

Swedish Apple Trees survive tornado

by Harry H. Anderson

A pair of recently planted apple trees, descended from a species brought from Sweden to the New World by a member of the New Sweden Colony, survived a class two tornado that caused severe damage to the timber growth at Old World Wisconsin historic site and to residences in a neighboring community in Southeast Wisconsin on Monday, June 23, 2010.

Damage was so extensive at the Old World Wisconsin site that more than 2000 trees were flattened or destroyed and several structures damaged. The Midsummer celebration scheduled for the following weekend had to be cancelled and the park closed indefinitely to public access.

The two Swedish related apple trees were planted several years ago by the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin (sponsors of the annual Midsummer event) as a tribute to Swedish immigrants who settled in Wisconsin. The trees, popularly known as the "Rambo Twins" by the park's staff, have already attained a height of over six feet and displayed several apple blossoms earlier this spring. Peter Gunnarsson, who later changed his name to Rambo, brought seeds of his favorite apple tree with him to the New Sweden colony in 1639. Descendants of these seeds are growing near the historic Finnish homestead in the park in recognition of the fact that Peter Rambo's wife, Brita Mattsdotter, also a member of the New Sweden settlement, was born a Finnish Swede.

The remarkable survival of the Rambo apple trees in the face of winds in excess of 100-125 miles per hour was in sharp contrast to conditions in other parts of the park, including the Visitor's Green where the Midsummer celebration normally takes place. Aerial photos on TV and in the local press revealed that the area where the Majstang was decorated, the procession took place and the musicians and dancers performed was literally covered with fallen tree trunks and damaged picnic benches. In the nearby community of Eagle, Wisconsin, dozens of homes were destroyed or severely damaged with estimates of losses totaling in excess of 20 million dollars.

Ironically, an important chapter in the Scandinavian history of Wisconsin included the role played by large members of Swedish-born lumberjacks who worked in the vast pine forests of the northern part of the State in the 19th century. If available today, their services would be most welcome in dealing with the recovery and timber clean-up at Old World Wisconsin made necessary by this recent tornado.

Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin Inc.

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