REPORT FROM SCANDINAVIA – NO. 15

Iron Mining Area Of Sweden Visited By Ishpeming Man

BY VINCENT H. Malmström

OSLO, May 3-In early historic times Sweden was divided into three principal regions – Götaland in the south, Svealand in the center and Norrland in the north. Both Götaland and Svealand have since become relatively densely populated agricultural and industrial regions, but Norrland has remained Sweden's frontier up to the present -- its chief wealth coming from its forests and mines.

Comprising almost 60 per cent of Sweden's entire area, Norrland is somewhat offside for most foreign tourists, yet thanks to the excellent train connections with Stockholm you are scarcely more than a day and a half away from the heart of the country even in the remotest corner of this vast region. For the visitor to Sweden who wants to see the Midnight Sun, some of the richest iron mines in the world, Lapps and reindeer -- all against the background of some of the most magnificent scenery in Europe, Norrland is the place. These were only a few of the things that I managed to see during my visit to the region during the past summer.

Visit To Historic City

Our train glided silently out of Stockholm's great, central station and we soon found ourselves speeding northward through the rolling agricultural districts of Uppland. My first stop was in Uppsala -- the home of one of Sweden's largest universities and cathedrals. Originally the site of pagan religious ceremonies, Uppsala today is a city of over 60,000, though the quiet dignity and charm which pervades its academic quarter gives it an air of a much smaller town.

Unfortunately my schedule did not permit more than the briefest visit to this historic city, and soon I was once again traveling northward -- this time on one of the famous through express trains that serve this region – the “Northern Arrow”. I had never realized that train travel could be as pleasant as it is in Sweden. Here, where almost 80 per cent of all rail traffic moves by electricity, there is a speed, comfort and cleanliness that I have seldom experienced in such a harmonious combination. Sitting near the window of a second-class compartment was like sitting in an easy chair in front of a picture window. The only difference was that the whole of Norrland was unfolding before you. Cleanliness is a particularly strong point in the favor of electric railroads, for you neither get off the train with cinders in your eyes nor have the aroma of burned diesel oil clinging to you. What is more, the use of electricity by the railroads of Sweden has
largely obviated the unsightly coal yards which plague most railway travel in the rest of Europe or America.

The patches of agricultural land grow fewer and smaller and the forest areas grow conversely greater as we continue northward. When we cross the Dal River, we officially enter Norrland, and by this time woods make up the bulk of the landscape. After a stop at Gävle, on the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, we turn inland and soon the interminable forests swallow us up in the misty gloom of the coming night. The first light of dawn finds us several hundred miles further north -- the “Northern Arrow” still speeding silently toward its goal in northern Norrland.

During the night we have crossed one after another of the great rivers down which the green gold of Norrland finds its way to the world markets -- broad churning rivers choked with logs on their way to the sawmills and pulp factories at their mouths. A little after nine in the morning we arrive in Boden -- the chief rail junction in the far north of Sweden and the place where I was to change trains for Luleå. Since, Boden is also an anchor point in the Swedish defense system in this part of the country, it is supposedly illegal for a foreign national to leave the railway station, though how strictly this is enforced I do not know. Without attempting to test the law on this point, I boarded a local train for Luleå.

**Summer Iron Port**

To begin with Luleå in my story of northern Sweden is somewhat like setting the cart before the horse, for Luleå owes its importance, if not its existence to something else. Luleå is the summer port for the iron ore mined at Gällivare, the latter being one of the two great iron deposits located in Swedish Lapland. It is in many ways what Marquette is to the mines of the Marquette Range or what Duluth is to the Mesabi Range. Here an Upper Peninsulan will find some very familiar structures in the landscape -- namely the long ore-loading docks. Lying in the harbor awaiting their turns to be loaded are up to a dozen freighters -- not the characteristic ore-boats of various private companies to which we are accustomed but sea-going freighters representing a variety of foreign countries, chief among them Poland, Germany and Belgium. Like Marquette, Luleå has a shipping season which is limited to the summer, for it is blocked by ice for an average of some 200 days a year. What was done to overcome this handicap I will tell you a little later. Unfortunately, it is something that we in the Upper Great Lakes area cannot duplicate,

Luleå is also the home of a new state-owned steel mill, operated by electric power. It was built as the first step in broadening the economic base of this region -- a measure that is being extended by the consolidation of small farm properties into more efficient units and by attempting to develop various other diversified and scattered industries. Like the Upper Peninsula, Swedish Norrland is a region of primary production -- one whose resources flow out to be utilized by others elsewhere. Also like the Upper Peninsula, Norrland has tended to lose much of its population through migration to better economic conditions to the south, and only when the national economy hits a snag, as during the ‘30s, do people flock back to the land. I am sure that the average Upper
Peninsulan will feel more than at home in Norrland, for the similarities between the two areas are surprisingly numerous.

**Western U. P. Recalled**

From Luleå I retraced my tracks to Boden and continued on to Gällivare in the process crossing the Arctic Circle for the fifth time in a month. Gällivare is more of an assembly point than a mining center, for the actual diggings are located at Malmberget and Koskullskulle, both in the immediate vicinity of Gällivare. A visit to Malmberget was like dropping into the western end of the U. P., for there were the hulking shaft houses and the orderly rows of company dwellings. Malmberget is also the site of a mining museum, something that my tight schedule unfortunately did not permit me to include in my itinerary.

From Gällivare I took a little rail-bus down along the new Inland Railway for a few miles to see the giant hydroelectric project that is underway at Harsprånget. On our way we glimpse, an occasional reindeer foraging along the track, and just before we arrive at Harsprånget we pass the largest power station in northern Sweden at Porjus. Supplying current for the railways and much of the domestic requirements of the region, Porjus will soon surrender first place to the new station at Harsprånget -- Sweden's all time hydroelectric colossus. Located on a great falls in the Stora Lule River, the Harsprånget station will generate some 250,000 kw which will be delivered by a 590 mile long power line for use in central Sweden. With a tension of 380,000 volts, this power line will be the world's longest and highest tension electric line. Tapping the vast power resources of Norrland, Sweden already has five other long-distance power lines each carrying 200,000 volts.

**Encounter With Reindeer**

On our way back from Harsprånget to Gällivare as our little rail-bus rounded a curve, we were confronted by a bull reindeer placidly grazing right in the middle of the tracks. He seemed almost as startled as we were, and attempted to charge this strange looking creature that had dared to interrupt his reverie. After narrowing the distance between himself and the rail-bus to about 10 yards, he realized that this "thing" was bigger than he was, so he stopped, turned around, and beat a hasty retreat. After clocking a good speed for about a quarter of a mile, he decided to throw in the towel, and get off the track to let us pass. If reindeer could thumb their noses at people, I'm sure that one would have favored us with such a gesture.

About 50 miles north of Gällivare we come to two low mountains which seem to loom up over the marshy, birch-covered plain of Swedish Lappland. From a distance we can see that one of the mountains has been cut into a number of step-like terraces while the other has a great open wound in its side. These are Kirunavaara and Luossavaara, respectively, the two great mountains of iron that have given birth to the town that nestles between them -- Kiruna. It is perhaps not too accurate to pinpoint the city of Kiruna in
that way, for its administrative boundaries enclose more than 5,100 square miles, and not until you cross the border into Norway do you technically leave the city-limits of Kiruna.

**World's Largest City**

With such an area (created for reasons of tax administration), Kiruna has been the world's largest city since 1948, despite the fact that it has only about 19,000 inhabitants. "Downtown Kiruna," if we can apply that term to the built-up section nestling between the two mountains, is uncommonly attractive for a mining town, and aside from its importance to industry, it forms the jumping off place for tours to Sweden's highest mountain and largest glacier at Kebnekaise.

Though the sun was high and the air was warm when I visited Kiruna, during the winter, because of its high latitude and inland location, it is one of the darkest and coldest places in Scandinavia. Mining operations are then carried on in the great open pits under the light of thousands of electric bulbs, strung for what must have been several miles up and down the terrace-steps. The ore mined here is between 60 and 70 per cent pure iron and from Kiruna, like Gällivare, it flows out in a continual stream to the great industrial centers of central Europe. Unlike Gällivare ore, however, that from Kiruna finds its way to the sea in Norway, through the port of Narvik, both during the summer and the winter. Despite the fact that Narvik lies over 200 miles farther north than Luleå, it remains ice-free the year around because it fronts on the warm Atlantic Ocean as opposed to the colder Gulf of Bothnia. Hence, strange as it may seem, Swedish ores move northward during the winter to avoid being blockaded by ice.

**Awe-Inspiring Country**

The journey which the ore must make to reach Narvik is through some 100 miles of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring country in Europe -- on one side you are flanked by snow-capped peaks, on the other by the rolling swampy, plains of Lappland, spring-green in its lacy-cover of fresh-budding birches. A little farther along our electric train skirts the edge of the incredibly blue Torne Träsk, one of the largest and certainly most scenic lakes of all Norrland. A few miles from its western end we begin climbing in earnest to cross the divide into Norway, the birches gradually falling away until we reach the watershed where the slaty rocks are naked but for a sparse cover of brownish grass. Shortly after we say goodbye to Sweden, thereby taking our leave of Kiruna too, our train begins dropping abruptly, for in the 25 short miles from the border to Narvik we must descend all of 1,600 feet. In few places can the tourist get such a vivid impression of how Sweden and Norway differ from one another as here, for what has been a long, slow, easy climb up the eastern slope has now turned into a breath-taking descent through a myriad of tunnels and along the face of perpendicular cliffs. It seems just a matter of minutes before our train glides noiselessly into the Narvik station after its thousand-mile journey from Stockholm.

Though Narvik was virtually wiped off the face of the map during the last war, it has now been almost completely rebuilt, and once again has a population of about
10,000. Before the railway was built from Kiruna, there was no such place as Narvik, and it owes its whole existence to the iron ore exports of Swedish Lappland. Now its harbor sees a constant stream of freighters waiting to be loaded by the constant flow of shiny black ore from Kiruna.

From Narvik I continued north by bus to Tromsø, where I rejoined my Scandinavian Airlines plane for a speedy dash along the whole length of Norway to Oslo. In the following and concluding articles of this series, I will describe my visit to two of the most remote and fascinating outposts of Northern Europe --the Faeroes and Iceland.

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