

Sioux Indian Uprising in Minnesota 1862

C.C. Nelson relates Unwritten History of Raids Made on Scandinavian Settlement in August 1862 – Massacre of Mrs. Erick Johnson and Eldest Son — Attack on Fleeing Settlers – Flights to St. Peter — Building of Sod Stockade at Scandia Grove Church.

Much has been written and much has been retold about the firesides of Nicollet County relative to the Indian Massacre of August 1862, but there is one important chapter that has never been published concerning this bloodstained epoch and that is the activities of the Indians in the New Sweden and Bernadotte communities. Luckily there is one man living today, gifted with a clear memory of those harrowing experiences who is able to put his recollections on paper, and that is C.C. Nelson of New Sweden, one of Nicollet County's oldest living pioneers. Mr. Nelson, after months of effort and consideration, has drafted an interesting bit of history which he is to supply to the Minnesota Historical Society and he kindly allowed the Herald the first opportunity of presenting it to the present generation.

Mr. Nelson was 7-1/2 years old at the time of the massacre. He was one of the refugees that same of St. Peter and who experienced contact with the Indians in August 1862. The sights he saw and the experiences he and the members of his family and the neighbors had were indelibly stamped on his memory. They were doubly impressed by retelling countless times around the hearthsides and they are as clear today as they were 64 years ago. They will form an important addition to the history of the settlement of Nicollet County.

The Herald is particularly pleased to present this historical document to its readers. It accomplishes a two-fold purpose. First it brings to the present generation a vivid glimpse of the privations and dangers that confronted the intrepid pioneers who developed this county into the well-ordered and beautiful farming country that it is today. It is an object lesson in respect for the sufferings these early Scandinavians underwent to pass on a priceless heritage to those of the older residents who lived in the county during those hectic days, recollections that have grown dim with age. Secondly, this publication of the history in the Herald makes it of permanent record in the newspaper files and undoubtedly in the scrap books and albums of many Herald readers, where it will be easily accessible for all time to come long after the author and the publishers have passed on.

It is alike a duty and a pleasure for the Herald editors to submit these documents to the readers through the medium of these columns, for a well-edited and balanced newspaper would contain not only the news of the day but instructive and historical features as well. So we pass on this interesting tale to our readers on behalf of Mr. Nelson.

Arrival of the Settlers

In the years 1856 and 1857 several families of Scandinavians came to Nicollet County from Illinois. They close to settle in and around Scandia Grove and Norwegian Grove. In the year 1858 four families arrived from Batavia, Illinois, namely: Carl Nelson, Pehr Carlson, Erick Johnson and Andrew Paulson. Three of these families made the journey with ox-teams and one enjoyed the luxury of a team of horses. They found the land in proximity to the river and trading posts all occupied, so this party had to go further west, crossing Rush River. Our family finally located on Section 8, Township 11, Range 28, now part of the town of New Sweden. We arrived on the 10th day of July 1858, and found the county a wilderness. It was quite uninhabited with the exception of the Indians. There were some white people already located along the Minnesota River up to New Ulm and Fort Ridgely and around Swan Lake, however.

Built Sod Houses

Later in the summer and fall, a few more families came and settled in our neighborhood, bringing the total population to nine families. We built temporary sod houses to live in. The next spring, three more families arrived, bringing the total to twelve as follows: Carl Nelson and family, Pehr Carlson and family, Erick Johnson and family, Lars Solomonson and family, P.M. Frijoff and family, Pehr Benson and family, and S.A. Herbert and John Johnson, both single men. In the fall of 1858 Mr. Paulson dies, the first death in the little settlement. Sometime later, his widow married Joran Johnson.

Indians as Neighbors

We lived right among the Indians for four years. They made their living by hunting, fishing and trapping muskrats. They would visit us often and frequently stayed all night. We accommodated them the best we could with the meager means at our disposal. Although we did not find them very pleasant or agreeable, we tried not to cross them or arouse their animosity, for we lived in constant fear of an attack.

Off to War

During the year 1860 [*sic*] when the Civil War broke out, the little settlement demonstrated its loyalty and faith in the Union by supplying three of its men, namely S.A. Herbert, John Johnson and P. M. Fritjoff. Mr. Fritjoff's family remained behind on the homestead. The other two had no families.

War Cry Sounded

It was in August, 1862, that the little settlement was notified that the Indians were on the war path and had prepared to attack our settlement and also the settlers in the northwestern part of Brown County. At night we could see the glare of the burning cabins.

About the 17th of August, we received a message informing us that the Indians had attacked New Ulm. Pehr Carlson, Johannes Ecklund, and Joran (Göran?) Johnson rushed off to help defend New Ulm. Their families were left in our care and we kept watch lest we be the next settlement to be attacked. Our wagons were loaded at once with our few belongings and supplies to be in readiness for an instant start for St. Peter should conditions become alarming. This situation lasted until August 22. That evening, we could see the glare of more burning cabins toward New Ulm and the river, so we decided to leave our homes to seek protection elsewhere for the night. We hitched up our oxen and drove down to the Scandia Grove Church, which was six miles from our place, and spent the night.

Spies Are Sent Out

The next morning, August 23rd, there was talk of going to St. Peter for safety, but some of the settlers at the church had horses with them and it was decided that a reconnoitering party be organized among the horsemen to find out if there were any Indians in the immediate vicinity to the west. They told us to return to our homes and attend to our farm duties, and on their return, they promised to notify us concerning the whereabouts of the Indians. The reconnoitering party consisted of Andrew Thorson, Andrew Webster, John Nelson, Martin Peterson, Erick Johnson, L.J. Larson and two others whose name I cannot now recall, making a total of eight. We followed their instructions, but loaded all our belongings onto the wagons, ready for an instant dash to St. Peter should it be necessary.

Spies Encounter Indians

The scouts had just left our place, heading west, about noon, when they espied some people on the edge of some timber near a big slough. It was too far to distinguish whether they were whites or Indians. Finally someone beckoned the horsemen to come nearer, which they did to make sure who was hailing them. They were Indians who immediately opened fire, but luckily no one was injured. Our men turned about and started back as fast as their mounts would carry them with the Indians on their ponies in full pursuit. The chase was so close that our scouts had no chance to notify the settlers, but had to race for their lives. The horsemen headed across the prairie about half a mile south of our place. Erick Johnson and L.J. Larson broke away from the party and headed for their homes to rescue their families.

The Race Against Death

Mr. Larson had promised to take care of the Pehr Carlson family while the latter was away at New Ulm. He had left his wagon and one of his horses at the Carlson place. He galloped up to the Carlson home, hooked up his own lathered horse with its teammate, assembled the two families and started for St. Peter on the jump. The group started off across the prairie.

Fleeing Settlers Attacked

Erick Johnson galloped up to his home and found his family ready for the get-away and waiting for him. He jumped from his horse, picked up the reins of the team harnessed to the wagon and started immediately. His son John mounted the saddle horse his father had abandoned, and looking back, saw the Indians coming full tilt in the direction, which the settlers were taking. His father turned around when he espied the Indians and headed for Norwegian Grove. Within 80 rods of the cabin, the Indians came upon the family. Seeing that escape with the wagon was impossible, the family jumped and took refuge in the tall grass. John, the lad on the saddle horse, succeeded in cutting ahead of the Indians, and continued on until he overtook the Larson and Carlson families then on their way a short distance ahead. He rode with them toward the settlements.

The Indians rushed up to the abandoned wagon, jumped from behind their winded ponies, tied them to a fence near a cornfield and started after the Larson-Carlson wagon with the Johnson horses. The delay in changing horses gave the two families a start and they were not easily overtaken. There was a curve in the road however, of which the Indians had knowledge at the east end of Norwegian Grove. They started across the prairie to head off the fleeing families, and they would have succeeded had it not been for a stout rail fence at the opposite side of the arc which could not be broken down and which their horses refused to jump. As the wagon bounded by, the discomfited pursuers took a shot at the Johnson boy who was riding behind, but missed him, the bullet lodging in the end gate of the wagon.

Fire on Galloping Rider

The Larson-Carlson wagon had no more gotten out of range down the road when along came a settler by the name of John Stockholm, galloping along on horseback with a little boy mounted in front of him. The lad was one of the Solomonson children, whom Stockholm picked up while going by. As they sped by, the Indians opened fire. The bullet lodged in the neck of their mount, but luckily it was only a flesh wound and served only to spur the horse on faster, carrying his burden to safety.

Johnson Family Massacre

Foiled in their attempt to slay the Larson-Carlson families and John Stockholm and the Solomonson boy, the Indians returned to the Johnson place for their ponies. Before exchanging mounts, they decided to search the tall grass for victims. They quickly found Mrs. Johnson with her little baby. They killed the mother but spared the infant. Pursuing their fiendish search, they found the girl, Inga, who was 14 years old, and the boy, Pehr, who was 11 years old. The girl was in a stupor and they did not strike her, evidently thinking her dead. They did take hold of her wrist, however and dragged her quite a distance. Her body was badly lacerated by being dragged over the rough ground, the sores healing later to leave big scars. They led the boy off with them, evidently intending to kidnap him, but her resisted and refused to trail along

docilely, so they shot him dead. His body was not discovered by relatives until a week later. The father and his other two sons, Nels and Olaf, who were hidden a short distance away in the grass, were not discovered.

It was about 2 p.m. when Mrs. Johnson and her son were killed. Soon after the Indians departed the girl Inga regained consciousness and started to search for her parents and brothers. She found the corpse of her mother and in the stiffened arm was her baby brother, wailing and crying. Inga snatched the baby and concealed herself under a haycock in a nearby meadow. When darkness fell, Mr. Johnson and his two little boys came out of hiding and started to hunt up the remainder of his family. He found the body of his wife, but there was no sign of the corpse of his eldest son.

Looking over into the meadow, he made out a dog sitting on a haycock. He suspected that its owner must be hiding there, so he tipped over the hay and found his neighbor's wife, Mrs. Ecklund, and her little daughter Mary hidden there. He turned over a few more haycocks and found his daughter Inga, and his baby son. Gathering together what was left of his family and his neighbor's, they wended their sorrowful way to the Scandia Grove Church under the friendly cover of darkness, where the refugees remained until morning.

Nelsons Hid in Cornfields

My father and my brother, John Peter Benson and his family and myself started from home by ox team at the first alarm. We had gone only about 20 rods from the cabin when the Indians came rushing by. They passed us by without harming us, being set upon the capture of the Erick Johnson team of horses, which was a short distance ahead of us down the road. Peter Benson, his wife and daughter jumped from our rig to take refuge in the fields. Father told brother and I to run with the Bensons, leaving him alone to unhitch the oxen. Mother had left the house ahead of us, and we could not find her. John and I took refuge in the cornfield with the Bensons, not far from where the Indians had overtaken the Johnson family. Sometime later we heard the Indians fire three shots. We decided that we had better seek denser cover, so we took to the rank grass. We crawled two miles on our hands and knees to Norwegian Grove. There we stayed until sunset when we pulled out with others for St. Peter. We dared not follow the road but took to the open prairie.

The Flight to St. Peter

About a mile from the timber on our flight to St. Peter, we saw far ahead a group of people. We first thought they were Indians and we became much alarmed, ducking down into the grass. A moment we were held in suspense until we saw one of the group wave a handkerchief, then we knew that they were friends. It was the Lars Solomonson family. We joined them at once and waited until dark before heading for the Scandia church in the timber west of what is now Norseland. Passing by a deserted farmhouse, we decided to investigate if there was anything left to eat. Mr. Solomonson searched and finally found a can of milk in the

cellar, which we drank. We walked through the timber to the road leading to the church under cover of darkness.

We had not progressed far down the road when we heard some people approaching, evidently coming west in our direction. We secreted ourselves in the bushes along the road, fearful of Indians. As the group approached, we overheard their conversation and found them to be whites. We left our hiding place and made our presence known. It was a company of soldiers sent out from St. Paul. They informed us it was safe to follow the main road to St. Peter. They continued on their way to the Scandia Grove Church to remain over night while we decided to make for St. Peter. We arrived in St. Peter at 2 o'clock in the morning, footsore, hungry and weary. With other refugees, we were taken to a one story stone building on Third Street, which we found occupied by many others from the surrounding country.

Soldiers Find Bodies

The following morning, the company of soldiers and some other men who had spent the night at the Scandia Grove Church, went out to Erick Johnson's place to find the remains. They searched the fields and found the body of the mother, which they brought to the church for burial. No trace of the boy could be found at that time.

Father Goes to Henderson

Carl Nelson, my father, remained behind to unhitch his oxen. Meanwhile we boys had disappeared into the cornfields. He started to make for Henderson across the prairie. He had not progressed far when Indians took a shot at the Solomonson boy, John, who was heading the same way as father. The bullet passed through the wrist of the right hand but as the boy did not drop, father did not know he was wounded. The lad started to run in a northerly direction while father kept on running toward Henderson. He arrived there after dark. The Solomonson boy who was wounded was 14 years old. He had been sent out by his father to round up the oxen, which were grazing on the prairie, preparatory to making a start for St. Peter. The lad displayed great courage and fortitude under trying conditions. After he was shot, he took his handkerchief and wrapped it around his wrist as best he could to stop the bleeding. Wounded and bleeding as he was, he continued on his 20-mile hike to Henderson, arriving there late at night where his wound was given attention.

Relief From Henderson

When my father arrived in Henderson, he spread the news of the massacre in the New Sweden neighborhood. A company of soldiers was formed to accompany him to the vicinity the next morning, which was Sunday. This party made a painstaking search for the dead and the living who might be in hiding. They came near the place where my mother was hiding in a slough in Norwegian Grove. They called out as they searched to attract attention. Mother heard them but thought they were Indians and did not dare show herself. They searched through

western New Sweden where the Indians had frightened the settlers the day before but failed to find anyone, living or dead. Most of the cabins and grain stacks had been burned to the ground.

Mother Found in the Slough

The soldiers returned to Henderson soon after completing their search, while father left them to walk to St. Peter, arriving there on Sunday evening. He went to the stone refugee building to ask about his family. He was overjoyed to find my brother and me and some of his neighbors, but there was no trace of mother. The next morning, Monday, father and some other men formed a party to search for her and for others that were missing. About a mile north of the church, they noticed someone coming out of the prairie and coming closer, they found it was mother. She had been hiding in the slough from Saturday afternoon and was nearly worn out from hunger, exhaustion, exposure and fright. They commandeered a lumber wagon to bring her to St. Peter [because] she was so exhausted. Thus our entire family was spared from death.

The Return Home

We remained in St. Peter two days and then drove out to the Scandia Grove Church. The families stayed there for some time, while the men folks returned to the farms to care for the stock and what was left. On their return, the settlers found only five houses and only a few grain fields that escaped the torch of the Indians. The five that were spared belonged to the following: Pehr Benson, house and grain; P.M. Fritjoff, house and grain; Jeram Johnson, house and grain; Johannes Ecklund, house; and Lars Solomonson, grain.¹ The men helped each other erect temporary shelters so that the families could return.

Pehr Carlson and Johannes Ecklund returned from the New Ulm battle where they helped repulse the Indians. Pehr Carlson, Swan Benson and father went to St. Peter to get some flour and groceries for the families confined in the Scandia Grove Church. Upon their arrival in town, they were drafted to haul provisions from St. Peter to New Ulm and Fort Ridgely. Swan Benson was exempted because of a sore foot, and was permitted to return to the church with the provisions. Father, Mr. Carlson and others were sent to Fort Ridgely. Upon their arrival there, and after they had unloaded their provisions before the start home, Mr. Carlson was again drafted to go with a troop of men to Birch Coolie. When the troop had completed half the journey, they were notified that the soldiers had succeeded in driving the Indians back to the reservation, so Mr. Carlson was permitted to return home. My father returned a few days previously.

¹ The Pehr Carlson cabin was also spared. I don't know about the grain, but the Carlson family believed that their home was spared because mother Chastie Carlson had always fed the Indians who came looking for food. This first log cabin existed until at least the 1960s.

Threshing What Was Left

When the Indian excitement was over, attention turned to the late harvest. The settlers arranged to thresh their grain and secured Andrew Thorson of Scandia Grove with his threshing rig. All that was left to thresh were four small settings of wheat. Some of the men worked around the machine, but a constant lookout from a point of eminence was kept to guard against hostile Indians. When the harvest was completed and temporary shacks erected, the families returned to Illinois.² They had their fill of privation, hardship and danger that was the lot of all who sought to convert the wilderness into the present Garden of Eden.

Precautions Taken

In order to guard against further attacks from the Indians, the settlers decided to erect a stockade where adequate preparations could be made for defense. It was built about 40 rods west of the Scandia Grove church. All the settlers of the neighborhood, including the entire western part of New Sweden gathered to work on the stockade. There was not enough lumber at hand for the walls, so it was decided to use sod for that purpose. All brought oxen, horses if they had them, wagons and plows. The sod was turned over by the breaking plows, cut into squares with spades and loaded onto the wagons. Others hauled the chunks to the crew at work laying out and packing it into bulletproof walls. Many of these old pioneers have now gone to their rewards, but there are a few of the sturdy race still living in 1926. Among the survivors of the Indian Massacre of 1862 in the town of New Sweden, still living are the following: C.C. Nelson and Swen Carlson of New Sweden; Mrs. Lorin, nee Inga Carlson, of Winthrop; Olaf E. Johnson of St. Peter; Nels E. Jonson of St. Paul; Mrs. Holmquist, nee Inga Johnson, of Faribault; Charles Wilson, formerly Solomonson, of Bernadotte; Alfred Solomonson of Milaca; Louis Solomonson of Sibley County; Tanne Johnson of Le Sueur; John Carlson of Havannah, N.D.; Mrs. Ola Carlson, nee Mary Ecklund, of Minneapolis; Johanna Larson of Takoma, Wash.

This, then is the true account of the Indian Massacre in the town of New Sweden in 1862, a period fraught with danger, privation and terror which will never be seen again. It is a true account of the heroic deeds and the fortitude of these pioneers to whom we are all indebted for the benefits and prosperity we now enjoy. Long after these facts and these names have been forgotten, the monuments they left behind them in fertile fields, improved farms and sturdy descendants will remain to reflect the glory that is their due.

Typed by Marlis Delger
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² Many of the families stayed in Minnesota, including that of the author, the Carlsons, the P.M. Fritjoff family, and others.