

*I wrote the following article that was published in The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly in 1978.*

The story of the immigrant is an important part of the story of northern Michigan. Although a large number of settlers came to this area from Ohio, New York, and other states, the Scandinavians and Germans who came to work in the harvest of the giant white pine forests had a great impact on the region. Part of it is still considered primarily Swedish, and the language is heard in many communities yet today.

When we consider the place of the immigrant in our history, we often look at only one side of the issue. We examine the immigrant's attitude toward his new country and his actions in attempting to attain "the American dream." We neglect the other side of his life, the tenuous contact he struggled to maintain with his family and homeland. Letters took a much longer and more uncertain route than they do in today's friendly skies. Weeks and often months passed before a family in Europe received news from a teen-aged son in America. Poor communications led to a gradual decrease in writing and, in many cases, loss of contact. This helped to create an inner conflict-- between home and family on one side and opportunity and greater freedom on the other. This developed into an unseen battle within many a young immigrant. As he reached maturity and gradually adjusted to American life, this struggle became more submerged. English replaced the native tongue, and with naturalization the immigrant soon became Americanized in nearly all aspects of living. But, two sides to life--here and now, as opposed to there and then--remained. And this, too, is an American story.

Lars Erickson came to Michigan from western Sweden in 1882. He was seventeen years old. The lure of America had already claimed an older brother, Nils, ten years earlier. It could not have been easy for any boy of his age to leave his family and the familiar rocky hills and cold lakes of his native Värmland. However, the people of this area suffered much poverty. In a large family, with few prospects for betterment, the seventeen-year-old Lars saw America as the answer.

Like so many others, he left his homeland to "make his fortune."

Like most of them, he never came home again to stay, never became rich, yet attained his goal. He achieved a better life and a freer existence for himself and his family. Working in the woods suited the young, lithe Swede. He was a top-loader in the winter, and in the spring he rode the teeming rivers. After several years he married a girl who was nearly a native American.

Cornelia Augustinsson came from Denmark as a small child. Her parents were homesteaders in northern Osceola County, and she grew up to be a country schoolteacher at age sixteen. She and Lars were married, and she taught him to read and write English. They had children, and soon Lars Erickson had two families, one far away in Värmland and one close at hand, ever present, in America. That the new family was the essence of his life now did not mean that he forgot the old life or his childhood home. Now farming his father-in-law's homestead in the 1890s, he maintained contact with his mother. Her husband was dead and one son had disappeared in America. Maria Larsdotter clung to the single thread of communication between Lars and herself. She wrote in January, 1895, to the daughter-in-law she would never meet:

*I thank you so much for the letter which we received the twenty-seventh of December. It was good to hear that all of you are well. Now it will be four years in April since we received a letter from you and then Olov became sick and we thought we would wait to write to you until he became better again, but it took a longer time before he became well. Later, I wrote to you and received no answer. Then I believed you had moved.*

Lars' sister Ingeborg added a message for her brother:

*I will write a few lines to you, Lars, and say that we are all healthy. You say that times are hard there now, but here times have become better since you were home. We have been very worried since last summer that you could have been burned out by the big fire, for we didn't know just where you lived. We had read with dread the newspaper articles, so we were very glad when we received the letter from you. We see in your letter that you want our mother's picture. We want one too, but we have thought it is*

*too far to go to Kristiana (Oslo), but now they say that there will be a photographer closer to home.*

So there were two homes, and although the immigrant chose America, he could not put the thoughts of the old home from his life. Over the years, the Ericksons on both sides of the Atlantic wrote sporadically. Family records show deaths on both sides and new members of the family, as well. Finally, in 1927, Lars Erickson made a trip to Sweden. For the first time in his adult life he saw his two remaining brothers, Emil and Elov. But now he suffered from homesickness for America and his family.

On May 29, 1927, he wrote to his family in America:

*I wish I was home. Haven't heard a word from home. I don't know what to think. If anybody is sick I should think you would write, and I cannot go till the 29th of June. I don't know if I can stand it that long. The first boat goes to Halifax. I was foolish for getting a return ticket; if I hadn't, I could have gone anytime. It has been awful cold here, raining every day and snowing part of the time. If it don't quit soon, I don't know what to do.*

*...It is awful lonesome here.*

*Anna (brother Emil's daughter) is calling me to come and eat--it is nothing but eat, eat all day--I am getting tired of eating. The first nice day we get I am going out in the woods and stay all day. Then Anna said she'd have to come and hunt me up for I surely would be lost. I told her I didn't care.*

Mail was still slow and Lars received very little during his stay in Sweden. But when he started home, he sent many letters back to Sweden, to his niece, Anna. The first was written in daily installments during his voyage back to America on the *Gripsholm*. From this letter one can again discern traces of homesickness, this time for Sweden. At one point he wrote:

*I wonder if it's raining at home yet. There has been sunshine and clear weather here the whole day, but the days are beginning to be so long that I dare not think about it. We have been on this journey four days and haven't come farther than Scotland's coast.*

*...The days are so long that there seems to be no end to them. In the midst*

*of Värmland's rocks and woods the days passed quickly when you and Fritz and I were out and took pictures, but this will pass, too, if I have patience.*

Shortly before landing in New York, Lars wrote:

*I would like to see you, little Anna, and talk with you for a while. Now, I'll tell you that I am homesick again. I should have stayed there a little longer, but perhaps it's better the way it is. You were all much too nice to your old uncle. I am sorry for the way I left. Well, Anna, you please forgive me and I hope all there do that. {Knowing the emotional stress it would place on his nieces, Lars told only his brothers when he was going to leave.} I wonder if you have the pictures back yet. I hope the one we took up on the high rock was good...*

*We have about one more day until we come to land. I hope you have written as quickly as I have, so I will get a letter as soon as I get home.*

In September, Lars wrote to Anna and her husband, indicating that he would like to visit his homeland again:

*You can take several pictures of Nistuga. Get everybody assembled in one picture and don't forget the little one and Little Mamma. But you see, I can say what I want to about Anna now when I am so far away, but I will say to you, Anna, that I have nothing bad to say about you. You were all too good to your old uncle then. After a few years, if all goes well, it could be that we can come over there again, both of us. I won't go alone to Sweden again, because the journey is too long for that.*

Lars was impatient to receive mail from his family in Sweden. In his Christmas letter of 1927, he chided Anna:

*It is certainly time that somebody should write. I had thought it was your turn, but it doesn't look that way. I have waited for a letter as long as I can wait, but none has come. I received a letter from Maria several days ago, and I think she's going to come here in the spring. Soon it will be time for you and Fritz to get the idea in your heads to come, too.....I wonder how things are over there now.*

Other letters followed, but Lars Erickson's story was nearly finished. On December 5, 1929, he died, leaving sorrowing families in both Sweden and America. But he had maintained a lasting connection

between the Swedish and American branches of the Eriksson/ Erickson family. Both are richer for the broadening of their lives and outlooks through contact with their cousins in another land. In the end, the inner conflict suffered by the immigrant produced good. The Swedes in America accepted the new, but never forgot the old. They stayed in America to become worthy citizens, but also maintained their Swedish heritage and passed it on, thus enriching both themselves and their families across the ocean through the exchange of language, knowledge, and culture.