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Journal of Mormon History Vol. 31, No. 2, 2005

Table of Contents

CONTENTS

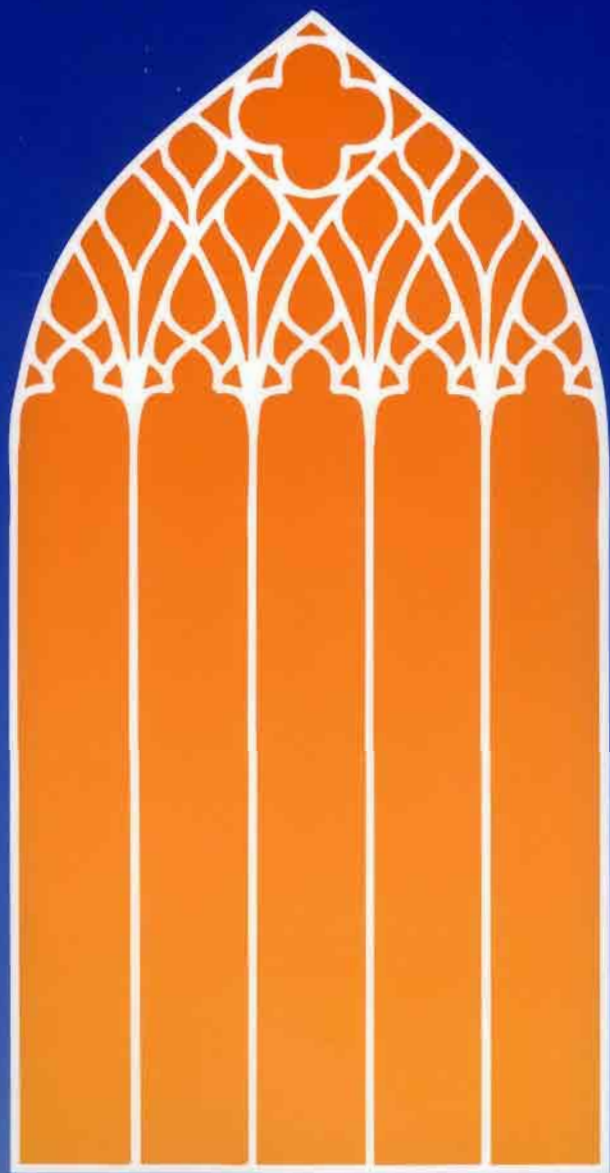
ARTICLES

- --The Case for Sidney Rigdon as Author of the Lectures on Faith *Noel B. Reynolds, 1*
- --Reconstructing the Y-Chromosome of Joseph Smith: Genealogical Applications *Ugo A. Perego, Natalie M. Myres, and Scott R. Woodward, 42*
- --Lucy's Image: A Recently Discovered Photograph of Lucy Mack Smith *Ronald E. Romig and Lachlan Mackay, 61*
- --Eyes on "the Whole European World": Mormon Observers of the 1848 Revolutions *Craig Livingston, 78*
- --Missouri's Failed Compromise: The Creation of Caldwell County for the Mormons *Stephen C. LeSueur, 113*
- --Artois Hamilton: A Good Man in Carthage? *Susan Easton Black, 145*
- --One Masterpiece, Four Masters: Reconsidering the Authorship of the Salt Lake Tabernacle *Nathan D. Grow, 170*
- --The Salt Lake Tabernacle in the Nineteenth Century: A Glimpse of Early Mormonism *Ronald W. Walker, 198*
- --Kerstina Nilsson: A Story of the Swedish Saints *Leslie Albrecht Huber, 241*

REVIEWS

- John Sillito, ed., *History's Apprentice: The Diaries of B. H. Roberts, 1880-1898* *Davis Bitton, 264*
- Martha Beck, *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith* *Boyd Jay Petersen, 267*
- Donald Q. Cannon, Richard O. Cowan, et al., *Unto Every Nation: Gospel Light Reaches Every Land* *Kahlile B. Mehr, 271*
- Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* *H. Michael Marquardt, 274*

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FALL 2005

KERSTINA NILSDOTTER: A STORY OF THE SWEDISH SAINTS

Leslie Albrecht Huber

BETWEEN 1850 AND 1905, more than thirty thousand Scandinavians joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and immigrated to America.¹ Kerstina (“Karsti”) Nilsdotter was one of them. There is nothing particularly distinctive known about Karsti, her life in Sweden, her conversion, or her journey to America. In fact, little is known about her at all. She did not come from a prominent family and did not leave a journal or autobiography. Accounts of others or local histories of the places in which she lived never mention her.² Yet this “averageness” is exactly what makes Karsti so important.

Although there are stories of the first converts, immigrants, and early missionaries that are extraordinary and mostly well documented, they are the exceptions. Karsti’s experiences, in contrast, represent a much larger group: ordinary Swedish Mormon converts who left the familiarity of home and country to come to a new world,

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¹William Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: The Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 102.

²The exception is a two-page sketch by Karsti’s daughter Chasty Margaret Harris Albrecht, “Autobiography,” ca. 1940; photocopy of typescript in my possession.

TABLE 1
KARSTI'S FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Nils Nilsson, born October 12, 1786, Svinarp, Esarp, Malmohus, Sweden; died May 29, 1858, Vallby, Kyrkheddinge, Malmohus, Sweden; married (1) **Anna Jonsdotter** (born ca. 1788, Bonderup, Malmohus, Sweden; died April 6, 1823, Vallby, Kyrkheddinge, Malmohus, Sweden) in Bonderup, Malmohus, Sweden, November 29, 1817

Children: born in Vallby and christened in Kyrkheddinge

1. Marna, born October 4, 1818

2. Pehr, born April 4, 1821, died November 9, 1823

Married (2) **Lisbeth Nilsson** (born October 11, 1799, Everlov, Malmohus, Sweden; died January 10, 1847, Vallby, Kyrkheddinge, Malmohus, Sweden) in Kyrkheddinge, Malmohus, Sweden, November 2, 1823

Children: born in Vallby and christened in Kyrkheddinge

1. Anna, born December 20, 1824, died January 25, 1847

2. Nils, born May 14, 1826, married Karna Hansdotter February 15, 1856, died 1885

3. Pehr, born March 30, 1829, died January 2, 1833

4. Karna, born July 23, 1831, died January 13, 1847

5. Hanna, born December 26, 1834, married Lars Andersson in November 4, 1859

6. Elna, born February 25, 1839, married in 1861, spouse unknown

7. **Kerstina ("Karsti")**, born August 19, 1843, married Edmond Harris in 1862, died March 14, 1901

vastly different from what they knew. In learning about her, it soon becomes obvious that even the story of an “average” Swedish immigrant convert is nothing less than remarkable.

VALLBY, SWEDEN

Understanding the magnitude of the changes faced by these converts requires understanding life in Sweden during this period. Kerstina Nilsson was born on August 19, 1843, in the village of Vallby in Skåne, the southern-most province of Sweden. Skåne was known as the “breadbasket of Sweden.” Southern Skåne, where Karsti lived, was made up of miles and miles of green, rich, rolling hills. In the area near Vallby, there was hardly a tree, let alone a mountain, to hinder one’s view. Not surprisingly, most people made their living by farming. Vallby was made up of fifteen farms, with up to five families living on each one.³

Karsti was the last of seven children born to Nils Nilsson and Lisbeth Nilsson. (See Table 1.) As a result of her father’s previous marriage and several early deaths in the family, when Karsti was born, the household was comprised of her parents, one half-sister, one brother, and four sisters. Karsti’s father was an *åbo* or tenant farmer, with lifetime and inheritance rights to his land. The family had a small farm, reported to be one-thirty-second of a *mantal*.⁴ In this area, one-thirty-second of a *mantal* was probably less than ten acres.⁵ People living near the Nilsson family owned farms of a similar size, show-

³Vallby Clerical Survey Records, Records of Kyrkheddinge Parish, Kyrkheddinge, Sweden, microfilm #145783, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter Family History Library). Although the families were considered to live on the same farm, each had an individual residence and address. Usually, the families were unrelated to one another. This arrangement had occurred over time as people had subdivided their land among heirs or sold pieces of it.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Martin Dribe, *Leaving Home in a Peasant Society: Economic Fluctuations, Household Dynamics, and Youth Migration in Southern Sweden, 1829–1866* (Södertälje, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2000), 27. Because of this, the size of a *mantal* varied from place to place, depending on local factors such as the quality of the land. The concept of a *mantal* had developed centuries earlier and was supposed to be the minimum amount of land a person needed to support his family. Although there

ing that the Nilsson's economic situation was typical.

Karsti's family fell into the category of "semilandless peasants," a group that included farmers who did not own enough land to support their families adequately. These people had to supplement their incomes by working on other people's land occasionally or by conducting a trade on the side. "Landed peasants," in contrast, included farmers with enough land to comfortably support their families (approximately one-sixteenth of a *mantal*). At the bottom of the social order were landless peasants who owned no land and subsisted as day laborers, working on other people's farms.⁶ By the 1850s, factors such as the continued division of land among heirs had decreased the size of the average landholdings by common people. Thus, the semi-landless group to which the Nilsson family belonged was expanding rapidly, while the number of landed peasants was decreasing. This declining availability of land became one of the major impetuses behind emigration.

The Nilsson family, like nearly every other family in Sweden, belonged to the state Swedish Lutheran Church. People from Vallby and several other villages attended services in the nearby village of Kyrkheddinge. The local parish pastor represented one of the strongest authority figures in a family's life. Families were expected to attend church, follow regulations for Sunday behavior, and learn Luther's Catechisms. The parish pastor regularly visited the homes of all the families in his jurisdiction, testing their knowledge and understanding of the Catechisms. Church and civil regulations were bound together and rules were rigid, controlling many aspects of life such as freedom of expression and movement between places.⁷

Unlike religion, education was not an integral part of life. If Karsti received an education beyond the Bible and Luther's Cate-

were always poorer people who did not own much or any land, in early times most wealthy "landed peasants" did indeed own a *mantal* of land. As time passed, these land holdings were subdivided, particularly in the early to mid-nineteenth century when the population boomed. Fortunately, better cultivation techniques enabled peasants to support their families on less land. Thus, the meaning of a *mantal* changed over time.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Franklin D. Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 195, 360. The norms and expectations are also evident through the text of the Catechisms themselves. Martin Lu-



Kerstina Nilsson was christened in this Swedish Lutheran Church in Kyrkhedding, in 1843. All photos by Leslie Albrecht Huber.

chisms, it was sparse. In 1842 the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament) passed a landmark act, requiring every parish to establish a common school. Before this, only about half of the parishes had schools and generally only boys attended them.⁸ Although most people learned to read enough to study the Catechisms and Bible, writing for women was a less common skill. A year before her death, in the 1900 U.S. census, Karsti would report that although she could read, she could not write.⁹

Growing up in mid-nineteenth century Sweden meant that death always lurked around the corner. Nearly every family faced the premature deaths of children or the loss of parents. Karsti's family was no exception. In early 1847 when Karsti was only three, she lost her mother, Lisbeth, and two older sisters—Anna, twenty-four, and

ther, *Luther's Primary Works: Together with His Shorter and Larger Catechisms, with Theological and Historical Essays*, translated and edited by Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896).

⁸Scott, *Sweden*, 352.

⁹U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1900, Wayne County, microfilm, #124168, Family History Library.

Karna, fifteen—in a matter of weeks from typhoid fever.¹⁰ Although most deaths occurred among the very old and the very young, Mother Lisbeth's age, forty-seven, was not far short of the normal life expectancy of the time.

While Karsti was still a child, changes in Sweden were occurring that would also impact her life. By 1853 after two unsuccessful attempts, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had established a presence in Sweden. Membership reached 180 members by the year's end.¹¹ However, persecutions continued as local leaders arrested, jailed, and even exiled LDS missionaries. These leaders threatened to fine people who held religious meetings in their homes. For secrecy's sake, missionaries organized the first Swedish branch, located in Skönabäck, in the middle of the night. Within a few days, missionaries also set up branches in Malmö, Lomma, and Lund. They organized several more branches also in 1853, all in Skåne. One was in the Nilssons's hometown of Vallby.¹² In the 1854–58 Vallby clerical survey, in the column reserved for remarks, the parish pastor wrote "Mormon" by several names. Two of these individuals were working for Karsti's brother Nils.¹³

Also in about 1853, Karsti's sixty-seven-year-old father passed the farm on to Nils, age twenty-seven, gave up his position as åbo (farmer) and head of the household, and was listed thereafter simply

¹⁰Anna Nilsson, Karna Nilsson, and Lisbeth Nilsson, Burial Records, Kyrkheddinge Parish, Kyrkheddinge, Sweden, microfilm #145782, Family History Library. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of parish records are mine.

¹¹Andrew Jenson, *History of the Scandinavian Mission* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 535. Elder John E. Forsgren first attempted to introduce the LDS Church to Sweden in 1850, the same time at which it was introduced in Denmark. Although he baptized several people, he was soon arrested and exiled. The second attempt in 1852 had similar results. Anders Winberg, a native of Skåne, made the third attempt nearly simultaneously but in a different area. The LDS Church maintained a permanent presence after his efforts. The Church grew more slowly in Sweden than in Denmark or Norway because of Sweden's stricter religious laws. However, by the 1860s, restrictions in Sweden began to loosen; and by the 1880s, there were more baptisms in Sweden than in Denmark.

¹²*Ibid.*, 80–81.

¹³Vallby Clerical Survey Records.



Although this farmhouse is not the original family home, it stands on the exact plot of land where Karsti's home once stood.



View of the farmland from Karsti's home.

as “widower” in his son’s household, as was the custom. With relatively greater financial security, Nils Jr. married a couple of years later. About this time, Karsti’s two sisters, Elna and Hanna, who were in their late teens or early twenties, hired out to work on neighboring farms.¹⁴ In this time period, young men and women often left home for six months to several years to work as farmhands or maidservants on neighboring farms. This practice eased the financial burden on their families, provided needed labor elsewhere, and gave them important opportunities to learn skills and meet other people. Farmers had the right to treat their employees as they saw fit, resulting in a large divergence in the circumstances and pleasantness of the experience for these young people.

On May 29, 1858, at age seventy-one, Karsti’s father died of “old age.”¹⁵ Fourteen-year-old Karsti was an orphan. For the next two years, she remained in the family home with her brother and his growing family. By law, daughters inherited equally with sons. Karsti probably received title to part of the farm, which she “loaned” to Nils, who would have paid her for its value as he was able. Then in 1860, sixteen-year-old Karsti went to work as a maidservant in Orup, a nearby village, replacing Hanna, who had worked there the year before.

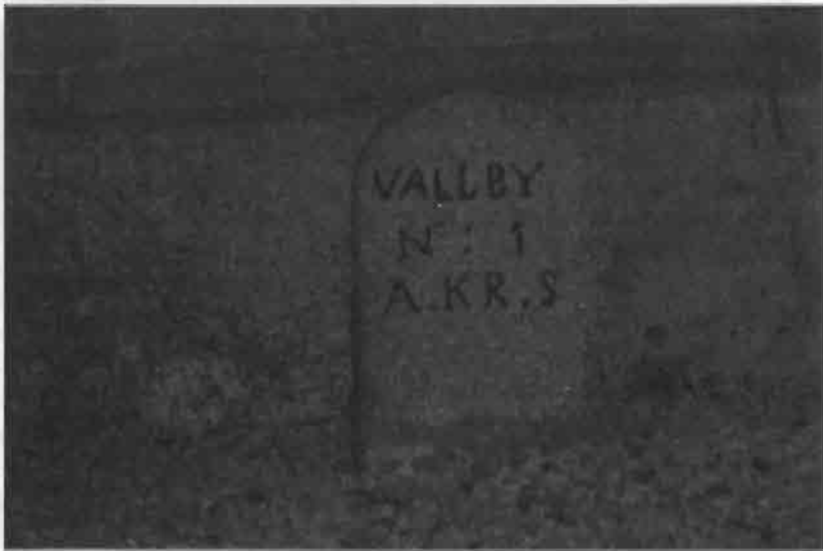
As a maidservant, Karsti likely performed tasks similar to those she had done at home. Workdays often began at daylight, which could be 4:00 A.M. in the summer, and lasted until nightfall. Women and children of all ages, except those of the wealthiest families, helped plant and harvest grain, the region’s major crop. In the winter, the maid servants would distill potatoes into a popular alcoholic drink, *brannvin*, that was consumed at nearly every meal. In the evenings, Karsti may have joined the other women and girls of the community as they worked at their spinning wheels. The women of the house also prepared meals, which commonly included barley porridge or some kind of soup, sausage, cheese, and sourdough bread spread with pork fat. Scandinavian peasants were known for being well fed and were often depicted as plump in illustrations of the time.¹⁶

With a branch of the LDS Church in Vallby, the teachings of the American church likely formed a lively topic of conversation for

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Nils Nilsson, Burial Record, Records of Kyrkheddinge Parish.

¹⁶Allan Pred, *Place, Practice and Structure* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1986), 77–80.



This stone, engraved “No. 1 Vallby,” gives the address of Karsti’s family and once stood beside the road leading to their home.

Karsti’s family and neighbors. Although Karsti left no record of her conversion experience, she may well have been surprised by LDS doctrines. As part of the political structure, the Swedish Lutheran Church emphasized authority, obedience, and conformity. As LDS historian Andrew Jenson wrote, this system left many of the peasants “panting for more liberty.”¹⁷ A growing dissident movement in Sweden led to a “Religious Awakening” in the 1850s as people turned away from the formalities that dominated worship in the state church, searching for a more personal and emotional way to connect with God. The LDS Church offered much of what these dissidents sought as the LDS missionaries went from door to door, boldly announcing a new gospel filled with vitality, urgency, and individual involvement. Part of the Church’s success in Scandinavia was due to its reliance on native Scandinavians as missionaries. As historian William Mulder describes it, the gospel was largely preached by converts “baptized one day and sent on a mission nearly the next.” These enthusiastic converts had more credibility than foreigners and were able to relate

¹⁷Jenson, *History of the Scandinavian Mission*, 11.

to the people more naturally.¹⁸

Anti-Mormon literature also flourished in Vallby, which would have heightened both Karsti's interest in the new religion and the stakes of leaving the church of her childhood for it.¹⁹ Although outright persecution was declining by 1860, prejudice and shunning still occurred regularly. Families sometimes did everything in their power to prevent relatives from joining. It was not uncommon for converts to find that their former friends avoided them. When one convert saw her former pastor in the street, he struck her with his cane.²⁰

Baptism into the LDS Church was a consequential decision for another reason: It essentially included an agreement to "gather to Zion," meaning that the converts must immigrate to America. At this time, the "gathering" was a fundamental doctrine, a duty incumbent upon the faithful. The LDS Church offered financial assistance to travel to America as well as support for starting a new life, a dream otherwise out of reach for many Swedish peasants. The statistics testify both to the difficulty of the requirements before new converts and of their commitment. During the life of the Scandinavian Mission (until 1905), nearly a third of the Scandinavian converts apostatized or left the church. Two-thirds of those remaining immigrated to Utah, a number equaling more than thirty thousand people. About 32 percent were Swedes.²¹

Despite the obstacles, on September 5, 1860, Karsti was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²² It was a decision that the seventeen-year-old made independently. Her brother Nils and his family joined the Church, but not until Karsti had immigrated to Utah. In fact, during the three-month quarter covering this time period, Karsti was the only person baptized in the little Vallby branch. Seldom more than a handful of baptisms occurred during

¹⁸Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 74, 78.

¹⁹Missionaries in Scandinavia relied extensively on pamphlets by apostles and mission leaders, although most were in Danish during the early time periods. The Book of Mormon was not printed in Swedish until 1878. Popular anti-Mormon materials were *Errors of Mormonism* and *Everyman's Aid in the Fight Against Mormonism*. Ibid., 91.

²⁰Ibid., 118.

²¹Ibid., 102.

²²Kerstina Nilsson, Baptismal Record, Vallby LDS Branch, microfilm #82947, Family History Library.

any quarter. Membership in the branch hovered between twenty and thirty during most of the branch's first ten years and consisted of only twenty-six members at the time of Karsti's baptism.²³

Without any record or family tradition describing Karsti's feelings, her reasons for making this decision can only be guessed. On the one hand, Karsti had less to hold her back than many others, making the decision seem almost convenient. She was single and an orphan. She did not have a great deal of property to dispose of and had no dependents. All of her siblings except one had married and were establishing their own households. The LDS Church promised a welcoming community and family for her.

Yet at the same time, Karsti did not choose an easy path. Joining the LDS Church was an unpopular decision. Immigrating to America was a dangerous and uncertain undertaking, particularly for a young woman traveling alone who did not speak English. Karsti financed her own emigration, showing that finding an affordable way to get to America was not her motivation. Instead, it seems likely that she shared the feelings expressed by other Scandinavian converts. One convert wrote that upon joining, "I had more happiness than I ever had before."²⁴ Another explained an emotion that might have also overcome Karsti, "My only desire was . . . to come to Zion."²⁵

THE JOURNEY TO AMERICA

Soon after joining the Church, Karsti began making plans to emigrate.²⁶ The gathering of Swedish Saints to Zion was part of a much larger emigration that swept through Scandinavia and Europe. Partially due to the population increase, which surpassed the land's car-

²³Skåne District, Swedish Mission, "General Minutes," Archives of the Family and Church History Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter LDS Church Archives).

²⁴Hans Jensen Hals, "Autobiography," quoted in Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 124.

²⁵Jens Nielsen, Letter to son Uriah, in Albert R. Lyman, "Sketch of Bishop Jens Nielsen," Utah State Historical Society, WPA Writers' Project Biographies; quoted in Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 125.

²⁶Available records provide much more information about Karsti's life during her six-month journey to Utah than for any other time in her life. Articles, books, journals, and autobiographies of fellow travelers have described each phase of the route she would have traversed: the ocean voyage,

rying capacity, Sweden was particularly hard-hit by “American fever” and saw the outmigration of more than a million citizens between 1830 and 1930. By 1910, one in five Swedes lived in the United States.²⁷ Overall, a much higher percentage of people emigrated from northern Sweden, where economic conditions were harder. The Mormon emigration, in contrast, came largely from Skåne, which came to be known as the “cradle of Mormonism.”²⁸

Prospective emigrants heard daunting warnings that the trip was long, exhausting, and fraught with dangers and risks. The greatest deterrent, however, was its cost, an insurmountable obstacle for many without assistance. A large number of emigrants relied on Church loans for at least part of the journey. Karsti, however, paid her entire way without help—the sum of between about \$75 and \$100.²⁹ Of the seventy-two emigrants who left the Skåne Conference at the same time as Karsti, she was one of only eleven who paid in advance.³⁰ She probably used the money from her share of her inheritance.

Once her finances were in order, Karsti began packing and making other preparations for the trip. She would have relied on the advice of the Mormon publication, *Skandinaviens Stjerne* (*Scandinavian Star*), whose pages were filled with tidbits of advice. The publication admonished travelers to pack lightly and convert valuables into cash to avoid excess freight charges. It also described what clothes, shoes, food, and utensils Karsti would need to bring or acquire in Liverpool.³¹

Despite difficulties ahead, on April 3, 1861, only seven months after joining the Church, Karsti left Sweden, not expecting to see her family again. She had the company of other Latter-day Saints. On that day in April, the parish register shows that six other unrelated

the arrival at Castle Gardens, the passage by train, and the overland trek to Utah. In order not to depart from her life story into a travel narrative, I have selected only some pertinent details to illuminate Karsti’s experiences.

²⁷Herman Lindqvist, *A Journey through Swedish History*, translated by Alan Tapsell (Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum 1994), 72.

²⁸Jenson, *History of the Scandinavian Mission*, 54. The *Skandinaviens Stjerne* of July 15, 1861, for example, shows that of the 1,074 members of the LDS Church in Sweden, 557 of them were in the Skåne Conference.

²⁹Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 146.

³⁰Andrew Jenson, “Skåne District, Swedish Mission, Manuscript History and Historical Reports,” LDS Church Archives.

³¹Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 165–66.

people from the nearby area also left. In the column for remarks in the register, the pastor simply wrote "Mormon."³²

The journey to America was a thrilling adventure for Karsti and her traveling companions who likely had never traveled far outside of the parish boundaries. The route took them first to Malmö, and then to Copenhagen. Here, on May 9, Karsti joined a group consisting of 373 Danes, 128 Swedes, and 61 Norwegians to travel to Germany, then across the rough North Sea to Liverpool. In Liverpool, they joined a larger group of 960 people representing ten nationalities to board the *Monarch of the Sea*, the largest sailing ship ever used by a Mormon company.³³

Despite the excitement of traveling, the daily realities of ship-board life were often tedious and unpleasant. Space was cramped, privacy hard to come by. The living quarters were below deck with only a small door for fresh air and light to penetrate. Passengers slept on narrow bunks, lined up against the bulwarks. Seasickness afflicted many immigrants, and sometimes lasted throughout the voyage. The stench from the vomit and inadequate sanitary arrangements could become suffocating.³⁴

The passengers had to prepare their own meals in cramped quarters and with little variety in food. The British Passenger Act (1852) required sailing ships to provide passengers with biscuits, wheat flour, oatmeal, rice, tea, sugar, and molasses. The LDS Church also supplemented these staples. One Scandinavian traveler remembered receiving "cheese, bacon, meat, rice, tea, sugar, potatoes, pepper, mustard and water."³⁵ In addition, "the sick were

³²Karsti Nilsson, Moving Out Record, Records of Kyrkheddinge Parish, Kyrkheddinge, Sweden.

³³The *Monarch of the Sea* carried another Mormon emigrant group in 1864. Its two companies were the largest Mormon groups to cross the seas. Conway B. Sonne, *Ships, Saints, and Mariners: A Maritime Encyclopedia of Mormon Migration, 1830-1890* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 146-47.

³⁴David H. Pratt and Paul F. Smart, "Life on Board a Mormon Emigrant Ship," *World Conference on Records: Preserving Our Heritage*, August 12-15, 1980, vol. 5, series 418: 1-34, 7, Family History Library.

³⁵Carl Eric Lindholm, "Diary," in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, compiled by Kate B. Carter, 20 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1969),

treated to wine and beer.”³⁶

The organization of the LDS companies gave them great advantages over unattached emigrants. Immediately, Church leaders divided the passengers into wards, each with an appointed leader who helped maintain order, enforce standards of cleanliness, care for the sick, set up schedules, hold worship services, and ensure that good feelings prevailed. Church leaders also held prayer services every morning and evening, and taught classes on various topics.

Several passengers who sailed with Karsti wrote accounts of the voyage. One passenger noted, “The voyage was very rough. I can remember the chest sliding and banging from side to side across the wooden floor and all the other chests and trunks with it.”³⁷ Storms occurred frequently, rocking the boat violently as waves washed over the deck, frightening the passengers.³⁸ Despite the challenges, one man reported, “Great unity existed among the Saints.”³⁹

On June 16, 1861, the *Monarch of the Sea* landed in New York. While Sweden had been at peace since 1814, this new land of liberty had just begun a bitter civil war. Evidence of the war surrounded Karsti’s group from the moment they landed. After disembarking from the ship, Karsti immediately saw “the military parading the streets of New York, and drumming up for volunteers to go and fight the south.”⁴⁰ They would travel in the shadow of the Civil War through much of their overland journey.⁴¹

The next phase of their trip included travel by train and boat and lasted a week and a half. Rail travel was no luxury, especially for

12:478.

³⁶Jenson, *History of the Scandinavian Mission*, 155.

³⁷Alma Elizabeth Mineer Felt, “Journal,” in *An Enduring Legacy*, 12 vols. (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1984), 7:196, in *Mormon Immigration Index*, LDS Church Archives.

³⁸Dean L. May, “Rites of Passage: The Gathering as Cultural Credo,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28 (Spring 2003): 28.

³⁹Pedar Nielsen, Diary, June 4, 1861, translated by Orson B. West, typescript, LDS Church Archives.

⁴⁰William Probert, Jr., “Autobiography,” in *Biography of William Riley and Hussler Ann Probert Stevens*, compiled and edited by Orvilla Ellred Stevens (N.p.: Privately printed, 1981), 56.

⁴¹Although the Civil War slowed immigration generally, it did not have this effect on the LDS immigration. In fact, in 1862 more Mormons

the Mormons, who almost always traveled in the cheapest cars, known fittingly as “emigrant cars.”

These crowded and uncomfortable train cars provided few eating and sleeping accommodations. The train cars usually lacked sanitary facilities and drinking water but had an abundance of noise, strong smells, dirt, lice, soot, and all sorts of jerking and jolting about; but the immigrants preferred those to sheep or cattle cars, which some emigrant companies had to use.⁴²

After several stops, the group arrived in Quincy, Illinois. On June 26, Karsti and the others took the steamship *Blackhawk* about twenty miles down and across the Mississippi River to Hannibal, Missouri, where they boarded another train. One person commented about this phase of the trip, “The ride was very bad as the cars were terrible.”⁴³

Travel across Missouri was particularly dangerous because of the residents’ conflicting sectional loyalties. Rather than let the Union control the railroads, southern sympathizers in Missouri tried to destroy them. This, combined with the general animosity of many Missourians toward Mormons, made the group nervous while traveling across the state. Often when crossing the war-ravaged country, the train-masters boarded over the windows and warned passengers to keep quiet.⁴⁴ In one place, a bridge had been burned and the train had to find an alternate route.⁴⁵ However, the group made it to St. Joseph, a town on the western border of Missouri, the next day without disaster. From here, they took another boat up the Missouri River to Florence (now part of Omaha, Nebraska).

crossed the plains to Utah than in any other previous year. This was partly due to the increased efficiency of the LDS emigration system. However, the Civil War itself also served as something of an impetus, increasing the urgency of many converts to reach Utah. Fred E. Woods, “East to West through North and South: Mormon Immigration during the Civil War,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 1 (2000): 8.

⁴²Stanley B. Kimball, “Sail and Rail Pioneers before 1869,” *BYU Studies* 35, no. 2 (1995): 30.

⁴³Nielsen, Diary, June 26, 1861.

⁴⁴John Staheli, “The Life of John and Barbara Staheli,” 2, *Mormon Immigration Index*, LDS Church Archives.

⁴⁵Elizabeth Staheli Walker, “History of Barbara Sophia Haberli Staheli,” *Mormon Immigration Index*, LDS Church Archives.

At that time, Florence was the designated outfitting place for Mormons continuing across the plains by wagon to Utah. Temporary dwellings for the hundreds of people who poured in and out regularly filled the town. Florence also stockpiled large quantities of supplies needed for the westward trek, available for the Saints to purchase. Immediately upon arrival, Karsti and the others in her group began making preparations to continue their trip to Utah.

The Saints of 1861 were the first to participate in the “down and back” plan, designed to reduce the cost of wagon travel. This would provide opportunities to gather to Utah for the growing number of poor Saints unable to complete the journey, while avoiding the hardships of the handcart pioneers. Church leaders also hoped to stimulate the Utah economy. According to the plan, wagon train leaders would come from Utah to Florence early in the spring, bringing extra cattle and Utah grain and other goods to sell to the converts or in the East. They would also bring oxen and wagons borrowed from Saints in Utah. The poor Saints would use these, while those who could afford it would purchase the surplus Utah cattle and other needed goods. The Utah teamsters would then lead the wagon trains to Utah, making the round trip in one season.⁴⁶

Since she was able to finance the journey herself, Karsti traveled in an independent company. Independent companies were composed of emigrants who could fund their own passage across the plains instead of relying on the Church teams. In 1861, eight of the twelve wagon trains (a total of 624 wagons) that left Florence for Utah were independent companies.⁴⁷ Karsti’s group, under the leadership of Samuel Woolley, consisted of 61 wagons and 338 people, most of them Scandinavian. Church leaders made an effort to group people of the same nationality for ease in communication and to make the trip more comfortable. On July 13, they set off toward Salt Lake City.

Their passage had only the usual problems and delays caused by bad weather, difficult roads, and runaway oxen. Woolley’s journal records their daily progress, usually about sixteen miles. At least two

⁴⁶William G. Hartley, “The Great Florence Fitout of 1861,” *BYU Studies* 24 (Summer 1984): 346–47. See also his “Brigham Young’s Overland Trails Revolution: The Creation of the ‘Down-and-Back’ Wagon-Train System, 1860–61,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 1–30.

⁴⁷Hartley, “The Great Florence Fitout,” 347, 367.

TABLE 2
KARSTI'S HUSBAND AND CHILDREN

Edmond Harris, born July 9, 1824, Long Crendon, Buckingham, England; married (1) Eliza Barrett; died September 23, 1886, in Gunnison, Sanpete County, Utah

Married (2) Kerstina ("Karsti") Nilsson (born August 19, 1843, died March 14, 1901 in Fremont, Wayne County, Utah) ca. early 1862

Children:

1. Mary Elisabeth, born December 31, 1862, in Millcreek, Salt Lake County; married Brigham Pierce July 6, 1887

2. Moroni Johns, born November 10, 1864, in Spring Lake Villa, Utah County; died December 10, 1921

3. Ephraim, born October 9, 1866, in Spring Lake Villa, Utah County

4. Chasty Margaret, born June 25, 1868, in Spring Lake Villa, Utah County; married John Albrecht November 27, 1885; died February 15, 1950

5. Rosanna, born July 19, 1870, in Spring Lake Villa; married Henry Albrecht in 1888; died March 15, 1952

6. Rachel Rebecca, born June 23, 1876, in Gunnison, Sanpete County; married Eli Curtis, died April 10, 1898

7. Joseph, born December 30, 1879, in Gunnison, Sanpete County; died June 1, 1884

8. Sarah Ellen, born June 15, 1881, in Gunnison, Sanpete County; married Brigham Pierce March 12, 1913; died November 28, 1941

emigrants died.⁴⁸ Another account describes encounters with friendly Indians as well as some minor disputes between travelers.⁴⁹

Finally, on September 22, 1861, the group arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. Many converts felt relief and joy at being in "Zion," but some also felt distress at the harsh desert scene. A Swedish traveler who had also come on the *Monarch of the Sea* recorded her mother's reaction. "With tears streaming down her pale cheeks, she made this remark, 'Is this Zion, and are we at the end of this long weary journey?'" The writer concluded that the desert "must have been a heart-breaking contrast to the beautiful home she had left in Sweden."⁵⁰

KARSTI'S LIFE IN UTAH

Soon after arriving, probably in early 1862, Karsti married Edmond Harris, a widower nearly twenty years her senior.⁵¹ For Edmond, this marriage was the beginning of a second family. Edmond, who worked as a "carman" (a poorly paid mover of merchandise with a horse-drawn cart) and his wife, Eliza Barrett Harris, a housemaid, had joined the LDS Church in January 1847. Rather than coming to Utah, they instead immigrated to Australia in 1849.⁵² In 1855, the couple had accumulated enough money for Eliza to sail for

⁴⁸Samuel Woolley, Journal, July-September 1861, microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives.

⁴⁹Nielsen, Diary August 1861.

⁵⁰Felt, "Journal," 200.

⁵¹No record exists of the original marriage, and their temple sealing occurred much later. Since Karsti did not arrive in Utah until September 1861 and their first child was born December 31, 1862, it seems likely that they married in early 1862.

⁵²It is not known why Edmond and Eliza went to Australia. Australia's gold rush did not occur until after their arrival, so it could not have been a motive. Interestingly, another Mormon man (William Barratt) and a Mormon family (Andrew and Elizabeth Anderson and their children) immigrated to Australia from England. They had been instructed to preach the gospel in Australia, prior to the arrival of missionaries (1851). Possibly Edmond and Eliza had a similar responsibility. Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia* (Laie, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1991), 23-27. Edmond and Eliza emigrated as part of a government-assisted program that underwrote the emigration to Australia for two-thirds of its 170,000 emigrants between 1831 and 1850. Ken Inglis, *Aus-*

Utah with a group of Mormon emigrants aboard the *Julia Ann* with their two children, Maria and Lister. Edmond planned to join them after he had saved more money.⁵³ The *Julia Ann*, however, was shipwrecked, and Eliza and Lister were among the five casualties. Although Maria survived, she has been lost to history, never appearing in any records with Edmond again. Edmond left Australia in 1857 aboard the *Lucas*. He landed in California and spent some time there before continuing on to Utah.⁵⁴

Edmond and Karsti first resided briefly in Millcreek, south of Salt Lake, where their first child was born. By 1864, they had settled in Spring Lake Villa, a new settlement in Utah County, halfway between Payson and Santaquin. During their eleven-year stay in Spring Lake, Karsti and Edmond added at least three children to their family. (See Table 2.)⁵⁵ At the time, only a handful of families lived in Spring Lake. The Harris family probably built their new residence themselves, living in a small, temporary dwelling or dugout in the meantime.

Karsti had to adapt to new circumstances in Utah. Life in "Zion" was anything but easy. First, there was the challenge of learning another language. Almost immediately after joining the LDS Church in Sweden, Karsti likely began studying English, an attainment that was

Australian Colonists: An Exploration of Social History 1788-1870 (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 21.

⁵³John Devitry-Smith, "The Wreck of the *Julia Ann*," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 3.

⁵⁴The Australian Saints on board the *Lucas* headed immediately for San Bernardino, whose population was evacuated to Utah shortly after Edmond's arrival. According to the 1860 U.S. census, Edmond was likely living in San Francisco, perhaps looking for Maria, since her ship docked there. No records in Utah contain information about Edmond and Maria together. Maria probably died as a child in California or became integrated into another family.

⁵⁵Likely the family had one or more additional children in Spring Lake, and perhaps also another child in Gunnison, who are not included on family group sheets. The spacing of the children shows gaps large enough to include additional births, especially between 1870 and 1876. According to the 1900 U.S. census, Karsti had eleven children, only five of them still living. Family records show only eight children.

heavily stressed for converts.⁵⁶ This effort continued during her voyage. Marrying an English-speaking spouse would have accelerated the process.

Making a living in Utah was also much different than in Sweden. In Utah frontier towns, in addition to using any skills they might possess to produce needed goods, nearly everyone farmed. This would have been an adjustment for the Harris family. Edmond, the son of a blacksmith, had never farmed before. Although Karsti grew up on a farm, Utah's arid land, which required irrigation, was nothing like the fertile plains of Skåne. Bad weather and thick swarms of grasshoppers periodically threatened the crops. Farmers in Spring Lake also grew a wider variety of crops than in southern Sweden: corn, sugarcane, potatoes, tobacco, and hemp among others.⁵⁷

As in Sweden, Karsti likely labored in the fields. However, the isolation of their location in Utah required pioneers to obtain a level of self-sufficiency unknown in their former countries. Until the railroad was completed in 1869 providing a link to eastern goods, Utah residents had little choice but to make nearly every item they needed including clothing, furniture, and tools.

In addition, Karsti's "village" in Utah differed considerably from her Swedish village. She had fewer neighbors in the sparsely settled village; and in Spring Lake, she probably had more Indian than white neighbors. One was the famed Black Hawk, leader of the Ute Indians in the Black Hawk War. Spring Lake was his birthplace and would be his death place in 1870. When the Harris family first arrived, interactions between the Mormons and the Indians in Spring Lake were friendly. However, in 1865 when war broke out, relations began deteriorating. The Spring Lake residents chose not to follow advice from Brigham Young to move temporarily to Santaquin during the hostilities and instead stayed in a local home that they converted to a fort during the worst of the conflict.⁵⁸

In 1874, Karsti and her family moved south to Gunnison, located in Sanpete County. Her brother, Nils, had been baptized in August 1862 and emigrated in early 1863 with his wife, Karna, and their

⁵⁶Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 128.

⁵⁷Spring Lake Branch, Utah Stake, "Manuscript History and Historical Reports," LDS Church Archives.

⁵⁸Brigham Young, Letter to Benjamin F. Johnson, Spring Lake Villa, January 30, 1866, LDS Church Archives.

children, settling in nearby Mount Pleasant.⁵⁹ At this time, Sanpete County was known as “Little Denmark” because of its large Scandinavian population. Although much larger than Spring Lake, Gunnison was still only a small, rural community. In 1870, a few years before their arrival, a postmaster indicated where ninety families lived in the area and described the fields there as “barren and desolate.”⁶⁰

As soon as they arrived, the Harris family, along with about three hundred other people, joined the newly organized effort at communal living known as the United Order.⁶¹ Their contribution of “stock” was one ox, an indication of their straitened means.⁶² For a short time, committees directed a range of activities including farming, herding, salt boiling, and harness making. The United Order also took over the gristmill and the cooperative store. Like most of the United Orders started at this time, the one in Gunnison was short-lived. Efforts at community building continued, though. While the Harris family lived in Gunnison, residents completed a Relief Society building and a tithing house, and also helped construct the Manti Temple.⁶³

In Gunnison, the Harris family grew to include at least eight children, of whom at least one died. The family had to work hard just to survive. A local history reported, “In addition to caring for her family and helping with the hard work, each pioneer mother waged a con-

⁵⁹Nils Nilsson, Baptismal Record, Vallby LDS Branch. They sailed on the *John J. Boyd*, which arrived in New York on June 1, 1863.

⁶⁰Centennial Committee, eds., *Memory Book to Commemorate Gunnison Valley's Centennial, 1859-1959* (Gunnison, Utah: Gunnison Centennial Book Committee, 1959), 48.

⁶¹The United Order movement began under Brigham Young in 1874, drawing on earlier instructions and attempts under Joseph Smith. Participants devoted all their resources to the Church and were assigned a “stewardship” over which they had control. By the fall of 1874, two hundred separate community United Orders had been established, at least on paper. Because participation was voluntary, many barely functioned and only a few lasted more than a year. Dean L. May, “The United Order Movement,” *Utah History Encyclopedia*, retrieved on July 1, 2004, from <http://www.media.utah.edu/UHE/u/UNITEDORDER.html>.

⁶²Gunnison Ward, Sanpete Stake, “Historical Record, 1874-1894,” LDS Church Archives.

⁶³Centennial Committee, *Memory Book*, 49-51.

stant war on the lizards, snakes, and rodents that would share her dwelling in spite of all she could do.”⁶⁴ Chasty, the only one of Karsti’s daughters to write an autobiography, recalled: “I spent most of my time helping mother weave rag carpets. We were very poor and sometimes didn’t have all the dry bread we needed to eat. When I was twelve, I started to hire out anywhere I got a chance. I earned my own clothes and helped Mother and Father all I could.”⁶⁵

Records in Utah reveal little about Karsti and her family, as most are sketchy during this early period, but all emphasize the hardscrabble life in rural Utah during this time. The other aspect of Karsti’s life revealed by the scanty surviving information is her continued commitment to the religion she embraced as a teenager. Ward records in Gunnison show the family’s continued involvement, including dates the family moved in and out of the ward, baptism dates for two of the children and a birth and blessing date for one child.⁶⁶ On August 28, 1875, Karsti received a patriarchal blessing, again an act that shows her faithfulness.⁶⁷ He advised her: “Listen to the councils [sic] of God’s servants and press forward to serve him and thou shalt wield an influence that shall be felt by all around thee for good.” In addition, many of Karsti’s descendants remained active members of the LDS Church, suggesting that they learned principles of the gospel in her home.

In 1886, after twelve years in Gunnison, Edmond died. Karsti moved farther south to Fremont, a new settlement in Wayne County, where her daughter (Chasty Harris Albrecht) and son-in-law (John Albrecht) lived with their family. Karsti died in Fremont on March 14, 1901, age fifty-seven.

CONCLUSION

Today, little remains of Karsti’s life except her descendants.

⁶⁴Ibid., 65.

⁶⁵Albrecht, “Autobiography.”

⁶⁶Harris Family, Moving In, Moving Out, Baptism and Burial Records, Gunnison Ward Records, microfilm #25977, Family History Library. The lack of baptismal or blessing information for other children does not necessarily indicate that these ordinances did not occur. The records are very incomplete.

⁶⁷Karsti Nilsdotter, Patriarchal Blessing, photocopy in my possession.

Even the location of her grave is unknown.⁶⁸ The Swedish language, customs, and stories were lost to time, even among her family. No information about her personality traits or insights into her thoughts or feelings has survived. However, assumptions can be made about the kind of person Karsti was based on her life choices. Karsti must have been an independent thinker, willing to go against the norms and expectations around her. She must have possessed courage to make the decision to join the Church and immigrate to America at such a young age. Most of all, though, Karsti must have possessed deep reservoirs of perseverance to endure the arduous journey followed by the continual hard work and struggle for survival she faced throughout her life in Utah. Other Swedish immigrant converts likely possessed similar characteristics.

Karsti's legacy continues, both individually and as a part of a greater movement. The Scandinavian Saints made up an important component of the Mormon immigrant converts. By 1900, people of Scandinavian origin made up 16 percent of Utah's total population, giving Utah a "remarkably Nordic cast."⁶⁹ Karsti's story is the story of these people who left behind all that they knew to face the unknown in the unsettled West. Despite resistance in their home country, a perilous journey, and only the promise of building a home on the frontier desert, thousands like Karsti chose this path.

⁶⁸Both the daughter and son-in-law with whom Karsti lived at the end of her life are buried in Fremont, but Karsti is not. Nor is she buried in Gunnison where Edmond lies.

⁶⁹Mulder, *Homeward to Zion*, 102, 197.