

The First Swedish Immigrants to Manitoba

The first Swedish immigrants to Manitoba came to Scandinavia Manitoba. James (King) Hemmingson was the immigration officer for the region. Scandinavia was located north of Minnedosa via Clanwilliam and Hilltop. Hemmingson actively recruited immigrants from Sweden. I think that many of these immigrants came from Dalarna, a Swedish province west of Stockholm. I am not sure if he actually travelled to Sweden to recruit. He more likely had an agent in Sweden doing that. At any rate around 1885, the first Swedish immigrants arrived in Scandinavia. It must have been shocking for them to find themselves in a wilderness area with no assistance of any kind and probably facing a harsh winter. There was an immigration house established in 1884 at Scandinavia which housed immigrants until they obtained a land grant (homestead). Many of these immigrants simply made a makeshift home in the side of a hill. There they lived with their family until they could manage to cut logs and build a log cabin. In 1894 the Scandinavian store and post office were built. Shortly thereafter a school was built in the region. It was the last one room school to close in the province of Manitoba. The Bethlehem church and manse at Scandinavia were built in 1897. They were later moved to Erickson as part of their historical museum. As more settlers arrived and took homesteads new settlers moved out to other areas. Interestingly Elinor Barr features " The Carlson family from Scandinavia 1898 on the cover of her book " Swedes in Canada ".

Hilltop was the next major Scandinavian settlement. Ivar and Hedda Ullberg were early settlers in the Hilltop area arriving in 1885. Hedda's brothers Carl and Otto Petterson arrived in 1890. My grandparents Carl and Anna Christina Booth arrived in 1893. Like many immigrants my grandfather had his name changed by the immigration officer. (original name being Båth). Carl, Otto, Hedda and Anna Christina were siblings. They left their parents and four other siblings in Vastmanland Sweden. Together with a few other immigrant families they built the original Hilltop Baptist church. It was completed in 1896. My grandmother brought Sunday school material with her from Sweden I still have some of it in my possession. Swedish was used in sermons until the early 40's. The Hilltop Baptist church is still active over 120 years later.

The Hillstrand family arrived in Hilltop in 1897 where they homesteaded. Frank Hillstrand ran a store and post office at Hilltop for many years. His brother Charlie Hill moved to Erickson and farmed just south of the town. Charlie Hill married my mother's cousin Emma Ekman. Emma and her sister, Eva immigrated to Canada in 1910. The Swedes who settled at Hilltop lived around Otter Lake. I am sure that Northern Pike (Jackfish) was a daily stipend. Early settlers lived on wildlife (deer, elk and moose). My uncle Charles Booth was around ten years old when they arrived and fed the family on rabbits that he snared. It is a very interesting and informative to visit the Hilltop Baptist church and look at the archives. Many of the settlers came from Dalarna and had known one another from Sweden. It is also very interesting to visit the cemeteries in Hilltop and Scandinavia where many of the original pioneers are buried. You will find

Hemmingson's grave at the Scandinavian cemetery. I had the opportunity of hosting Elinor Barr when she was gathering information about Swedish immigrants in the area. We visited the cemeteries and churches mentioned. She also interviewed some of the children of the original immigrants.

The next area to be settled was Erickson which is located just west of Otter lake. The town of Erickson originated shortly after the CNR railroad passed through the area. The town was originally called Avesta after a town in Dalarna Sweden. The name was later changed to Erickson. The railroad came through the area in 1905 and the town of Erickson was established in 1908. Shortly after the railroad arrived a post office was established. The Erickson school district was established about the same time. Classes were held on the Bergwall farm. The first school was opened in 1907. The town of Erickson flourished. For more detail refer to " Forest to Field " a History of the village of Erickson and the Clanwilliam municipality. After the Riding Mountain National park was opened in 1933 Erickson grew even more. Later No. 10 provincial highway was built and passed through Erickson en route to Clear Lake and this added to the town's growth. The National park provided work for many of the Erickson Swedes. Many of the log structures in the park were built by Swedes. Alfred Sjogren and Gotfrid Johnson are prime examples. Although Erickson was founded by Swedes and named after a Swede it rapidly became a cultural mix of Swedes, Norwegians and Ukrainians. The Norwegians settled in Danvers an area east of Erickson and built a Lutheran church there. Bethel Lutheran church is still at Danvers but not active. It was replaced by a Lutheran church in the town of Erickson which is still active. The Norwegians also settled just east of Clanwilliam and built a church Immanuel Lutheran church. They were sister churches and much visiting back and forth occurred in the early days. The Ukrainians settled east of Hilltop at Mountain Road. Erickson rapidly became a mix of three cultures and much intermarriage occurred. I remember going to Erickson with my parents in the late 30's and hearing Swedish, Norwegian, Ukrainian and English being spoken on the streets. Erickson has the Rolling River Reserve just south of the town. On a Saturday night in Erickson in the 30's you had a mix of cars and horse drawn wagons from the reservation parked along the streets. It presented a very interesting blend of cultures.

A Swedish settlement also occurred just south of Minnedosa. These settlers came from the province of Smaland in Sweden. They settled in a fertile area and were very successful. They immigrated around the turn of the century and shortly after arriving built a church. This was the Covenant church and was originally located in the country. It was struck by lightning and burned down in the 50's. It was replaced by the Minnedosa Covenant church. The sister church was the Winnipeg Swedish Mission church and later the Winnipeg Covenant church. The original Covenant church site is just south of Minnedosa. You will find the Covenant cemetery located at the original site.

I grew up in Clanwilliam. My grandparents chose a homestead south of Hilltop and closer to Clanwilliam. The road from Minnedosa via Clanwilliam and Hilltop to Scandanavia was referred to as the town line. My grandparents were met in Minnedosa by Ivar Ullberg with an ox cart. The CPR line ended in Minnedosa in 1893. They travelled by cart north through Clanwilliam to Hilltop. As I said they arrived in Hilltop in August of 1893 and spent their first winter with my grandmother's brothers Carl and Otto Petterson. In the spring they took a homestead and the brothers built them a log house and barn. Carl also built them furniture. Swedish men were known to be talented carpenters. The Booths fortunately lived across the road from an English immigrant by the name of Currie. They became day workers for the Curries. They earned fifty cents per day and in lieu of money bought a chicken, a pig or a calf. My grandmother eventually established a dairy farm. She sold butter to merchants in Clanwilliam and Minnedosa. She eventually built an eight-room house with her butter money. She called it the " Butter House ". My grandmother was an ardent Baptist and often took the train from Clanwilliam to Winnipeg where she attended Baptist conventions. She always combined her visits to Winnipeg with shopping trips to Eaton's store. I have several of her pieces of furniture which she purchased and had shipped to Clanwilliam with the shipping label still intact" Mrs. C R Booth."



A painting of 'The Butter House' built 1908.

I learned to understand Swedish after my grandmother passed away and my grandfather came to live with us. My parents always spoke Swedish with my grandfather. After many trips to Sweden I have learned to speak and write Swedish as well. My father was Norwegian and arrived in Canada in 1910 and settled in the Clanwilliam area. He married my mother, Freda Booth in 1922. My father among other things was a cattle buyer in the early days and ran a meat market in Clanwilliam. As a cattle buyer he travelled north to Hilltop, Scandinavia, Erickson and Mountain Road. I as a small boy often rode along and watched him while he negotiated his business. Some of the farmers he bought from did not speak English especially in the Mountain Road area. It amused me to watch him communicate with these farmers always reaching a deal to the satisfaction of both parties.

I recall the Swedish settlers hauling wood in winter to Minnedosa for sale. They would sit on the front of the load many times covered in rags. They often had sleigh bells and you could hear them long before you saw them. My father knew all of these men and often would go out and stop them as they passed through our town. He would invite them into his butcher shop to thaw out and have my mother make them a cup of hot coffee. The money they got for the sale of their wood fed their family for weeks. We had a Royal Bank in Clanwilliam and many of the Swedish settlers came to town to transact business. They also did their shopping while in town. I remember many of the Swedes would stop in to visit my parents. They never left without fika and of course the conversation was always in Swedish.

I look back on these childhood days with fond memories. Recalling the hardships which these people endured makes one grateful for the sacrifices they made in order that their children and grandchildren could enjoy a better life. They are our heroes. They blazed the trails and made our country a better place.

This article was written by Walter B. Syslak



Booth family portrait taken 1908. From left to right back row: Mary, Charles, John, Anna. From left to right front row: Freda, Carl and Anna Christina.