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Emil Tyden (1865–1951)

Franklin D. Scott*

It is easy to imagine the scene — a group of furniture manufacturers were indulging in a fishing outing during a convention, entertained at the summer lakeside home of Emil Tyden near Hastings, MI. But it was one of those bad days for fishing and one of the guests was particularly disgusted with his luck. An argument arose and the gentleman said that he would pay \$2.00 for every fish caught that day. The host asked how large the fish had to be and the visitor, in his huff, said that it might be anything that could swim. So Mr. Tyden took a pail and a seine, went down to the dock, hauled in a pailful of minnows, took it up to the house and asked to have the fish counted. There were two hundred and fifty! The protests were loud, and it took a few years and several more conventions and a bit of cajoling before the protester finally broke down and paid up — to the benefit of a favorite charity. Perhaps this is Emil Tyden's only fish story, but it is worthy of the man.

This inventor-businessman, born in the parish of Flisby in Jönköping *län* in Småland Jan. 13, 1865, arrived in the United States at the age of 17. After landing in New York he went directly to friends in Moline, IL, where he got work at the Moline Cabinet Organ Company, while attending night school in order to learn English. Soon he was making suggestions for improvements in the operation of the plant, and during a winter shut-down he proceeded to make two organs on his own. When he visited some friends on a farm he watched the corn planting and conceived the idea of a device that would plow a furrow, plant seeds in proper spacing, and cover them. Even before this and from this time on he was inventing things — he took out a total of 165 patents between 1885 and 1945. His fertile mind was at work all the time, thinking of how to do things better.

Early in 1885 Emil moved to Chicago, the big city of the Middle West, and took a job with the Kimball Piano and Organ Company. After some time he was lured away by the McCormick Harvester people who were impressed with his corn planting machine. However, his suggestions were not always accepted by the decision makers and he decided that he could do better on

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his own. He therefore founded in Chicago in 1889 The International Seal and Lock Company and began manufacturing one of his most fruitful inventions — the self-locking seal on boxcar doors, a light flexible steel band to be inserted in a ball. It was cheap and it was effective, and it soon became indispensable. It was used by railroads in 95% of their freight cars, by the United States Customs Service and even by Paris dressmakers. It was in its way the perfect invention, for once it was destroyed and thrown aside a new one was required for the next sealing — it was a single one-time use product par excellence. The factory that made them had thus permanent employment and they produced them by the millions. Tyden did not take out a patent on his seal until 1896, and kept constantly improving the product until 1949. In 1900 he had moved to Hastings, MI in order to establish the Consolidated Press and Tool Company (now owned by Gulf and Western), which made the implements for manufacturing the seal lock. One Saturday night in 1901 lightning struck his plant, which was consumed by the fire. By the following Monday morning a new and better factory was under construction.

But if the ingenious little seal was the foundation for continuing prosperity, it was far from being the only interest in Tyden's life. In 1892 he was sufficiently successful to make his first visit back home to Sweden. On his return to the United States he became a land agent for the Union Pacific Railroad. He gathered Swedish settlers from the Middle West and established a "New Sweden" near Idaho Falls, ID. His people may have grown potatoes in Sweden, but they were soon growing bigger and better ones. The soil and climate were ideal, only water was lacking. "No problem"! The young land agent quickly organized The Great Western Land and Irrigation Company. When the resulting crops far surpassed the size of the local market, the ever-resourceful agent persuaded the railroad to grant temporary low freight rates to Chicago. He took a large cargo east, distributed free sample bags to hotels and restaurants, and thus built up a demand that paid off handsomely and made the "Idaho bakers" famous. In some quarters Tyden became known as the father of the Idaho potato industry.

Happy family life was inaugurated by his marriage in 1895 to Minnie H. Johnson of Chicago, the seventh child in a Swedish immigrant family, and the first in the family to be born in America. In due course came the birth of a daughter Florence, who eventually married Richard Groos, and it was he who succeeded to the leadership of the various Tyden interests. In the next generation came Richard Tyden Groos, and after him five great grandchildren of Emil and Minnie are waiting their turn. Incidentally eventually Emil's sister and four brothers as well as his mother emigrated to America.

It was inevitable that Emil Tyden should become involved in other business and civic affairs in Hastings. When the Hastings Wool Boot Company was in financial trouble, Emil was called upon to improve productivity and restore profitability. Two local banks used his advice to maintain com-

petition and rebuild financial health. For the Hastings Table Company his ingenuity led to new inventions and business success — he inserted dowel pins into the table leaves in order to assure proper alignment and developed a clamping device to hold the leaves together — then he went on the road and proved to be a remarkably successful salesman.

Fire protection challenged his interest and he made a series of improvements in overhead sprinkler systems and especially in a sprinkler head flush with the ceiling. In this endeavor both his business sense and his human interest were exemplified. He looked for capable men experienced in the



Col. Emil Tyden

sprinkler field and loaned each of them a stake of \$50,000. He then made them partners in his Viking Corporation for the operation of their business. The result was some 25 distribution centers throughout the country.

World War I found the management expert back on the scene of his early immigrant years — the Quad City area, where he served as a dollar-a-year production manager for the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps at the Rock Island, IL Arsenal. Here he was commissioned a lieutenant colonel, and thus obtained the title he was to be known by thereafter.

In civic affairs Col. Tyden was a benefactor to individuals as well as institutions in town, state and nation. He aided young men to go to college, he donated land for a park for the city of Hastings, he was one of the founders of the Barry County Hospital, MI, and he was the first supporter and long-time Board member of the American Swedish Historical Foundation of Philadelphia. In 1945 he served as its president. He conceived the idea and gave to the Museum of the Foundation its popular Pioneer Room. Naturally the achievements of such a man were widely recognized, even by King Gustaf V of Sweden, who in 1940 conferred on the Colonel the knighthood of the Order of Vasa.

The Tyden Corporation, using Emil Tyden's methods and inventions, continues to prosper in its multiple activities. Col. Tyden built for his own time, but also for a longer future.

Author's note: This article is based on facts gleaned from more detailed treatments by Walter G. Nord in 1964 *Yearbook* of the American Swedish Historical Foundation as well as Nancy Wait's article in *The Will to Succeed. Stories of Swedish Pioneers* (New York and Stockholm, 1948). It has also been checked by Florence Tyden Groos.

Bishop Hill Bible Inscription

Tell G. Dahllöf of Stockholm, Sweden, recently located the following Bishop Hill, IL related item in a badly worn Holy Bible, printed in Stockholm 1888. On the inside of the flyleaf is the following inscription:

“Ida M. Nordstrom was born in Bishop Hill March 26, 1866. Thomas S. Paddock and Ida M. Nordstrom were married in Reno, NV March 15, 1892. Mabel Lillian Paddock was born in Battle Mountain, NV Dec. 27, 1892. Fenton M. McElrath and Mabel [sic!] Lillian Paddock were married in Mankato, MN Jan. 1 [year illegible].”

Ida M. Nordstrom may possibly be the daughter of Hans Nordstrom, who arrived in Bishop Hill in 1846. He married Margta Molin in 1849 and had with her five sons and two daughters.