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Listening to the Prairie

The old Jansson homestead in Minnesota is visited by a descendant. Part III

BY DENNIS L. JOHNSON

Growing town of Bernadotte

The same year (1871) Gustafsson's new general store had opened across from the church, and it had a post office. After Sunday services, settlers could stop for their mail, buy a few things, and deliver butter and eggs for sale.

A new one-room schoolhouse had been built only a mile north of the Johnson's farm, and school was held for two months in the winter and two months in the summer. By 1870, they had 27 children of all ages attending. One of them no doubt was Ephraim, now 14 years old, and learning to speak English so he could teach his family at home. Mathilda and Wilhelmina might have gone as well, but they were older and may not have wanted to join all the little children. A few years later, Otto would also begin his schooling in this little classroom, and become proficient in English.

By 1870, land prices in the area had risen to nearly 6 dollars an acre from the \$1.50 of just a few years earlier when Jonas arrived in the township. Most of the land around the Johnson farm was now settled, and the church was filled every Sunday. At the general store, butter could be sold for about 20 cents a pound, a dozen eggs would bring 15 cents. Their chicken flock grew larger, and little Otto helped Ephraim and

Mathilda collect the eggs every day, leaving one egg behind so the hens would not stop laying. Stina kept all the butter and egg money in a jar behind the stove; this was her money to be used for needed items at the store, or for the infrequent trips into St. Peter for shopping.

Farm chores

There was milk in the household now, with several milk cows in their new cow shed. The cows had to be milked daily and the cream separated from the milk. From the cream they made butter, cheese from the milk, and any excess milk and buttermilk was drunk, fed to the calves, or sold. The farm had acquired a stray cat who settled in to help keep the mice at bay, and who always showed up at milking time for her share.

Plowing was easier now; Jonas had bought a team of horses and given them new Swedish names. He built a shed large enough for the pair, the harness and equipment, and enough feed to last a winter. Now he would also plant barley and oats to feed these hard-working horses. To add new acres to the plowing, however, he still had to borrow a team to hitch in tandem to his own, or perhaps use John Hed's oxen, to break new sod. He could also plow the vegetable garden for the women to plant and tend; it would be a little larger every year. They tried a little sweet corn, and raised turnips, car-

rots, pumpkins, cabbage, beans, and peas. Some of the Swedish farmers built familiar zigzag rail fences; Jonas found posts with the new barbed wire more practical.

Dangers

Spring and fall, when the grass and fields were dry, brought the threat of prairie fires, usually signaled by smoke in the western sky. The more experienced farmers would quickly hitch up their team and plow a firebreak around their woodlot to protect their house and other buildings, but the fires would sometimes jump the firebreaks in the strong winds.

In July of 1873, another kind of cloud appeared on the horizon. A plague of locusts swept over the land, one which was to reappear every year for four years more. The desperate farmers fought back, but these locusts, or grasshoppers, could strip a field bare in a few hours. People were paid from 3 to 10 cents per bushel by the county for dead locusts.

Jonas and his neighbors tried everything to save their crops. Some used a drag, a flat pan coated with molasses to drag the fields and trap the insects. Others used long, sticky ropes to drag through the fields, all to little avail. With luck, the swarms moved on and not too much of the valuable grain was lost. Yields were poor in those years, and the families

had to struggle to get by. A fund was set up to help families that lost their entire crops, and by 1878, the locusts had pretty much gone away. The winters became milder in 1877 and 1878 and in 1880-81, and yields improved.

Children leaving

By 1874 *Lars Johan*, the oldest son of Jonas and Stina Johnson, was 28 years old and had worked for his father since coming to Minnesota eight years before. He was ready to start his own farm and to marry and raise a family. He had a sweetheart, *Betsy Morshare*, the daughter of a farmer who lived about two miles down their road to the west. Lars had seen Betsy regularly in church and at other gatherings, and they were married in 1874. They had six children in the next twelve years.

Tragedy struck in 1889 when Lars Johan was killed by a falling tree on his farm. He was only 43 years old, and left Betsy a widow with six young children to raise.

After Mathilda left home in 1873 and Lars in 1874, the family had become smaller and the house was now less crowded. More work fell on the shoulders of *Wilhelmina*, now 24, and *Ephraim*, a young man at 18.

Otto was by now 7 years old and learning to help around the farm. He collected all the eggs from the henhouse, chased rabbits and the occasional deer away from the garden, and had learned not to fear the mean rooster that sometimes used to chase him into the house, strutting about and acting as if the entire farmyard was his territory. Otto had learned to read and write in English at school, and tried to teach his family new words as best he could. He had a pet dog now, his father had brought home a pup from a neighbor's farm, and between them they would bring the cows in from the field at night, into the barn. Otto William was good with his hands, and began to try and make things from scraps of wood he found in the shed. He wasn't so sure he wanted to be a farmer, however. He hated it when the locusts came

and ate the crops. He liked the trips into St. Peter, he thought that was a splendid town.

July and August brought hotter weather than any of the Swedes had experienced in the old country. Summer storms, usually at the end of hot and humid days, could be violent and frightening. The sky would become black, a deep greenish black like they had never seen before, and lightning would flash and the thunder would roll. Powerful winds would suddenly shatter the calm, and send all the farmers and their families to their root cellars for safety. (On July 7, 1869, Alfred Johnson [not a relative] and another man were killed by lightning in Bernadotte Township, and by 5:00 the same day, a tornado had struck St. Peter and damaged many homes and buildings.) After a storm had passed, it would be a little cooler for a time, then the heat would resume. Sometimes weeks on end would pass without rain, or the rain would miss their farm completely, until the wheat was shriveled and dry. The farmers had to take what came their way and continue with their lives.

Golden years

The 1880's brought better weather and many signs of progress to the prairie. The worst of the locust years were over, all the fields were now producing crops across the entire township as far as the eye could see, except for a few undrained sloughs and small lakes. The price of wheat had risen to over a dollar a bushel by 1881, higher than in the 1890's and later. The winters in the '80's were among the coldest, with temperature records that would stand until almost a century later, in the 1970's. The growing seasons were pretty good, however, and many farmers were turning to corn as the demand for beef in the growing cities made this a valuable feed crop. The new Minnesota River Valley Railroad had been extended through St. Peter by 1869, so river boat traffic had declined, and the railroads now hauled crops to market.

The railroad comes

In 1881, the year President Garfield was assassinated, a new railroad was extended west from Henderson on the Minnesota River to Breckenridge, and a new depot was built near Titleo Lake, only seven miles or so north of Bernadotte. The town of Gaylord quickly sprung up around the depot, with a general store, grain elevators, post office, and saloon. Other stores quickly opened, and this soon became the nearest town for shopping and other needs. There was even a telegraph in Gaylord, but the first telephone was not to come until 1897, with a line extended to Bernadotte in 1902. Party line telephones to each farm were not to become common until the 1920's and later.

More marriages

In May of 1879, Jonas and Stina's older daughter, *Wilhelmina*, 29, was married to *John Holberg*, and they moved to the Holberg farm a little ways away.

Then on January 31, 1881, son *Ephraim*, now 25, married *Ida Liljegren*, 21, daughter of August and Maria Liljegren. They were also members of the Bernadotte Church, and had come from Sweden a little after Jonas's family.

Ephraim had been a big help to Jonas on the farm after Lars Johan married, but he was restless to own his own place. Good land in Minnesota had by the 1880's all been taken up, and the cost of buying a farm had risen to nearly eight dollars an acre. He had heard of good homestead land available way out in Washington State, in the Willamette valley, and began making plans to leave and seek his own fortune. Ephraim knew the pioneer life well, and he and Ida were young and unafraid.

Thoughts of the future

By 1883, Jonas was able to start thinking about his and Stina's own future. He was now 63 years old and Stina was 60. Despite help from his sons and son-in-law Charles Hed, the work was tiring and aches and pains

began to slow them both down. Otto was now 16 years old, had done well in school, but showed little sign of wanting to be a farmer. He seemed mostly to enjoy working in the shed, making things of wood and repairing the farm equipment. Ephraim and Ida wanted to leave to make a start in Washington, and perhaps could use a little help.

Jonas had built up this farm from empty prairie during his eighteen years in Bernadotte, and didn't want to see it pass out of the family. They knew it was soon time to rest from their labors, but they still needed a way to live. It was time to make some hard decisions, and he talked many times to Stina to see what she thought.

Last Christmas together

The whole family gathered at the Jansson homestead for Christmas, 1882, for a Christmas Eve dinner before going to the Yuletide services at the Bernadotte church. Stina had roasted three chickens in her new kitchen range, and had even made some *lutfisk* from dried cod that they found at Gustafson's store. Gifts were exchanged in the Swedish fashion on Christmas Eve, mostly little things that each had made for the others. There was Lars Johan, his wife Betsy, and their children Anna, 5, and Albert, 3. Wilhelmina and John Holberg had been married three years, but so far had no children. Mathilda and Charles Hed brought Anna, 9, Johan, 7, Jennie, 5, Emma, 2, and Mathilda was expecting. Ephraim and Ida had been married only a year, and had no children yet. And there was Otto, the youngest of Jonas's children, still only 15 and enjoying his status as uncle to his six young nephews and nieces. He had made them each a toy in his workshop in the barn. The little ones enjoyed seeing their cousins again, and romped together as children do.

Jonas sat and watched them at play, marveling at all the new young lives, the fruit of his and Stina's marriage. There would be 17 souls around his *Julbord* this year, a little

makeshift with the adults at the big table and all the children sitting nearby around the kitchen table. Jonas led in the saying of an old Swedish table prayer, then Stina and the mothers rose to tend to passing the foods and helping the little ones. After coffee and lots of Christmas cookies, Jonas told some stories about Christmas in Sweden and Stina taught the children some songs she had sung as a little girl.

It was soon time for Jonas and Otto to go out and hitch up the team and sleigh for the ride to church. Lars drove his own team, the others all crowded into Jonas's sleigh. The stars shone bright and clear in the night sky, and the children's eyes filled with wonder as they saw the big church dressed and decorated for Christmas. The chandeliers held dozens of candles, and there were more on stands along the center aisle, in the windows, and in the chancel.

Christmas Day was more quiet, a day of rest, and a time for Jonas to think about the future. He walked to the barn to check on the animals, the team of horses quiet in their stalls, the three cows munching hay in the yard near the hay barn. A few chickens wandered about, pecking at the snow covered ground but most stayed in the hen house out of the cold wind. He looked over his equipment, now taking up quite a bit of space in the shed and waiting for planting time. Jonas pumped up some more water into the cattle trough, breaking the ice on what remained. Someday he would get one of those windmill kits to pump water automatically and fill the trough as needed.

The house gleamed white in the bright sun, and the yard was neat with a new picket fence around the vegetable garden. Across the road and down a ways, smoke was rising from Charles and Mathilda's chimney almost straight up into the blue sky. He came back in the kitchen door, stomping his boots on the stoop to shake off the snow, and hung up his Mackinaw. Stina was starting

dinner, this time a ham she had bought for Christmas Day. Otto was reading a book in English at the table by the stove, and there would be only the three of them for dinner, their married children would be visiting their spouse's parents' houses today. Perhaps a few friends would stop by to visit in the parlor in the afternoon; Stina would make coffee and serve cakes and Christmas buns.

Jonas walked into the front room, once their first bedroom. They now had several pieces of furniture, chests, and a davenport. Today they would open the parlor, furnished with their best things, and a new carpet bought in town, for their guests. He wound the tall clock in the parlor, the one that struck the hours night and day, and raised the window shades to let the sun shine in. Stina had asked him to build up a fire in the parlor stove, in case company stopped by. He put in some kindling and corncobs, some paper, and a few pieces of oak from the nearby rack and struck a match, watching the fire catch hold and blaze up. He closed down the damper, and sat down in his newest easy chair to warm himself.

Summing up

From this chair he could also see the road and watch who was passing by, recognizing them by their team of horses. It was not a bad life, and he decided that leaving Sweden for America was not his worst decision. Both his and Stina's parents were now dead, but he did get a letter once a year from his older brother, still farming in Brålanda parish. Things were a little better in Sweden, his brother reported, now that so many people had left for America. There was an addition to the Brålanda church, and the new railroad now passed by and went all the way to Göteborg.

Jonas counted his blessings. His family was establishing themselves and independent, except for young Otto, filled with dreams about the city. Farming had grown easier, with

the new horse-drawn plows, planters, cultivators, and harrows. Harvest was no longer back-breaking work, threshing crews with mechanical threshing machines went from farm to farm to harvest the wheat and leave the straw tied into bales. Jonas had even heard of steam-powered threshing machines in the County. He had put aside a little money in the bank, but not enough to live on for long. He still had a small mortgage he had taken out to build the new hay barn, but it was slowly being paid off. He and Stina had their health, but who knows how long that will last? And the little grandchildren were the joy of their lives, and still more of them to come.

The decision

Within a few more weeks, the decision was made. Jonas would retire from farming and sell the farm to his son-in-law and daughter Mathilda. This energetic and successful farmer was prospering, and would surely look after the farm. Lars and Wilhelmina were doing well also, but lived a little further away and stood to inherit land from their in-laws. Ephraim was restless and wanted to move to Washington, and Otto did not appear to have much desire to be a farmer.

By March 12, 1883, a contract had been drawn up by a lawyer in St. Peter, in which Jonas agreed to sell his farm to Charles for the sum of \$900.00. That was a little less than market value, but Charles agreed to pay off the remaining mortgage of \$160.00 also. Charles also agreed "to provide hay for 3 cows and 1 team, and feed for the team." Jonas and Stina would have the right to live in their house for "the rest of their natural lives."

Idleness did not sit well with either Jonas or Stina, however, and when Ephraim and Ida decided to go out to Washington State in 1884, Jonas and Stina decided to go along with them and help them get started. Otto, 17, would stay in Minnesota and live with his sister Mathilda, looking after their house and helping

Charles Hed with the farm work. They stayed in Washington State for nearly four years, until Ephraim and Ida had established themselves on a homestead near Creston, Washington. They farmed there for many years, and raised six children, the first not being born until 1886, when Ephraim's parents returned to their farm in Bernadotte. Jonas and Stina moved back into their home, rejoined the Bernadotte church, and resumed their retirement on the farm. Jonas helped his children where he could, and Stina helped look after the grandchildren when needed.

Old folks' life

Otto moved back in with his parents and helped with the heavy chores. He found himself traveling often in to St. Peter, borrowing one of the horses or now and then taking the team and a wagon, sometimes doing errands and picking up things in the stores for his parents. Jonas wondered if maybe Otto was seeing a young lady in St. Peter, and hoped it was a nice Swedish girl.

Life was quieter now, and the aging couple often just sat by the stove and talked of old times. They enjoyed seeing their friends in church on Sundays, now almost all more prosperous looking. Gone were the sheep-

skin or buffalo coats and old style homemade clothes. The men, mostly bearded, all had proper suits to wear, and looked distinguished in their hats (except when removed indoors to reveal their "farmer's tan," deep brown cheeks and face but a very white forehead). The ladies wore store-bought big fancy hats decorated with ribbons and flowers. Seldom seen any more were the old style Swedish caps or the prairie bonnets. Stina had several nice dresses she had bought in town, and Jonas even on workdays wore shirts and overalls from the dry goods store. No more home-made clothes!

Stina kept busy with her crocheting, making decorative cloths to cover dresser tops or the backs and arms of upholstered chairs. She knitted sweaters and layettes for the little grandchildren as they came along, and made many more rag rugs and quilts, most of which she gave away to her children. Cooking was easier now, they had bought a big new icebox to keep butter and meat in. An ice man brought a big block of ice every other day to keep things cold, and another dray man picked up a few cans of milk and their eggs at the road twice a week, for their account at the creamery. Despite many hardships along the way, life



A last look at the deserted Jansson homestead.

had been good to them and there were no regrets about breaking loose from their roots in Sweden and coming to pioneer in Minnesota. None at all.

Epilogue

The children of Jonas and Stina continued to grow and prosper in their new land.

Lars Johan and Betsy had six children by 1889 when tragedy befell them in the death of Lars, killed while felling a tree on his farm. The family struggled on with help from all their relatives and friends. Jonas and Stina never really recovered from the shock of this loss, their sturdy oldest son who had been through so much, and had been such a help to them. Stina said little, but Jonas knew her heart was crushed by the loss of her firstborn in the prime of his life.

Wilhelmina and John Holberg had five children, she died fairly young in 1897, at the age of only 47. The cause of her death was lung fever.

Charles Hed became one of the more successful farmers in the area, adding land and leading in mechanization. He and Mathilda had 11 children, one died in childhood but many of their children had large families.

Ephraim and Ida had 6 children and began a whole new branch of the family in Washington State. Ephraim died in 1915 at the age of 58, of lung fever and a heart lesion.

In November, 1894, Otto William, age 27, married 24-year-old Mathilda Brink in St. Peter, a Swedish girl from Skara in Västergötland. They settled in St. Peter, where Otto (known as Bill, or 'Willie') built a house on St. Paul Street just a few doors down the hill from Gustavus Adolphus College. He worked as a carpenter most of his life for the State Mental Institution at the southern edge of town. They had four children; their second son was my father, Hilding Ephraim.

The end of the story

Jonas Jansson, after feeling poorly

for a few years, died of consumption on the 12th of April, 1894, just three months short of celebrating his and Stina's 50th wedding anniversary, and about six months before his youngest son, Otto, was married. Stina after a time moved in with her daughter Mathilda, and lived with her until her death on Feb. 25, 1904. At the time of her death, Stina had 33 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren. They and their descendants now live in all parts of the United States.

Only one descendant continues to be a member of the Bernadotte Church. Duane Anderson, grandson of Mathilda and Charles Hed, has a dairy farm near the church and only a mile west of the Jansson homestead. All others now have a variety of urban careers, living in cities and small towns throughout this country.

The first Bernadotte church, to meet the needs of a growing congregation, was replaced by a new and larger brick church in 1897. In 1894 the congregation had 525 adult members and 472 children.

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An example of a name change

My Swedish great-grandfather changed his name at naturalization. He came to the U.S. as Karl Käll, and became Charles Schell at naturalization. The family story is that his naturalization lawyer was a German, thus the German spelling for Shell. As his brothers and sisters came to the U.S., they also used the surname Schell. In a similar way, my great-grandmother came as Selma Christine (or Kristin) Andersdotter, but was known in the US as Selma Christine Anderson until marriage.

Karl Käll was born in Norra Sandsjö parish, province of Småland, Sweden, Dec. 11, 1867. At the age of 19 he left Sweden on Nov. 11, 1887 for Duluth, Minnesota. There he was married to Selma Anderson Sept. 15, 1894. They had seven children.

He worked as a baker most of his life and died in Seattle on Feb. 5, 1937.

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