

A Swedish Immigrant Letter from Gem, Idaho

Tucked away in overseas archives, immigrant letters provide insights about life in the West for the region's many ethnic groups. The following letter is part of a 27-letter collection deposited at the Emigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden. The writer, August Peterson, left his home in Blädinge¹ in 1886 at the age of 19. The contents and return addresses of his letters indicate that he worked in Minnesota before serving as an infantryman at Fort Keogh, Montana, and Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After returning to Sweden in the mid-1890s, he came back to the West to work as a mine laborer in Montana, Idaho, and Colorado during 1899-1902. The following letter found August Peterson in Gem, Idaho, in February, 1900.

Dear Hjalmar,

I have received your letter and made out its contents. I had a letter from Walfrid in Kexlegard with some news. I worked in Butte City [Montana] only one month, and then I thought it was best to quit before my health was gone. Fritiof quit some days before me because the heat and fumes were terrible. We traveled here and found work immediately met up with Walfrid Chals and Gust Ehrneberg Gust is foreman so we have had it good. I have been at the hospital twelve days I got a finger injured on the right hand. I can just now hold a pen to write but I cannot work yet so that has cost me (yes that it has) — Peter or Pehr Nelson in Jonsboda has been in Spokane and had an operation on his stomach² he came back yesterday evening and is nearly well again. Walfrid Ehrneberg has built onto his house so he says we can move in with him when he gets it done. It has been a remarkably fine winter without snow until now a couple of days it has snowed here down in the valley on the mountain tops is an everlasting snow that is up to 120 f³ here and there we had a nice Christmas we worked until 4:15 on Christmas morning but then we were free until 7 in the evening and among other things there were masquerade balls both Christmas Eve and Christmas evening but now there is only work until the 4th

of July. Here I should stop. Wishing you health and well-being. Greet good friends and loyal neighbors! But the most amiable [greetings to] yourself from August Peterson.
Adress Gem Idaho U.S.A.⁴

In his letter from Gem, Peterson expressed a number of concerns common among the Swedish immigrants to the Northern Rockies. He was concerned about his and other immigrants' health, especially because he knew that their working conditions in mines, stamp mills, and smelters posed a threat. Many Swedish immigrants bemoaned the fact that they were expected to work on Christmas. American Christmas celebrations of the nineteenth century were lacking measured against the several-day-or-more celebrations of Sweden. In this regard Peterson was luckier than most, able to attend Christmas dances sandwiched between shifts. Clearly he placed a high value on comradeship with other Swedish laborers, and like many of the Swedish immigrants he was very impressed with the snow-covered mountains surrounding the towns where he worked.

*Peterson's story comes to a sad end. The final letter in the collection, from Victor, Colorado, is written not by August but by another Swedish worker, P.N. Johnson, who informs Hjalmar that their mutual friend has died in a mine accident. The Peterson collection is part of a larger study of letters, "Swedish America in the Rocky Mountain West, 1880-1917, and Folkloric Perspectives on the Immigrant Letter," by Jennifer Eastman Attebery, soon to appear in *Scandinavian Studies* 77.1 (2005).*

Notes: for Swedish Immigrant Letter

¹Blädinge is a village very near Växjö in the south-central Swedish region of Småland, from which many of the immigrants came. Information about Peterson's immigration is from the parish records on microfilm at the Emigrant Institute.

²Or possibly, abdomen.

³This word is only partially legible in the manuscript. A Swedish cognate for the English *feet* does exist, but even so a depth of 120 feet seems an exaggeration.

⁴English words used by Peterson are in italics. Spelling and punctuation are rendered as found in the original, which is transcribed here:

Ärade Hjalmar

Dett bref har jag emottagit och dess innehåll uppfattat Jag hadde bref från Walfrid i Kexlegard med några nyheter Jag arbetade i Butte City endest en Månad så tankte jag det war best att sluta innan hälsan tog slut. Fritiof slutade några dagar före mig för värmen och gasen war förfarlig. Wi reste hit och fick arbete genast treffade Walfrid Chals *and* Gust Ehrneberg Gust är Förman så wi har haft det bra. Jag har varit på Lasaretten i 12 dagar jag fått en [enda?] fingret skadat på högra handen Jag kan just nu hålla pennan till att skrifva men jag kan inte arbeta ännu så det har kostat mig (Ja det har det)— Peter eller Pehr Nelson i Jonsboda han har varit i Spokane och blifvet opererad i Magen han kom tillbaka i går qväll och är nästan frisk igen. Walfrid Ehrneberg han har byggtill sitt hus så han säger wi får flytta till honom när han får det färdigt. Det har varit en utmärkt fin winter ingen snö tills nu ett par dagar det har snöat här nere i dalen på bergtopporna är en evig snö den är upptill 120. f [fot?] på sina platser wi hade en trefflig Jul wi arbetade tills Kl: 4:15 på Juldags morgon men sedan war wi fri till 7. på Kvällen och bland annat så war det Maskeratebal både Julafton och Juldag Kvällen men nu är det slätta söknet t [till?] den '*4^{de} July*' Jag får härmed s [slut?]. Onskar eder hälsa och välmåga. Hälsa goda vänner och trogna granner vet! Men sjelf på det Vänligaste af August Peterson
adress Gem Idaho U.S.A.