



Olof Bergstrom: Swedish Pioneer

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OLOF BERGSTROM: SWEDISH PIONEER

BY LOUISE POUND

OLOF Bergstrom, an early settler in Dawson County, was a leader of Swedish immigrants in the Gothenburg region. It has often been remarked that his life and activities in the Nebraska of the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries deserve at least partial chronicling.¹ Some day, if and when the history of the Scandinavian element in Nebraska is written, his will be a prominent place. Not only was he an influential colonizer; he was a colorful personality; and, before it is too late, some account of him should be made available. It is nearly too late now, for hardly anyone who knew him is yet alive. What information is to be had may well be brought together at the present time as a contribution to the history of Dawson County.

A German settlement preceded the Swedish in the Gothenburg *locale*. The Germans came mostly from the eastern states and they had in some degree resources to fall back on. They preempted the choicer locations for their homesteads. When the settlers from Sweden came, this in 1882, their alternatives were to homestead the less desirable land to the north and west of the present Gothenburg, or to buy land from the Union Pacific Railroad, which had penetrated and crossed Nebraska by the late 1860's. The federal government gave the Union Pacific every other section of land (the odd numbers) for ten miles on each side of the right of way. The railroad might then sell the surplus land to the settlers. Olof worked on the Union Pacific after coming to America in 1881 and he decided to homestead in the Gothenburg region, after a stay in the town of Stromsburg in Polk County of which his brother became a resident. He took his

¹ For the suggestion that this article be written and for much or most of the information supplied I am indebted to P. R. Beath of Washington D. C. and Don Holmes of the Gothenburg *Times*.

homestead in Dawson County in 1881. The original Bergstrom farmhouse was a dugout, the site a sheep pasture, and there was no house or building near. In the summer of 1882 a house of sun-dried brick was put up. The earlier farmhouse was used as a shelter for Swedish immigrants when they came until they were located on their own land.

Olof and the Plum Creek station agent, J. H. McColl, got the concession to sell land from the Union Pacific railroad. The railroad laid out eight blocks, now known as the Original Town and built the first side track. The name Gothenburg given the site came from the Swedish city of Gothenburg (Göteborg) from which Olof had emigrated. In the spring of 1882 he went back to Sweden and induced a number of persons to come to Dawson County and to start the new town. He told them that they would soon be independent and he assured them that there was no need for them to learn English as this town would be made up of people from Sweden. When the Swedish settlers came in that same year, their alternatives, as already said, were to homestead the less desirable land north and west of the present Gothenburg or to buy land of the railroad at \$6.00 an acre. More did the latter.

One of the Swedes coming in 1882 was Per Nelson, a preacher. He went again to Sweden and returned with another group of immigrants. He painted the Nebraska plains to them in glowing colors. Naturally those coming with him were disappointed when they found no town on arrival, but he told them to look forward to the future. Another of those coming from Sweden in 1882 was Dr. Vollrad Karlson. He worked in a Kearney drugstore, primarily as a pharmacist. The next spring he opened up his own drugstore in the second building to be built in Gothenburg, this in January, 1883. Dr. Karlson died while yet in his twenties; his was not a long life for one who played a large part in the early days of Gothenburg. Two citizens of Gothenburg state that their impression is that Olof Bergstrom himself made several trips to Sweden, three perhaps, to bring more immigrants to Gothenburg and Dawson County.

The Gothenburg *Independent* of 1885 had an advertisement of Olof Bergstrom and Company.²

The above firm is engaged in the real estate business, and is composed of O. Bergstrom, Dr. Vollrad Karlson and A. S. Booton. O. Bergstrom, then senior member of the firm, is a native of Sweden and came to America in 1881, making Nebraska his first permanent stopping place. He secured from the U. P. railroad six townships of land, the same including the present site of Gothenburg. He returned to Sweden sometime during the same year, but in 1882 he again set sail for America, bringing with him a party of about 370 of his countrymen. The major part of the company settled in Phelps County, but few caring to stake their fortunes in Gothenburg and vicinity—although a large number of them have since moved here. Mr. Bergstrom is the founder of Gothenburg and, having implicit faith in the future of the town, has labored zealously for its welfare.

His "implicit faith" was to be borne out, but probably, at the time he expressed it, it was more qualified than he represented to his followers. Elvina Karlson, daughter of Dr. Vollrad Karlson's brother Frederick, said in an interview in 1944, quoting her mother, that "knowing the hardships and slim pickings of the years ahead, Olof reasoned that only the Viking spirit of high courage and self reliance could hew a homestead out of this camping ground of buffalo and Indians." In the same interview³ Elvina Karlson told more that she had learned from the talk of her mother of Olof Bergstrom. Mrs. Frederick Karlson was his contemporary and knew him well.

In 1885 Mr. Bergstrom got up a petition for a Postoffice. The petition was accepted and Bergstrom was appointed Postmaster. Mail was brought to his house or homestead and anyone who wanted his mail called for it there. There was not much mail, a sack coming in at a time. If no one was at the train to get the mail it was stuffed into a box used as a step-off from the train. Sometimes the mail would remain there for days before some one from the Bergstrom's would walk down to get it. Bergstrom himself was seldom at home, newly arrived emigrants doing his work around the place. When the sack was brought back there was a general stampede for the key which hung on a nail, and the one getting the key was privileged to open the sack and dump it on the floor. The

² May 18, 1885.

³ Reported by P. R. Beath in 1944.

letters were then gathered and placed on a table. When people called for their mail they were invited to look through the mail on the table. In 1883 when Dr. Vollrad Karlson started his drugstore, the Post Office was moved there, on Front Street, and he served as mail clerk. Dr. Karlson conducted the Post Office in a more dignified manner. He went after the mail himself and tucked it away in a cigar box under the counter in the store. He sorted the letters and told the settlers if they had any mail.

Olof married a concert or opera singer as his second wife, and this seems to have had no little effect on his career. A soprano of considerable note, coming to this country from Sweden, she gave concerts in the East and had a wide repertory.

Inquiry sent to Mrs. J. A. Frawley, daughter of Lewis Headstrom the founder of Stromsburg, brought the following information, in May, 1944. I am indebted for it to Chattie Westenius of Stromsburg, editor of the *Stromsburg Headlight*.

[As a child] I remember Olof Bergstrom's being spoken of as a revivalist type of Baptist preacher. . . . My parents attended some of these meetings, but he was never a guest at our house, either in Galva or Stromsburg. Then one day a letter came from him stating that he had just returned from Sweden and had attended a concert in Stockholm given by a beautiful and talented singer, and was told that she was very anxious to visit the U. S. A. and study for her career. So he conceived the idea that it might be a very profitable financial success if he could be her manager. He obtained an interview and arrangements were so made. He told her they would have to be married because in America it would not be proper for them to travel together except as man and wife. So they were married and lived at Gothenburg.

This is the account of her coming to America as told by Mrs. Bergstrom to Mrs. Frawley. The latter added that Bergstrom asked Mr. Headstrom to let his wife come to Stromsburg to give a concert, which she did, Mrs. Frawley playing her accompaniment. He had asked that the Headstroms sponsor her as their guest, and they did. This was about three years after Mrs. Frawley's marriage. Mrs. Frawley also remarked "Bergstrom's wife was a very pleasant and confiding guest but we never heard of either of them again."

The same issue of the *Gothenburg Independent* that printed the real estate advertisement of the Bergstrom-Karlson Company (May 16, 1895) contains, according to Don Holmes, "reports from Minneapolis papers about the Aklander-Bergstrom Concert Company of which Mrs. Bergstrom was the prima donna, with a soprano voice of remarkable strength, range and compass." Mrs. Frederick Karlson stated that "When they came back as bride and groom to Gothenburg, the Gothenburg band met the Bergstroms at the station, which was a platform merely with no building in sight as yet." Mrs. Bergstrom gave up concert singing. They lived in the home of sun-dried brick and entertained lavishly. In 1890 it became the scene of a killing.

Earlier Bergstrom had been deeply interested in temperance. According to Mrs. Karlson he even went to Sweden and organized there a Temperance Union called in Swedish *God Templar*. Finally, to continue Mrs. Karlson's testimony:

Mrs. Bergstrom, forgetting her good training in Sweden and Olof Bergstrom falling a devotee of liquor, they carried on in their house extravagantly. A few of Mrs. Bergstrom's friends met there one evening. One of those present was a jolly sort of fellow, always teasing. He agitated Olof Bergstrom that night so that he picked up a revolver. There is no evidence to prove that he did shoot, or who did it, as all present were in the same state.

The last sentences refer to what was the most conspicuous event in Bergstrom's life in Dawson County, his trial for the murder of Ernest G. Edholm. Records concerning the case are on file in the office of the Clerk of the District Court in Lexington, Dawson County⁴ and in the Appearance Docket. The killing took place March 14, 1890. The information against Bergstrom was filed March 15 by Edwin Edholm. The judge examined the following witnesses at the preliminary hearing: Dr. W. P. Smith, Annie Dell, Amanda Ingram, for the complainant and Mrs. Sarah Johnson for the defendant. The defendant was represented by Hinman and Garret. The trial began June 9. The defendant with

⁴ District Court Journal, 3, pp. 100, 123, 140, 141; Appearance Docket, 2, p. 237.

counsel appeared in court and pleaded not guilty. In the interval between July 9 and July 14, the jury was decided on. The papers in the case that are existent tell of formal motions made by the parties concerned and preserve three sketches of the scene of the crime and a few subpoenas. There is no verbatim testimony and the motive of the crime is nowhere mentioned.

For a transcription of the charge (The State of Nebraska, Dawson County, in the District Court of the Tenth Judicial District vs. Olaf Bergstrom), I am indebted to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Johnson of Lexington. I hope I may be pardoned for printing a section of the document. It is more interesting, perhaps, as a sample of the legal language of the time (legal language is said to be much simplified today) than as throwing light on the Bergstrom case. The italics, punctuation and spellings of the original have been retained.

Be it remembered that T. L. Warrington, County Attorney in and for Dawson County, and in the Tenth Judicial District of the State of Nebraska, who prosecutes in the name and by the Authority of the State of Nebraska, comes here in person into the Court at this June term, A. D. 1890 thereof and for the State of Nebraska gives the Court to *understood* and be informed that Olaf Bergstrom late of the County of Dawson, on the *Fourteenth* day of March, A. D. 1890 in the County of Dawson aforesaid in and upon one Ernest G. Edholm, then and there being unlawfully, purposely and feloniously and of deliberate and premeditated malice, did make an assault with the intent him the said Ernest G. Edholm unlawfully, purposely and of deliberate and premeditated malice to kill and murder, that the said Olaf Bergstrom, a certain rifle then and there charged with gun powder, and one leaden bullet, which the said rifle, he the said Olaf Bergstrom, in both of his hands, then and there had and held, then and there unlawfully, feloniously, purposely and of deliberate and premeditated malice, did discharge and shoot off, to, at, against and upon the left breast of the body of the said Ernest G. Edholm, and that the said Olaf Bergstrom with the leaden bullet aforesaid, out of the rifle aforesaid, then and there by the force of the gun powder, by the said Olaf Bergstrom, discharged and *shott* off as aforesaid, then and there, unlawfully, feloniously, purposely and of his deliberate and premeditated malice did strike, penetrate and wound, with the intent aforesaid thereby then and there, giving to the said Ernest G. Edholm, in and upon the left breast of the body of him, the said Ernest G. Edholm, then and there with the bullet aforesaid, so as aforesaid discharged and shot out of the rifle aforesaid by force of the gunpowder aforesaid by the said Olaf Bergstrom, in and

upon the left breast of the body of him, the said Ernest G. Edholm, one mortal wound of the depth of four inches and the width of which said mortal wound, he the said Ernest G. Edholm instantly died, and the said T. L. Warrington, County Attorney, as aforesaid upon the authority aforesaid does say that the said Olaf Bergstrom, him, the said Ernest G. Edholm, unlawfully, feloniously, purposely and of his deliberate and premeditated malice did kill and murder contrary to the form of the Statute in such case made and provided and against the peace and dignity of the State of Nebraska.

T. L. Warrington, County Attorney

The following persons were named as jurors: Charles Cook, Thomas Patton, J. P. Cahow, J. B. Donaldson, Howard Koch, John Lee, Ed Thomlinson, William Reed, George Bogett, Con Hammond, William Tallowell, Jer Kearns, who were duly impaneled and sworn according to law. They returned their verdict in writing as follows:

We, the jury in this case, being duly impaneled and sworn in the above entitled case do find and say that we find the defendant not guilty,

J. P. Cahow, Foreman

And therefore it is ordered and adjudged that said defendant Olaf Bergstrom be discharged.

A statement made by Howard Koch, one of the last jurors to survive, concerning the trial of Olof Bergstrom is of interest.⁵ Koch was born in Philadelphia, he states, in 1865. His father homesteaded north of Lexington and Howard came from Philadelphia to join him in 1877. Koch said:

One day in the spring of 1880 I came to town to get some repairs for my binder. The sheriff met me on the street. He said to me:

"Hello, Howard. The judge wants to see you."

"Not me," I said. "I ain't got no time to serve on any jury. My binder is one of the best in the country and I've got to get it fixed."

"Well, come on in anyway," said the sheriff.

So I went in the court house and there they were preparing for the trial of Olaf Bergstrom for shooting that fellow up in Gothenburg. Well, the judge picked me for one of the jury, and I guess I'm the only one of them left.

Well, I had heard of Bergstrom before the trial, but I had

⁵ Reported by P. R. Beath, 1944.



Vollrad Karlson and Olof Bergstrom, photographed at Kearney, 1883.

never seen him till that day. He was a partner of Jack McColl. I bought my farm from McColl.

As for the trial itself, as best I can remember, the testimony was that Bergstrom and this fellow Edholm were sitting there on the settee in Bergstrom's house examining Bergstrom's goose-gun. We called shotguns "goose-guns" in those days; the country was full of geese. Well, they got to quarreling about the gun and finally to wrestling and it went off and shot Edholm and killed him. Bergstrom said Edholm was one of his best friends. I remember one of the lawyers tried to bring in about this fellow fooling around Bergstrom's wife, but he didn't get anywhere with that line. His wife was at the trial and seems to me she testified the same as her husband did. I remember too, about a Swedish maid the Bergstroms had, but she wasn't at the trial. Right away after the killing, I believe, she went back to Sweden.

Well, there was only one thing to do, so we set him free. He was a big man, fine looking and wore a moustache. We all wore moustaches in those days.

And after the trial, you know what? Bergstrom was so happy he took us into the back room and opened a little black bag he had and gave us each a \$20 bill. Well, the trial was over, you understand, and he was happy to get free and wanted to do something for us.

According to Don Holmes, when the verdict came Olof Bergstrom was met at the train by the Gothenburg Silver Cornet Band and escorted to his home.

The best account of Bergstrom was obtained by P. R. Beath from Mrs. Frederick Karlson Sr. It should be printed in full. It was written down in 1944 by Miss Elvina Karlson of Gothenburg from the conversation of her mother, Mrs. Frederick Karlson Sr. A few sentences from it have been quoted in preceding pages.

I arrived in Gothenburg, Nebraska, the morning of June 18, 1885. In the afternoon I went to my brother's drugstore. Outside was Olof Bergstrom standing by his team of horses and buggy. He was all dressed up for the occasion to meet Dr. Vollrad's sister who had just arrived from Sweden. Dr. Vollrad Karlson was secretary to Olof Bergstrom and Company. Olof Bergstrom was a very handsome gentleman, fine physique, six feet tall, brown curly hair. He was dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, white vest. He was outstanding in his mannerisms. One characteristic was he always held his head on one side and had a pleasant smile. He possessed a fine personality. He spoke excellent Swedish; he was a Swedish minister from Göteborg, Sweden. He did not use much English because he contacted mostly Swedish people. His parents were very fine folks in Sundsvall, Sweden.

He lived in Göteborg, Sweden, before he came to America

in 1880. He first went to Stromsburg, then to Gothenburg in 1881. He was a Real Estate agent for the Union Pacific railroad; he sold railroad land cheap. He was in the real estate business, sold railroad land and was agent for the homestead land. He was no relation to McColl. Mr. McColl, an attorney, was real Estate Agent at Plum Creek, Lexington, Nebraska, for the Union Pacific Railroad Company. Mr. Bergstrom would consult Mr. McColl on the many land deals. Bergstrom was no relation to E. G. West. They were business partners. Mr. West came with Mr. Bergstrom from Chicago.

He told them [his recruits in Sweden] that land was so cheap that they would soon be very independent. They would not have to learn to speak the English language because there would be just Swedes from Sweden. They could possess their own beautiful valley, he said, "the wonderful Platte Valley, the greatest agricultural valley in the world excepting the Nile in Egypt." To homeseekers he made the statement "The Early Bird Catches the Worm."

He was married twice, would have been married the third time but he left the bride "waiting at the church." His first wife was a very cultured woman. He had a beautiful daughter by this marriage. The daughter had a winning personality like her father. She studied music in Boston and Chicago. Mr. Bergstrom played the violin very well. The daughter died at the young age of twenty-five years; she grieved so much over the loss of her father's speculations in Chicago. His second wife was very homely but a fine dresser. She was an opera singer from Stockholm, Sweden. She sang in grand opera there. She received her education there. She gave concerts at the cities and towns in America. A pianist from Boston was her accompanist. Mr. Bergstrom's plans were that she would make a great deal of money with her mezzo soprano voice. I'm sorry to say Mrs. Bergstrom did not use her career to a good end. She died in the County Hospital at Omaha and sold her body for medical purposes.

Olaf Bergstrom was tried for murder but acquitted. The jury decided that under the circumstances Bergstrom could not be accused alone, because the other men in the party were drunk as well as Bergstrom. A minister from the East pleaded this case to this ending.

In later life Bergstrom lost all his wealth, probably through speculations in Chicago, and went to Tennessee. The late Ernest Calling who came to Gothenburg in 1889 and was at one time a partner of Bergstrom told P. R. Beath, July, 1944, that he bought the farm immediately north of Lake Gothenburg from Olof Bergstrom in 1906. This farm was the scene of the killing for which Bergstrom was tried and acquitted. Later Bergstrom returned from Tennessee and wanted Calling to trade for some Tennessee land the farm where he intended to spend his last days. Calling

refused and Bergstrom returned to Tennessee. It was probably of the same occasion that Mrs. Karlson said, according to the account of her daughter in 1944, "Mr. Bergstrom lost all his wealth and returned the last time plain 'broke.' He went to Mr. Karlson's market and wanted to pawn his watch and chain, but Mr. Karlson said 'No.' He fixed up a nice lunch of meat, crackers and cheese etc. for Bergstrom. Olof's many friends helped him. He left for Tennessee and died there."

An article on Bergstrom is said to have appeared in the Chicago newspaper *Svenska Amerikanaren Tribunen*. Whether this was before or after his death I do not know. Elvina Karlson was unable to obtain from the newspaper the date of the issue in which it is supposed to have been printed.

In a few respects tales and anecdotes of Olof Bergstrom have affiliations with Nebraska folklore. When I first looked into his history I thought there must be something of legend associated with his attitude toward strong drink. Various sources of information mentioned him as almost a fanatic crusader for Temperance. Other sources mentioned his unique prowess as a drinker. My brother Roscoe, for instance, whose remarkable memory is well known, recalls stories of Olof's prodigious capacity as regards alcoholic potations. But in due time I realized that folklore was not involved in these contradictory reports. Both accounts of his attitude seem to have been true. A preacher, he started life in the United States as a strong advocate of temperance. Perhaps it was after his marriage to the opera singer that he surrendered to the attraction of alcoholic beverages, serving them liberally in his home and drinking with others as the custom was. The representations of Mrs. Karlson are relevant here and no doubt should be accepted. His change of attitude was fact; no lore entered into it. Beyond question, however, is Olof's relation to the folk stories of Febold, the Nebraska strong man. Paul R. Beath, editor of *Febold Feboldson: Tall Tales of the Great Plains* (1948), states that

Febold was a reconstruction of Olof Bergstrom, though the name got itself applied to or mixed up with Bergstrom Stromsberg, the reputed grandnephew of Febold and the narrator of tall tales concerning him. The same testimony is given by Don Holmes of the Gothenburg newspaper in which many of these tales were originally printed and are still being printed. Olof played, then, a leading part in the genesis of the Nebraska Febold tales. A third bit of lore that has a degree of circulation by chroniclers of Febold is that, by transposition of syllables, the town of Stromsburg was named from Bergstrom. Olof's brother Andrew became a resident of Stromsburg, as mentioned already, but the town was founded by Lewis Headstrom in 1872, nearly a decade before Olof came to the United States. According to the historian of the place,⁶ it took its name not from Olof Bergstrom but from its earliest inhabitant, Headstrom, *-burg* being added to the second syllable of his name (*Strom's burg*). The same explanation is given in *Nebraska Place-Names*.⁷ Unmistakably the association of Olof Bergstrom with the naming of Stromsburg is folklore.

⁶ Chattie Westenius, *History of Stromsburg*, (Stromsburg, 1931), p. 2.

⁷ Lilian Fitzpatrick, *Nebraska Place-Names*, (University of Nebraska Press, 1925), p. 117.