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Chisago Lake Swedes and the Methodist Church

Robert B. Porter*

As a transplanted denomination from England, one might not think Swedes would have been interested in the Methodist church. Such was not the case, however. The appeal of Methodism was to the “hewers of wood and the drawers of water.” Methodists brought with them what has been referred to as “Secular Christianity,” that is, a religion controlled by the common man rather than by clergy or a privileged class. Perhaps this is why this protestant denomination drew many Swedish converts in the 1840s.¹

In 1845 a wooden ship docked at the wharf in New York became the church of the Swedish Methodist preacher Olof Gustaf Hedstrom. Cleaned and provided with plank benches, the converted vessel was known as the Bethel Ship *John Wesley*.² Hedstrom sensed the needs of Swedish sailors and immigrants aboard ships anchored in the harbor and provided this convenient place for them to worship. Hundreds were converted, including the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind.³

From the first Methodist church in America in 1769, and with the encouragement of the Bethel Ship, the new denomination spread rapidly throughout the American frontier. Swedish missionaries and immigrants helped speed the growth of the church. One of them, Jonas Hedstrom (a brother of Olof), established the first Swedish Methodist Church at Victoria, Illinois. This was the beginning of the Rock River Conference, which extended from Illinois through Iowa. From here, Methodism reached deeper and deeper into the Midwest.

In 1849 the Territory of Minnesota was established. That same year Congress gave approval for a road from Point Douglas (near the Mississippi

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¹ Richard Bryden Dunworth, ed., *A Centennial History of Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, 1875-1975* (Minneapolis, 1975), 3.

² Charles Nelson Pace, *Our Fathers Built a Century of Minnesota Methodism* (Minnesota: Historical Society of the Minnesota Conference, 1949), 130.

³ Elmer T. Clark, *An Album of Methodist History* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), 255; Henry C. Whyman, *The Hedstroms and the Bethel Ship Saga: Methodist Influence on Swedish Religious Life* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

River) to La Pointe on Lake Superior. Called the "Military Road," it would soon be open to migrants and provide another route to the interior for settlers.⁴ Meanwhile, several events occurred that would later hasten the arrival of Methodism in Minnesota.

The Reverend B. F. Kavanaugh established a Methodist mission at Red Rock (later South St. Paul) to serve the Sioux and Ojibwa tribes in the area.⁵ Both Benjamin and William Kavanaugh preached occasionally at the Falls of the St. Croix. Besides the natives, the only other people at the Falls were "squatters" who had come prior to the land being opened for settlement. Most were there to steal timber and sell illegal liquor to the Indians. Another significant event was the emergence of Jacob Fahlström as an emissary (if not a missionary) of the Methodist church. Fahlström, by a large margin the first Swede in Minnesota, had been beguiled by stories of the coming Methodist missionaries. "They yelled and banged the table with their fists," he was told.⁶ This apparently appealed to "Tete Haute," as he was called by the Ojibwa, and he eagerly joined them.⁷ Later, as a frontier mail carrier, Fahlström stopped occasionally at the Swedish colony of Chisago Lake to visit with his countrymen.⁸

Finally, government surveyors finished with their work of platting the area acquired from the Ojibwa tribes in the Treaty of 1837. With the marks of Esh-ke-bogi-cox-he, Pes-he-ki, and others firmly affixed on a treaty that transferred the entire delta region between the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers to the government, the natives ended their ownership for the sum of \$870,000 in goods and money. The Methodist missionary, Alfred Brunson, wryly commented: "The whites showed their skill in making a good bargain with the ignorant Indians."⁹ Immigrants began slowly moving onto the easier to reach and more desirable land.

In the spring of 1851, a small group of passengers alighted from the riverboat *Nominee* at the landing in St. Paul, Territory of Minnesota. After transferring to a smaller vessel, the little group of Swedish immigrants reached the St. Croix River village of Stillwater. Although steam-powered riverboats had made the journey safely, the party of immigrants polled their way upstream in

⁴ *Daily Minnesotan*, St. Paul, 12 September 1850.

⁵ J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875* (1876; reprint, with an introduction by Lucile M. Kane, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1983, 115.

⁶ Chauncey Hobart, *History of Methodism in Minnesota* (Red Wing, MN, 1887), 20; James E. Erickson, "Jacob Fahlström's Declaration of Intention," *Swedish American Genealogist* 15 (June 1995): 92-95.

⁷ Theodore Norelius, "Jacob Fahlstrom," *Chisago County Press*, 31 March 1949.

⁸ Robert Smith, "Reuben Anderson Papers," United Methodist Church, Lindstrom, Minnesota.

⁹ James Taylor Dunn, *The St. Croix: Midwest Border River* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 48.

flatboats to avoid the rapids and hidden sandbars. They landed at the village of Taylors Falls, situated on the Falls of the St. Croix. Using a crude map, the men the next day followed trails through the forest to Big Lake. After reaching the lakeshore and then bringing their families and belongings to the new site, the Swedes set about building a colony that would come to be called "Chisago Lake," after the Indian name "Ki-Chi-Sago," which translated meant "fair and lovely waters."¹⁰

Per Anderson, leader of the new Swedish colony, sent a letter back to Sweden in September of 1851, in which he stated: "In a word, as I see it, we have the most suitable place for Swedes to settle, not for the first year but for the future. There is no lack of good fishing and hunting. As for churchly matters I must say that is depressing at present because there are so few, almost none, to talk about the unmerited grace in Christ."¹¹ Not all of the newly arrived Swedish immigrants belonged to the Lutheran church. Some Chisago Lake settlers were "Methodists from Sweden and from Sugar Grove, Pennsylvania, where the Swedish Methodist Church of Jamestown, New York, maintained a mission."¹² Whatever their religious preference, many were uncomfortable without a church official to perform marriages and baptisms.

The following year, John Tidlund and Henry Russell, both Swedes, arrived in St. Paul from Boston to join John Lundbeck, who was already at work there for the Methodist church.¹³ They set up a Swedish Methodist Church in St. Paul in 1853, but made no attempt to provide missionary services at the Chisago Lake colony.¹⁴ That distinction had gone to Gustaf Unonius, a Swedish Episcopalian, who visited the colony in 1852 and even administered communion.¹⁵ Whether John Anderson took communion that day is not known, but Anderson (who would become a charter member of Chisago Lake's Methodist Church) arrived in 1852, purchased land next to the lake, and when he applied for citizenship, changed his name to "John Smith." His future wife and her family would arrive in 1854, suffering enroute the deaths, from cholera, of her father, an older sister, and that sister's child. Their bodies, wrapped in blankets, were left in shallow graves along the river. In 1855 Maja Lena Johanson married John Smith, but

¹⁰ W. H. C. Folsom, *Fifty Years in the Northwest* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1888), 41.

¹¹ Emeroy Johnson, *Chisago Lake Reflections* (1985), 37.

¹² Carl H. Linden, *Guds Lilla Skara: The Story of Swedish Methodism in Minnesota* (Millville, MN: Anvil Press, 1983), 134.

¹³ Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* (Stockholm: Royal Library, 1995), 363.

¹⁴ See James E. Erickson and Laura J. Erickson, "Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN Members, 1853-1860," *Swedish American Genealogist* (December 1994): 161-193.

¹⁵ Emeroy Johnson, *Eric Norelius* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1954), 35.

only after the death of his first wife—Maja Lena's older sister, Johanna—who was another victim of the harsh pioneer life.¹⁶

In the next few years, more Swedish immigrants arrived and they most often were Lutheran. During 1854 Eric Norelius, the first pastor at Chisago Lake Lutheran Church in Center City, wrote:

“On Sunday, June 4, when I came to Berg's haymow to conduct services, I found a stately-looking venerable gray-haired man, who introduced himself as 'Agrelius, Swedish pastor, now in the service of the Methodist church.' It would probably have been polite of me to ask him to preach in my stead. But I could not do so because of my own religious convictions, nor had I received the right to do so from the congregation. I preached as usual, but I had hardly finished before Agrelius stood up and delivered another sermon. No one wanted to have a disturbance, so there was nothing to do but wait patiently. And patience certainly was needed to sit still for any length of time and listen to such drivel as he presented.”¹⁷

Carl Petter Agrelius had been appointed an assistant pastor in St. Paul at the Annual Session of the Wisconsin Conference in 1854 (Minnesota was not yet a state, much less a church conference).¹⁸ He and the Norwegian, Samuel Anderson, were appointed to the “Scandinavian Mission” that encompassed outlying areas where Scandinavians had settled. Among the early assignments for Agrelius was the Mound Prairie Methodist Church near Afton. Finally, in August 1856, the Minnesota Conference of the Methodist Church was separated from the Wisconsin Conference and organized at Red Wing. One of those attending this historic meeting was Richard Mates, whose mission circuit included Sunrise, Linnville, Amador Prairie, Taylors Falls, and an unidentified settlement on the Sunrise River. Most of these were in Chisago County, which had been organized in 1851.

By 1857 the village was separated from the Chisago Lake colony and called “Centre City,” because it was the center of a larger Swedish settlement. “In the summer of 1858 the first Swedish Methodist Camp meeting was held on the shores of beautiful Chisago Lake, held in a grove with an improvised pulpit, and with planks for seats, where people gathered for several days. At this meeting the following preachers took part: J. Tidlund, C. P. Agrelius, C. F. Lindquist, and P. M. Johnson, then a local preacher. Quite a number were converted,

¹⁶ Before her untimely death, Johanna Johanson had been married to John Smith for only one month. - Robert Smith, “Reuben Anderson Papers,” United Methodist Church, Lindstrom, Minnesota.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Chisago Lake Reflections*, 63.

¹⁸ Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* (Stockholm: Royal Library, 1995), 326-27.

among whom were both of my parents, who then with others joined the church.”¹⁹

After the camp meeting, Agrelius met with the settlers to form a Methodist society or class, a prelude to organizing a church. In the fall C. F. Lindquist was appointed to a circuit that included the new group at Centre City as well as Marine Mills and Horse Lake (Wisconsin). Records of Chisago County show the purchase of land from Andrew Swenson (Anders Svensson) and his wife, Catharina, for the sum of five dollars. The deed is dated 28 December 1858 and signed by Trustees of the Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, Centre City. The exact site is on Main Street just north of the present county jail.

It is likely that logs were cut down and skidded out of the forest that winter; and, in the spring of 1859, a twenty-four foot by thirty-two foot log church was erected in Centre City. That building still exists as a private home. That same year, a Scandinavian District was organized in the Minnesota Conference. In the minutes of one of the Conference meetings this information is recorded: “On the 5 & 6 Feb. 1859, Bro. Bolles held our qr. mtg. at Stillwater and went to Swede Lake and returned with Bro. John Tidlund then the missionary among the Swedes.”²⁰ During the summer, the Baptist missionary Fredrick O. Nilsson arrived at the Chisago Lake settlement to preach to the residents. His comments, although not particularly complimentary, were recorded in his diary: “Which reminds me of another oddity, namely the so called Center City on the east side of Chisago Lake. The town consists of a Lutheran church (an ungainly large frame structure), a Methodist church (a graceful loghouse built last summer), the town schoolhouse, and one lone inhabited dwelling.”²¹

The location chosen for the village of Center City (as it is now called)—on a peninsula extending into Chisago Lake—would seem to suggest by its geography that it would be easier to defend from attack by unforeseen enemies. As other villages were developed nearby, that location became a hindrance. To travel to Lindstrom, which was easily seen across the lake, meant a wagon trip of six to seven miles around the various sounds and bays. During periods when the lake was lower, wagons with teams of horses could ford the shallow channel separating the two villages. The same was true between Lindstrom’s farm and Chisago City. The April 1862 minutes of a Chisago Lake Township meeting contained this attempt to rectify the problem: “Resolved that the Bridge at the narrows at Mobecks place should be raised three feet and for that purpose

¹⁹ Algot E. Strand, comp. and ed., *A History of the Swedish-Americans of Minnesota*, (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1910), 1:203.

²⁰ Thomas M. Fullerton, “Scandinavian Missions in Minnesota,” *Methodist Episcopal Minnesota Annual Conference Historical Society Papers*, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN.

²¹ F. O. Nilsson’s *Diary, 1855-1856*, trans. Joseph Tanquist.

should each farmer bring to the said bridge two logs, walnut, oak, or red elm." They were trying to bridge the channels!

Not until 1880, however, would a permanent method for crossing the lake be determined. The new railroad from Wyoming to Taylors Falls crossed the lake at Lindstrom's farm (Lindstrom village) and at Mobeck's farm (Center City), first with wooden trestles and then with earthen fill. In future years the highway followed the same route, and the lake was eventually isolated into the five separate pieces that exist today. The distance between the villages of Center City, Lindstrom, and Chisago City, however, was shortened considerably.

Unfortunately, the new railroad tracks missed "downtown" Center City by a half-mile. Eventually, the business district moved nearer the railroad but the damage had already been done. Lindstrom developed into the economic center of the area as well as the most populated residential section. This was enough to impress members of the Center City Methodist Episcopal Church. When it became obvious that the old log building needed considerable repair, the congregation voted in 1892 to move to Lindstrom, where it is today.

Times were changing. More people were moving into the area, and it was rapidly losing its Swedish provincial nature. New residents were often migrants from Minneapolis and St. Paul. By 1932, the church council at Lindstrom Methodist Church voted to limit Swedish language services to one each month. For a long time, the Swedish language was used in Sunday School; and, according to the late Pauline Grandstrand, no other language was allowed. Newcomers were taught to speak Swedish until they could understand the lessons. As late as 1945, some lessons and Bible readings were being given in the original language. The official church board minutes in 1935, however, ordered "that the Swedish services be discontinued."²² Until the appointment in 1955 of William Erle Shields, the first thirty-five pastors who served this congregation were of Swedish ancestry.

So, when the Swedish novelist and historian, Vilhelm Moberg, came to Chisago Lake in 1948 to do research, little evidence that the Methodist church once had a Swedish origin could be found. Moberg spent part of the summer at Chisago Lake riding his bicycle from village to village, while he visited with older residents and gathered their stories. One would hope that some of the people he interviewed were Methodists. This year, First United Methodist Church of Lindstrom is celebrating its 140th birthday. Appropriately, committee members have arranged a few events to remind the congregation of its Swedish heritage.

²² Robert B. Porter, ed., *Emigrants At Worship: 125 Years of Chisago Lake Methodism* (Lindstrom, MN, 1983), 55.