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Joseph B. Oakleaf's boyhood journey to Kansas

– a sequel to B.P. Oakleaf's reflections in SAG 1/09

BY STEVE COX

In 1869, when Joseph B. Oakleaf was not quite eleven years old, his Swedish immigrant family left their home in Moline, Illinois, to make a fresh start farming virgin land in south-eastern Kansas.¹

Joseph Oakleaf remembered that trek to the end of his days.

His parents, Benjamin Peter (B. P.) Oakleaf (1827-1893) and Mary Oakleaf (1830-1905), were among the few Swedes – no more than 1,400 of them – who came to America in 1854.²

B. P. Oakleaf was twenty-seven years old and Mary twenty-four, when, with two young children in tow, they sailed for America. Leaving their home near Melbystrand, on the southwestern coast of Hallands län, they sailed from the port of Göteborg on June 25, 1854. Their son Christian, two and a half years old, died at sea. They landed in Boston forty-five days later and, along with other Swedes who had come on the same ship, the Oakleafs went directly to Moline. A few days later, their seventeen-month-old daughter, Christina, also died.³

B. P. found a steady job in the S. W. Wheelock paper mill, in Moline, and the Oakleafs started a new family. By 1869, they had three sons and two

daughters to make the trek to Kansas: Charlie (born 1856), Joseph (1858), Junia (1862), Lydia (1866), and Emanuel (1868). Two children had died in Moline, and the last Oakleaf child, Stephen, was born in 1871, two years after they arrived in Kansas.⁴

Neighbors

Just next door to the Oakleaf family in Moline lived Peter and Johanna Swanson, who had emigrated from Sweden in 1855, the year after the Oakleafs, and their five daughters. In age, the Swanson sisters fit with the Oakleaf children like cards expertly shuffled. Augusta or Gustie Swanson, the eldest, was born in 1855; she was a year older than Joseph's elder brother Charlie Oakleaf. Then came Lottie Swanson (1857), a year older than Joseph, and Nell Swanson (1859), a year younger than Joseph, and Jenny Swanson (1862), the same age as Joseph's sister Junia, and Pauline Swanson (1869), the youngest Swanson, born in January 1869.⁵

The Oakleafs and Swansons were among the few Swedes in Moline when they arrived, but more and more Swedes came until, by the

1870s, about half of Moline (population 7,800 in 1880) was Swedish.⁶

Moline was a compact, lively industrial city, full of things for children to see and savor – steamboats on the Mississippi, the railroad carrying goods and people to the West, the fire and smoke and bustle and rumble of workers and machines in the factories: when the John Deere plow shop worked late, the constant pounding of the drop hammers rattled the windows of the town far into the night.⁷

The Civil War came

The Civil War added to the excitement. Moline was far from the front, but Gustie Swanson remembered, as an eight-year-old girl, watching Confederate prisoners, captured at the Battle of Chattanooga of November 1863, being marched to the military prison on Rock Island, visible from Moline across a narrow channel of the Mississippi River.

The brick schoolhouse, built in 1843, was a short three-block walk from the Oakleafs' home. The paper mill where B. P. worked was downtown, six blocks away, and just five blocks east and around the corner was the home of Moline's most prominent citizen, John Deere, whose plow factory was the anchor of Moline's industry.

B. P. Oakleaf was an orphan who had made his way in Sweden as a soldier and had acquired, according to one chronicler, "a sound English education." Within six years of arriving in America, he held a personal



One of the early factories in Moline.

This is the wagon factory, but the others probably looked much the same.

The Swedish population grew from about 360 in 1860 to about 4100 in 1900, compared to the total population of 19,700.

estate of \$1,600 and real estate valued at \$600. His neighbor Peter Swanson, a farmer in Sweden, had worked in a sawmill for all of his fourteen years in Moline.⁸

The Oakleafs go west

B. P. Oakleaf was capable of better things than working at the paper mill. And breathing the chemical fumes of the paper plant made him ill. He had once taken a three-year break from the paper mill and its fumes to try farming in the Rock River valley. Finally, his doctor recommended that he go west for his health.

After the Civil War, land in the West was opening up. Late in May 1869, B. P. Oakleaf and Peter Swanson, both in their forties, quit their factory jobs, left their families in Moline, and went to Kansas, lured by the prospect of good, cheap land.⁹

By riverboat, train, and wagon, and finally on foot, the two men made their way to Labette County in southeastern Kansas. By June 10 they had staked claims on Osage Indian land in the valley of Pumpkin Creek. About two miles from their claims, settlers were organizing a brand-new town, Mound Valley.¹⁰

While B. P. Oakleaf settled his Kansas claim, Peter Swanson returned to Moline to spend the three summer months organizing the move and preparing to pilot a party of twenty or more Swedes to Kansas: his wife Johanna and their five daughters, B. P. Oakleaf's wife Mary, three Oakleaf sons and two Oakleaf daughters, and, in addition, as B. P. recorded, "Swan Peterson and family, Carl Olson and family, Mr. Swan Larson, Mr. Sandburg and youngest daughter."

Decades later, Joseph B. Oakleaf, the Oakleafs' second son, recalled this adventure as seen through a boy's eyes. It was a fast trip – in eleven days, between September 20 and September 30, they traveled more than 520 miles, 180 of them by wagon caravan, averaging all told better than 47 miles per day. For the final part of the route, by wagon, the party followed the Missouri-Kansas

stat line some 140 miles directly south from Kansas City to the southeastern corner of Kansas, and from there almost directly west 40 miles to Mound Valley. Joseph remembered the names of a string of towns along the route, perhaps the locations of inns where the party stayed rather than making camp each evening and breaking camp every morning.¹¹

The journey to Kansas

In his reminiscence, Joseph wrote: "Father could have purchased land around Kansas City for \$10 an acre, but it was hilly and rough and he didn't think it was very good for farming. He wanted government land so he continued on south and finally reached the quarter section on which he lived when he died.

"He reached there [Mound Valley, Kansas] about the first of June, 1869, and built a house.

"Mother and we children left for Kansas on the 20th day of September, 1869, and there were several immigrants who had just come from Sweden who went with her. She had to be the spokesman for all of them.

"We went to Rock Island [Ill.] and took a steamboat for Quincy [Ill.] in order to get the Wabash train, as that was the only railroad which went through Kansas City. We took the Wabash railroad at Hannibal [Missouri] for Kansas City.

"When we reached Kansas City, Mother went out and hired a couple of wagons and two men to take the caravan down through Kansas. We passed through Fort Scott and Girard, they are the only towns I can remember, and then on through Columbus, I remember that, and the county seat of Cherokee County and Oswego, the county seat of Labette County. When we came to a hill halfway between Mound Valley and home, he [Peter Swanson] pointed out to us a light which shone from a house not far distant, and he said that was where Father lived. We were walking, and how jubilant we were that we would soon see Father. We had not seen him since May. The creek was low so we could ford it a



Joseph B. Oakleaf as a young man.

short distance from the wagon road, and then we started up towards the house. It was a little bit uphill all the way, and the light shone brightly.

Joy at meeting

We ran ahead of Mr. Swensson [Swanson] and pounded on the door and called "Papa, Papa, Papa." He had gone to bed, for he didn't know when we were coming. He was overjoyed to see us and we just hung onto him as though we could never let go. The next day, the first of October, was my birthday, and I was eleven years old.

"The next day the caravan arrived. Father had not seen the Petersons since we left them in Sweden, and they surrounded him and left Mother sitting over on the wagon waiting for him to come over to her. He was so bewildered he didn't seem to know which way to turn, so finally she called out, "Peter, don't you know I am here too?" Then of course he came to his senses and helped Mother down.

"It was a wonderful evening, and we didn't get to sleep until early morning. Just think of it! Some had to sleep out in the wagon, some under the wagon, and the rest crowded into the house, which was only thirteen by sixteen and beds were made on the floor. That was my first night on the old homestead where I lived until the fall of '76 when I went east to school.

Moving to Kansas, B. P. Oakleaf took the long view. Near his own claim, he also purchased a quarter section of land for each of his sons, and three of the Oakleaf sons—Charlie, Emanuel, and Steve—farmed there all their lives. Indeed the home place remained in the Oakleaf family for more than a century¹².

B. P. Oakleaf also joined with other civic-minded settlers in building the community of Mound Valley. He was among those investing in stores and encouraging business ventures, and until the government established a post office in Mound Valley, B. P. Oakleaf himself carried the mail seventeen miles from the county seat, Oswego.¹³

Son Joseph goes to school

Still, the quiet farm town of Mound Valley stood in contrast to the busy little industrial city of Moline. Schooling was sketchy, and B. P. Oakleaf seems to have recognized that by nature his son Joseph was meant for business, not farming. By age fifteen, Joseph was clerking in a store in the larger nearby town of Independence, Kansas, and then in Peru, a smaller and newer town, founded in 1870 further west in Kansas.¹⁴

In 1876, which he called “the year of the great grasshopper plague,” Joseph Oakleaf went east to Bailey’s Mercantile College in Keokuk, Iowa, on the Mississippi River about a hundred and twenty miles downstream from Moline.

On graduation, he returned to his birthplace, Moline. Within three years, he married Josephine Anderson, a daughter of Swedish immigrants who came to America on the same ship with B. P. and Mary Oakleaf, twenty-five years before.

In Moline, Joseph B. Oakleaf became a successful lawyer and a well-known collector of books and manuscripts concerning Abraham Lincoln. He wrote this memoir in April 1930, just two months before he died at age sixty-two.¹⁵

Notes:

- 1) Ilene Oakleaf Bussman, *Descendants of Benjamin Peter Oakleaf* (2008), formatted by a second Oakleaf descendant, Anne Frank Chittenden.
- 2) Hans Norman and Harald Runblom, *Transatlantic Connections: Nordic Migration to the New World After 1800* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1988), p. 115.
- 3) Bussman, p. 11.
- 4) Bussman, pp. 11, 12.
- 5) Birth dates of Swanson daughters in membership roll of the First Lutheran Church of Moline (founded as the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Moline), in Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.
- 6) Lilly Setterdahl, *Swedes in Moline, Illinois, 1847-2002* (Moline: Universal Publishers, 2003), p. 17.
- 7) John Diehl, a John Deere employee of 1874, described the shop of earlier days, as quoted in Wayne G. Broehl, Jr., *John Deere’s Company: A History of Deere & Company and Its Times* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p. 230.
- 8) Bussman, pp. 11, 12, 13, citing William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (1883), Labette County, Part 29, Biographical Sketches. Moline city directories list Peter Swanson as working as a “lastmaker” (probably a misspelling of lathmaker; 1856) and sawyer (1867).
- 9) Bussman, p. 12; B. P. Oakleaf refers to Peter Swanson as Peter Sfanon, and Joseph refers to Peter Swanson as Svennson. The Swanson family left Kansas for Colorado in 1876 (perhaps as a result of the grasshopper plague that Joseph mentions) and seems to have disappeared from the Oakleafs’ awareness. (The eldest Swanson daughter, Augusta, married a local farmer, Charles Tibbets, and raised her family on the Tibbets’ farm near the Oakleaf farms south of Mound Valley.)

- 10) B. P. Oakleaf reminiscence, Mound Valley (Kansas) *Herald*, April 27, 1882, reprinted in Mound Valley *Times-Journal*, (Thursday, August 21, 1969). See also SAG 1/09, p.1.
- 11) Reproduced in Bussman, p. 12.
- 12) Until 1976, after the death of his grandson, Marcus Oakleaf, in 1974. Bussman, p. 14.
- 13) As he testifies in his own reminiscence and as recalled by his granddaughter, Gertrude Oakleaf Belknap, Bussman, p. 14.
- 14) William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (1883), chapter on Chautauqua County. Peru, Kansas, is coincidentally the birthplace of Madelyn Dunham (born 1922), the grandmother of President Barack Obama.
- 15) Bussman, pp. 12, 19.



Joseph B. Oakleaf as an elderly man.

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