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Article Summary: When Nebraska was still a new state, Sven Gustaf Larson, a pastor of the Augustana Lutheran Church (Augustana Synod), brought his energies and purpose first to Omaha and then to Saunders County in the 1870s. His departure after ten years of work on the mission field in Nebraska signified the close of the formative period in the history of Augustana Lutheranism and Swedish settlement in Nebraska.

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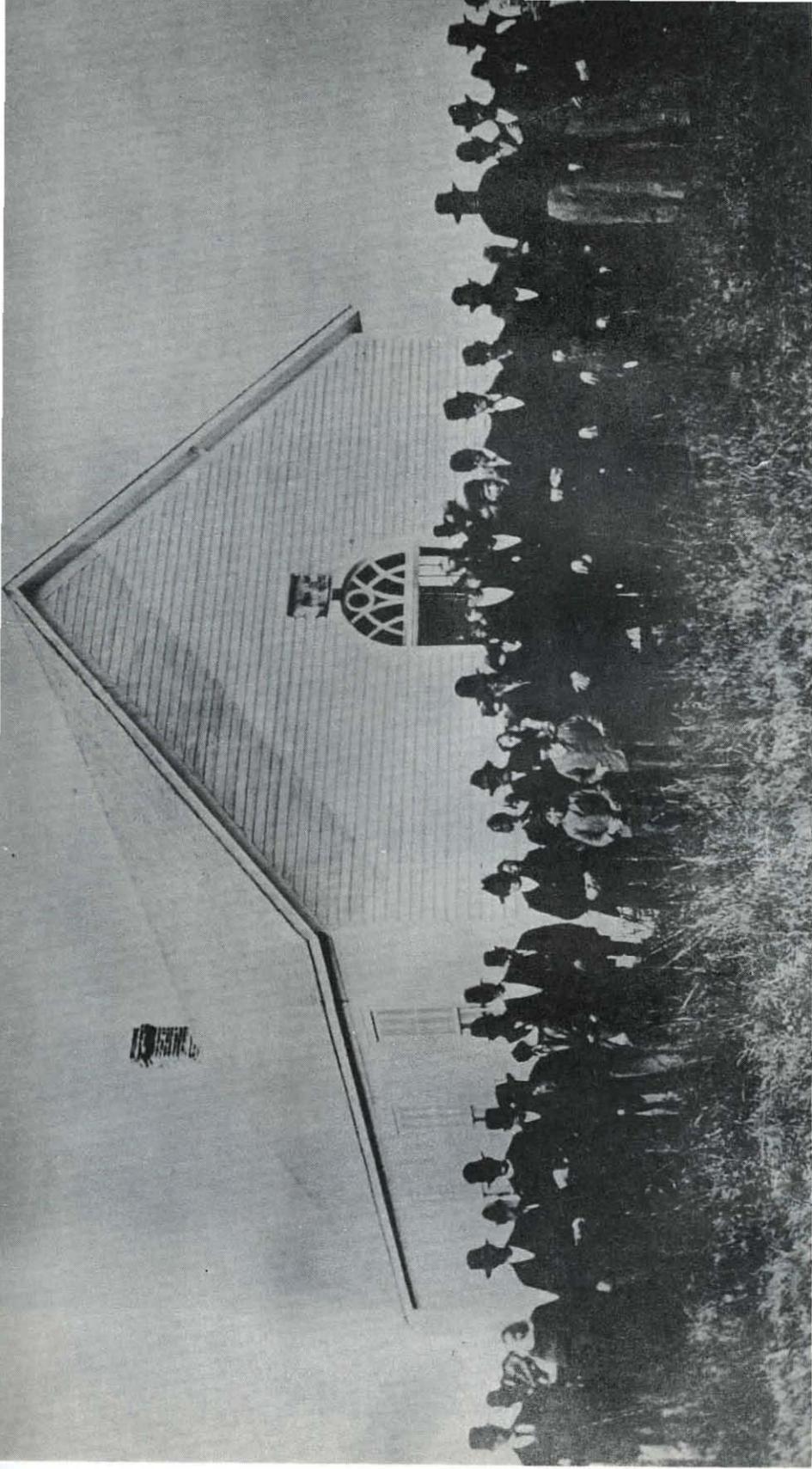
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Photographs / Images: Pastor Sven Gustaf Larson; Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska, Founded by Pastor Sven G Larson (with congregation in front)



Pastor Sven Gustaf Larson



Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska. Founded by  
Pastor Sven G. Larson

## SVEN GUSTAF LARSON, PIONEER PASTOR TO THE SWEDES OF NEBRASKA

BY JAMES IVERNE DOWIE

THE epic of western pioneer settlement has gradually emerged out of inexhaustible sources which the historian must continue to glean if he would garner the unclaimed harvest from the rich field. Of course, there is no assurance of gaining an audience for such gleanings, for they may take on the guise of twice-told tales. The glamor of the American frontier has been blighted by familiarity. There is, nevertheless, always a fresh, new adventure in retrieving from anonymity the life of some individual whose work blended with thousands of others to give the pulse beat of an era now past. When Nebraska was still a new state with limitless promises for immigrants and native Americans, Sven Gustaf Larson, a pastor of the Augustana Lutheran Church (known as the Augustana Synod) brought his physical energies and devout purposes first to Omaha and then to Saunders County. Subsequently

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his role as pioneer pastor became an inseparable part of the heritage of Swedes in Nebraska.

A typical roster of itinerant evangelists on the American frontier probably would not carry the name of Sven Gustaf Larson; yet in his undramatic way he laid his hands upon the nascent Swedish culture in Nebraska, claiming it in the name of the Augustana Lutheran Church. Larson entered Nebraska history when the state was on the threshold of phenomenal expansion in population. Generally speaking, native Americans had possessed the prairies first, but they were more than eager to share them with Germans, Bohemians, Russians, and Scandinavians. While much of the story of these immigrant groups has yet to be told, the promotional techniques for the rapid settlement of the new state are well known. Pastor Larson came to Nebraska in the spring of 1868, the magic time when men's credulity had not yet been taxed by grasshoppers and prairie fires and drought.<sup>1</sup>

Pastor Larson was caught up in the crescendo of mellifluous voices raising hymns of praise to the new state. Traveling west from his own parish in Knoxville, Illinois, he had an itinerary which would take him through the sparsely settled lands of western Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas. His original intentions were to make a quick survey of the area, to preach a few sermons for Swedish Lutherans far from regularly established churches, and then to return to his parishioners in Illinois. But this assignment, undertaken in behalf of the Augustana Lutheran Church, initiated the first organized effort to promote Swedish settlement and to establish Swedish Lutheran churches in Nebraska. Thus, Nebraska reached out to claim Pastor Larson himself and through him many landsmen (i.e., fellow countrymen) who were encouraged by him to choose the state as their new home. Out of these Swedish settlements arose six Augustana Lutheran congregations, all of them the result of Larson's ministry during the 1870's. In

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<sup>1</sup> S. G. Larson in an article for *Hemlandet*, June 2, 1868. *Hemlandet* was a Swedish language newspaper published in Chicago.

a very tangible way the good pastor strengthened the creed and faith of fellow Swedes whose frontier proclivities had carried them far beyond home and church ties.

Pastor Larson himself knew the meaning of such broken ties, for only ten years before at the age of twenty-five he had left relatives and friends in Sweden to emigrate to America.<sup>2</sup> In Sweden he had been a student at the Fjellstedt School in Stockholm, and he continued his studies in America at the Illinois State University located at Springfield.<sup>3</sup> Here Larson was a student of the Rev. L. P. Esbjorn, a pioneer leader among Swedish Lutherans in the United States.<sup>4</sup> When Scandinavian leaders organized their own college and seminary at Chicago in 1860, student Larson transferred to the new school where he was ordained into the Lutheran ministry in 1861.<sup>5</sup> In the same year he married Johanna Caroline Lagerstrom.<sup>6</sup> This marriage proved fruitful and profitable—fruitful to the Larson household which welcomed nine children into the family circle<sup>7</sup> and profitable to the pioneer Lutheran churches which took their meager beginnings from the courage and persistence of Pastor Larson who had learned the way of privation and actual want in his own home.

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<sup>2</sup> "Protokols-Bok for Alma Forsamlings Kyrkorad" (Ms., 1874). These are original church records in the Alma Lutheran Church established by Larson at Mead, Nebraska, on January 5, 1870.

<sup>3</sup> J. Torell, "Sven Gustaf Larson," *Korsbaneret* (Rock Island, Ill., 1906), p. 157. *Korsbaneret* (The Banner of the Cross) was an annual publication of the Augustana Lutheran Church. Fjellstedt was a special center for training young men for the church. Larson had been converted in 1855 when he decided to study for the ministry. The Illinois State University was a privately operated Lutheran school.

<sup>4</sup> G. M. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1932), p. 301.

<sup>5</sup> C. F. Sandahl, *The Nebraska Conference of the Augustana Synod* (Rock Island, Ill., 1931), pp. 26-27. The school, Augustana College, is now in Rock Island, Illinois, where it continues to serve the Augustana Lutheran Church.

<sup>6</sup> Torell, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159. According to Torell's account, Larson had won her heart for the Lord by his preaching in Sweden and for himself by courting her in America.

<sup>7</sup> Sandahl, *op. cit.*, p. 27. Despite the poverty of the Larson family their children were not without education. Among them were two doctors, one artist, one lawyer, and one teacher.

Before coming west to the mission field in Kansas and Nebraska, Pastor Larson had served congregations in Burlington, Iowa, and Knoxville, Illinois.<sup>8</sup> With the close of the War between the States the West had become once again a shining symbol of opportunity for Americans conscious of the Pacific railroad, homesteads, and the resurgence of immigration. Apparently Larson was captivated by the same bright vision, to which he added the expansive possibilities of new churches extending the kingdom of God under the banner of Augustana Lutheranism. His interest in the West found its expression in the columns of *Hemlandet*, and in this Swedish language newspaper he alerted readers to the migration of landsmen to western Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas.<sup>9</sup> When he left Illinois in 1868 to make a personal survey of these three states,<sup>10</sup> he carried credentials which might prove valuable to him in such an enterprise:

As the Rev. S. G. Larson, settled pastor in Knoxville, Illinois, has consented to make, this spring, a missionary tour through the western part of Iowa, through Kansas, and, if possible, parts of Nebraska and places in Missouri, in order to visit the many settlements of Scandinavians, and minister to their spiritual wants; it is hereby attested and certified, that he is a regular member in good standing of the Augustana Synod (Evangelical Lutheran), and will undertake this long and arduous journey on the request of his conference, which is a part of the above named Synod, in the hope of advancing the cause of Christ and His Church. He is, therefore, also earnestly and most respectfully recommended to all who are enabled in some way to alleviate the difficulties and burdens of his journey, and further the cause for which he is laboring. May God bless him, and return him to his family, people, and friends.—Paxton, Illinois, March 31, 1868. T. N. Hasselquist, President of Augustana Synod, Jonas Swensson, Secretary of Augustana Synod.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> B. M. Halland to Jonas Swensson, April 12, 1865. All letters cited, unless otherwise noted, are in the Archives of the Augustana College Library, Rock Island, Illinois. Halland and Swensson were pastors of the Augustana Lutheran Church.

<sup>9</sup> *Hemlandet*, April 23, 1867.

<sup>10</sup> S. G. Larson to Jonas Swensson, April 2, 1868. Larson wrote frequently to Swensson who was the secretary of the Augustana Synod. These letters, written in Swedish for the most part, are good sources for information on Larson's stay in Nebraska.

<sup>11</sup> Sandahl, *The Nebraska Conference*, p. 24.

Thus, with the blessing of the Augustana Church, Pastor Larson made his way to Nebraska. His first impressions were recorded in an article for *Hemlandet* dated May 26, 1868:

Nebraska is a land of rivers and streams. . . . Near the Missouri River land is more rolling and irregular. . . . The land is not unlike that around Berlin and Bishop Hill in Illinois or Vasa in Minnesota. . . . One part of the land belongs to the state; one part to schools; one to speculators; and one part to the Union Pacific. . . . There is a little settlement of Swedes on Logan Creek in Dodge and Burt counties. . . . Near the Missouri River in Washington County there are Swedes. Logan Creek is a new settlement. They live in small frame and log houses. . . . The Swedes are very hospitable. . . . It is not so bad to live in poverty here as in Sweden, for here there is hope that things will be better. If God will give a harvest, we can sell wheat to build better houses. . . . In time Nebraska will become a highly productive state.

Larson was still a bit cautious, however, in weighing the merits of Nebraska. He thought that landmen might be wise to go to Kansas—at least as long as Kansas land was available. He prophesied, nevertheless, that some day Nebraska would be the home of many Swedes.<sup>12</sup> While in Nebraska the itinerant missionary conducted the first Swedish Lutheran services ever held in the state. Swedes in Omaha gathered under improvised conditions to hear the word of God proclaimed in Swedish by a truly ordained servant of the Augustana Synod.<sup>13</sup>

Having completed a cursory survey of Nebraska, Larson boarded a steamer going down the Missouri River to St. Joseph. The surcease from overland travel gave him an opportunity to write further details of his stay in Nebraska. He reported that the rainfall in the state was less than in Illinois. The soil, however, was of such a nature that rains soaked in quickly and were not lost through runoff. The climate appeared very favorable for maintaining good health.<sup>14</sup> Truly, as Pastor Larson's words suggest,

<sup>12</sup> *Hemlandet*, May 26, 1868.

<sup>13</sup> "The Eighty-fifth Anniversary of the Alma Lutheran Church," compiled by Mrs. J. Nelson, Mrs. A. V. Lund, and Miss Edna Jepson (Ms., Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska, 1955).

<sup>14</sup> *Hemlandet*, June 2, 1868, and August 4, 1868.

the old myth of the desert-like plains of Nebraska was being supplanted by a new verbal mirage lending a gentle and beneficent guise to the once dreaded expanse of prairies. The techniques employed to modify the public image of Nebraska in the closing decades of the nineteenth century somewhat anticipated the present-day mores of Madison Avenue. Thus, in alluding to sufficient rainfall Larson had picked out perhaps the major motif running through the background music of the "new" Nebraska. Ferdinand V. Hayden, director of the geological and geographic survey of Nebraska in 1867, lent credence to the new legend:

It is believed . . . that the planting of ten or fifteen acres of forest trees on each quarter section will have a most important effect upon climate, equalizing and increasing the moisture and adding greatly to the fertility of the soil. The settlement of the country and the increase of the timber has already changed for the better the climate of that portion of Nebraska lying along the Missouri, so that within the last twelve or fourteen years the rain has gradually increased in quantity and is more equally distributed through the year.<sup>15</sup>

Through the collective efforts of promoters, politicians, and preachers the theme of good climate, good land, and good health in Nebraska was pitched in various keys and scored for many different instruments, not the least of which was the immigrant press like *Hemlandet*. Pastor Larson was, therefore, sounding the first notes of a melody which other Augustana Lutheran pastors could later develop in their reports from Nebraska to various Swedish language newspapers.

Evidently after surveying the little Swedish settlements in Nebraska Pastor Larson determined that the cause of Swedish Lutheranism could not be advanced just by occasional visits of an itinerant missionary. First, however, there were the Swedes in Kansas whom he had promised to visit. So now he was on his way down the Missouri to St. Joseph where he planned to cross overland to min-

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land, the American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 175. According to Smith, Hayden's "seminal exploit of destroying the myth of the desert and legislating the myth of the garden in its stead" produced a school of theorists with unlimited faith in the agricultural fecundity of the prairies.

ister to the landmen who resided near the present town of Lindsborg, Kansas. He found there a thriving Swedish settlement<sup>16</sup> with a subsequent development paralleling in a striking manner the settlement which Larson himself was later to promote in Saunders County, Nebraska.

In the fall of 1868 Pastor Larson returned to Nebraska after taking leave of his Knoxville parish. The beginning of his ministry in Nebraska was not auspicious. He had brought his family across Iowa to Council Bluffs. In those early days there was no bridge over the river, and passage was usually by ferry. The river, however, had frozen over early that winter, making it necessary for the Larson family to walk across the ice to their new home in Omaha. This was a minor inconvenience compared with other privations confronting the Larson household. They had reached their new home without adequate clothing or money to replenish their wardrobe.<sup>17</sup> Nor was there any hope for a festive Yuletide. Though Pastor Larson might preach the good tidings of Christmas to his new parishioners, he could not free himself from anxiety about his wife and children who were practically without food or fuel.<sup>18</sup> During the first winter in Nebraska things did not improve greatly for the Larson family. By February, 1869, the distraught missionary was desperate. Since coming to Omaha the previous November he had received only \$83.65. Should another call come to minister elsewhere, he would be happy to leave the Nebraska field in order to improve conditions for his family.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Emory K. Lindquist, "The Story of the Kansas Conference," p. 3. When he prepared this manuscript, Lindquist was president of Bethany College at Lindsborg, an Augustana Lutheran school which was founded just two years before a similar school opened in Wahoo, Nebraska, which was itself a rather direct result of Larson's ministry in Saunders County. This school, operating under the name of Luther College and Academy, observed its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1958. The manuscript is in the possession of Mr. Lindquist at the University of Wichita, Wichita, Kansas.

<sup>17</sup> S. G. Larson to Jonas Swensson, November 12 and 24, 1868.

<sup>18</sup> C. F. Sandahl, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> S. G. Larson to Jonas Swensson, February 1, 1869.

The sufferings of the Larson household, however, were not advertised in the press. Larson reserved his own troubles for private correspondence, while in the columns of *Hemlandet* he kept inviting Swedes to join him in Nebraska. The supply of jobs and the rate of pay were good in Omaha. Omaha was certainly the coming city in America. Already two excellent railroads served this promising community. In the midst of such opportunities, Larson wrote, "We need to start a Swedish Lutheran Church here in all haste."<sup>20</sup>

The spring of 1869 sent new life rushing over the prairies. It also revived Pastor Larson's expectations for a better existence. Although employment had slacked off in Omaha during the closing months of the winter, Larson and his Swedish parishioners were already caught up in new hopes and new purposes engendered by the old magic of the land. Some of the landsmen in Omaha had organized an exploratory committee to seek out the best place in the state where Swedes might take up homesteads for a new settlement. Pastor Larson went along with this group. Spring floods prevented the exploring party from reaching that part of the state where they had expected to find land. Instead, the committee was diverted into Saunders County.<sup>21</sup>

Writing to Jonas Swensson April 22, 1869, he reported that he and other Swedes were filing homestead claims in Saunders County. Pastor Larson also introduced the readers of *Hemlandet* to his find:

Homestead !! the leading Scandinavian settlement in America in Saunders County, Nebraska. Two well known persons, Boberg and Blomberg, have looked over this land for settlement. Saunders is the best place for Swedes to settle. It has the richest land with water from five to forty feet below the surface.<sup>22</sup>

Two railroads, according to Pastor Larson, gave excellent transportation to residents of the county. Omaha was

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<sup>20</sup> *Hemlandet*, December 22, 1868.

<sup>21</sup> G. M. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> *Hemlandet*, March 2, 1869.

close to the potential settlement, and Fremont was only fifteen miles away. Soon a railroad would be constructed from Fremont to Lincoln, possibly passing very close to the chosen site.<sup>23</sup> Fremont was on the main line of the Union Pacific and would have a direct connection with San Francisco before the close of the year. Pastor Larson offered to send readers who were interested in land a map showing those portions yet unclaimed. The price of the map was one dollar.<sup>24</sup>

There was no time to lose, for homestead land would be gone within three months.<sup>25</sup> Larson's own homestead was near the present village of Mead, and in 1874, after five years of residence, he was granted title to the land.<sup>26</sup> The records indicate that many Swedish families secured homesteads in the neighboring area, while still others purchased railroad land in the vicinity.<sup>27</sup> Ostensibly the sole motive for Larson's association with the Mead settlement rested on the supposition that his Lutheran ministry would be strengthened by concentrating the Swedish population in the immediate area. He was clear about this point in his writing appearing in *Hemlandet*: "If there is a large settlement, then God's word can be preached, and schools will open."<sup>28</sup>

More and more Swedes came into Saunders County to claim homesteads or to buy land from the Union Pacific or the Burlington. Three distinct centers emerged: one at Mead, another at Swedeburg, and a third close to Malmo. It is evident that Larson's influence contributed greatly to this migration, although it is also true that the general population in the county was expanding rapidly during the

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<sup>23</sup> The proposed railroad was not actually completed until seventeen years later. (See H. M. Anderson, "The Influence of Railway Advertising upon the Settlement of Nebraska" [M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1926], p. 19.)

<sup>24</sup> *Hemlandet*, March 2, 1869.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Numerical Index, Saunders County (Ms., Saunders County Courthouse, Wahoo, Nebraska), Vol. 14-8, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 110, p. 132.

<sup>28</sup> *Hemlandet*, March 2, 1869.

seventies. Larson reported in 1870 that there were two Swedes in the county in April, 1869. One month later there were two more. A year later there were three Swedish congregations with a total membership of 161.<sup>29</sup> By 1880, 1,385 Swedes had come to reside in Saunders County.<sup>30</sup>

The history of a pioneer family which settled in Saunders County illustrates the role of Pastor Larson in directing Swedes to the area and helping them to establish new homes. The Anderson family had come to America in 1867 where the mother, a widow, had to support her children by working in the harvest fields of Illinois. Reading in *Hemlandet* about land in Saunders County, she determined to take her small savings and to join other Swedish families going to Nebraska. There were six families in all making the trek to Saunders County, and when they reached their destination, Pastor Larson and his wife welcomed them. In fact, his own little sod house was converted into an immigrant hostelry until the new settlers could manage for themselves.<sup>31</sup>

A letter to Jonas Swensson provides a glimpse of Larson's schedule as missionary pastor, homestead farmer, and counselor to immigrants:

I have been ill but am better now. . . . I am about to write my report for your committee. I will send it in due time. I am almost overrun by immigrants, letters, and letter writers . . . so that I have hardly time to do anything. If some of your friends and mine can make a good bargain of horses or still rather of mares for me as soon as possible, I should be very glad. I need them to do breaking sod in the summer. . . . I hope that you will in some way or other advance the money to pay for the horses and a buggy until I meet you at Synod. Please do the best you can for your brother in the faith.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Hemlandet*, June 14, 1870.

<sup>30</sup> Kieve Stubenhaus, "Origins and Growth of the Nebraska Population, 1870-1900" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1935), p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> C. J. Anderson, who had thus come to Nebraska with his mother and younger brother, has left an extended account of early days in the Mead settlement. They used a hole in the ground for a pig pen since there was no wood for fencing or building. The lack of wood also made it necessary to twist slough grass to burn for fuel. (For the complete account see *History of Saunders County, Nebraska*, edited by Charles Perky [Chicago, 1915], I, 44-45.)

<sup>32</sup> Letter, May 25, 1869.

So the Swedes came to Saunders County, and Larson became the shepherd of three Swedish Lutheran congregations. The settlement was meeting the measure of his expectations. There was apparently no other tangible profit for this unofficial land agent. At times in *Hemlandet* there appeared to be an oblique relationship between him and the Swedish Commercial Company which was engaged in advertising land. Its notices about land in Saunders County were printed in *Hemlandet* early in 1869, and it certainly was to the advantage of the company to have the Rev. S. G. Larson commending the same area so highly.<sup>33</sup> Later there was a rather obscure reference to Pastor Larson whom an official of the Swedish Commercial Company had recommended to the Cunard Line as an immigrant agent.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence that Larson ever profited personally from such casual business connections. His good will in permitting the use of his name, nevertheless, must have proved helpful to such enterprises.<sup>35</sup>

Certain it is that his personal finances did not improve very rapidly in Nebraska. In October, 1869, he was writing again to Jonas Swensson: "I have eight cents of my own. Please help me get some money by the 15th." Although he had filed for his homestead in Saunders County at the time of this appeal, he was trying to establish a permanent congregation in Omaha. A few weeks later Swensson received another urgent petition: Could he draw on the special mission fund until the new Omaha church was established?<sup>36</sup>

Financial genius was not one of Pastor Larson's gifts. Right in the middle of a land boom—almost on the very spot at the time it commenced—he probably had neither conscience nor capital to join others in speculative adven-

<sup>33</sup> *Hemlandet*, January 19, 1869.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, May 30, 1871.

<sup>35</sup> Some of Larson's friends have recorded that at times he was naive in his associations with people less honest than himself. He was willing to let them use him and his name to their special advantage. (See Torell, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-159.)

<sup>36</sup> S. G. Larson to Jonas Swensson, November 29, 1869.

tures. He must have convinced himself finally by his own praises of Saunders County, for at last he took the plunge. Almost all the good homestead and railroad land had passed into private hands by 1872. Demand was increasing, and prices soared.<sup>37</sup> At the crest of the cycle Larson decided to buy a piece of railroad land belonging to a certain J. A. Smith who had purchased it originally for \$320. Larson paid Smith \$650, but after holding the land a year he had to sell it at a loss of \$90.<sup>38</sup>

The history of the Larson homestead suggests the precarious status of his personal finances. Having established his claim, he secured title in 1874. On four separate occasions he found it necessary to mortgage this land, three of these mortgages occurring within less than ten years.<sup>39</sup> He did manage to free himself, however, from these debts so that he retained possession of the land. When he retired from his last parish in Iowa, he returned to Nebraska to spend the closing years of his life on the land which he and fellow landsmen had claimed for their homes and their churches thirty-five years earlier.<sup>40</sup> These churches were the true harvest of Larson's work in Nebraska. In the scramble for land and settlers he did not forget the cause that had brought him into the region. The distinct character of the ministry of this pioneer missionary was recorded in the churches which he helped to plant in Omaha, Mead, Swedeburg, Malmo, Oakland, and Lincoln.<sup>41</sup>

Years later, the patriarchal preacher reminisced about his early days in Nebraska. These reminiscences were at times sentimental excursions into the past:

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<sup>37</sup> M. N. Spencer, "The Union Pacific's Utilization of Its Land Grant with Emphasis upon its Colonization Program" (Ph. D. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1950), pp. 246-247.

<sup>38</sup> Numerical Index, Saunders County, Vol. 14-8, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> Obituary of Sven Gustaf Larson (Ms., Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska).

<sup>41</sup> C. O. Gulleen, "Historical Sketch," *Seventy-fifth Anniversary, Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church of Swede Home, 1873-1948* (Davenport, Iowa), p. 7.

As he described the hardships that he had experienced, the tears trickled down his withered cheeks into his snow-white beard. Whenever he came to a pause in his narrative about the hardships and dangers he had met with, he folded his hands and said, smiling through his tears, "Even at that time the Lord helped me wonderfully, praised be his name."<sup>42</sup>

Nebraska was not an easy mission field. Pastor Larson knew what it meant to be alone on the prairies, going from congregation to congregation on horseback and sometimes by foot. All who knew him were impressed by his great physical strength, and such strength was frequently in demand on his rigorous journeys. On one occasion Larson had proceeded as far as the flooded Platte on horseback, but there he had to leave his horse tethered at the side of the stream while he himself swam across and walked the remaining ten miles, arriving at the scheduled service in time, though he had to preach still clad in soggy clothes.<sup>43</sup> Larson himself recounted some of his adventures for *Hemlandet* readers. Frequently his only bed was the hay mow of a lonely barn. He could always count on swimming several streams before reaching his destination. Still, he always found his Swedish friends hospitable in their lonely homes dotting the open prairie.<sup>44</sup>

But Larson did not always minister to a gentle, receptive folk. He came to "the wild West" where he sought "to break the bread of life" among "sinful, atheistic, God forgetting, fallen Scandinavians." In the midst of such depravity Larson experienced a life of misery in which "physical and spiritual need and strife" became his daily portion.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes Larson felt that the good seed was going to waste on the stony ground of the frontier. The Omaha

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<sup>42</sup> C. F. Sandahl, who set down this description many years after Larson's death, had met the patriarchal missionary for the first time when Sandahl was a boy of ten. Very likely the above account is tinged by personal sentiments, for in writing it Sandahl was harking back to his own days as a young seminary student when he had talked with Pastor Larson for the last time. (See Sandahl, *op. cit.*, p. 26.)

<sup>43</sup> Torell, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>44</sup> *Hemlandet*, February 1, 1870.

<sup>45</sup> Torell has given these interpretations of the rigorous ministry in Nebraska where he himself joined Missionary Larson in 1876. (See *Korsbaneret*, p. 160.)

church, his first in Nebraska, was a continuing source of concern:

The people . . . tend to be loose or unattached in their religious views . . . They do nothing for the church. All they do is work [for themselves] . . . The church's debt in Omaha is as large as when I left. . . . Shall no one come to Omaha, so that it will not be left like the ground that is overgrown with weeds? . . . If so, it will be more difficult to reclaim than the wild prairie.<sup>46</sup>

Larson's first permanent call to a Nebraska parish came from the Alma Lutheran Church which he had founded at Mead. In May, 1870, this congregation offered to pay him one hundred dollars a year if he would preach there at least one Sunday a month.<sup>47</sup> Pastor Larson accepted the call, reserving the right to continue his missionary visits to other congregations. Difficulties also developed in Larson's rural parishes just as they had earlier in Omaha. The free, unregimented atmosphere of the frontier was at times alien to orthodoxy. Old rituals and carefully preserved doctrines were not always a welcome heritage from the past to a dynamic society where the cult of individualism in religion as well as in economics was fostered by open prairies and new neighbors. So it was that Pastor Larson like other champions of the more conservative churches had to arm himself against the powers of darkness, for apostasy was a real threat to his little congregation at Mead. The so-called Waldenstrom movement swept over Nebraska in the 1870's and 1880's like a prairie fire.<sup>48</sup> This theological quarrel claimed its toll of the faithless from Larson's Alma congregation where the membership of 151 in 1874 had fallen to 94 by 1877.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> S. G. Larson to Jonas Swensson, January 16, 1872.

<sup>47</sup> Secretarial Records of the Alma Lutheran Church (Ms., Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska.)

<sup>48</sup> Waldenstrom was a Swedish clergyman whose doctrines, particularly his interpretation of Christ's atonement, were heretical in the opinion of orthodox Lutherans. Though his ideas gathered support first in Sweden, they came to America through adherents generally known as Mission Friends.

<sup>49</sup> "Eighty-fifth Anniversary of the Alma Lutheran Church" (Ms., Alma Lutheran Church, Mead, Nebraska.).

Thus, dissention and division hindered Larson's ministry in his closing years in Nebraska. The tide of brotherly love and Christian charity was ebbing. This fact was painfully evident when a quarrel between Pastor Larson and a member of his congregation could not be resolved. On one occasion the good pastor, who had an impetuous temper, grabbed the offending parishioner by the collar when gentle persuasion failed. Ryding, the incorrigible member, took his case to the church board. After due examination the board accepted Ryding's version of the quarrel and insisted that the pastor should confess his fault in the presence of the entire congregation. Larson resigned his pastorate, and subsequently he left the rigorous ministry in Nebraska to return to the more regulated life of an Illinois parish.<sup>50</sup>

Ten years of work on the mission field in Nebraska were drawing to a close for Sven Gustaf Larson. His departure from the state to minister elsewhere also signified the close of the formative period in the history of Augustana Lutheranism and Swedish settlement in Nebraska. Surveying the results of his years of service, Missionary Larson could match success against failure, and such an inventory would not prove too disappointing. Many Swedes had come to Nebraska at the behest of Pastor Larson. Saunders County, his home territory, gave promise of assuming the leading position in rural settlements where landmen had their own Lutheran churches. It was destined to become the home of Luther Academy, a school established to perpetuate the ideals of Swedish culture and the Lutheran creed. Larson could leave Nebraska knowing that the Augustana Lutheran banner was recognized in a region where there had been no Swedish Lutheran church ten years before.

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<sup>50</sup> "Protokols-Bok for Alma Forsamling Kyrkorad" (Ms., January 30, and February 22, 1878).