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The First Swedish Bride in Minnesota

M. J. Forsell

Editor's note: I came across the following letter and article in the Wilhelm Moberg Papers¹ at The Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö, Sweden, this past summer. While no attempt has been made to identify the author, his article is reproduced here with the permission of Ulf Beijbom, Professor and Managing Director of the Institute. Footnotes and a figure have been added by me to supplement the original manuscript, which consisted of five pages of typewritten text.

oOo

Seattle 2 Wash. July 29 Th. 1955
1915 Miller Street,

Mr. Wilhelm Moberg,
150 Cleo St.
Laguna Beach,
Calif.

Dear Mr. Moberg:

Thinking that you might be interested in knowing about one of Minnesota's early interesting families, I am enclosing a copy of its story. It is the only copy that I have so must ask that you will please return it. I happen to be a grandnephew of the bride's father.

I am now reading your book *Utvandrarna* in Swedish, after having read it in English last winter.

Very truly yours,
M. J. Forsell

oOo

In the fall of 1851 Helena Nilsson arrived in "the Marine settlement." Marine was then a lumber town with crude roads leading into the back country over which logs were brought to the mill and later supplies were hauled out for the new settlers. Her father, Daniel Nilsson, had come in the spring of that year and, after a short stay with his partner at Fish Lake, he bought a 40-acre tract

¹ Cataloged as "Den första svenska bruden in Minnesota. Brev till V. M., Forsell, Seattle, 29-7-1955, 1:4:4:1-7," in Ulf Beijbom, *Utvandrarromanens källor: Förteckning över Vilhelm Mobergs samling av källmaterial* (Växjö: Emigrantinstitutet, Utvandranas Hus, 1972).

with a log cabin at Hay Lake. This cabin had been erected by the three Swedish bachelors who had lived there their first winter. They were the first settlers. In the fall, Mrs. Nilsson and the three children arrived. Helena, the oldest, was the first Swedish girl of marriageable age to arrive in the community. She was just sixteen. From the log cabin home at Hay Lake through the woods to the nearest neighbor was about two miles and [there were] very few companions of a similar age, even in Marine.

Today, state highway 97 skirts the community, which has grown since these early days. It is Scandia, so named by its first postmaster. A mile to the south is a granite monument nearly twenty feet high erected about 1900 honoring the pioneers and early settlers. The Nilsson home stood on the shore of Hay Lake just a few hundred feet to the east of this monument. They resided here for a number of years, later moving to Kandi[y]ohi County, where all trace of them save for Helena seems to be lost.

September 18, 1852, was an eventful day for Helena, for on that day she was united in marriage with Fredrick von Lammers, a German nobleman whom she had met in Taylors Falls. The wedding dress had been made by Mrs. Martha Rosengren, a neighbor whose name appears on the charter list of the Elim Lutheran Church at Scandia. The house in Taylors Falls was ready for occupancy. However, there was no resident person authorized to perform marriages at that time. Consequently, when an Episcopal minister from Pine Lake, Wisconsin, arrived on a missionary tour of the Marine settlement, Helena Nilsson and Fredrick Lammers were united in marriage in the Nilsson home. The youngest son of this couple proudly wears a heavy gold band, his mother's wedding ring. The minister was Reverend Gustav Unonius, author of *A Pioneer in the Northwest [sic]*.² He probably traveled on horseback and we have no record of other visits to this region later known as Scandia.

Why Fredrick Lammers left his homeland for the wilderness of North America is not clear. The name has been in Germany since Reformation times and appeared in the news again as recently as the Hitler purge. When he left Germany he was well schooled and spoke several languages. He located in Taylors Falls, a place of opportunity for lumbering and business, it being the river terminus of navigation on the St. Croix. Here Fredrick built or had built their home, which is still standing. The lumber for it was whipsawed from butternut logs. Whipsawing is a two-man operated sawmill. The log is rolled up on a pair of high sawhorses and, with one man mounted above and the other below, one board after another is sawed from the log. No doubt Fredrick built his house "in the sweat of his brow."

Here they lived until about 1865 and here their first eight children—Nelson, Nathan, Louis, George, Albert, Mary, Charles, and Alice—were born.

² *A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858: The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius*, edited by Nils William Olsson and translated by Jonas Oscar Backlund (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950).

One of the last battles between the Chippewa and the Sioux Indians was fought while the Lammers still lived at Taylors Falls. It took place in a valley, apparently on the Lammers farm. It caught Helena and the children on one hillside and the father across on the other. A great number of arrow and spear heads, as well as battle axes, have been found on this land and it is said that some of those who were killed were buried in a pasture on the Lammers farm. For a long time afterward, the older boys kept watch with a gun while the family worked in the fields. Helena always distrusted the Indians and their motives after that, but the family was never molested.

Fredrick Lammers was a man of considerable business acumen. He operated his own logging camp at Vasa, near Marine, helped new settlers find suitable locations, and laid out the boundaries of their new preemptions. The compass that he used is still in existence, an English make designed for use on sailing ships below the equator with the needle pointing in reverse. He also served as assessor for the county in his township. He made the acquaintance of the business leaders of his time. At Marine, a large operator by the name of Sabin offered Lammers a free farm if he would move into the Marine settlement to oversee the company's land operations. This brought the Lammers family to the south end of Sand Lake, Washington County, a couple of miles north of Marine and only a mile from Helena's girlhood home.

Moving the eight children and a long list of farm animals and equipment from Taylors Falls to Sand Lake was a two-day operation. The inventory, still in existence, is very imposing for the times. In their new farm location, the remainder of the children were born—Frank, Benjamin, Amanda, Elmer, Eli, Melinda, and Clarence—making a family of fifteen children in all.

Sand Lake even in the early days was rated as a jewel. Mother Helena carried water from it to the church at Marine so that her babies might be baptized by its clear pure water. Not only did it symbolize cleansing from sin, but also performed the menial task of keeping the family clean and happy. Friends gathered at the Lammers home vied at fishing and swimming contests. The pioneer style called for men to swim in one lake, the ladies in another. Fredrick Lammers was a strong swimmer and could outdistance the others. When they swam the length of the lake, he would swim back in preference to walking.

Possibly the happiest occasion at Sand Lake was the visit of Jenny Lind to the Lammers home. She was a friend of Helena's folks in Sweden. Her tour in America brought her to Stillwater in 1860. The enterprising Fredrick Lammers bought the first rubber-tired buggy in the whole countryside in order to convey "the Swedish Nightingale" to Sand Lake. There she visited for a week and she, too, enjoyed swimming in the waters of Sand Lake.

Life in a pioneer settlement with fifteen children and a husband whose business took him away on lumbering, land settlement, and like enterprises for weeks at a time, might have proved too much for a less hardy soul. But Helena was an excellent manager. She not only supervised the children in the planting

and harvesting of the crops and garden, but took a hand in haying and butchering when the occasion demanded. There was the continuous need for food to be prepared [and] clothing to be made, remade for the next in size, cleaned, and mended. There was work and play for all. Mother Helena ruled the brood with a firm but gentle hand. Her descendants have distinguished themselves in many walks of life. The youngest son, Clarence, is living in retirement at Vancouver, Washington.

When their family was grown, [the] Lammers bought a home in Stillwater in order to take life a little easier in their declining years. It was near the church and had conveniences not available in the country. Such a haven was not to be for Fredrick Lammers, for on the day they moved to this house he died on the doorstep. Helena spent the rest of her life in the new home he had provided. She died in 1901.

So ends the story of the first Swedish bride in Minnesota. The beautiful girl; the handsome groom; the loving, capable mother; the stalwart, dependable father; the brood of rollicking children—this was the life of early settlers in Minnesota. They have left a heritage of industry, honesty, fear of God, and love of country. They have left a challenge to those who live in the land of lakes and sky-blue waters.

Name	Age	Date	Notes
Fredrika Wilgen Lammers	1	1839 Febr 20	" "
Helena Sabina	1	1834 Marts 2	" "
S. Albert Lammers		1853 Febr 15	" "
S. Johan Daniel		1854 Sept 26	" "
S. David Ericsson		1856 Decem 14	" "
S. George August		1857 Marts 5	" "
S. Albert Lammers		1859 Apr 10	" "
S. Wilhelmina		1860 Marts 2	" " 20
S. Johanna Cecilia		1862 Febr 28	" "
S. Elna Helena		1864 Febr 18	" "
S. August Edward		1866 Febr 14	Mars

Fig. 1. The Lammers family listed in the 1872 Membership List for Elim Lutheran Church, Scandia, Washington County, Minnesota.