

THE FIRST EMIGRANT TRICKLE

In the spring of 1851, HANS MATTSON, Bengta's former neighbor, decided to leave his homeland for the opportunities of North America. He recorded a glimpse of how he and his accompanying friend felt:

"We gazed back at the vanishing shores of the dear fatherland with feelings of affection, but did not regret the step we had taken, and our bosoms heaved with boundless hope. At the age of eighteen, the strong, healthy youth takes a bright and hopeful view of life, and so did we. Many and beautiful were the air-castles we built as we stood on deck, with our eyes turned towards the promised land of the nineteenth century. To some of these castles our lives have given reality, others are still floating before us" (Mattson, 13).

Back in Scania, BENGTA gave birth on July 3rd of that year to her first child, ELNA - the daughter of CORPORAL MARTEN RING. (It is not yet known who CORPORAL RING was, or what happened to him.) ELNA was christened at home that day. As Johansson explains, "when it was feared that a child would die before the minister would be able to perform the baptism, any person present could perform an emergency baptism (Swedish "noddop"), and the child would thus avoid the awful fate of hell for the eternities, according to the doctrine of the Lutheran Church. This emergency baptism was most often performed by the farmer or the midwife. It was reported to the minister as soon as possible, and he confirmed it and sometimes made a note of it in the birth record" (80). BENGTA's fears, in this case, were unfortunately confirmed, for little ELNA passed away later on that day.

In the midst of her anguish, a message of hope was being prepared. Across the Sound in Copenhagen that same year, the Danish translation of the Book of Mormon was completed by the missionaries.

The next few months were likely a struggle for young BENGTA. During that time, a young compassionate gentleman saw her, childless and blind, and love her instantly. Quickly and happily, he chose to be her provider and protector.

Towards the end of that year, BENGTA and MATHIAS were married in Ahus parish church (December 29, 1851). They probably saw on that day the famed key which was kept on display in memory of the clergyman who tried to set back the clock on the Reformation. At this time, MATHIAS moved to Ahus parish to live with BENGTA and her grandparents.

On April 4th, 1853, MATHIAS and BENGTA had their first child, OLA. The parents of MATHIAS came to Ahus parish for his christening four days later, and MATHIAS' mother ELNA stood in as godmother for her grandson. BENGTA's grandparents from Horna were apparently too ill to attend: or at least they are not listed as being among the witnesses.

BENGTA's grandmother lived just long enough to see her new great-grandchild, for she passed away just one week after OLA's christening.

In August of that year, MATHIAS said farewell to another family member under more cheerful circumstances. His older brother JONS emigrated with his wife and daughter for America - perhaps encouraged by HANS MATTSON's departure two years earlier.

Later that fall, MATHIAS and his bride experienced a tragedy: they had to bury their young son OLA. The grief-stricken newlyweds moved back to Rinkaby parish to live with MATHIAS' parents.

The following year, on October 31st, MATHIAS and BENGTA became the parents of their first healthy child - HANNA. That same year, the first branch of the LDS church was opened in the city of Kristianstad (Johansson, 61).

For the next one and one-half years, MATHIAS bounced from farm to farm, around the parish, apparently wherever he could find appropriate work to apprentice him for the trade he was learning - that of wheelwright.

In his struggle to provide for his growing family, MATHIAS decided in 1856 to move his family to Denmark to earn a better living. At about the same time, his sister ANNA moved to Copenhagen, likely for similar reasons. By April, MATHIAS was able to find work as a wheelwright in Store Ajstrup parish in northern Jutland, near Alborg, and his wife and daughter joined him there shortly afterwards.

“Hear me! We’ve heard of Danish heroes,”
[Let me tell of one more noble]
“He’d traveled to Denmark alone,
...but changed his own fate,
Lived to be rich and much honored.”

Beowulf, Lines 1,6,7,8
with one line added

The following year, on September 11, 1857, while still in Store Ajstrup parish, MATHIAS and BENGTA were blessed with another child - JENS CHRISTIAN MATHIASSEN. Two days later, he was christened at home, suggesting concerns that JENS might not survive. This time, there were no relatives to witness the birth of their child; only other laborers and new-found fiends, as they prayed for the life of their son to be spared.

JENS' health improved rapidly, and within five months he was strong enough for MATHIAS and BENGTA to move north to Rodslet Manor in Vadum Parish (N.W. of Alborg). They must have been content here, for they remained in Vadum Parish for the next twenty-two years.

In the spring of 1858, more of MATHIAS' family left Sweden. His oldest brother NILS also left for America, and his parents moved to Denmark— perhaps to live with their daughter, ANNA, in Copenhagen.

At this time, MATHIAS' family was spread across the world. He and his wife were in northern Jutland, his sister and probably his parents were in Copenhagen, two of his brothers were in America, and the rest of his family was back in Sweden.

Each branch of the family certainly waited eagerly for news of the others. Individual letters were probably treasured. Those from JONS and NILS in distant America were probably treasure above all for their news of the beckoning opportunities across the sea. The Danish poet Jeppe Aakjaer wrote:

“When such a precious letter from America had been laid out in the light of the candle, deciphered with the use of forefinger and spectacles and read aloud, anxiously and apprehensively, to the whole household it was nailed to a rafter with a knitting-needle or knife...” (Hvidt, 174-175).

At this time, Scandinavian missionaries were recalled to Utah due to reports that a federal army was en route to Salt Lake Valley. Worldwide news coverage of the plight of the fleeing settlers “placed the United States government in an unfavorable light as a persecutor of an innocent people,” drawing both “national and international attention to the Church” (Fulness, 376, 377). The London Times reported: “We are told that they have embarked for a voyage of over five hundred miles of untracked desert” (Fulness, 377).

Danish newspapers likely reported on the exiles as well. Perhaps it was news of this event which was the final necessary ingredient which helped MATHIAS and BENGTA (apparently sympathetic for the downtrodden) not only relate to the Mormon people and see past the slander which had been spoken of them, but also to investigate their message openly and honestly.

The Mormon missionaries had been having great success among the people of northern Jutland. In fact, that region of Denmark proved to be one of the most fertile areas in all of Europe for the preaching of the restored gospel. That summer, Elder PETER A. FJELDSTED, President of the Vendsyssel (North Jutland) Conference of the LDS Church stated, “The Elders were faithful in their labors and had great influence among the people, who permitted the missionaries to hold meetings in private dwellings” (Jenson, 132).a

A portion of their success in the region was due to a young fourteen-year-old named ANTHON LUND. Earlier, at his eleven-year-old catechism, the Lutheran bishop of the diocese had personally examined young ANTHON. The answers of the young boy surprised the bishop, and he said to the whole school: “I have not heard a boy answer so well in any of the two hundred schools in my diocese” (Jensen, Bio. Ency., v. I, 162).

The young boy, having studied the message of the Mormon missionaries, was convinced of its truth and baptized one year after his catechism, the same year MATHIAS and BENGTA

moved to Denmark. At the age of thirteen, young ANTHON LUND was called to assist the growth of the church in northern Denmark - to teach emigrating saints English, to distribute tracts, and to help the Elders hold meetings.

Going from house to house, distributing tracts and inviting his neighbors in northern Denmark to attend meetings where the Elders would teach, ANTHON's reception was quite varied. Once, ANTHON knocked on a farmhouse door and politely invited a woman and her family to such a meeting. Apparently, the woman had heard and believed some of the fanciful slander circulating in Denmark about the church, for she jumped up angrily from her stool, grabbed the fire tongs from the fireplace, and, yelling, chased the brave boy for quite some distance down the road.

Several years later in Utah, a woman approached ANTHON and asked if he recalled a woman chasing him with fire tongs. "Yes," he answered, "but you are not that woman, for her face I have never forgotten." "No," she said, "I was her neighbor, and seeing her running after you, I asked her what you had done. She said that you had invited her to a Mormon meeting. I became curious to learn something about the 'Mormons' and went to the meeting. I heard you speak and was convinced of the truth" (Jenson, Bio. Ency., v. I, 164)..

ANTHON was apparently an exceptional young man, and many of those who were open-minded enough to listen to his message were surprised to hear wisdom and truth from such a young boy. One year after he was called to the work, young ANTHON's labors bore fruit for our family.

MATHIAS and BENGTA were among those with whom "the Elders had great influence," for a few weeks later, on October 3, 1858, less than a year after their arrival in Vadum Parish, they were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by SOREN NIELSEN.

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Not only was BENGTA uncomfortably seven-months pregnant at the time of her baptism, but the water must have been brisk so late in the year. MATHIAS and BENGTA were confirmed that same day by LARS C. CHRISTENSEN, perhaps the same man who later married their daughter HANNA.

It appears that both young ANTHON LUND and conference President PETER A. FJELSTED were not only deeply involved in teaching of MATHIAS and BENGTA, but had made a great impression on their lives. Two months after their baptism, when BENGTA gave birth to their next son (December 17, 1858), they named him ANTON PETER MATHIASSEN, apparently in gratitude and memory of these two men.

Since MATHIAS and their children were no longer Lutherans, the births of their children from then on, including ANTON's were no longer recorded in the Danish Lutheran parish records.

It appears that MATHIAS was keeping in touch with at least part of his family, and had

informed them of his investigation into the message of the Restoration, for within three months of his own baptism, his sister ANNA was baptized by the Elders in Copenhagen.

In 1860, three years after coming to Denmark with her husband, MATHIAS' mother returned to Sweden - alone and newly widowed. Sometime during those three years, her husband NILS had died in Denmark. She, and perhaps her husband, likely witnessed the baptism of their daughter ANNA in Copenhagen or of their son MATHIAS in northern Jutland.

Not enough has been said about this man NILS, the namesake of the NELSON family. Some day, his story may be told. There is also little trace of what happened to ANNA after her baptism. (As late as the 1862 death of ANNA's daughter, MARTINA FRIBERG, who had been living with ANNA's brother OLA in Scania, the Swedish parish registers indicate that ANNA was still in Copenhagen.) [Added January 2016 - long after this book was written, I discovered Anna's LDS church records on microfilm in a Utah County ward. I visited her grave years ago in Utah County. If memory serves, she was laid to rest in either Springville Cemetery or Spanish Fork Cemetery, and she had surviving relatives. If memory serves, a daughter was buried next to her.]

On July 24, 1861 (Pioneer Day in their new faith), MATHIAS and BENGTA had another child - NIELS CHRISTIAN MATHIASSEN - my great grandfather.