders this was the Swedish "community;" seen from within it was, in many ways, a divided people.

When recently immigrated Swedish men and women settled in St. Paul, each gender was exposed to radically different aspects of its urban life. Like Martin most Swedish men labored at the very bottom of the city's social hierarchy and had relatively little contact with Americans. In contrast, as domestic servants young immigrant Swedish women like Hanna were readily introduced into the very heart of the American home and had a better chance than Swedish men to experience the pulse and rhythm of its intimate life.

Among the thousands of Swedes who came to St. Paul in the 1870s and 1880s were a good many young and unmarried newcomers. Free finally of fathers and Old Country restraints many young Swedish bachelors spent their first American years in one long celebration. When they were not working they were drinking, gambling, and idling in gangs on the downtown streets. To the more settled members of the Swedish community,

those who already had joined the Swedish church, these young men led vulgar and immoral lives.

Meanwhile, Swedish girls and women who readily found work and a place to live in American homes, tended to become more refined. They celebrated their America-found freedom by mimicking their mistresses, rivaling them in their choice of hats and gowns, and in becoming late-Victorian ladies.

Nevertheless, Swedish servant girls readily joined the Swedish Lutheran Church, as did many of the young married couples. Many Swedes who did not join the church nevertheless turned to its pastor when they wanted to marry, baptize a child or bury a loved one. Nothing was seen to be wrong in this. However, among the outsiders who showed up at the First Swedish Lutheran Church were young men who came to make mischief or, one suspects, only to meet the young women. In either case such visitors were frequently drunk enough to cause rowdy disturbances. Toward the end of the 1880s the problem grew worse and the then pastor, P. J. Sward, complained in his annual report for 1889 of "unchristian" visitors who molested the worshipers, were "lewd, rough and perverted." "Utterly pitiful," the Pastor wrote, "that Swedes can behave so badly."

Pastor Sward was sometimes obliged to call in the police to subdue fellow countrymen before he could complete Sunday evening vespers. Of course, calling in the police under such circumstances was a blow to Swedish pride. The Board of Church Deacons preferred to handle these matters on their own and established an in-house police force.

Great Grandfather Martin served as one of several church members who were deputized as "Special Police." Their job was to assure that church services were carried out in an appropriately dignified atmosphere. Trouble makers were evicted. For his services as special policeman Martin was paid $25 a year! In 1889, a year in which these disturbances were particularly bothersome, Alma was ten, old enough to draw conclusions concerning the rough nature of young Swedes when compared with the quieter Yankee youth in her Oak Park neighborhood.

"Among my grandmother Alma's papers I found a sepia-tinted photograph of the Ames School from the spring of 1892. The school stands solid and emblematic, towering above a collection of tiny, specter-like figures in the foreground."

Overall, what happened in Alma's Swedish church in Lowertown was of less importance to her than what was happening in her East Side neighborhood. Developments there in the late 1880s radically altered the life of the Johnson family. In 1887 William Ames initiated an ambitious real estate promotion effort that dwarfed his earlier Oak Park project. After 1887 Oak Park was absorbed into this new community, one he called "Hazel Park."

To sell lots in Hazel Park, Ames continued to appeal to what he thought to be the more responsible members of the working class. At the same time he was obsessed with the notion that Hazel Park should have a special tone, something to set it apart, and, in the best Yankee tradition, concluded it should be a school.

Traditionally, Yankees believed that illiteracy and lack of learning played into the hands of the devil. Wherever they founded communities in the West they established New England versions of the public school. But Ames was not thinking of the usual white clapboard school building with a bell tower. What he wanted for Hazel Park was a majestic building that would stand out as a landmark and serve as an emblem for his new community.

Ames got the project rolling by donating a suitable parcel of land to the city, an elevated site at 1750 Stillwater Avenue (now Ames Place), a site high enough so that the completed school would tower over the modern cottages, the tree-lined boulevards and grassy slopes that he envisioned for Hazel Park.

A Castle-like School

Ames probably had a hand in selecting the school's architect, J. Walter Stevens. Stevens provided the design for the Peoples Church being built just then, in 1889, on Pleasant Avenue, below James J. Hill's Summit Avenue home. Ames was well acquainted with the founder of the Peoples Church, the Reverend Samuel G. Smith, a dynamic person who had split off from the Methodist church a few years earlier to establish a church of his own on the Congregational model. Smith and Ames were both promoters, and in the 1890s would work together to establish a Peoples Church in Hazel Park.

The building is gone, but as completed in 1889, the Peoples Church on Pleasant Avenue looked more like a large clubhouse than an ecclesiastical structure. The Hazel Park school was also a break with tradition. Stevens gave it many features of the Peoples Church: a red brick facade punctuated with rough hewn brownstone, a steep roof with dormers, and deep-set arched windows. The school looked rather like a compact version of some European castle.

The castle impression arose out of the

school's overall design but especially from the two heavy octagonal towers that formed the right and left wings of the building. In later years former pupils had trouble describing how the school looked from the outside. Perhaps its overall design was difficult for a child to comprehend. One alumnus thought the school had been round. It was the classrooms that were round. There were only four of them, one up and one down, in each of the octagonal towers. Because there were only four classrooms, later generations assumed that the first Hazel Park school had been small. Actually the school's steep roof rose 67 feet to its highest point, sufficient, as Ames had hoped, to dominate the residential area growing up around it.

Alma and many of her chums were among the first pupils of the Hazel Park school. Martin became the school's first janitor. Very likely, William Ames, the Yankee who already had played such an important role in Martin's life, recommended Martin. William Ames had influence in such matters. The new Hazel Park school was named after his ancestor, the Massachusetts-born Fisher Ames, statesman, orator, political writer and contemporary of George Washington.

Martin Johnson had every reason to be satisfied. As school janitor, an employee of the city, Martin had at last achieved a measure of security, even a kind of status, in the new world. He held the position for twenty-seven years, until his death in 1916.

Among my grandmother Alma's papers I found a sepia-tinted photograph of the Ames School from the spring of 1892. The school stands solid and emblematic, towering over a collection of tiny, specter-like figures in the foreground. I used a magnifying glass and discovered a teacher, in a long skirt and shirt waist with puffed sleeves, standing in the sunlight in front of the school's pillared portico. I examined the small figures wandering about in the school yard, girls and boys, clutching books and wearing what appear to be variously-shaped straw hats.

A tall schoolgirl stands in the foreground at the far right, my grandmother. Graduating today from the eighth grade, she dressed this morning in a fine white frock. It seems too large for her and may have been her mother's. Far behind, alone and close to the building, is a man in a dark hat and a rough jacket. His unpressed trousers, and something uncertain in his posture, set him apart as a worker. It's the janitor, I realize, my Swedish great-grandfather, who has at last found his niche in America.

"A studio portrait of Alma in half profile, wearing the high-on-the-neck, shoulder-broad, and silk-beribboned lace collar of a Swedish Lutheran girl at confirmation, reveals a remarkable self confidence in one so young."

The opening of the Fisher Ames school, Martin's janitor work there, Alma's, and later her brother Ernest's and sister Selma's attendance there as pupils, gave the family a new sense of security, even well-being. The school's mid-day break was a full hour-and-a-half, time enough for Martin and the children to walk home for lunch. Together each day around the kitchen table, with father always at the head, Hanna vis-a-vis, and the children all at their customary places at either side, the family felt right and whole as never before. It was an experience the children would remember in later life, partly because it ended so quickly.

Hanna was not well for her elder daughter's twelfth birthday. Alma celebrated it at home with a few friends from school. Hanna gave her daughter a memory album with a blue plush binding. In it Hanna wrote in English, "Aug. 25. 1891. Dear Alma. Happy may thy birthday Be, And a Blessing from me to thee." She closed on a curiously formal note, "Your True Mother, Mrs. Hanna Johnson." Five weeks later, on October 2, Hanna died of tuberculosis.

Hanna was buried at Union Cemetery on a bright October day with the nearby woods in full autumn color. Already, as the little family gathered around the grave, Alma must have sensed the weight of new responsibilities. Who but she could fill her mother's place at home? Now she would fix the family's midday meal, all their meals, clean the house, wash the clothes, purchase the food, see that Ernest and Selma were looked after, and assist her father in matters requiring a better command of English than he could manage.

When Alma graduated from the Fisher Ames school her formal education in English was over. However, her father wanted her to be confirmed, a traditional rite of passage in the Swedish church, and she continued taking religious instruction in Swedish until, at nearly fifteen, she was confirmed in May of 1894. A studio photo of Alma in half profile, wearing the high-on-the-neck, shoulder broad, and silk beribboned lace collar of a Swedish Lutheran girl at confirmation, conveys a look of remarkable self confidence in one so young.

The Missing Pages

Alma's confirmation photo dispels any temptation to think of her as a lost, bewildered working class child from a Charles Dickens novel. Alma was none of these things. Alma did not think of herself as a victim. She identified rather with her middle class Yankee schoolmates. Still, the four years between Alma's confirmation in 1894 and 1898 when she unaccountably left to live in Chicago do resemble a Dickensian novel in one important aspect. They contain, I'm convinced, hidden secrets. There are, for example, three pages in Alma's memory

album that have been removed with a sharp instrument. What was it, I've asked myself, that a girl would have wanted to hide. Was there some great disappointment that she wished to forget, an unhappy love affair perhaps, one that she preferred to keep secret?

What is clear is that Alma did not work in other people's homes as her mother had done when she first arrived in St. Paul from Sweden. Instead, in the years following her mother's death she kept house for her father and looked after her younger brother and sister. Alma became an efficient housekeeper. She rose early, made Martin's and the children's breakfast, and always completed the household chores before noon. Real ladies, she knew from her Yankee friends, never did chores in the afternoon. Afternoons were for receiving guests, perhaps for working outside in the flower garden, going into the city on errands or joining with friends for an outing.

Alma learned how to get around the city while still very young. At twelve she went into town to do errands for her father, to pay real estate taxes or insurance premiums, to shop, to carry out all the errands connected with running a household. To get downtown Alma took the electric car on Seventh Street, the St. Paul-White Bear line, which ran every half hour. Once in the loop she could transfer to electric cars running to all parts of the city.

Family life ran smoothly under Alma's direction, but there were unforeseen problems. In the summer of 1894, not long after her confirmation, Alma came down with typhoid fever. Each summer of the 1890s saw a number of cases of this dreaded illness in St. Paul. I never heard grandmother speak of the disease, but an envelope I found among her things contained a lock of fine golden hair and bore the inscription, "My hair before I had typhoid fever." Presumably the fever changed the color or texture of her hair. I can't say. As I remember her, grandmother's hair was always gray.

Alma would have recovered slowly from typhoid fever, and during a long convalescence at home, as late summer turned to fall, would have had time to reminisce and to think about her future. It was then, I believe, that she first puzzled over her position between two worlds, the ethnic world of her Swedish church in Lowertown, and the Yankee world of Hazel Park. As a child, she felt no conflict between them, but now, as a teenager in the mid 1890s, she may have found them incompatible. What one knows for sure is that when she was well enough and began to move about, Alma neglected her Swedish church and concentrated on her Hazel Park friends and interests.

Among Alma's neighborhood interests was the mission of the Peoples Church established in Hazel Park in 1894 by Dr. Samuel Smith. Among those supporting the new church were William Ames and W. W. Dunn. Both became members of its Board of Trustees. Ames, of course, was no stranger to the Johnson family and Dunn was the father of Alma's school friend Elsie. Mary Coffin, the same pretty Miss Coffin who was Alma's teacher and friend from the Ames school, was appointed assistant Sunday School superintendent. Martin Johnson, Alma's father, became church janitor at a salary of $2.50 a month.

Alma followed the ups and downs of the Peoples Church in Hazel Park. In November, 1895, when it was reorganized as the Hazel Park Congregational Church, she assisted the Ladies Aid Society in serving a special supper for the occasion. There is no record, however, that Alma actually joined the Hazel Park church. It was totally American and Alma found the atmosphere congenial, but Alma was not conventionally religious and eventually shied away from churches. On the other hand, she was drawn to the secular piety of patriotism and reverence for the nation's past.

* * *

In early September 1896, John H. Stacy of Newport spent several days in St. Paul in the company of his seventeen-year-old adopted son, Walter John Stacy, the orphaned cousin with whom Alma once had shared a cradle. The elder Stacy came to the city to take part in the thirtieth National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic, made up of men who, like himself, were Union army veterans of the Civil War. In 1896, many Civil War veterans still were alive and the GAR was a formidable organization.

Some thirty-seven years later, in September, 1933, I, a bewildered ten-year-old, was puzzled by my grandmother's solemn intensity as we watched a contingent of straggling ninety-year-old men in blue march slowly past us to the hesitant cadence of an equally ancient fife and drum corps. In one of my grandmother's scrapbooks I've found a newspaper clipping describing this nearly forgotten event, the sixty-seventh National Encampment of the GAR. The parade, according to the *St. Paul Daily News* of September 20, 1933, was one of the most impressive St. Paul had ever seen, and "Many a spectator, standing bareheaded before the procession of flags and marching men, wiped an occasional tear from his eye and swallowed a lump in his throat as he watched the blue-coated symbols of the nation's highest idealism pass in review."

Alma, with her reverence for the nation's past, was bound to be moved by this brave display of living remnants of a once grand army, but, as I now realize, her 1933 reaction was run through with a note of personal nostalgia for a significant moment in her youth. In 1896, when the GAR had last encamped in St. Paul, she had watched the parade in the company of her cousin, Walter John Stacy.

Within the family, an air of mystery always accompanied mention of Walter John Stacy, or simply Walter Stacy, and the precise nature of his relationship to my grandmother remains a mystery still. Walter, who had little or no contact with the Swedish-American community after his adoption by the Stacy family, grew up as a Yankee. Alma may well have felt that if Walter could become so American, so could she.

* * *

In Lowertown, the Board of Deacons of Alma's Swedish church dropped members who did not attend services regularly and who, for two years, failed to pay their annual membership fee of $10. This may have been why, in 1897, the deacons dropped Alma from church membership rolls. If Alma had been guilty of something more serious, some unpardonable sin in the eyes of the Board, she would have been excommuni-

cated. But records reveal no special reason for Alma's dismissal, no spectacularly sinful behavior on her part.

In becoming more American Alma was out in front of her Swedish church, but only just barely. Alma's confirmation class of 1894 was the last to receive religious training solely in Swedish. The Swedish-born and ordained pastor who had confirmed her, the Reverend A. J. Sward, departed shortly thereafter. He was replaced on June 17, 1894, by the church's first American-born pastor, the Reverend L. A. Johnston.

Under Pastor Johnston's direction, the First Swedish Lutheran Church in St. Paul became less ethnic and more self-consciously American. English as well as Swedish was used to prepare young people for confirmation, and more and more English was heard from the pulpit. In this and other ways the Swedish Lutheran Church gradually closed a chapter in its history. In the early years its mission had been to serve the spiritual needs of Swedish immigrants. Now, as a mature church, it would serve an increasingly American congregation.

* * *

The year, 1897, in which Alma was dropped from membership in her Swedish church was decisive for her in yet another way. In June Walter Stacy graduated from St. Paul College, a Methodist school in St. Paul Park and close to the Stacy's Newport home. The school sponsored an elaborate six-day-long graduation program and the Johnsons were invited. Martin accompanied Alma when she went down to St. Paul Park on June 6 to attend baccalaureate services. After the services, Martin and Alma sat and chatted with the family on the broad porch of the Stacy's fine Newport home, Swedes and Yankees together, almost related.

Alma went down alone to St. Paul Park on Thursday evening for a "Lawn Sociable" on the college campus. It was a mild June evening. There she finally met all the graduates, sober but fun loving young men in Walter's circle. After the sociable, Alma joined the young bachelors and a few of the college misses in the parlor of the Stacy home. There, among the young people, the talk was light, polite and flirtatious. Alma was delighted with the evening and made frequent trips to Newport during the summer of 1897.

The Stacy home in St. Paul Park, with the elder Stacy at the far right. Walter stands stiffly in the front center. The girl on the left is not identified. Mrs. Stacy lounges on the porch.

That winter, on February 15, 1898, a violent explosion sank the American battleship "Main" in the harbor of Havana, Cuba. In March, a court of inquiry concluded that the explosion was due to an underwater mine. The press and public opinion assumed that Spain was responsible and the nation was soon at war. Many young men flocked to take part in the Spanish-American War. One of those who went off may well have been a special friend of Alma's from St. Paul Park and the light-hearted summer of 1897.

One knows only that before the war was over in August, Alma left for Chicago and there, very soon, she met my grandfather-to-be, Joel Wilhelm Larson. There was reason enough to marry Joel. He was a tall and attractive young man and Swedish like Alma's father. Still it was a surprising move, Alma marrying a Swede, after her commitment to everything Yankee.

Carefree Summer

Pasted into Alma's first scrapbook, the one begun soon after her arrival in Chicago, are a dozen or more small, postage stamp size photos of Walter Stacy and his friends. They appear to be clowning. There are several photos of Walter alone, one in profile, his teeth clenched over the end of an unusually large cigar. In another a friend wears a derby, and one young man boldly flaunts a cigaret. In Chicago, Alma thought back to the carefree summer of 1897, and she continued to cherish its memory for years to come.

When Joel and Alma's first son, my father, was born in 1901, he was not named Joel Wilhelm after his father. Perhaps Joel and Wilhelm were too Swedish. He was named John Walter, a reversal, simply, of Walter John Stacy's given names. As though to perpetuate this act of remembrance, grandmother never called my father John. He was always called Walter.

When I, in turn, was to be baptized in 1923, my grandmother insisted that Walter Stacy's Yankee stepfather, over ninety now, be my godfather. I, too, was named John Walter. Sly Alma! She never let the family in on her secret. In subtle ways, and without ever explaining what was afoot, she assured that the summer of 1897 lived on in the family, as it has, for nearly a hundred years.

* * *

Alma clung to her Yankee connections and her father Martin became more American, too. In October, 1897, he became a United States citizen. Then, as though to celebrate the new age about to be ushered in by the turn of the century, he trimmed his beard, reduced the size of his Old World mustache, and wore his

hair shorter than heretofore. In a photo from 1905 Martin sits with other family members outside his Hazel Park home, with my father, aged four, standing between his knees. Martin no longer looks like a Swedish immigrant, or even like a janitor, but could almost be one of the Yankee businessmen who lived about him in Hazel Park.

In a small way Martin had become a businessman. He had managed to have a second small house built on his Hazel Park property, one that he hoped to rent out. But Selma, his youngest daughter, had an unhappy marriage to a man who, although a Yankee, neglected his wife and children. After 1912 Selma and the children lived rent free in Martin's second house. This was only one of Martin's many acts of generosity toward his children. To afford such generosity, Martin supplemented his janitor pay with extra money earned in any way he could. My father remembered him walking about in Hazel Park with a sawhorse over his shoulder, a saw in hand, ready to saw kindling wood for his neighbors in return for small amounts of cash.

Perhaps it was hard work, or possibly illness, but the years were not kind to Martin. Photos taken of him after 1910 show him greatly aged. He was hospitalized briefly in the spring of 1916. Released from the hospital, Martin's health did not improve in the course of the summer.

Meanwhile, Hazel Park had expanded greatly since the Fisher Ames school was built in 1889. For some years now local residents had clamored for a larger school. The city eventually relented and built a new school in the fall of 1916. The new school did not soar over its surroundings as the old one did, and it did not look like an early medieval castle. If anything, it resembled a renaissance palace.

The new Hazel Park school was no longer named after Fisher Ames, but after his St. Paul descendent, William L. Ames. William's name was carved in stone above the new school's front entrance. Before he died in 1910 William had been a member of the St. Paul Board of Public Works. The city fathers recognized this and his other contributions to the life of the community in naming the new school. The Fisher Ames school

Walter John Lord Stacy as a thoroughly Yankee young man about 1900.

eventually was torn down. The 1916 school named for William L. Ames is still in use.

* * *

In December of 1916 both the new and old Ames schools were standing side by side. It was an unusually cold winter and Martin had to keep furnaces going in both buildings. The effort proved too much for him. Feeling ill, he did what he often had done before, he climbed onto the Seventh Street streetcar, transferred downtown and arrived at his daughter's place on Jessamine Street, only to be put to bed. He died two weeks later. The St. Paul *Daily News* told the story.

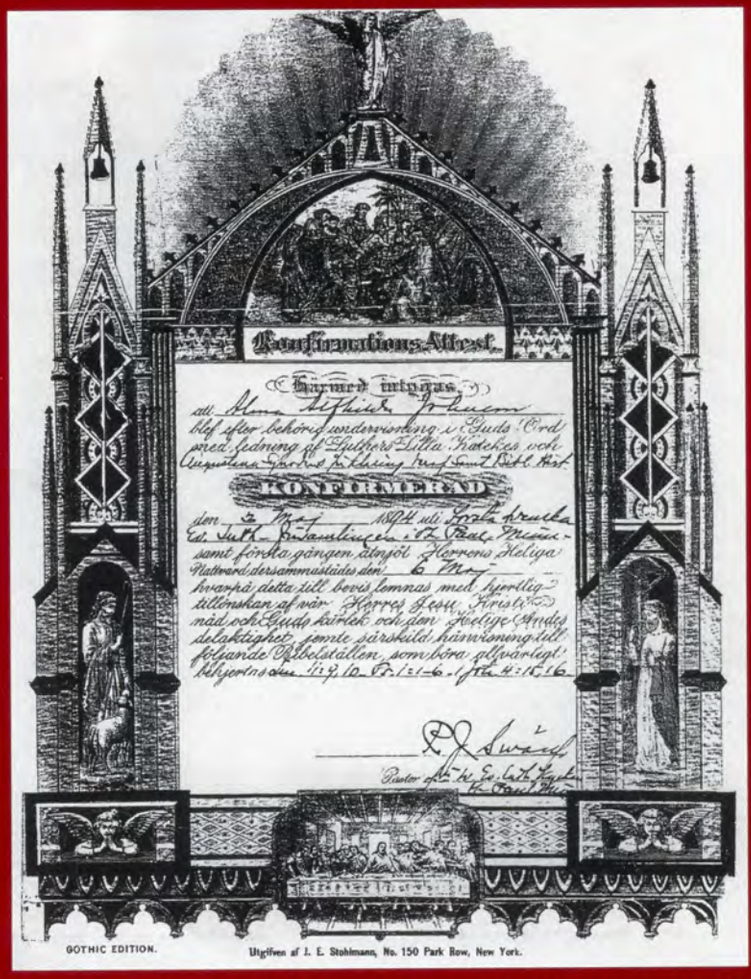
"Veteran Janitor Dies". . . . Martin Johnson, 68, janitor, Ames School, for 28 years died Thursday at the home of his daughter, Mrs. J. W. Larson, 83 E. Jessamine Street. He contracted pneumonia in the course of his duties. Since the construction of the new Ames building near the old one, Mr. Johnson had care of both buildings and had to attend furnaces in both. Two weeks ago he became ill from a bad cold and grew slowly worse until his death. Mr. Johnson lived at 1545 Harvester Avenue. . . . Funeral services will be at the English Lutheran Church, Hazel Park, at 1:30 p. m. Saturday."

Martin had been a member of the Swedish Lutheran Church in Lowertown for nearly forty years, but when he died Alma had him buried from the English Lutheran Church. She was not a member of the English Lutheran Church, but she preferred it to the Swedish church for reasons the family has never clearly understood.

Many wreaths accompanied Martin to his grave next to Hanna's in Union Cemetery. The Janitors and Engineers Society sent flowers, as did the Swedish Bethesda Society, and relatives of course, as well as teachers from the Ames school. Ames school pupils sent their own bouquet to their "Yonny Yonson," as they called him. With all his efforts to fit in, great-grandfather Martin Johnson remained a Swede until the end.

With Martin's death the Swedish language was no longer heard in my grandparents' home on Jessamine Street. Grandmother Alma and the Larson family were now free to go their American way. Perhaps it was just as well. Within four months of Martin's death, on April 6, 1917, the United States was at war with Germany. In Minnesota there were zealous patriots in high places who suspected Swedes of pro-German sentiments. Under the circumstances it was best not to be a hyphenated American. By the time the war ended, only remnants of Swedishness were to be heard or seen in the Larson household except, of course, for my grandfather Joel who had been born in Sweden, and he generally kept his thoughts to himself.

John W. Larson, a retired public relations officer for the United States department of defense, is the author of several earlier accounts of his Swedish ancestors which have been published in Ramsey County History.



Alma Johnson's certificate of confirmation from the First Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in St. Paul, May 3, 1894. See "Growing Up in St. Paul," page 17.

R.C.H.S.
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Published by the Ramsey County Historical Society
323 Landmark Center
75 West Fifth Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

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Permit #3989