

REPORT FROM SCANDINAVIA – NO. 3

Blessings Of Fate, Nature Bestowed on Sweden, Ishpeming Student Learns

BY VINCENT H. MALMSTROM

(EDITOR'S NOTE - This is the third in a series of special feature articles written by Vincent H. Malmstrom, Ishpeming. As the recipient of a Fulbright scholarship grant to Norway, he is spending the year in research and travel in northern Europe. From time to time, The Mining Journal will publish his articles touching on various phases of life in modern Scandinavia. In the belief that his observations as a geographer and fellow Upper Peninsulan will be of interest to readers in this area)

OSLO. Sept. 23 - From the Norwegian town of Ørje the road winds eastward into a melange of lakes and forested hills -- an area which to all appearances might have been taken from the more rugged sections of our own Marquette county and set down here in Scandinavia.

Somewhere up in this maze of pine-clad knobs and clear, cold lakes there was an international boundary line -- that between Norway and Sweden. The first indication I had that I was in Sweden, however, came in the form of a blatant highway sign telling me in four languages to "Keep to the Left." Swedes, like the British, still drive on the left hand side, so from that moment on, with the help of additional reminders at intervals along the road, I realized that I was in another political realm.

Other Differences Discovered

As I went farther into the country of course, I found other differences in almost everything except the people. Fluttering above me now were the blue and gold colors of the Swedish national emblem, but the people I saw in the fields or met on the streets looked about the same, acted about the same, and even talked about the same as had the Norwegians. (Norwegians and Swedes find little difficulty in understanding one another's language, so that the knowledge of one quite successfully meets the demands of the other.) It occurred to me that that boundary line which I had crossed somewhere back in the woods was no sharper a line of distinction between Norwegians and Swedes than is the St. Mary's river between Americans and Canadians. Does such a boundary have any real basis for existence then? What differences between Norway and Sweden have led them to seek independent destinies?

The answer, of course, is found quite simply in physical geography. Forming the backbone of the Scandinavian peninsula is the Kjølen mountain range, named by ancient sea-faring Vikings who likened its configuration to that of an over-turned boat. These mountains fall very steeply into the sea in the west but slope very gradually into the

Baltic and Gulf of Bothnia in the east. The barren, rugged western fringes of this range have become the hearth of the Norwegian nation, while modern Sweden has taken root and flourished on the infinitely more fertile and gently sloping eastern side. Towering cliffs and sterile rock have driven the Norwegians into the sea to gain their livelihood from fishing, whaling, and shipping. But this same Nature which has been so niggardly toward the Norwegians has smiled kindly on the Swedes, and this fact of physical geography alone is responsible for most of the differences which *do* exist between the two countries.

Given Gentle Treatment

Fate, as well as nature, has treated Sweden gently. The events of the past decade have had considerable effect in pointing up any differences that may have existed previously. For five long years during the recent war that nebulous "line in the woods" separated an enslaved people from a free people. Why Hitler's legions never ventured to cross that line will probably always go unexplained but the mere fact that they did not has intensified, for the moment at least, those differences which stem from the geography of the region.

The most obvious differences borne of the war are those the visitor notices in the shop windows and restaurants, whether they be in the smaller provincial towns such as Karlstad, the first city of any size I passed through in Sweden, or the great dynamic capital of Stockholm. Here one finds an abundance of delicacies and luxuries that the unfortunate Norwegians have not seen for 10 years. There is no rationing in Sweden as there still is for several commodities in Norway.

Like Entering Valhalla

Shop windows are full of clothing, chocolate and fruit. Restaurants not only have meat, but you have a considerable selection from which to choose. Even I, having spent only six weeks on the average Norwegian diet of fish and boiled potatoes, could not help feeling that I had somehow come into a rich and favored land, a Valhalla. As I traveled through the sunny wheat fields, the hilly forest lands, the small farming villages and the great industrial cities of Sweden, the thought kept running through my head -- How lucky the Swedes have been! Nature and Fate have indeed been kind to Sweden.

My tour of Sweden took me of course to Stockholm, so aptly labeled the "Venice of the North." From a group of islands in the channel between Lake Mälaren and the Baltic Sea, the city has spilled over onto the mainland both north and south of its original core. As a result, it is a city cut into many parts by winding waterways, and finds its unifying bond in a great network of bridges. This insular setting not only makes for a somewhat spectacular and beautiful site, but it also ties the history of Stockholm into neat little bundles for the visitor. The oldest part of the city is the island now known as the "Staden mellan broarna," or "the city between the bridges," and it is here that the royal palace and the famous Riddarholm church are located. Extending outward in ever

widening circles are the progressively more recent sections of the city. It is in the outermost, suburban ring that we find the ultra – modern apartment buildings, hospitals, and social centers that have given the Swedish capital its claim to fame as one of the most attractive and well-planned cities in Europe. With almost 700,000 inhabitants, the capital of the Swedes represents the largest city on the Scandinavian peninsula and Sweden's greatest port on the Baltic.

Visit In Visby

If we go back some six or seven hundred years into history however, the greatest port and city of all the north was not Stockholm or Oslo, or even Copenhagen, but rather the city of Visby on the Baltic island of Gotland. Visby was the great Mecca of merchants from all over northern Europe in the early days of the Hanseatic League. Here the fine embroidered textiles of Flanders were exchanged for the amber of the German coastal provinces and the furs and forest products of distant Muscovy. Trade routes extended, in fact, far into present-day Russia, down the Volga river and across the Caspian into the exotic land of Persia. This is borne out by the numerous discoveries in the fields of Gotland of coins and ornaments from these far away places, and even today the farmer's plow is doing its bit in helping to piece together the fascinating history of this ancient Gothic stronghold.

While in Visby myself, I stayed in a building whose exterior had originally been built in 1250, but whose interior was as up-to-date as most American hotels. It was located in the heart of the old city on the corner of Novgorodgränd, the street of the Russian fur merchants, With a little imagination, one could picture in his mind's eye some of the colorful barter and pageantry that must have taken place within these ancient city walls some seven centuries before. As I wandered along the quays and wharves of that ancient market town, it was interesting to note how little things actually change in the course of 700 years. There, taking on some of the same commodities that their counterparts had carried so long ago, were ships from some of the same ports -- Hamburg, Lübeck, Danzig, Amsterdam. Time had almost seemed to stand still in Visby. Just as the massive, turreted walls of the city have enclosed within themselves a segment of medieval life and culture, so have they tended to capture the memories and unhurried pace of living of an age long past. Visby is one of the most fascinating cities of all Europe.

Contrasting Scenes

From medieval memories to jet aircraft may seem like quite a gap to bridge but one finds this sort of contrast in Sweden. As I went south and westward through the broad fields of ripening grain in Östergötland, Swedish jet planes soared gracefully overhead. Along the roads, rearing up in the fields or on the birch-covered knolls were runestones, some dating back 1,000 years or more. I passed old country estates that looked like pages from the 18th century and I went through modern industrial cities, so neat and clean that you wondered whether you were not now in some sort of “model city.”

But the more often you encountered these well-planned, well-built and well-kept towns the more certain you were that these were not the exception but the rule in Sweden. I am not trying to exaggerate the cleanliness of Swedish cities and towns but almost everywhere you go in the Scandinavian countries, there is a neatness and attractiveness that we seldom find in our American urban areas. As a Norwegian housing expert told me, "We don't want any psychological slums here," or as a Dane expressed it: "The Americans are very clean when it comes to their persons, but they just don't seem to care what kind of a place they live or work in." As I recall parts of Chicago's south side, or the Pittsburgh industrial area or Brooklyn's tenement district, I wonder if there isn't some truth in his generalization after all.

Amazing Coincidence

It was on a train in a rather out-of-the-way section of the Småland hills that the most amazing coincidence of my tour took place. I happened to be sitting in a coach with a number of Swedish missionaries who were going to a conference somewhere in that region and I couldn't help but overhear a conversation that was going on behind me. It seems that a man and woman were debating where it was that they had first met each other. The woman ventured that it was Ipinglan (Yunnan province, China). The man, who hadn't quite understood her, what with the noise of the train and the conversation of the other passengers, said questioningly, "Ishpeming?" The woman corrected him to Ipinglan, China. He laughed, and by manner of explanation for his mistaken impression, explained that there actually was a town by that name in Michigan in the United States.

By now my curiosity was getting the better of me, so excusing myself, I interrupted the conversation and asked if I hadn't heard him mention the name of Ishpeming. The man turned to me and answered affirmatively, repeating his explanation of where it was. When I responded, "Yes, I know, I live there," you should have seen the expression that crossed his face. From there on, our conversation alternated between Swedish and English, for it turned out that he had lived a couple of years in Rockford, Ill., and on one occasion (about 23 years ago) had visited the Upper Peninsula and gone through Ishpeming, the name sticking in his mind because of its unique quality. More recently he and his wife had been missionaries in Yunnan province, China, until being forced to leave by the swift march of events in that area. So, strange as it may seem, Yunnan in China and Ishpeming in Michigan came close together in the wooded hills of Småland in Sweden.

From the rocky, forested ridges of Småland one gradually drops down into the rolling farming country of Skåne, Sweden's most southerly province. Here, the change that takes place is not only in the physical landscape, but also in the speech and dress of the people.

Great fields of wheat interspersed with groves of beech trees take the place of the heavily forested and stony highlands of Småland. Now, on the highest of the undulating hills, the gangly arms of creaking windmills reach up to embrace the wind. The dialect is

softer here, more like Danish, and correspondingly a little more difficult to understand. Moreover, you see people wearing wooden shoes and piling their firewood in conical stacks, traits I saw nowhere else in Sweden, As one crosses these rich, sunny plains through the old university town of Lund and on to the port of Malmö, it would appear that Sweden has more tillable land in this one southern province than in the whole of neighboring Norway.

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