

Wisconsin's Swedish pioneers observe holidays

by Harry H. Anderson

From a few surviving written records some insights are possible today on how the often financially strapped Swedish immigrants to Wisconsin celebrated the Christmas and New Year's holidays that had been so significant in their lives before they left the mother country. One of the richest sources of this information is the writings of Gustaf Unonius, leader of the Pine Lake settlement in today's Waukesha County, where he and his immediate following settled in 1841. In particular the Unonius memoirs of his pioneer years in Wisconsin described the manner in which central themes of Swedish holiday observances were continued in the New World—the importance of the family circle; gift giving; the dependence upon extensive use of candle lighting; serving of special foods; and the reading of the Biblical Christmas story in the home. These practices were all part of the Pine Lake observances in December, 1841. That year Christina Sodergren, the family maid, prepared a splendid rice pudding (“risgrynsgröt”) for the holiday morning meal; extra candles were obtained to brighten the otherwise gloomy interior of their log cabin residence; and for Julotta, Charlotte Unonius received a gift of a homemade oak dining table, her husband observing that this very welcome present no longer made it necessary to serve the traditional rice pudding meal on a trunk lid. After their family devotional service, the household traveled to nearby Delafield town, where they were surprised to see sawmills in full operation in spite of the religious holy day. They not only missed hearing the singing of familiar hymns (including of course “Var Hälsad Sköne Morgonstund” (All Hail to Thee O Blessed morn) but also found that a number of Protestant churches did not hold worship services at all and only the Roman Catholic Congregations did so.

Several years later, after children became part of the Unonius household, more candles were added to brighten the cabin's interior; bread served with Christmas meals was whiter in color than usual; ginger cookies (undoubtedly the beloved “pepparkakor”) were served for dessert; and economical but imaginative gifts of raisins and candy were distributed to all present.

At another pioneer Swedish colony near Lake Koshkonong in Jefferson County (the nucleus of this settlement had arrived from Sweden in 1843), one prominent member kept a diary which described other traditional practices of Swedish holiday observances brought to frontier Wisconsin. On December 25, 1845 Thure Kumlien wrote in his diary: “I hauled the womenfolk to [Carl] Reuterskold's; then to [Gustaf] Mellberg's [and at each] I read Hagberg's Christmas dissertation.” [Hagberg's writing was from a widely known Swedish book of Christmas sermons. Two years later Kumlein's entry for January 6, 1848 described how visits to friends' homes still played a traditional role in the New Year's observances: “I call on all Swedes [in the neighborhood] and greeted them all and helped them celebrate New Year's Day.” A year later, 1849, Kumlein described a different dimension to the day's activity, writing that he had invited to his home “All my countrymen here” for a celebration.

And, if the Wisconsin pioneer Swedes looked forward to special foods and the enjoyment of a unique menu for Christmas dinner they sometimes utilized unusual methods to provide the meat dish for their celebration. The household of the celebrated Friman family, the first Swedes known to have settled in Wisconsin near Genoa City in Walworth County, offer one example of this. In August, 1841 one of the Friman sons wrote home to relatives in Sweden that during a wind storm, a fallen tree trunk had badly injured the back of one of their oxen. The animal survived but was unable to perform farm work. The letter writer added that they planned to nurse it along “but we intend to butcher him for Christmas

Christmas gifts apparently came in many forms, especially for imaginative Swedes, in that time period

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