

# The Emigrant Routes to the Promised Land in America

*Prelude...*

As in Wilhelm Moberg's book about Swedish immigrants, "*The Last Letter Home*", I would like to frame this story with the "*Last Letter From Home*" written by Carl Person's parents, Per and Johanna Svensson, that was left behind in the old country, with their memories and loss, during the sunset period of their lives.



Immigrants

*"9 September 1922*

*Dömle, Sweden*

*Our dear children,*

*Thank you for your letter and that you are well is the best news. Papa is in poor health. He does not get better, and I'm not in very good health either, but with God's help we get through one day at the time. It is so sad to see him in so much pain.*

*We have to thank you Karl so much for the money you sent. So far we have gotten along fine. You tell us that we can use the money. So far we haven't had to but it is so nice of you that we can use it if we want to. We have to tell you that my brother Ole is dead. He was buried the second day of Christmas, but I was in such poor health that I didn't go because it was so cold.*

*We can send you greetings from Johan in Karlshof. They are so nice to us. He helps with wood. Hilda comes and cleans house for us. Even in Nyback in Nykelby they come and help us. Lotten sends her greetings. It is hard for them in Baksholm. They have no work.*

*We close now with our love, Per and Johanna Svensson"*

*The stories...*

These stories are about the brave Swedish men and women who decided to emigrate (utvandra) to America, and how their journey to America forever changed their lives, as it did change mine, as I myself am an immigrant. My name is Leif Rosqvist, and I write personal Swedish emigrant stories. These emigration stories try to illustrate the shared tenacity and will that Swedish emigrants possessed in their search for a better life in the promised land of America, as well as telling the story about the people left behind in the old country. Their journey was much different from mine, in that I came on a Boeing 747 airplane together with my family, had a job waiting, and everything taken care of, contrary to the emigrants who left Sweden on a one way ticket without any available support system, facing a very uncertain future. I feel the urgency to tell these stories as the voices and faces of these people are slowly fading away forever into forgotten memories of our Swedish heritage.



A few faces related to these stories and among the 1,3 million Swedish people that emigrated to the promised land of America during the period 1820 - to -1930 . We must not forget these faces and voices of the Swedish immigrant families of Hans Gösta Anderson, Per Johan Anderson, Daniel Person, Per Gustaf Svensson, among many others.

### *Why they left...*

During the Swedish emigration to the United States from 1840 to 1930, about 1.3 million Swedes left Sweden for America, mainly for economic reasons. In Sweden, population growth made farmland scarce in a country already overpopulated. The Swedish bishop and poet Esaias Tegnér summarized the population growth with these three words: peace, vaccination, and potatoes.



While the land of the U.S. frontier was a magnet for the poor all over Europe, some factors especially encouraged Swedish emigration. There was widespread resentment against the religious repression practiced by the Swedish Lutheran State Church and the social conservatism and class snobbery of the Swedish monarchy. Population growth and crop failures made conditions in the Swedish countryside increasingly bleak. Most people working the farms were "Statare". They were married agricultural laborers in Sweden who received payment primarily in kind. The system mainly existed in the south of Sweden and reached its maximum extent in the late 19th century. Thereafter the system gradually declined until it was formally abolished in 1945. These agricultural laborers were generally viewed as being on the lowest ranks of Swedish society, and it developed into a social scandal in Sweden.



Statare på väg hem från mjölkningen, Ven 1933  
Photo Gunnar Lundh

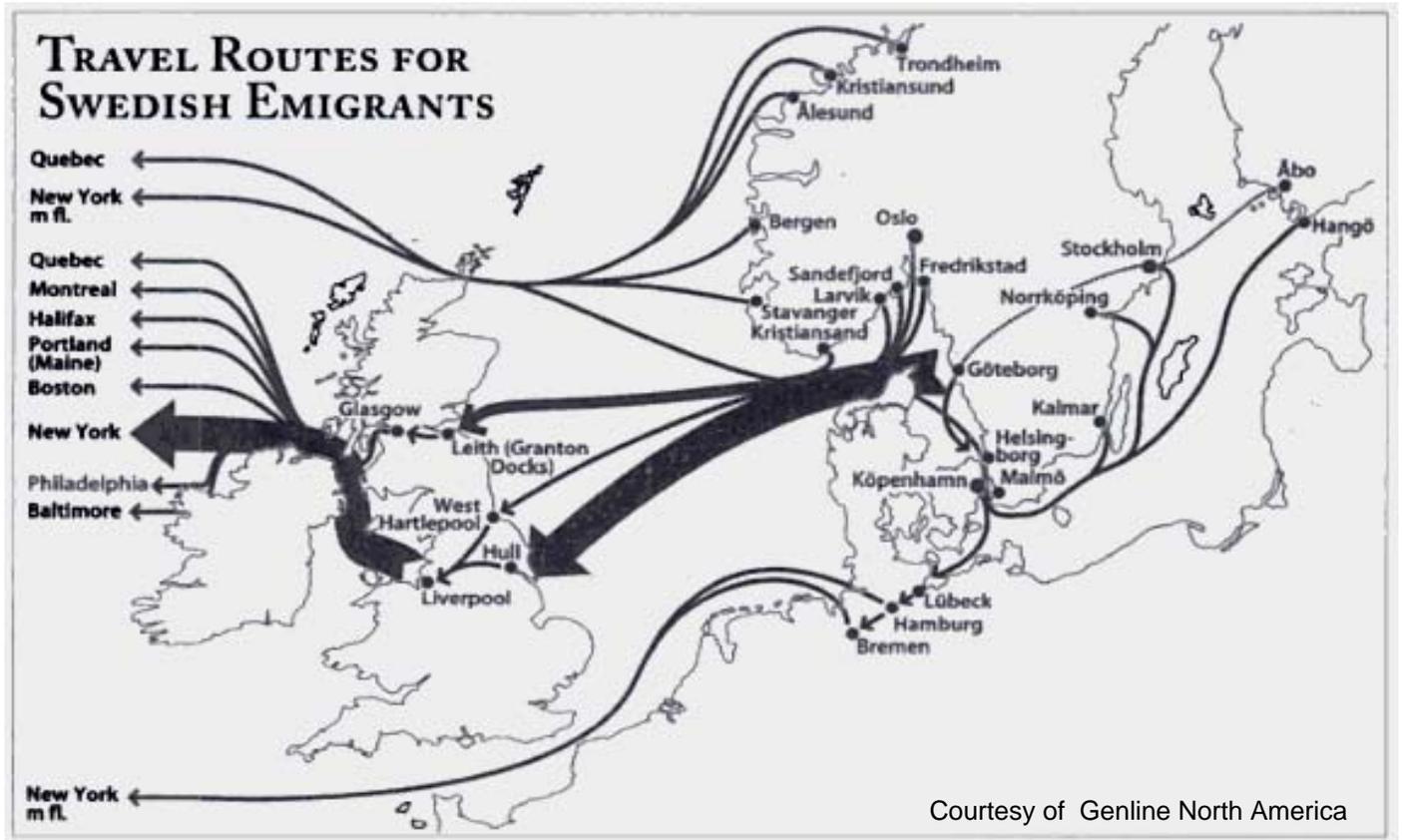
By contrast, reports from early Swedish emigrants painted the American Midwest as an earthly paradise, and praised American religious and political freedom and undreamed of opportunities.

Swedish emigration peaked in the decades after the American Civil War (1861–1865). By 1890 the U.S. census reported a Swedish-American population of nearly 800,000. Most immigrants became classic pioneers, clearing and cultivating the prairies of the Great Plains, while others remained in the cities, particularly in Chicago. Single young women usually went straight from agricultural work in the Swedish countryside to jobs as housemaids in American towns. Many established Swedish Americans visited the old country in the later 19th century, their narratives illustrating the difference in customs and manners. Some made the journey with the intention of spending their declining years in Sweden, but changed their minds when faced with what they thought an arrogant aristocracy, a coarse and degraded laboring class, and a lack of respect for women.

After a dip in the 1890s, emigration rose again, causing national alarm in Sweden. A broad-based parliamentary emigration commission was instituted in 1907. It recommended social and economic reform in order to reduce emigration by "bringing the best sides of America to Sweden". The commission's major proposals were rapidly implemented: universal male suffrage, better housing, general economic development, and broader popular education. The effect of these measures is hard to assess, as World War I (1914–1918) broke out the year after the commission published its last volume, reducing emigration to a mere trickle. From the mid-1920s, there was no longer a Swedish mass emigration.

The 2000 US Census lists 4,339,357 persons with Swedish ancestry. Of this total of 4 million were found in the Northwest:

Oregon: 107,065 or 2% of Swedish Americans  
Washington State: 213,013 or 5% of Swedish Americans



### *The journey to America...*

If your ancestors were Swedish emigrants in the late 1800 to early 1900, the likelihood was that over 80% of them departed from Gothenburg to Hull on the east coast of England.

Most emigrants did not depart directly from their homelands to America. Instead, they would first take a smaller steamer, referred to as a "feeder ship" to a British port, like Hull, then by train to larger emigration ports such as Liverpool, to embark on a transatlantic steamship. The emigrants who travelled by this "indirect" route were referred to as transmigrates. The journey from Hull to Liverpool lasted for five hours without water or restroom for third class travelers.

After a few short, failed attempts at regular steamship traffic in the 1830s between Göteborg (Sweden) and Hull (England), the J W Wilson company started regular service from Göteborg to Hull about 1850. The trip took about two days.

In most of the emigrant ships, space was very restricted, as most ship owners wished to carry as many passengers as they could possibly accommodate it was common to see 500 or 1000 passengers crowded into the steerage (third class passengers). Each wooden bunk was 6 ft. long by 6 ft. wide and a passenger was entitled to the use of one quarter of such a bunk. The berths were usually arranged in two or three tiers, with four people to each tier. The advertisements all boast of the extra space available between decks, but many passengers found that they rarely had enough room to enable them to stand in comfort. Unscrupulous agents often put more passengers aboard than the regulations allowed. Ninety percent of the vessels did not have a surgeon on board, only one of the advertisements boasts of the services of a surgeon for the duration of the voyage. Sea sickness was always a problem, but cholera and typhus were the killers.

In 1853, on the ship Washington nearly 100 passengers died from cholera while crossing to New York. In the 1840's, the ship Exmouth left Londonderry on her way to Quebec, and within hours it was lost, and 248 persons on board were drowned. As many as 59 emigrant ships were lost between 1847 and 1853, while on their way to America. The most significant catastrophe was the loss of SS Norge, that sank off Rockall, an isolated rock in the north Atlantic, in 1904, with few survivors, the biggest civilian maritime disaster in the Atlantic Ocean up to that time with 635 lost and 163 survivors.



SS Norge, Scandinavian America Line

For most emigrants this must have been an inconceivable journey that changed their life forever. They closed their eyes and contemplated: "What in the world have I put myself in for?" Only their strong Christian beliefs, and desire for a better life, kept them going.

*The ships...*

There were feeder trips from many ports in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. An estimated 15% of the Swedish emigrants, mainly from the southern provinces, had Gothenburg as the main departure harbor. Some of the well-known feeder ships were: **Hero** (1866 it carried 550 pass.), **Argo**, **Oder**, **Albion**, **Orlando and Rollo** (1869/70-, 800-900 pass.), **Romeo** (1881-), **Ariosto** (1890-), **Calypso** (1904-), **Eskimo** (1910-), and **Cameo**.

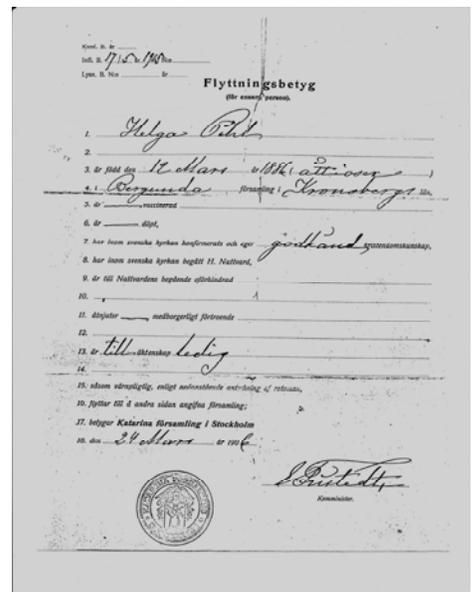


SS Eskimo, Wilson Line



SS Rollo, Wilson Line

Sillgatan (Herring Street) in Gothenburg, as it was renamed in 1895, was, during the emigration years, a lively street with cheap rooms and various agencies for those who were on their way to America. Those who arrived by train to Gothenburg were able to go directly from the train at Drottning Torget (Queen Square), along Sillgatan down to Packhusplatsen (warehouses), from which the boats departed. Until the departure, the emigrants were able to stay cheaply in overcrowded rented rooms at Sillgatan. They had booked their tickets in advance through agents around the country, but it was also good to buy it directly from the line agency at Sillgatan. Often, emigrants were met on arrival in Gothenburg by an agent, to assist the mostly untrained traveler, not to get lost in the strange city. Officers saw to that the emigrants had shelter and had their tickets in order. Emigration during the early days of sailing ships meant that departure had fully signed passenger lists. Later, steamers departed regularly to Hull. However, it was necessary to be in Gothenburg about one week before departure in order to cope with all formalities. Before departure, the emigrant were obliged to present his certificate of change of address from his home parish (Flyttbetyg), necessary for everyone who left their home parish. It was required not only when moving to America but also when someone moved to the neighboring parish or any parish in the country. It was written by the pastor in the home parish (hemförsamlingen). The certificate included the name, address and profession, from which the emigrant moves and to which parish the emigrant is transferring to. Information on vaccinations and general social behavior was also included. The agencies in turn had to submit passenger lists. In addition they had to cope with all the purchases necessary for the journey. Food, clothes and mattresses for the boat trip were needed.



Flyttbetyg, Stockholm 1906

Each emigrant had to obtain an "Utvandrare-kontrakt" (emigrant contract) which was really the ticket for their journey, and they always brought it with them. But in the port of departure they had to show it at the Police Chamber, to be checked that it was a genuine ticket and not a fraudulent one, which had happened before this law was instituted in 1869. At the Police Chamber they were recorded on a chronological list, and given a number on the list, and it is this number that is recorded as the Police Chamber emigrant contract number or "källkod" in Swedish. This was the "secure ticket" for an emigrant person with very little education and no language skills other than fourth grade Swedish.



Emigrant contract #2267, for Hilma Magnusson from Stockholm

*Arriving in America...*

After about two weeks of sailing crossing the Atlantic in a completely packed ship under unbearable conditions the emigrants saw the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in the morning fog and they knew that the longest and most difficult piece of the journey was over.



Statue of Liberty  
Theodore Horydczak collection

While most immigrants entered the United States through New York Harbor (the most popular destination of steamship companies), others sailed into many ports such as Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, San Francisco and Savannah, Miami, and New Orleans. The great steamship companies like White Star, Red Star, Cunard and Hamburg-America played a significant role in the history of Ellis Island and immigration in general. First and second class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. Instead, these passengers underwent a cursory inspection aboard ship; the theory being that if a person could afford to purchase a first or second class ticket, they were less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons. The Federal government felt that these more affluent passengers would not end up in institutions, hospitals or become a burden to the state. However, first and second class passengers were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection if they were sick or had legal problems.



Ellis Island, Library of Congress, A. Loeffler, Tompkinsville, N.Y.

This scenario was far different for the majority of emigrants in the "steerage" or third class, passengers who were poor and uneducated. These immigrants traveled in crowded and often unsanitary conditions near the bottom of steamships with few amenities, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. Upon arrival in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers. First and second class passengers would disembark and pass through customs.

The steerage and third class passengers were transported from the pier by ferry or barge to Ellis Island where everyone would undergo a medical and legal inspection.

If the immigrant's papers were in order and they were in reasonably good health, the Ellis Island inspection process would last approximately three to five hours. The inspections took place in the Registry Room (or Great Hall), where doctors would briefly scan every immigrant for obvious physical ailments. Doctors at Ellis Island soon became very adept at conducting these "six second physicals." By 1916, it was said that a doctor could identify numerous medical conditions (ranging from anemia to goiters to varicose veins) just by glancing at an immigrant. The ship's manifest log (that had been filled out back at the port of embarkation) contained the immigrant's name and his/her answers to twenty-nine questions. This document was used by the legal inspectors at Ellis Island to cross examine the immigrant during the legal (or primary) inspection.

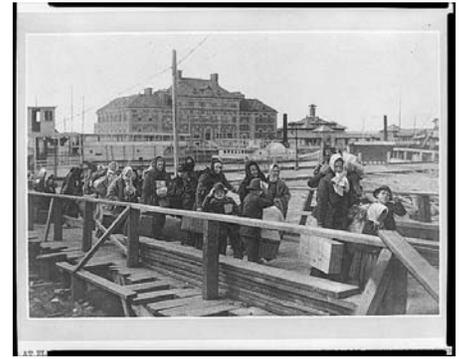
*To the final destination...*

The Midwest remained the heartland of the Swedish-American community, but its position weakened in the 20th century: in 1910, 54% of the Swedish immigrants and their children lived in the Midwest, 15% in industrial areas in the East, and 10% on the West Coast. Chicago was effectively the Swedish-American capital, accommodating about 10% of all Swedish Americans-more than 100,000 people-making it the second-largest Swedish city in the world.

Defining themselves as both Swedish and American, the Swedish-American community retained a fascination for the old country and their relationship to it. The nostalgic visits to Sweden which had begun in the 1870s continued well into the 20th century, and narratives from these trips formed a staple of the lively Swedish-American publishing companies. The accounts testify to complex feelings, but each contingent of American travelers was freshly indignant at Swedish class pride and Swedish disrespect for women. It was with renewed pride in American culture that they returned to the Midwest.

The migration to the Northwest (about 6% of Swedish immigrants) followed two major routes from the midwest. First the northern route that went over Michigan, the Dakotas to Oregon, and the southern route that went via Kansas and Utah to California and Oregon..

About 125,000 Oregonians claim Swedish ancestry, and have been active in a cross section of work that is reflective of the rest of the population.



Immigrants landing at Ellis Island, 1904, Library of Congress



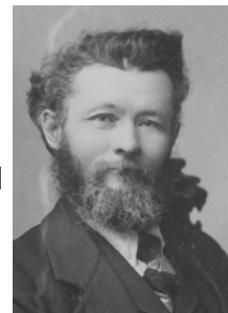
Immigrants on Ellis Island dock looking to future, Library of Congress



Popular Swedish Square Deal Café, Portland, Oregon

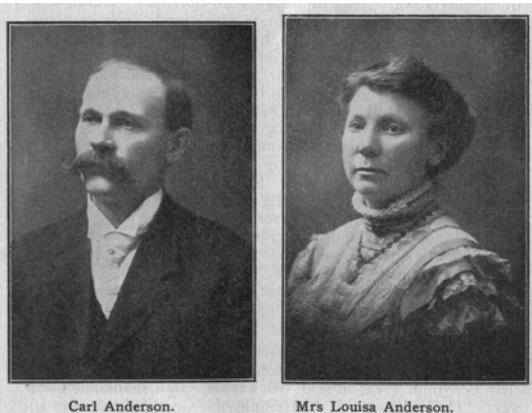
### Three Immigration Biographies...

In 1911, the well-known Swedish-American journalist Ernst Skarstedt finished the third volume in his trilogy about Swedes in the Far West, "*Oregon och dess svenska befolkning*" [Oregon and its Swedish population]. The book covered the period 1880 to 1910. In 2001, the organization Swedish Roots In Oregon (SRIO) translated about 100 of his biographies showing the migration to the west by Swedish immigrants.



Ernst Skarstedt

The full stories are available on SRIO web-site at [www.swedishrootsinoregon.org](http://www.swedishrootsinoregon.org)



Carl Anderson.

Mrs Louisa Anderson.

**Carl Anderson**-mechanic-Portland, born in Mölnbacka, Värmland, January 21, 1861. After completing his military service, he left for America in the fall of 1883. He spent about a year in Chicago, mainly working for Newton & Co. Moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, and in 1886 to Tacoma, Washington. In 1887 he moved to Portland, Oregon, and has remained there. Anderson is the owner of a large house on 249-251 1/2 Halsey St. In 1884, he married Louisa Peterson from Onsberg in Denmark, who, in 1889 completed her dentist's certificate at the American College of Dental Surgery in Chicago.



J. O. Lindblom och hans nu levande barn.

**John Olof Lindblom**, retired farmer born in Attmar, Medelpad, on November 28, 1834. He traveled to America in the spring of 1862 and arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, in July. In 1864, he enlisted as a soldier in the army and took part in the Civil War. After being discharged he went back to farming in Minnesota, Kiron, Iowa and then to La Centre, Washington. He later moved to Portland and lived at 229 N. 14 St. Portland. Lindblom married Helena Danielson from Hassela, Hälsingland, in 1860. She died December 9, 1895. They had eleven children. Four of them died of diphtheria in less than two weeks while the family lived in Iowa, thus becoming a reason for the family to move from there.



G. Holmes med familj 1886.

**Gustaf Holmes**, pioneer, capitalist, bank president-Astoria -born in Tveta parish Värmland, on February 8, 1845. In 1867, he moved to America, initially residing in Burlington, Iowa, where he held a variety of jobs. In 1875, he moved to Astoria, Oregon, where he earned his living fishing on the Columbia River and later became part owner in different canneries. He sold most of his cannery interests, but owned a lot of property in both Portland and Astoria, including a magnificent home in Astoria located at No. 288, 34th St. He married Maria Kristina Johansson from Tveta parish in Värmland in 1870. They had eight children.

When the immigrants came to America, whether to Oregon or not, they searched for support from what could be called “Pillars of Heritage”. This support system made their adjustment to the new life in America easier. In Oregon and Portland some of the most important such “pillars” were The Swedish Society of Linnea together with the churches and other social clubs, providing the immigrants with support enabling them to build a purposeful life in their new country.

The immigration stories covered illustrate the shared tenacity and will that Swedish immigrants possessed in their search for a better life in the promised land of America. The stories attempt to recreate the route many people followed emigrating to America, as well as trying to communicate the social and physical challenges they had to face during their journey to America.

There is ample academic text covering the Swedish emigration to America, hence my approach is to cover individuals or families during their journey to the promised land in America.

Sources and interesting reading:

Swedish Roots In Oregon: the book Swedish Oregon published in 2008, and immigrant stories on SRIO web-site [www.swedishrootsinoregon.org](http://www.swedishrootsinoregon.org).

New Sweden Cultural Heritage Society of Oregon and S.W. Washington at the web-site [www.newsweden.org](http://www.newsweden.org) and go to Culture and Heritage section.

The Swedish Emigration to America by Ingela Martenius

Emigrant Traffic on the North Sea by Nils William Olsson

Latter-day Saint Scandinavian Migration through Hull, England, 1852 - 1894, by Fred E. Woods and Nicholas J. Evans (BYU Studies 41, no. 4 (2002))

Research project Göteborgs-Emigranten (Per Clemensson, Ulf Beijbom)

Clarification:

The terms emigrant and immigrant are often incorrectly used, creating confusion at best, and annoyance of English teachers at worst. In general understanding the proper usage can help dispel confusion or quell the rage of would be wordsmiths. An *emigrant* leaves their land to live in another country. The person is emigrating to another country. An *immigrant* is a person who once resided somewhere else and now lives in your country.