

David M. Gustafson
1414 25th Street
Moline, IL 61265
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Land Agent Victor Rylander And Nebraska Free Churches

by David M. Gustafson

Victor Rylander worked as a land agent for the Union Pacific Railway selling land to fellow Swedes in south central Nebraska at the end of the nineteenth century. He was also a financial partner for two Swedish-language newspapers, *Vårt Nya Hem* in Kearney, and *Chicago-Bladet* in the Windy City. Although based in Chicago, he traveled widely, recruiting Swedes, mainly from Illinois and Sweden, to come and settle the Nebraska prairie.

In addition, Rylander was active among Swedish Mission Friends and encouraged the establishment of a Mission Society in Phelps County, as well as Swedish Free Churches in Phelps, Kearney, and Hamilton counties. He associated particularly with Free Mission Friends who had been influenced by the great American evangelist D.L. Moody and his independent Chicago Avenue Church in Chicago. Among them was Fredrik Franson who labored to establish the earliest Free Churches in Nebraska.

Nils Peter Viktor Rylander was born 16 March 1840 in Oppeby parish, south of Linköping, in the province of Östergötland, Sweden to Alexander Rylander and his wife, Maja Stina Persdotter. Alexander Rylander worked as a farmer. His oldest son, Nils Peter Viktor, became commonly known as 'Victor.'

Victor married Anna Lovisa Andersdotter of Tjärstad parish in Östergötland. He worked as a shop clerk when the couple emigrated from Göteborg (Gothenburg), Sweden on 20 August 1869. They came to America and settled in Chicago.

In 1875 Victor began working for the Union Pacific railroad, promoting Swedish settlement in the south Platte area.¹

Railroad Land Sale

The government of the United States, through the land grant system led by Stephen A. Douglas, gave away public lands to promote construction of railroads and to encourage settlement in sparsely populated areas.² The Union Pacific was given alternate tracts of land lying ten miles on each side of the railroad extending the length of the state.

The railway companies created land departments that promoted sale of the land. By 1870 the Union Pacific had begun its appeals aimed at Swedes in the United States by advertising in Swedish-language newspapers.³ Pamphlets originally written in English were soon translated into Swedish, such as C.G. Linderborg's version published in 1872, boasting of twelve million acres of land available in Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and Utah.⁴ Three million acres of land were for sale by the Union Pacific in Nebraska.⁵

The Swedish land agents worked especially among the Swedish enclaves. Sometimes they even returned to Sweden to promote emigration there. The Burlington & Missouri River Railroad began its campaign for Swedish immigrants in 1870 by sending J.E. Osborn to Göteborg. In his reports, he cited attacks by the Swedish press against those promoting emigration from Sweden, characterizing the agents as "robbers and scoundrels."⁶

Rylander & Hallgren

Victor Rylander worked with Leander Hallgren, a Union Pacific land agent, originally from Horn parish in Östergötland, Sweden who immigrated to America in 1870. These two men became partners in the firm *Rylander & Hallgren*, and in 1876 were in Knox County, Illinois, recruiting Swedes to come to Phelps County to establish a Swedish settlement there.⁷

John Johnson, along with his wife and son, Rolf, were persuaded to move west. In his diary, Rolf Johnson explained:

Henderson Grove, Illinois, Jan. 22, 1876— This evening I, in company with my parents, went to church to hear Reverend Jacob Danielson of Lockport (formerly of this place) preach. We also met Mr. Victor Rylander and Leander Hallgren, U.P.R.R. land agents, who were organizing a colony for the settlement of Phelps County, Nebraska.⁸

Rylander and Hallgren initially recruited families from Henderson Grove,

Galesburg, and Princeton, Illinois, plus the Mission Friend preacher, Jacob Danielson.⁹ In March the families traveled by train to Nebraska, and then drove four teams of horses, with lumber from Kearney, to the site of the new colony, near Williamsburg.¹⁰ Two loads of lumber were for building the “Emigrant House” on the farm owned by Rylander & Hallgren.¹¹

On 12 March 1876, Rolf Johnson gave a vivid description of the Nebraska prairie:

As far as the eye could reach in any direction, not a sign of human habitation was visible, except about three miles southeast, where Rylander and Hallgren were building an Emigrant House and digging a well for the accomodation of the colonists. Nothing but miles and miles of level prairie burned black by the prairie fire. Hundreds of thousands of bleaching buffalo skeletons are scattered over the plains, showing what a terrible slaughter of these animals there has been. ... Dahlstrom and I unloaded our wagons and went back to Williamsburg, where we found Leander Hallgren with a party of land hunters from the east.¹²

Two days later, a caravan of wagons loaded with house wares, farm implements, women and children, arrived at the settlement.¹³

During the following years, settlers continued to come to Phelps County, mostly from Illinois, Iowa, eastern Nebraska, and Sweden. Many stayed at the Emigrant House while they constructed sod houses and farm buildings on their new properties.¹⁴ During the early years, the colonists experienced several adversities. Locusts destroyed crops, while hail and drought caused the first expected harvest to fail. Therefore, the colonists resorted to gathering buffalo bones left on the prairie from buffalo shot merely for their hides with their flesh left to rot.¹⁵ Rolf Johnson penned: “Victor Rylander and several of the neighbors were here to dinner. Many of the settlers make their living now by picking up buffalo bones, hauling them to Kearney and selling them at six dollars per ton.”¹⁶

Phelps Center Mission Society

Rylander and Hallgren, both close to the Mission Friends Movement of Swedish Lutheran Pietists, made their appeal particularly to “believers” to settle Phelps County.¹⁷ The result of their efforts was that a relatively large number of the settlers were affiliated with the Lutheran Mission Synod, Lutheran Ansgar Synod, Swedish Baptist, and Swedish Methodist churches, as well as the Lutheran Augustana Synod.¹⁸ The Emigrant House provided not merely temporary housing for new settlers but also a place for worship where Pastor Danielson “preached to a mixed congregation.”¹⁹

In contrast to the *pietistic spirit* of Rylander and Hallgren appealing to church folk, F.A. Beiyon, another Swedish land agent, appealed to prospective Nebraska landowners with *other spirits*, making generous use of the jug.²⁰ On one occasion he had thirty gallons of whiskey delivered to his house, where a customer was staying. He attached a note asking the tenant to store it until he came.²¹ When Beiyon arrived with a party of Swedish land seekers, he broke out the booze which in turn lead to a celebration. Most of them after seeing the land, and drinking the whiskey, were ready to sign on the spot.

On the other hand, from the beginning Rylander and Hallgren promoted church

life in the Phelps County settlement. They had invited Pastor Jacob Danielson to join them in establishing the settlement.²² In a short while a mission society was formed. The minutes of the organizational meeting from 8 February 1877, read: “The friends here in this place have sensed that the time has come to organize a mission society. Therefore we are gathered for such a purpose. --Pastor J. Danielson.”²³ The new organization was named the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society, and was associated with the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission Synod.²⁴ Regarding doctrine, the constitution adopted at the organizational meeting stated:

As Evangelical Lutheran, this congregation confesses that the Holy Scriptures are “the Word of God,” and the only sufficient means for faith and life. Also, we hold fast and confess not merely the three oldest creeds-- the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian, but also the unaltered Augsburg Confession as a clear and concise summary of the major doctrines of the Holy Scriptures.²⁵

According to the society’s minutes, the settlement was first called “Vennersburg, Phelps County, Nebraska.” The name was changed within a year, however, as the minutes state: “Held in Vennersburg, Dec. 14, 1877— Since the name of this place has been changed to Phelps, hereafter the name of the society will be Phelps Center instead of Vännersburg.”²⁶

In addition to worship services, the mission society conducted revival meetings for area settlers. On 27 June 1877, Rolf Johnson wrote: “Attended a revival meeting at the Emigrant House. Rev. Danielson and Rev. A. Hallner of Wahoo, Nebr., conducted the exercise. Hallner is an eloquent and powerful preacher, and many sinners have been converted.”²⁷ In 1879 the mission society erected a church at *Mosebacke* (Moses Hill).²⁸

Phelps Center continued to grow as more Swedes arrived. In September 1877 Rylander and Hallgren had thirty farm hands employed at cutting, hauling and scraping broom corn. These workers stayed at the Emigrant House. John P. Bragg worked as a “scraper” boss and Oscar Hallgren was the “field” boss. Rolf Johnson wrote, “Among the boys here are several from Illinois who came out to see the country and pay expenses by cutting broom corn.”²⁹ By March 1879 Center Township had nearly 300 residents, compared with 200 the previous year.³⁰

Vårt Nya Hem

On 4 January 1877, Rylander, Hallgren, and O.P. Pearson as financial partners, together with newspaper editor Magnus Elmlblad, published in Kearney the first edition of the weekly newspaper, *Vårt Nya Hem* (Our New Home). In regards to politics the paper would be Republican, and in regards to religion it would “always speak the true Christian tone, and would by no means become sectarian.”³¹

With the first edition, the influence of the American evangelist D.L. Moody was apparent. Moody had already made an impact on Swedish Mission Friends in the Windy City.³² The church that he had founded in Chicago had hired city missionary John F. Okerstein in 1873 to work among the Scandinavians. Soon a Swedish fellowship at Moody’s church was thriving.³³ One of the members of the fellowship was Fredrik Franson, a disciple of D.L. Moody, and native of Nora parish in Västmanland, Sweden.³⁴

Franson had immigrated with his mother and stepfather to Lindsborg, Kansas, and then settled in Estina, Saunders County, Nebraska. After working among the Baptists, in 1876 he joined Moody in Chicago.³⁵ In 1878, Franson became the first missionary commissioned by Moody's Chicago Avenue Church.

Vårt Nya Hem's editor was Magnus Elmlblad who had immigrated in 1871, and worked in Chicago as the assistant editor of the newspaper *Hemlandet* (The Homeland), and then editor of *Nya Svenska Amerikanaren* (The New Swedish American). In 1876 he began work with *Vårt Nya Hem* in Kearney.³⁶ In the first issue Elmlblad wrote:

Vårt Nya Hem has made its objective to be a newspaper of the people, that on the foundation of Christianity, and through good information and interesting reading on various topics, shall contribute to the use and pleasure of the Swedish-American people. On questions that deal with human behavior towards God, this newspaper recognizes no other authority than the Bible. God's Word understood rightly, as it is written, is valid infinitely more than the words of men, since his Word alone can make one wise.

The compulsion toward confessional statements and churchly despotism-- which is without authority and without fruit-- will always be resisted with moderation. The friends who hold to total religious freedom within the limits of Christianity will find in this newspaper a faithful alliance. For the rest, it is not an organ for any one denomination or another, but with delight leaves in its columns room for brief dialogue from them all, provided that this communication, although in one respect or another may differ from the editor's opinions, must not abandon the foundation of the Christian religion.³⁷

The first issue of *Vårt Nya Hem* included D.L. Moody's lecture "For Young People" that he had recently delivered in Chicago.³⁸ In addition, a brief report stated, "Moody and Sankey have completed several days of their evangelistic work in Chicago. We hope that the seed they have sown falls on good soil."³⁹ The first issue also reported the tragic death of P.P. Bliss, the gospel songwriter who had composed many of the tunes sung by Ira D. Sankey, Moody's musical partner. The first issue of *Vårt Nya Hem* also mentioned the Swedish Mission Friends in Chicago referring to the Swedish preacher E.A. Skogsbergh as "the second Moody," known more popularly as the "Swedish Moody."

The newspaper further revealed its association with Swedish Mission Friends by its advertisements from booksellers and publishers Julin & Hedenschoug in Chicago, Ansgar College & Seminary and the newspaper *Zions Banér*, both of Knoxville, Illinois. It further revealed *the Chicago-Nebraska connection* by its advertisements from McCormick's Agricultural Machinery, and the Union Pacific Railway. The latter read:

**Rylander & Hallgren, traveling agents
for the Union Pacific, Land Department
Commissioned to sell about 3,000,000 acres of land
situated in the eastern and central parts of Nebraska.
Several Swedish settlements.
Churches of various denominations.
Suitable conditions for homesteads.**

**Unoccupied land in the Swedish settlement “Svea”
in Phelps County is still available.
Rylander & Hallgren, Kearney, Neb.
or 60 S. Clark St., Chicago
O.F. Davis, Land Commissioner, Omaha, Nebraska**

In the twenty issues of the short-lived *Vårt Nya Hem*, the influence of D.L. Moody on the editor and its partners was apparent. The newspaper regularly reported news of Moody's and Sankey's work.⁴⁰ It also published Moody's articles and sermons such as “Moody on Prayer,” “The Death of Christ,” and “Love.”⁴¹

After only five months, *Vårt Nya Hem* ceased publication. Elmblad moved to Moline, Illinois to work for the newspaper *Skandia*, and then returned to Chicago in 1878 where he became editor for *Svenska Amerikanaren*.⁴²

Rylander and the “Free” Mission Friends

Victor Rylander's interests led him in 1878 to enter the book business in Chicago while continuing to travel as a land agent for the Union Pacific Railway. The bookselling venture was named *Rylander & Company*, located at 149 East Chicago Avenue, and Rylander's new partner was Carl F. Julin.⁴³

Julin had partnered earlier with August W. Hedenschoug.⁴⁴ In 1876 these two men had made an agreement with P.P. Waldenström, editor of *Pietisten* (The Pietist) in Sweden, to take over the periodical's subscriptions in America.⁴⁵ In 1877 Julin & Hedenschoug published two of Moody's works: *Kristi andra tillkommelse* (Christ's Second Coming) and *Tal till nyomwände* (Talks to New Converts).⁴⁶ They also published a Swedish version of Sankey's songbook under the title, *Sånger till lammets lof* (Songs in Praise of the Lamb).

When the partnership between Julin and Hedenschoug dissolved in 1878, Rylander joined Julin.⁴⁷ In 1878 Rylander & Co. published *Daniel och hans vänner* (Daniel and His Friends) by C.O. Berg, and in 1879 printed another edition of Sankey's *Sånger till lammets lof*.⁴⁸ Rylander & Co. offered books for sale including *Nåd och sanning* (Grace and Truth) by W.P. Mackay, with the foreword by Moody.

Rylander then became a financial partner with John Martenson and Karl Erixon in the newspaper *Chicago-Bladet*.⁴⁹ Martenson began this Christian-political newspaper in February 1877 shortly after his conversion to faith during the Moody and Skogsbergh revivals in Chicago.⁵⁰ The non-sectarian *Chicago-Bladet* soon became the organ of the burgeoning “Free” Mission Friends, with subscriptions reaching Nebraska.⁵¹

Rylander was clearly active as a layman among the Swedish Mission Friends. In August 1877, he and his wife Anna, accompanied Skogsbergh on a steamboat up the Mississippi River from Burlington to Minneapolis.⁵² In 1878 he attended the annual meeting of the Mission Synod in Bethesda, Nebraska. From this meeting, he traveled with Hallgren, Skogsbergh, J. Peterson, and Edw. Johnson to Hamilton County in order to “spy out the land,” for what later became “the Princeton settlement.”⁵³ In 1879 he took part in an ordination service in the East, along with Rev. Adam Lidman. A.P. Nelson, in his history of the Swedish Mission Friends in America, wrote of his own experience:

I was ... through prayer and the laying on of hands set apart to minister and teach

the Word. All the other ministers were set apart in the same way for their various offices by the brothers Lidman and Victor Rylander. The latter mentioned was visiting in the East at the time, and was of great benefit and blessing, partly through the preaching of the Word and partly through the direction and support of gathering believers into Christian congregations.⁵⁴

Rylander, known for his generosity, gave A.P. Nelson an “orange cane” which he used “to keep the lads at a proper distance.”⁵⁵

Obviously D.L. Moody and Chicago Avenue Church had an influence on Rylander. His association especially with Free Mission Friends such as John Martenson at *Chicago-Bladet* had grown. He was a part of the Swedish fellowship at Chicago Avenue Church along with Okerstein, Franson, and C.O. Berg, and formally joined the Moody church on 1 May 1881.⁵⁶

Nebraska Free Churches

Fredrik Franson’s connection with Rylander and Hallgren was a reason why this missionary from Chicago Avenue Church in 1880 was active establishing free churches in south central Nebraska. Franson had earlier established a free, evangelical church in Denver on the pattern of Chicago Avenue Church.⁵⁷ After Denver he came to Nebraska where he assisted settlers in forming *evangelical, free churches* at Phelps Center, Loomis, Industry, and Keene.

At this time there was a widening of opinions over church polity among Mission Friends. Some preferred the structure of a synod like the Lutheran Mission Synod to which the Moses Hill Mission Church belonged. Others like Franson preferred an ecumenical, non-sectarian church polity, where churches remained independent with no higher authority over them, but were free to cooperate with one another in evangelistic work. Franson declared, “...the best way to solve the question about the synods would be for each congregation to act as its own synod.”⁵⁸

The earliest Free Church history summarizes the story:

In 1876 some Swedes moved from Illinois and settled on the plains in Phelps County Nebraska. Some were believers in the Lord and began immediately to meet in homes for devotional meetings around the word of the Lord. Among those in particular was J.M. Dahlström. In the spring of 1879 a meeting place was built at Moses Hill. Swedes gathered there irrespective of various doctrinal interpretations. However, different views were soon made an issue, and in 1880 when Missionary F. Franson visited Phelps County, he himself knowing various believers there, introduced an independent work. These friends gathered then at the so-called “Emigrant House,” at Phelps Center, belonging to Hallgren.⁵⁹

Leander Hallgren was quick to assist Franson in organizing evangelical, free churches. Like D.L. Moody had done in his citywide evangelism campaigns, these two Swedes built a coalition of evangelical congregations drawn from Swedish churches—Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist—and emphasized unity and setting aside petty differences over creeds.⁶⁰ The following announcement for a *non-sectarian* mission

meeting appeared in *Chicago-Bladet* on 1 October 1880:

A mission meeting will be held, the Lord willing, at Phelps Center, Nebraska, beginning Friday October 22nd and continuing through Sunday. The meeting will not be sectarian, but free, aiming only at the salvation of souls and the up building of God's children on the ground of the apostles and prophets, which is Jesus Christ. Therefore, we invite all, regardless of denominational affiliation, to be present. And we not only invite, but also seriously urge, as many as possible not to stay away, but to come, even if at a sacrifice, in order to help their brothers pull in the fishing net of the Gospel. Carriage will be provided for those who arrive by train at Kearney on Thursday evening the 21st.

By request,
L. Hallgren⁶¹

Hallgren reported in the 10 December 1880 issue of *Chicago-Bladet* what had transpired during the October mission meeting. Fredrik Franson attended, along with other preachers such as Jacob Danielson, C.J. Magnusson, Ed Nilson, and J.W. Strömberg. Discussion focused on "living in the last days."⁶² The study ended by concluding that the Church, the Bride of Christ, should be ready for the Lord's return "at every moment."

Hallgren said that a revival occurred among the people that touched all of Phelps County and parts of Kearney and Harlan counties. He noted that two Biblical admonitions especially gripped the people: to expect Jesus' imminent return, and for God's children to be one.⁶³ The right of God's children not to divide into separate denominations had been their hope, and now it was beginning to happen. Hallgren reported, "In four different localities around here, God's children have joined together in free congregations with no other Constitution than the New Testament, with no other label than that of the locality or nearest post office."⁶⁴

Within a month, three Free Churches in Phelps County were established with Franson's help.⁶⁵ The first was the Church of God at Phelps Center, organized on 16 November 1880 with 32 members.⁶⁶

In 1889 this group of Free Mission Friends established *Det Kristna Barnhemmet* (The Christian Orphans' Home).⁶⁷ Worship services for the church were held at what was known as "Phelps Center Hall."⁶⁸ In 1899 a majority of members decided to build a new church two and a half miles north, and so established the Swedish Evangelical Emanuel Church of Holcomb.⁶⁹

The Church of God at Westmark, near the western edge of Phelps County, was organized on 19 November 1880.⁷⁰ Fredrik Franson was elected chairman of the meeting. Earlier, gospel meetings in the Westmark community had been held in homes where Jacob Danielson and C.J. Magnuson had preached, and a Sunday school work had begun with Frank J. Ahlström in charge.⁷¹ The minutes from the 1880 organizational meeting state:

It was decided that the congregation confesses both scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as equally inspired by God. But at the same time we recognize that

the Old Testament was written to the people of the Old covenant, from which we may glean many of the same holy instructions. Nevertheless, we regard and accept the New Testament as our constitution, the only rule for doctrine and life.⁷²

In contrast to the constitution of the Moses Hill Mission Church that identified the group as *Evangelical Lutheran*, the Church of God at Westmark was *non-sectarian*—inclusive of all believers.⁷³ It also accepted the New Testament as the *only* rule for doctrine and life, unlike the Moses Hill Mission Church that held additionally to the historic creeds and unaltered Augsburg Confession as a summary of the scriptures.

The Church of God at Industry was organized on 23 November 1880.⁷⁴ There too Franson served as chairman of the meeting, and the church adopted the New Testament as its constitution.

In Keene in Kearney County to the east, the Church of God of Keene was organized 25 November 1880.⁷⁵ Concerning developments there, Hallgren wrote:

In Kearney County it was a joy to see a host of new believers, who before had belonged to five separate communions, now give to each other their hands as brothers and sisters in one family. ... The communions to which they had belonged were the Baptists and Methodists, as well as the Mission, Ansgar, and Augustana synods. For a member of one communion to leave this communion and transfer to another is not much gain. But for all of them to agree to discard their party labels and become one under the banner of the cross, that truly is gain.⁷⁶

Five years later, in 1885, another free church connected to Rylander was organized at the “Chicago settlement” in Hamilton County, Nebraska. This church was located an equal distance from Aurora, Phillips and Marquette, and became commonly known as the “Chicago Settlement Church.” The first Free Church history states, “Through the influence of the well-known Victor Rylander, the Swedes in Chicago learned about ‘the Great West,’ and from 1879 to 1884 twenty-five families were influenced to leave Chicago and come to this place.”⁷⁷

It was reported that many of the early settlers had been “saved during the revivals in Chicago and Sweden and began Christian work here immediately after their arrival.”⁷⁸ In the beginning preachers such as Skogsbergh, Hjalmar Anderson, A.N. Sweders, and C.J. Nyvall of Sweden visited the settlement.

Swedish-American “Moodyites”

These Free Churches were unique from other area churches. Lutheran churches were at Funk, Holdrege, Bertrand and Axtell. There was Moses Hill Mission Church at Loomis. The Swedish Baptists had a small congregation in Holdrege, and the Swedish Methodists had two congregations in Phelps County and a third in eastern Kearney County.⁷⁹ The independent churches established by Franson, however, were *free*—free from denominations, synods, and sectarianism, and free to cooperate with other likeminded churches in their mission. Their constitution was simply the New Testament, and like D.L. Moody, they believed deeply in the imminent return of Christ.

The Free Mission Friends while holding to some of the elements of Swedish Lutheran Pietism had also adopted views and methods of the great American evangelist.⁸⁰ Upon Moody's death in 1899, the Lutheran newspaper, *Hemlandet*, in Chicago summarized his influence:

Moody was indisputably the most earnest and Bible believing of revival preachers of our time. During his most fruitful time of ministry here in Chicago, he counted numerous Swedish-Americans among his listeners. His preaching style and content of his sermons appealed particularly to the countrymen who had been more or less touched by the free, nondenominational revivals in Sweden. Indeed, the countrymen who were nurtured in the schools of Schartau and Hoof and other teachers, were less favorable to his ministry than those whose eyes had been greatly colored by the Reformed. Nevertheless, all esteemed Moody for his honest conviction, zeal and earnestness.⁸¹

Among Swedes in America, the Free Mission Friends like Franson, Rylander, Hallgren, Martenson, and those influenced by them, had become *Swedish-American Moodyites*.

In the years that followed, Hallgren remained at Phelps Center, and served actively as a layman with Martenson and Franson among the Free Mission Friends, who later became the Swedish Evangelical Free Church of America.⁸²

Business Boom

Rylander's land sales boomed in the 1880s. He broadened his base of advertising in the Midwest and Sweden by distributing his twenty-page guide for buying inexpensive land in Nebraska.⁸³ In another booklet published in Sweden in 1882, he gave practical hints for emigrants coming to Nebraska, and featured land offered in Dawson County at four to five dollars per acre.⁸⁴ Besides advertising in *Chicago-Bladet*, he also advertised land for sale in Chicago Avenue Church's newspaper, *Pen and Scissors*.⁸⁵

During this time Rylander made trips to Sweden, and was generous with complimentary tickets. A.P. Nelson remarked, "In the spring of 1883 I received from Brother Victor Rylander a complimentary first class ticket on Thingvalla Line in order to make a trip to Sweden. I departed from New York on 26 May on the Atlantic steamer, *Island*, in the company of brother J. G. Princell."⁸⁶

While in Sweden, Rylander resided in Göteborg, the major port of embarkation for Swedish emigrants.⁸⁷ He continued to offer land for sale in Kansas, Nebraska, Oregon and Washington on "seven to ten year terms of payment with deeds direct from the railroad company."⁸⁸

Rylander & Waldenström

When P.P. Waldenström, editor of *Pietisten*, as well as popular but controversial leader among Mission Friends in Sweden, visited the United States in 1889, Rylander acted as one of his guides. Waldenström commented:

There are several prominent Swedish businesses and employers in Chicago. I was able to meet only a few, however. Among them I would especially like to mention Victor Rylander since he showed me such good will. He is the head sales agent of land for the Union Pacific Rail Road that owns large tracts of land in Kansas. Generally speaking, these so-called land agents are not so highly esteemed, and their integrity is raised to a level of doubt. They don't hesitate to present one another as villains and swindlers either. However, as for Rylander, the general opinion that I was able to ascertain from the business world was very good. He is respected as an honest businessman in whom one can have complete confidence. He confesses faith in Jesus.⁸⁹

Rylander accompanied Waldenström westward from Chicago attending to business along the way. In Omaha, he enlightened a *pastor land-agent* who had been conversing with Waldenström on the railway platform of the fact that he had no hope of securing any business from him!⁹⁰ J.A. Hultman continued to accompany them westward at Omaha, and after Rylander's brief stay in Salina, Kansas, joined them again at Idaho Springs, Colorado.⁹¹ In Green River, Utah, Rylander purchased and gave to Waldenström a prized fish fossil.

Waldenström recalled the story of nearly missing the train at Fort Douglass, Utah:

We were to travel at 6 o'clock the next morning and so we arranged with the hotel office for a wakeup call at 5 o'clock. However, the watchman overslept. Rylander woke up, ran down to him and asked what he was thinking.

He answered calmly, "I've been sleeping."

"But you should have woken us up at 5 o'clock since we have to be on the train at 6 o'clock," said Rylander.

"All right," he answered, "plenty of time."

Rylander then dashed up to our room, pounded on the door and shouted.

We got up from our beds like lightning. We washed just enough to be presentable in this Mormon town and went as fast as we could on a so-called omnibus-- a miserable vehicle. We had to go 1½ English miles to the station, and we actually arrived there before the train departed, but had no time to spare. The lady who I mentioned earlier [a Swedish woman who had visited the home of C.O. Rosenius in Sweden] had come down with others to say farewell but was too late for us to see them before the train started moving. Nevertheless, we waved our hats and handkerchiefs to them as well as we could.

I said: "Whew."⁹²

At Salt Lake City, Hultman returned to Omaha, and at Ogden Rylander left with his wife and foster daughter to return to Chicago. Reflecting on Rylander's departure, Waldenström concluded, "This too was a time of great sadness. He had been much help and a delight to us because of his kind nature, as well as his knowledge of the country and the entire state of things."⁹³

Victor Rylander's business ventures continued to expand. In 1889 he entered a business partnership in Chicago with August Jernberg. Their firm, *Jernberg & Rylander*, advertised large sections of land but also offered lots for building, as well as banking.⁹⁴ By 1892 Rylander and Jernberg had joined William V. Griffin in the banking business under the name *Jernberg, Griffin & Co.*⁹⁵ Rylander also managed the Belt City Improvement Association, a real estate firm that promoted lots in a new subdivision called Belt City, located thirty miles west of Chicago near Aurora. In 1893 his firm offered ten acres of land and \$25,000 in cash to leaders of the Mission Covenant for building a school, an attractive offer until the Swedish University Association submitted a better proposal for the school to be located at Foster Avenue in Chicago.⁹⁶

Although Rylander had been successful to a greater or lesser extent over the years in real estate, in the final years of his life "storms of adversity began to blow on him with such force that anyone with less energy and enterprising ability would have been totally devastated."⁹⁷ Apparently, Rylander had taken on more than he could manage by himself and had experienced the consequences of going into the banking business "with men of ungodly character." Although his economic position had become rocky, he did not lose everything and remained courageous in the midst of the storms.

Gradually he saw new opportunities and was entering into better times when he became ill with rheumatic pain, combined with renal failure. Rylander died in Chicago on Thanksgiving Day, 30 November 1899 at 59 years of age.⁹⁸ John Martenson's *Chicago-Bladet* said of him:

Rylander was a cordial, compassionate and helpful man. Thousands received help from him. If he had any enemies, they perhaps came from his eagerness to help. His compassionate heart went out immediately, and he was not always paid-- at times the debts were forgiven, at the times people weren't able to pay. Certainly those who knew Rylander could do nothing other than love him, for despite his faults, he was always honest, sincere, and considerate. He was quick to fall on his knees to confess and ask forgiveness for his forgetfulness and faults.⁹⁹

Rylander's wife Anna remained in Chicago until 1919 when she moved to Boone, Iowa. There she joined the Evangelical Free Church, and in 1923 moved to the Swedish Old People's Home in Boone operated by the Swedish Evangelical Free Church. She resided there until her death on 16 July 1931.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Rylander played a dominant role in the Union Pacific Railway's colonization in Phelps County and the establishment of the Swedish settlement at Phelps Center. From the beginning, he recruited Swedes from among Mission Friends to settle the Nebraska prairie. As a layman he supported the ministry of preachers, evangelists and churches, and through *Vårt Nya Hem* and *Chicago-Bladet*, as well as his partnership with C.F. Julin, identified with D.L. Moody, and even joined Moody's Chicago Avenue Church.

Two questions raised but not sufficiently answered by researcher Edvard P. Torjesen are: How could four [Evangelical Free] churches in such geographically distinct

and separated areas of Phelps and Kearney counties have been organized [in 1880] within ten days of each other? And how had Fredrik Franson become involved?¹⁰¹ The answer offered here is: Victor Rylander and the *Chicago-Nebraska connection*.

The story of Rylander uniquely combines the story of Swedish immigration and settlement with the story of the Swedish Mission Friends in America. Rylander worked as a land agent among Swedish “believers.” He was known and respected in wide circles especially from his circulars, advertisements, and meetings with people.

In many ways, the story of Rylander illustrates the relationship between early Swedish settlers in Nebraska and the Windy City. Both commerce and church life were closely tied to Chicago, whether the location of the office for the Union Pacific land agent recruiting Swedes to Nebraska, or Swedish churchmen who were influenced by D.L. Moody and Chicago Avenue Church and had come to establish Free Churches in Phelps, Kearney and Hamilton counties. We see in Victor Rylander and his labors an illustration of the *Chicago-Nebraska connection*.

David M. Gustafson is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Free Church of America, and a doctoral student in church history at Linköping University, Sweden.

¹ Frank A. Anderson, “Phelps County,” in John Faris, ed., *Who’s Who in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska Press Assoc., 1940) 884.

² Cass G. Barns, *The Sod House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970) 125.

³ Terrence J. Lindell, *Acculturation among Swedish Immigrants in Kansas and Nebraska, 1870-1900* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, Dec., 1987) 50.

⁴ *Vägisare till Union-Pacific jernvägens land: 12,000,000 acres änges-, åkerbruks- och mineral-jord, den yppersta i Amerika, belägen inom staten Nebraska, territorierna Colorado, Wyoming och Utah: till salu hos Union-Pacific-jernvägskompaniet, i större och mindre egendomar till låga priser*. Translated by C.G. Linderborg. Omaha; Landdep., Union Pacific jernvägs bygging, 1872.

⁵ *Zions Banér*, Galesburg, Ill., Sept. 1871.

⁶ James I. Dowie, *Prairie Grass Dividing* (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Historical Society, 1959) 13.

⁷ In 1876 Rylander & Hallgren had post office addresses at “Oneida, Illinois” (Knox County), and “Kearney Junction, Neb.” *Nya Svenska Amerikanaren*, Chicago, 9 Nov. 1876, 3.

⁸ “Diary of Rolf Johnson,” 22 Jan. 1876 in *Citizen*, Holdrege, Nebraska, 18 November 1939. A translation of Rolf Johnson’s diary was published serially in the *Citizen* in 1939 to 1940. The Rolf Johnson Papers, Archives of the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

⁹ 5 March 1876, *Citizen*, 25 Nov. 1939.

¹⁰ 11 March 1876, *Citizen*, 16 Dec. 1939.

¹¹ Rylander & Hallgren’s land was located at Section 1, Township 6, North, Range 19, West—the exact center of Phelps County. Anderson, 884.

¹² 12 March 1876, *Citizen*, 16 Dec. 1939.

¹³ 14 March 1876, *Citizen*, 23 Dec. 1939.

¹⁴ Helge Nelson, *The Swedes and the Swedish Settlements in North America*. (Lund:

C.W.K. Gleerup, 1943) 290.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 21 Dec. 1876, *Citizen*, 1 July 1940.

¹⁷ P.P. Waldenström described Phelps Center as a Swedish settlement founded in 1875 “existing mostly of believers.” P. Waldenström, *Genom Norra Amerikas Förenta Stater* (Stockholm: Pietistens Expedition, 1890) 449.

¹⁸ Edvard P. Torjesen, *A Study of Fredrik Franson: The Development and Impact of His Ecclesiology, Missiology, and Worldwide Evangelism* (Ph.D. Dissertation, International College, Pasadena, 1984) 106.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Beiyon, or alternately, “Buyon,” was based in “Fort Kearney, Nebraska.” *Zions Banér*, Nov. 1871. Also see *Hemlandet*, 6 April 1875. Ernst Skarstedt made the broad statement: “... the first land agents who sought to bring people out there [to Nebraska] such as F.A. Beiyon, V. Rylander and several others were openly criticized, declared heretics, and taunted in the press. But it has been shown, that when they looked into the future, what they saw was not merely their imagination; Nebraska would become a picture of wealth and prosperity.” Ernst Skarstedt, *Svensk-Amerikanska folket i helg och söcken* (Stockholm: Björck & Börjesson, 1917) 58,59.

²¹ Dowie, 72,73.

²² Jacob Danielson was among the early Mission Friend pastors in America to have studied at the Ahlberg school at Vetlanda, Sweden. Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962) 130.

²³ Minutes, Moses Hill Mission Covenant Church, Loomis, Nebraska, 8 February 1877, 1.

²⁴ The minutes were altered after the formation of the Mission Covenant in 1885. The name became: the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission *Church*, associated with the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Mission *Covenant*.

²⁵ 8 February 1877. The following officers were elected: Pastor J. Danielson, chairman; John Johnson, vice chairman; Aron W. Johnson, secretary-treasure; A.P. Anderson, John M. Dahlström, deacons; Anders A. Olson, Gustaf Danielson, A. Stenfält, John S. Salgren, John Anderson, and Charly Nelson, trustees.

²⁶ Minutes of Moses Hill Covenant Church, Loomis, Nebraska, 11, and *Nebraska Missionsförening i Ord och Bild vid Dess Tjugofemårsjubileum 1887-1912* (Chicago: Williamson, 1912) 105.

²⁷ 27 June 1877; *Citizen*, 9 Sept. 1940.

²⁸ This church is known today as Moses Hill Covenant Church in rural Loomis.

²⁹ 4 Sept. 4 1877, *Citizen*, Oct. 1940.

³⁰ Lindell, 54.

³¹ 4 January, 1877, *Vårt Nya Hem*, 1.

³² Karl A. Olsson, “D.L. Moody and Some Chicago Swedes,” in Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck, eds., *Swedish-American Life in Chicago* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) 309.

³³ David M. Gustafson, “John F. Okerstein and the Swedish Fellowship at Moody Church,” *The Covenant Quarterly*, Vol. LXII, No. 1 (Feb. 2004) 40.

³⁴ G.A. Young, Frank W. Anderson, and E.A. Halleen, *Minnen och Bilder från Svenska Ev. Frikyrkans Predikantförenings Tjugofemåriga Verksamhet, 1894-1919* (Chicago:

Emil Forslund Printing, 1919) 60.

³⁵ There has been confusion over the time that Franson joined Moody in Chicago based on his biography by Josephine Princell that suggests 1875. Josephine Princell, *Fredrik Franson: World Missionary* (Chicago: Chicago-Bladet Publishing) 11,12. Thus, Torjesen posits “A Critical Data Gap” theory and “A Suggested Reconstruction” that Franson was on the East Coast with Moody from Oct. 1875 to April 1876, stating “a gap exists (October 1875-February 1877) in the primary data on Fredrik Franson.” Torjesen, 47-53. However, the minutes of First Swedish Baptist Church of Estina show that Franson served regularly as secretary of the church board from 24 Sept. 1874 to 11 Aug. 1876. Although he was elected on 2 Sept. 1876 “to be the congregation’s secretary for the next year,” his move to Chicago during this time required on 14 Jan. 1877, “that in Fr. Franson’s place, to choose a secretary until the next annual meeting.” After Franson joined Chicago Avenue Church, he requested to be dropped from the membership at Estina. Minutes of First Swedish Baptist Church, 13 Sept. 1878.

³⁶ J. Oscar Backlund, *A Century of the Swedish American Press* (Chicago: Swedish American Newspaper Co., 1952) 114,115.

³⁷ *Vårt Nya Hem*, 4 January 1877, 1.

³⁸ “Aftonläsning” *Vårt Nya Hem*, 4 Jan. 1877.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Vårt Nya Hem*, 11 Jan. 1877, 8 Feb. 1877, 15 Mar. 1877, 19 Apr. 1877. Several Nebraska towns had a brief era of Swedish-language newspapers including Kearney, Stromsburg, Wahoo, Lincoln, Plattsmouth, Holdrege, Oakland, Wausa, Fremont and College View. Backlund, 68.

⁴¹ *Vårt Nya Hem*, “Moody om bönen,” 8 March 1877; “Kristi Död” 19 April 1877; “Kärlek” 3 May 1877, 10 May 1877.

⁴² Eric Johnson and C.F. Peterson, eds., *Svenskarne i Illinois: Historiska anteckningar*. (Chicago: W. Williamson, 1880) 397.

⁴³ *The Lakeside Annual Directory of the City of Chicago 1879* (Chicago: Donnelley, Gassette & Lloyd, 1879) 939.

⁴⁴ Rylander & Co. distributed a book catalogue of publications, with information about land for sale, under the title: *Rylander & Co.’s bok-förteckning samt förlags- och backhandlers-katalog.*, Chicago: Rylander & Co. 1878. A note states that Rylander & Co. was formerly Julin & Hedenschoug.

⁴⁵ *Pietisten*, Stockholm, June, 1876.

⁴⁶ *Chicago-Bladet*, 16 Feb. 1877.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 August 1878; 6 Dec. 1878; Hedenschoug died in November 1878.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 April 1879; and Gunilla Larsson and Eva Tedenmyr, *Svenskt tryck i Nordamerika: Katalog över Tell G. Dahllöfs samling* (Stockholm: Kungl. Bibliotheca, 1988) 252.

⁴⁹ Ernst W. Olson, Anders Schön and Martin Engberg, *The History of Swedes of Illinois, Part I* (Chicago: Engberg-Holmberg, 1908) 817.

⁵⁰ David M. Gustafson, “D.L. Moody and the Swedish-American Evangelical Free,” *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* (Vol. LV, No. 2, April 2004) 113.

⁵¹ By 1883 Martenson bought out Rylander and Erixon as partners. *Chicago-Bladet* eventually became the official organ of the Swedish Evangelical Free Church of America.

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- ⁵² E. Aug. Skogsbergh, *Minnen och Upplevelser: Under min mer än femtioåriga predikoverksamhet* (Minneapolis: Veckobladets Tryckeri, 1923) 158.
- ⁵³ *Nebraska Missionsförening i Ord och Bild*, 141. The meeting was held 28 May to 3 June 1878.
- ⁵⁴ A.P. Nelson, *Svenska Missionsvännernas i Amerika Historia* (Minneapolis: A.P. Nelson, 1905) 75.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁵⁶ *Moody Memorial Church, Original Membership Register, 1864-1887*. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. See also, "Church Membership," *Pen and Scissors: Chicago Avenue Church Paper*. Vol. 1, No. 24 (9 June 1888) 6.
- ⁵⁷ Arnold T. Olson, *Stumbling Toward Maturity* (Minneapolis: Free Church Press, 1981) 74,81.
- ⁵⁸ Torjesen, 87.
- ⁵⁹ *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift: Utgifven med anledning af Svenska Evangeliska Frikyrkans i Amerika, Trettioårsjubileum i Rockford, Ill., 10-14 Juni, 1914, 1884-1914* (Minneapolis: Larson Printing, 1914) 176.
- ⁶⁰ Bruce J. Evensen, *God's Man for the Gilded Age: D.L. Moody and the Rise of Modern Mass Evangelism* (Oxford: Oxford and New York: University Press, 2003) 22,27,29,41.
- ⁶¹ Torjesen 107,108.
- ⁶² *Chicago-Bladet*, 10 Dec. 1880, 4.
- ⁶³ Torjesen, 109.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ⁶⁶ *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 145.
- ⁶⁷ O.M. Nelson, *Svenskarna i Nebraska: Kort öfversikt af Nebraskas svenska settlement, deras afärsmän, kyrkor och föreningar* (1929) 32. See also August H. Modig, *Hågkomster och Minnen från Kristna Barnhemmets i Phelps tjugoåriga verksamhet: Samlade och nedtecknade af Hemmets nuvarande föreståndare*, Minneapolis: Pedersen Linotyping Co., 1909.
- ⁶⁸ E.A. Halleen, Wm. B. Hallman, Milton G. Nelson, and G.A. Young, *Golden Jubilee, Reminiscences of Our Work Under God, Swedish Evangelical Free Church of the U.S.A., 1884-1934* (Minneapolis, 1934) 160.
- ⁶⁹ *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 177. A smaller group remained at the church in Phelps Center. In the early twentieth century, Phelps Center completely disappeared from the landscape. Only a historical marker at the site of the Christian Orphans' Home remains. The Emanuel Church continues today as Holcomb Evangelical Free Church, north of Holdrege.
- ⁷⁰ Minutes of Westmark Free Church, Loomis, Neb., 19 Nov. 1880, 10.
- ⁷¹ Halleen, et. al., 169.
- ⁷² Minutes of Westmark Free Church, 10,11.
- ⁷³ The Church of God at Westmark exists today as Westmark Evangelical Free Church, north of Loomis.
- ⁷⁴ Torjesen, 108. This particular work in Industry Township, northeast of Atlanta, never became viable.
- ⁷⁵ *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 172, 173; Torjesen, 108. The following officers were elected: Fredrik Franson, chairman; Nels Wendell, secretary; Joseph Allin, Jonas Johnson and P.

Peterson, deacons; Oliver Carlson, S.G. Boostrom and Olof Wendell, trustees. The Church of God of Keene is known today as Keene Evangelical Free Church, south of Axtell.

⁷⁶ Torjesen, 111. Services were first conducted in homes. Halleen, et.al., 159. At the annual meeting on 15 October 1881, it was decided to build a small mission house that was erected that fall. *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 173.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 187. The first Mission Covenant Church history also cites Victor Rylander's initiative in Swedes coming to Hamilton County. Besides Chicago, settlers came from Princeton, Illinois and Des Moines, Iowa. *Minnesskrift, Svenska Evangeliska Missionsförbundets i Amerika Tjugofemårsjubileum i Chicago 21-26 Juni, 1910* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1910) 227.

⁷⁸ E.A. Halleen, et.al.,166. This church is known today as Monroe Evangelical Free Church, of rural Phillips.

⁷⁹ Lindell, 56,57.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*. 114.

⁸¹ *Hemlandet*, 27 Dec. 1899. In Sweden Henrik Schartau and Jakob Otto Hoof were among Pietists who emphasized preparation for conversion through soul-searching, contrition and repentance. They had reacted against the Herrnhut sentimentality, free grace and invitation to "come as you are," that became characteristic of the Rosenian Mission Friends. Olsson, 60.

⁸² *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 10,14,30.

⁸³ Victor Rylander. *Wägledare till billiga hem: 3,000,000 acres of Union Pacific Jernvägens öfverträffliga farmland till salu i Nebraska*, 1881.

⁸⁴ Victor Rylander. *Råd och upplysningar för dem som ämna resa till Union Pacific Railway Co's (Stilla hafsbanans) landsträckor i staten Nebraska, Förenta Staterna, Nord-Amerika*. Göteborg: Göteborgs boktryckeri-aktiebolag, 1882.

⁸⁵ *Pen and Scissors: Chicago Avenue Church Paper*. Vol. 1, No. 8 (18 Feb 1888). At this time Rylander was an agent for the Union Pacific, and manager of the Southwestern Swedish Colonization Company.

⁸⁶ Nelson, 94. After residing in Sweden briefly, Rylander returned from Copenhagen to New York City in July 1886 on the ship, *Island*. In 1883, J.G. Princell, Leander Hallgren and John Martenson were elected to serve as the organizing committee for the missions conference to be held the following year at Boone, Iowa, which marked the inception of the Swedish Evangelical Free Church of America. *Frikyrkans Minnesskrift*, 10.

⁸⁷ Swedish Census, Göteborgs stad, 1890; "Nils Peter Victor Rylander," Riksarkivet.

⁸⁸ For example, see *Chicago-Bladet*, 7 Jan. 1890.

⁸⁹ Waldenström, *Genom Norra Amerikas Förenta Stater*, 262.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 439, 440.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 475, 490.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 519.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁹⁵ *The Lakeside Annual Directory of the City of Chicago, 1892* (Chicago: The Chicago Directory Company, 1892) 763, 1304.

⁹⁶ Leland H. Carlson, *A History of North Park College: Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary 1891-1941* (Chicago: North Park College and Seminary, 1941) 77,79.

⁹⁷ *Chicago-Bladet*, 5 Dec. 1899.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* Rylander is buried at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Membership records of the Evangelical Free Church of Boone, Iowa, and *Boone News Republican*, 15 July 1931, 1. Membership records of the Free Church of Boone state that Anna was converted to faith in 1871.

¹⁰¹ Torjesen, 108.