

"Letters from the Promised Land": The Ambiguous Radicalization of a Swedish Immigrant, 1928-1934

Eva St. Jean

Volume 53, 2004

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t53not01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

St. Jean, E. (2004). "Letters from the Promised Land": The Ambiguous Radicalization of a Swedish Immigrant, 1928-1934. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 53, 203-222.

NOTE AND DOCUMENTS

“Letters from the Promised Land”: The Ambiguous Radicalization of a Swedish Immigrant, 1928-1934

Eva St. Jean

IN MARCH 1928, 25 years old and bursting with optimism, Martin Johansson left the town of Ulricehamn in south-western Sweden to try his luck as a worker in Canada. It was not easy for a farmer's son to finance such a journey. Like so many others, cap in hand, he had to ask for a loan at the local bank, which his grandfather and four other men co-signed. Once in Canada, Martin proved to be a prolific writer, sending more than 100 colourful letters home, tracing his journeys in Alberta and British Columbia (BC).¹ The full extent of Martin's correspondence is unknown, since the only letters saved were those addressed to his family, in particular to his mother, grandfather, and brother Folke. The letters indicate that Martin was not only optimistic but also politically naive and bound by tradition and the Lutheran faith.

¹ There are several examples of published letter collections from immigrants in the 19th century. A classic study is Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America* (Coral Gables, Florida 1972). For a Canadian example, see Wendy Cameron *et al*, eds., *English Immigrant Voices: Labourers' Letters from Upper Canada in the 1830s* (Montreal 2000). For a Swedish-language publication of letters from a Finland-Swedish sojourner in Canada, see Erik Storhannus, *I Canadas ödemarker och i fädernebygden. Axplock ur en brevväxling 1926-1933* (Vasa, Finland 1998). For an innovative means of using letters in historical studies, see Stephen Davies, *The Canadian Letters and Images Project*, <http://www.mala.bc.ca/history/letters>.

When the Depression upended his plans, Martin's time in Canada was spent drifting, dead broke and unemployed, in an often fruitless chase after work that would pay for room and board, and turn a few dollars toward the repayment of his outstanding debt.

The letter collection, from which the enclosed Johansson correspondence is drawn, carries the ironic title, "Martin in Harvered — Letters from the Promised Land, 1928-1934."² The letters provide glimpses into the contradictory and confusing experiences that shaped the working class during times of extreme distress, and inform on how immigrant workers in Canada perceived labour conditions and came to terms with new social circumstances. Important indications of how the depression hit the logging industry in the interior of BC more than a year before the crash of the Wall Street market in October 1929 are also conveyed. Martin felt frissons of panic as his savings dried up and he found himself competing for temporary, low-income jobs in isolated locations. Painfully aware that his failure to pay the loan instalments meant an extra burden for his grandfather, the Depression scarred Martin's faith in capitalism. His letters provide a unique insight into the complicated and ambiguous birth of a radical political consciousness.

Martin's first employer in Canada, a Norwegian-Canadian farmer – J. G. Grue – lived just south of Edmonton, Alberta. He paid his crew between \$30 and \$40 a month, which was a relatively good wage for agricultural work. Martin was pleased with the work, his new employer, and the new country:

I am with a good & kind family that looks after my best. Your fears that it would be bad here were not correct. I have arrived to God-fearing people who mean well & who want to see me read the bible & go to church. Each time we sit down for a meal the farmer's father-in-law or his little girl says grace, & we always wash up before coming to the table.³

The working hours are a bit long but time pass quickly & it's not any worse than in Sweden, on the contrary. They are very hospitable here & the farm workers can come along when they [the family] go for a drive. Last Sunday we visited a Norwegian church further down in Alberta & then we went to Grue's brother for dinner.... There is no need to worry about me. I am just as fine as if I was home & I have not run into any bad people yet. Farmers here in Canada are honest & God fearing & industrious ... Yes, it is a rich country that I have arrived to, millions [of dollars-worth] still slumbering in the wilderness. Good earth, coal, silver, gold, oil & everything that is needed. Canada is a great & rich country, thousands of opportunities if one can remain happy & healthy.⁴

²Frida Unge, 15:17:15A, "Martin i Harvered. Brev från lyckans förlovade land 1928-1934" (hereafter FU), The Swedish Institute of Emigration, Växjö, Sweden (hereafter SIE). The original letters are in care of Martin Johansson's son, Roy Unge, Stockholm, Sweden.

³FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Wilhelm Johansson, 20 April 1928. The letters, which have been translated from Swedish to English by the author, are replete with ironic twists, plays on words, and reproduced dialogues that Martin leaves to the reader to figure out. All care has been taken to retain Martin's voice throughout the translations, and explanations have been kept to a minimum.

⁴FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 13 May 1928.



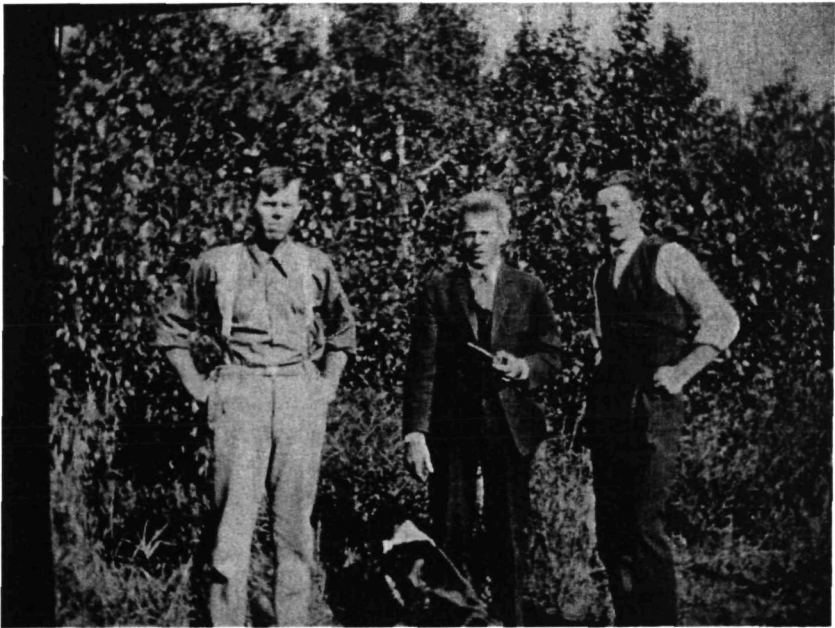
Martin Johansson's parents and siblings in Sweden.

Enskade 2 goda arbetare som ville lära sig plastring
 det är det samma som rappa hus, vi gick dit, det
 var en yrkesskola. Vi skulle få 1.25 om dagen till,
 hade tjänat 100 dollar å sedan var vi tillbaka
 Å herr Glerre Gud det tog ju hela sommaren
 å på 1.25 kunde vi inte leva här. Nej det fick
 vara. Ja så gick vi till ~~den~~ centrumet å staden
 igen å ställde oss. det börja bli kallt å inte kunde
 vi köpa till mat när det kunde vara en del här
 å det var det samma som hände som vi stod där å
 filosoferade över livets ljusa å glada sidor, fick vi
 höra en tjock gubbe fråga oss "hur det står till på
 engelska, å inte något vidare vi var utan arbete å utan
 pengar å gränsat hungriga. Vill om vi vill gå

Letter, Martin Johansson to brother Folke Johansson, Vancouver, 6 June 1929.



Martin Johansson by the Columbia River, British Columbia.



Martin and unnamed navy friends in Nelson, BC. [Martin wrote: Me and navy pals in Nelson, B.C., Canada]

Although Grue demanded a more gruelling work-tempo during the late summer harvest, Martin remained optimistic. He was used to hard work. But the monotony of farm work and the relatively low remuneration for it made him long for the winter, when he planned to move west to the better-paid British Columbia forest industry:

When you see the moon send him a greeting to your kin far away in the Wild West, thousands of miles from home, alone on alien soil. Well, don't let this troubled you, brother, for this Swede can still take care of himself just like all the other Swedes, trust me on that. One does not suffer, only the terrible loneliness. But soon it's harvest time & then it will be livelier around here, & after that's over I guess I'll try out life in a logging camp in BC. I hope I can get work so I don't have to be unemployed throughout the long winter.⁵

When the harvest was in and Grue had dismissed his workers, Martin packed his bags and headed to BC, where he started working for Olof Hanson, a Swedish railway tie contractor who also doubled as the Swedish Consul in British Columbia. Martin was freshly installed in Olson's Decker Lake camp, but had yet to work his first shift when he wrote:

Everyone is complaining about this country over here, but they complain too much. Because one can certainly get better work here than at home. But times are definitely not as good now as they were earlier. I am happy that I came to a good camp & that I have work the whole winter.⁶

His pen rasped a sharper note after only a week as a "Canadian lumberman":

It is hard work making ties & you get 20 cents a piece but then you have to cut your way through the whole grove [of trees] & pull the ties sometimes up to 50 meter, & put them in a pile. Well, it is certainly hard work this. If one shall make any money. The food costs \$1.25 & I haven't cut 19 ties a day yet, but perhaps I get better when I get more practice.... One cannot make a fortune here, & all one's earnings are eaten up by travels & other expenses. I had sixty dollars when I left Hey Lake & that's not spending one cent needlessly. I have not tasted one single glass of beer or spirits since I arrived in Hey Lake. The trip [to Decker Lake] cost 30 dollars, & then I snatched a ride for free [on the train] for a full day ... I don't advice to come here; stay where you are. It is a damned country this. Everything is expensive & only work & no amusements. I won't see a woman all winter.... Here in BC they work Sunday & Monday. No religion, just swear words & money. No one has any peace of mind.... It was good at the farm, they were churchly people & there were peace & tranquillity but here it's only work, what do they live for here[?] I cannot understand it, old Swedes who have not been home for 15 - 30 years, & who live most of their time in the woods. But it is so that when they have finished a job they go to a city & drink up the money & then it is gone. Well, of course, some are married & have family & then they have something to live for. I never thought that Canada

⁵FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 23 August 1928.

⁶FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 6 October 1928.

208 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

would have been such an empty land without interest. Imagine what a life, lie in a hovel all winter long & not even so much as a female cook.⁷

Disgusted with these working conditions, Johansson and an unnamed friend left Hanson's camp.

We went to Smithers, arrived in the evening & asked if there was any work in town. No, there were no jobs, but if we went to H-camp [Olof Hanson's] in Decker Lake we would get work for sure.

Next day we went to Prince Rupert out by the Pacific Ocean; we were there two to three days asking for work but there was nothing. It would have been great getting a job at the pool elevators ... but many in front of us had to turn around. We went to the employment bureau & asked for work. Yes, in Decker Lake & in Levery they needed tie makers. Well, we won't go there anymore, no matter what happens.⁸

After a period of drifting between Prince Rupert, Terrace, and Smithers, the immigrant Swede's fortunes seemed to improve when he walked into John Erickson's tie camp in Houston:

We could tell that the forest was better here so we decided to stay. We are only three men. We live alone deep in the forest & cook for ourselves. It is much nicer here & we can live more cheaply & we can maybe cut more [ties] & what's better, right near here is a road leading to a mine that will start operating this spring. [Mining] is the best kind of work in Canada since one can stay all year long, but it's difficult to get hired.⁹

The forest proved to be as unforgiving in Houston as it had been in Decker Lake, and in early January Martin despaired:

Well, there's a difference between Sweden & 'Tieish' Columbia. If one could find another job one would leave immediately because harder work than here is not to be found on God's black earth. If one could cut 20-25 ties a day it would be ok, but that is not possible. Forests like this I have never seen before. I did cut 20 ties today, but I worked harder than I ever have done in Sweden, & then I still hadn't pulled the devils together. Pardon me. Some ties are between 12 to 15 inches wide & 8 inches thick & one must drag them 50 to 100 meter in the worst of terrain, over windfalls & tops, over holes in the ground & steep hills, & in two feet of snow. Then one must cut a road through the clearing so wide that they can drive through with four horses & the ties across on the sled, at least 11 feet wide & 15 to 20 in the corners. That means cutting down great firs & dry trees & clearing away thousands of windfalls, & then dragging the ties to the road & stacking them in great piles. You can only cut down redwood, & that's only a tree here & there. Fir & bushes are by the thousands. I cut a 150 meter long road for 24 ties the other day ... This is by far the worst kind of work I have ever done, & what

⁷FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 14 October 1928.

⁸FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 19 November 1928.

⁹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 19 November 1928.

a life one lives, getting up at 6 in the morning making breakfast, going out & cutting ties, & making dinner when one gets home. Nothing to read & nothing to amuse oneself with, more than a deck of cards that lies untouched since one is too tired to play; but why did I ever come here? But everything will work out well if I can keep my health & good spirit. I am healthy & in pretty good mood, although I swear sometimes over the ties, [as] when I get the hook in a big one & it lets go as I'm pulling so that I fall backwards & hit my behind on a stump or a windfall.¹⁰

During this first winter as a "Canadian" lumberman, Martin occasionally brought his daily wage up to six dollars, which allowed him to send part payments to cover the Swedish bank loan. But with the spring thaw he returned to the ranks of the unemployed, and his winter savings melted away. At times he washed dishes in a restaurant, but that did not even pay his room and board. After 3 weeks of unemployment he reluctantly hired on to the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR) for 30 cents an hour, 10 hours a day. The low wages and the poor working conditions drove him away, however, and together with a man he referred to as "Skåningen," Martin quit the CPR.¹¹ With less than fifteen dollars each in their pockets, the two walked from Terrace to Prince Rupert, where they decided to take the next ferry to Vancouver. The price of the two-day boat ride was \$10.65 per person, but after paying for three days' room and board in Prince Rupert their collective purse was ten cents short, which they begged from a bystander. Literally penniless, they boarded the boat:

We knew that we wouldn't get anything to eat for two days, & we also knew that when we arrived in Vancouver we would arrive in a big city with many unemployed & perhaps with no chances of either work, food or rooms. I almost started to regret having left. We lived through the night & the day after & the next night & that next day until around 11 am without food & so hungry that our bodies were screaming. Then, finally, Skåningen talked to another passenger & told him that we hadn't eaten for two days. You haven't? — Here's two dollars, go & eat. We went & ate as soon as dinner was ready. It cost one dollar for two men. One dollar left; we were rich.¹²

But the competition for work was fierce in Vancouver:

We went to an employment office; there was lots of opportunity for a craftsman, but nothing that we could take on. Well, they wanted someone who could nail together boxes. How many boxes can you make in one day, they asked us. I said 20 — 30 boxes; Skåningen said 100. Ha Ha Ha, no, in this country you must make between 600-900 a day. Oh, jeepers, we can't do that. No, we walked away. To heck with them & their boxes.¹³

¹⁰FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Bernhard Johansson, 9 January 1929.

¹¹The name is based on the Swedish province, Skåne.

¹²FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 1 May 1929.

¹³FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 1 May 1929.

210 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

The two men could only find temporary work, a couple of days at a time, but not enough to pay their keep. Johansson feared that the only work available was too dangerous for the unskilled:

One can for certain find work in the forest here and on Vancouver Island. But the trees are giants and as wide around as the kitchen at home in Harvered. And the work is mortally dangerous out there. All well-paid rough labour here is deadly dangerous. And one cannot get into a trade when one doesn't know the language well enough.¹⁴

Had I been a painter or a carpenter or a bricklayer or have had any kind of trade at all I had found work, but for one who only knows rough labour it is difficult to find work in V[ancouver].¹⁵

Eventually Martin pawned his suit for six dollars, and his friend Skåningen tried begging on street corners, until finally a CPR line outside of Vancouver hired them:

Well, working in an extra gang is not such fine work; it provides poor food and lodging in a railway car on old straw where perhaps 300 Russians and Poles, Serbs, Hungarians, Chinese and all sorts have slept before us. But one doesn't ask about that now. One is in Canada and not in Sweden. We were on the Canadian Pacific a few miles from Vancouver and I had been there still if not for a few details. You see, on this kind of work one does not get paid the first fourteen days but have to wait for a full month. And I was soon without snuff and my shoes started to fall apart. The other guy needed pants and it's impossible to borrow a cent from anyone at work since all are without money, because no one accepts work on an extra gang until they are broke. There were Swedes, and the rest English, Scots, Irish, Greeks and other kinds. So when we had been there I think for 14 days we found out that if we stay longer than 14 days the boss sends in the numbers of hours we worked and then it's impossible to get paid for another 14 days even if we quit.¹⁶

Martin and his friend did quit, and headed east on a freight train.

There was no work either in Revelstoke or Field, but rumours of jobs in Calgary spurred them on. Dirty and dishevelled they arrived in the Albertan urban centre at 3:30 AM:

[After leaving the train] we broke up into groups of two. Skåningen and I met a city police officer. He said: Where the hell did you boys come from? From Vancouver. Did you beat the freight? Yes. Are you broke? No. Alright.

¹⁴FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 1 May 1929.

¹⁵FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 6 June 1929.

¹⁶FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 6 June 1929. For more on how the Canadian Pacific Railway wage system hurt migrant labour, see Edmund W. Bradwin, *The Bunkhouse Man: A Study of Work and Pay in the Camps of Canada, 1903-1914* (Toronto 1972), 53-90.



Martin Johansson, 1928.

You see, the city police have nothing to do with the railroad. It's the railway police who get you for riding without a ticket.¹⁷

Martin managed to get a couple of weeks' work painting houses for 50 cents an hour, 11 hours a day, which raised his spirits and allowed him to buy some new clothes and send for the suit that he had pawned in Vancouver. But even painting houses was different from Sweden, and Martin noted with irony that workmanship was less important than speed:

I think that I painted a bit too carefully to start with. I painted according to the Swedish method but my boss got angry & said I was working too slowly and that if I didn't speed up he would only pay me 40 cents an hour. That's when I slathered it on as fast as I could & then he was satisfied and said I could stay until the job was done.¹⁸

Despite the economic insecurity, Martin saw certain attractions in his situation and expressed the sense of camaraderie existing among the unemployed. But his

¹⁷FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 6 June 1929.

¹⁸FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 15 June 1929.

letters oscillated between cautious optimism and a mixture of impotence and rage. In June 1929 he wrote, "The people are smiling and happy even if ever so poor. I can see bums, I can't call them beggars, since it's not begging in an ordinary sense, nor are they drifters or vagrants but they are workers without work ... it's so common ... that there is no shame involved."¹⁹ A month later his growing fears fed intolerance against other ethnic groups, but such discrimination was Janus-faced, and Martin's role fluctuated from aggressor to victim.

There is much more misery here than in the old country. And it's the same in the States. It is only bullshit - lies, everything about America. Some people in the past may have made a fortune in America but 96% or perhaps 99% have gone through life working hard for their living. Wages are down & the price of living is up considerably since the war. Earlier, Scandinavians made good money on the railway, but now bohunks are working = Poles & Galaciers & such people. Goddamned blacks, they swarm like the grasshoppers of Egypt, for 30 or 25 cents an hour.

By the way, Scandinavians are not that well liked any more, just because Sweden was on Germany's side during the war, & the hatred grows beneath the smiling surface. And Swedes are such good workers that workers from other nations hate them even more. In any job where there are many differed people Scandinavians get the heaviest & most difficult work. The only place where the Scandinavian has priority is in the forest & on wheat elevator constructions. Because the work there is so hard that other nations cannot handle it; although, it's not a question of nationality when one seeks work, because the one who comes first gets the job. But on some places the bohunks get priority since those poor idiots will gladly work for food alone. We were looking for work at the creosote where they boil the ties, we planned load ties on piecework, but the boss told us: give me bohunks & Hungarians, because they stay on the jobs. Swedes quit right away ... Yes, it's not immigrants, but cattle that Canada imports by the wagonload, & one's supposed to stay in such a country.

But I hope that you are all well and that none of you get the notion in your head to go to the promised land in the West, the land that flows of milk and honey - in the arse of the Big Boss.²⁰

Exhausting all opportunities for work in Calgary, Johansson jumped the rails again, riding the proverbial rods. He first fought fires in Golden, BC, but eventually returned to Vancouver where he felt at home in the Swedish community.

Vancouver is a fine city & cheap to live here & warm year around so if I find work here I can't wish for anything better. I can get things, & see things that even pretty rich folks at home cannot afford to have & see.... Just think if one could find work here. Here are Swedish cafés, Swedish hotels, Swedish clubs, Swedish dances, a Lutheran church, a large & fine church that I visited last Sunday. I imagined that I sat at home in Gällstad's church, plus there is a whole bunch of other Swedish & Norwegian churches and mission houses. There's a Swedish newspaper & much other things Swedish so one can feel at home here. So you understand

¹⁹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 15 June 1929.

²⁰FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 6 July 1929.

why I so gladly drift to this place. It's almost like coming home when I enter a Swedish place here.²¹

Vancouver offered certain amenities and congenial surroundings, to be sure, but no work. Bitter times drove Martin back to camps in the interior, where he was forced to compete for work with other desperate men who all tried to explain the inexplicable by casting blame on each other:

You cannot imagine how it is here because it has never been this bad in Sweden. At every [railway] station there are men camped out in the forest & going around begging. I ran out of money in V[ancouver] & although it started to get cold, I & a Swedish student that I was with in a tie camp last winter took off with 85 cents in our pockets. We went to Karnlops [sic], Sickamas [sic], Revelstone [sic] & Golden, where I had worked putting out forest fires. No work; full with men. We lived on bread & sometimes coffee, but there were many days without a bite. Went from place to place, it was damned cold at nights, we either slept in a freight-train car or in the woods at a fire without blankets & without food & frost all around us.

From Golden we went south, to Kanal Flate [sic], where we heard there would be forest work. We arrived, full with men in the camps & full of men in the bush. Onwards to Cranbroke [sic], nothing there either. As we were leaving, my friend made it up on the train because he wasn't carrying anything, but I had my pack-sack so I didn't dare to go near the station because of the police but waited a bit on the outskirts, but the train went by too fast so when I ran up & tried to jump on a step of a freight car it yanked me so I flew in between the cars and I felt the wheel brush against my leg, but I didn't let go and was dragged along for a while before I ... managed to pull [myself] up ... & [I] cut a hole in my knee, otherwise I didn't get hurt one bit, but I had a piece of cheese & a jar of jam in the pack-sack that flew from here to the nearest birch.²²

From Cranbrook I went on my own to Lumberton, a sawmill, I got to ride for a while in a car. "No work." From thereon to a mine ... No work. I stayed the night there, got a cup of coffee & a little bun for 10 cents from a Chinese the next morning, & on that food I walked for 23 English miles to Yak [sic], where I stayed over in the CPR barrack for sawmill workers. CPR has a big sawmill & several logging camps 8 miles from here ... I went to the camps & asked, but no results. A Norwegian ... gave me 1 dollar & 20 cents. It was packed with men in Yak [sic] & that night I took the first freight train west.

²¹ Martin Johansson to Wilhelm Johansson, 1 October 1929.

²² There are several similar experiences that did not end happily. William Quilty, for example, was found beside the railroad track with both legs amputated. *Salmon Arm Observer*, 29 October 1931. There was a similar notice in *Prince Rupert Daily News* of a nameless man who fell off a freight train and died when both feet were cut off. *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 12 October 1935. See also Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years 1929–1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto 1997), 146. One of Broadfoot's informants remembers having seen "too many bodies, guys with bodies cut in two, legs off, head off, to think anybody could hop a freight."

Martin fell asleep on the train, and ended up too far south, in the United States. Fearful of the border guards, he had to sneak back into Canada.

So around 10 pm I crossed the border without knowing it, because I was fast asleep.... [T]he border guards [walked beside the train] & shone [their flashlights] into the cars & on me but said nothing.... Finally I got off ... and wandered back to Canada again. No one said a word to me. When was on the Canadian side I met a bloke with a strong lantern. I thought it was the brakeman so I kept on walking. When we passed each other I could see that it was a police or border guard. He didn't say a word....

I jumped up on top of the locomotive of a train that was heading to Kootenay Landing. It had snowed & rained the whole day so the locomotive was covered in coal & soot & snow & water to sit on, & then it became frosty & a starry night - ghastly. Imagine, several hours ... before I could get down.²³

Johansson's misery was shared by countless of other men. He also found that other workers who competed for the same jobs questioned his position in the working class.²⁴

There was no work in Proctor. About 50 men lay waiting, so I & two other Swedes went to Nelson. We went to the Salvation Army & begged for supper but didn't get any until we chopped wood for one hour. Then we got three small sandwiches & a cold cup of coffee. We went out in the jungle to look for a camp but we found neither hobos nor fires, so we started our own fire.²⁵ Then arrived 5 Canadians & wanted to sleep there too. Which they could, but they wanted to have the best place at the fire so we were arguing all night. They tore a strip off us & off all Swedes in Canada & said that the Swedes had ruined the country so that now a white man could not find any work. We Swedes are not counted as white in this country any more.

²³FU SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 31 October 1929, One "survivor" of the Depression remembers that while it was common to ride on top of railway cars in the summer, the winter frost made it "a quick way to die." Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years*, 146.

²⁴Much has been said about the racialization of Jewish and Irish immigrants in North America. Anglo-Canadians were also quick to assign racial labelling to groups that were not normally associated with racial slurs. For other testimonies of Swedes who found themselves declared "non-white," see Eva St Jean, "From Defiance to Defence: Swedish-Canadian Ethnic Awareness during the Two World Wars," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 34 (2002), 66-68. For a discussion on the problematization of whiteness among Ukrainians in Canada, see Vic Satzewich, "Whiteness Limited: Racialization and the Construction of 'Peripheral Europeans'," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 66 (November 2000), 271-289. David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York 1991) opened up a debate on the usefulness of whiteness studies in the complete issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall 2001).

²⁵The "jungle" was a term commonly used for places where the unemployed drifters gathered, whether in the red-light districts of the cities, or around camp fires along the rail lines. See Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years*, 144-145.

So in the end we left them at 7 in the morning, & later on the day we went back to Proctor & then we started walking the whole rail construction, camp after camp, from gang to gang, asking for work at all these places & got some food but no work the first day, uphill and downhill through the wildest of mountains and keeping a close look-out for the dynamiting, but the next day — today — first one of us got work, & after awhile us other two got work.²⁶

It thus seems that by redefining and assigning values according to race, workers attempted to protect their position in the workplace against competing ethnic groups. David Goutor suggests that Canadian workers linked whiteness with Britishness, which fostered a sense of “themselves as ‘civilized’ people who deserved higher wages and better working conditions.”²⁷ While Martin at times seemed to sympathize with the frustration expressed by Canadian workers, he was never able to connect the racial construction that identified him as “non-white” with his own ethnic prejudices. The collective subjugation of workers encouraged a domino-like chain of blame that drove Martin to strike against those below him in the working-class hierarchy, just as Canadian workers scapegoated him.

Chinese, Japanese, & Hindu who work for 25 cents an hour. At every sawmill in Vancouver it is crawling of goddamned yellow people. 50% working people in V[ancouver] belongs to the yellow race. So does 30-40% of the business. The railroads are run by “bohunks” = East Europeans. Swedes neither can nor want to work that cheap. Swedes can only get the most gruelling jobs, & these are starting to disappear.

The Chinese can live on rice, & Bohunks on bread, but a Scandinavian wants to have a real meal once in a while. What do they mean? Yes, that the emigrants should build up the country so that the Englishmen & the native Canadians can make a good deal. Or rather, CPR, CPR.²⁸

And one is hated wherever one goes, at work & in town & everywhere. Crazy Swede or Goddamned black bastard or outsiders, those are the names you get now, from all. Why[?], yes, thousands native-born Canadians are without work & starve in their own country while another has work & food. One feels like a criminal when one thinks about it. But why did they trick us to come here, & what is the reason behind the unemployment & the terrible times that began one year after that I arrived?²⁹

Immigrant labourers such as Johansson not only experienced the ways economic pressures skewed their consciousness but also confronted a general contempt for human life that employers often exhibited toward unprotected migrant workers.

²⁶FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 31 October 1929.

²⁷Catherine Carstairs, “Defining Whiteness: Race, Class, and Gender Perspectives in North American History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall 2001), 204.

²⁸FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 26 January 1930.

²⁹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 14 July 1931.

[O]ut here life is without value. If someone dies out here they dig him down in some cave in the mountain or sink him in the lake & then he is forgotten, maybe no one knew wherefrom he was or if he had relatives in the old country. One guy blew himself up with dynamite the other day. He committed suicide & was a Swede or a Norwegian. They threw him in the lake, disappeared & forgotten, [and] perhaps in the old country some mother & father or wife wonders where he was & why he never writes. Perhaps they ask for him through the Swedish-American newspapers or at the consulate. But no one knows where he is. That way, thousands of emigrants have disappeared without anybody knowing what happened. But many others just get into trouble; they sink deeper & deeper & don't bother writing.³⁰

Even Christmas in a small, non-unionized logging camp brought little to be cheerful about.

Now I shall describe Christmas. We arrived in a camp 17 miles away from the railroad. Old bearded men, mostly Frenchmen & the odd Swede. Not a sign of Christmas, [and] they [the crew] lie in their old beds staring up to the ceiling like some jailbirds. Then the dinner bell sounds. We storm to the cookhouse in the hope of getting a bit better food [since it's] Christmas Eve. No thank you, worse food than I got there you have to search for. Potatoes that had been on the stove for so long that they had turned sour, meat that was too tough for my poor teeth to chew, a bit of xxxxx [?] for desert & after to sit an look at old sour clothes & old men & smell the shit & the wet clothes & horses until it was time for bed.³¹

At times despair brought Martin poetic powers. By January 1930, Martin's customary playful wording had darkened. He distanced himself even further from his narration by abandoning the pronoun "one" for the second person singular:

Damned be the earth for your sake. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread until you turn again to earth. Yes, that's how it is & that's how it will remain until something else happens. You were in Sweden - the earth was damned, you were goddamned angry, damnation rests over you & the earth, you heard of the Promised Land in the West, you went there & found that even that land was damned.³²

In the spring of 1930 Johansson's narrative took on a more critical political content:

I have found that the capitalist rule is not good for anyone but for the rulers. They take everything, for a normal person everything is closed. The biggest criminals are those who control a country so thousands suffer, & others wallow in excess ... I think of families that cannot get food or work, & on young girls who have to travel bad roads to get food. It is just as difficult for womenfolk to get work here as it is for a man.³³

³⁰FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 10 November 1929.

³¹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 13 January 1930.

³²FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 26 January 1930.

³³FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 30 May 1930.

Martin and his friends looked for assistance from other Scandinavians, but they also received support from Canadian labour activists and radicals. By the end of 1930, Martin was describing how the unemployed demonstrated for food in Nelson, BC. The protest was in response to the city's decision to cut down on the numbers and the quality of meals provided to transients.³⁴ Civic officials believed that Nelson was a "Mecca" for unemployed men who would rather receive handouts than work. In an article subtitled "Some Refuse Work," the Mayor accused the jobless of being "choosy" and of only "ostensibly looking for work," while refusing to leave the city for areas where work was available. Therefore, he claimed, Nelson must reduce the food rations in order to stop the flow of new transients looking for free welfare.³⁵ Some newspaper columnists cautioned that while "some of our transients are respectable" others beg to get money for "alcoholic stimulant."³⁶ The unemployed in Nelson were incensed by the cut backs, and led by T. B. Roberts, a One Big Union (OBU) organizer, they formed a march to Nelson City Hall, where they demanded that city officials provide work for the unemployed. When Roberts presented a list that named the unemployed, however, only four were residents of Nelson, while the majority were Scandinavian, which hardly endeared them to the Canadian city leaders, quick to target the "alien" unemployed.³⁷

While Martin's letters vaguely echo the radical sentiment from the One Big Union that likely bolstered his courage and convictions during the preparations and execution of the march, he never named the OBU, nor did he discuss its leaders. Rather, he seemed more concerned with the Scandinavian situation, both among the employed and unemployed. He was counting on their need to unite along nationalistic lines to help each other.

If one can't get a meal now & then from a working pal of Scandinavian birth one will starve to death, since to get help from someone from another nation is not to think of. The authorities don't care any more about an immigrant than [they do] about a dog. Here are about 100 Scandinavians on the bottom without means, & who get a meal one day, the next nothing. And then Nelson is not any bigger than Ulricehamn. Imagine if there would walk 500 men on the main street in Ulricehamn without food & nowhere to sleep ... And this is the civilised America. The richest land in the world, as they say. They have too much wheat, but they rather burn it than give it to the unemployed ... If we compare Sweden with Canada, then Sweden is Paradise & Canada is Hell.³⁸

³⁴For a comment on the federal-provincial tug-of-war over who was responsible to feed the unemployed, see James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian State 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983).

³⁵*Nelson Daily News*, 10 December 1930.

³⁶*Nelson Daily News*, 17 December 1930.

³⁷*Nelson Daily News*, 16 December 1930. The Mayor of Nelson estimated that 90 per cent of the names on the list were Swedish, while Roberts only admitted to a 75 per cent Scandinavian participation.

³⁸FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 20 October 1930.



Martin Johansson, Albertan farmer Grue, and Martin's friend Einar at the Grue farm, Hey Lake, Alberta. [Martin wrote: "Grue, Einar & I, Martin"]

The only comfort is that one is not alone, 'cause we are legions now, the unemployed in America ... In Sweden the unemployed has a home & some support from unions & such but here he has nothing. We have started an unemployment union but we probably can't do much ... Perhaps we can get the high and mighty to start some relief work.... But the big trust companies & the big businesses have never before made as much money as they do now. So soon all America's millionaires will have every cent there is & then they will have to start eating them when us workers & farmers have stopped producing their foods.³⁹

But class and a politics of revolt also mattered to Johansson and, by implication, to disposed immigrant workers.

We have demonstrated for work or food, we were 162 men who asked for help, mostly Scandinavians. We have received 15 cents a day for food ... & we get a bowl of soup at the Salvation Army & coffee & bread. It is a bit better, but not enough, so one must beg at houses & cafés, but it is an unpleasant chore that I cannot do. If only there were not so many of us. The

³⁹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 5 December 1930.

rich Swedes in town don't care about us one iota so if people from other nations didn't provide for us we would starve.⁴⁰

[The city of Nelson] don't want to help us, they say we don't belong to Nelson but are outsiders, but they can't drive us away, since we all work for the CPR & don't belong anywhere. We are almost only foreigners & don't have residency anywhere ... if they continue with this in America, it won't be long before revolution, powers are in motion & unemployment creates revolutionaries.⁴¹

But there are not labour laws in this country, only laws that allow smart people to rob & steal in a bit fancier way from the poor worker. And if we refuse to work on their conditions then they have thousands of workers in our stead.

Farmers here in the country are starting to realise they are cheated by the capitalists. ... [A]t a meeting for farmers in Saskatchewan they played & sang the International rather than the national anthem & instead of Canada's flag they raised the RED flag for the first time in the world history that farmers have raised the red flag, except of course in Russia.

I've seen a bit more of how things are done since I got out in the world. I didn't understand much when I was home [in Sweden]. I believed what I read in the right-wing newspapers but now I know that this is the biggest lie that ever existed.⁴²

Martin had moved from a proponent of Canada's west as a possible land of immigrant dreams, to someone who, struggling to secure work, began to appreciate the logic of a revolutionary critique of capitalism.

If "millions" in "Good earth, coal, silver, gold, oil and everything that is needed" laid waiting under the soil in Canada, Martin never found the proper shovel to unearth it. He eventually returned to Alberta, and for a while life seemed brighter and his initial faith in the possibilities offered by Canada returned. He first worked on a farm in Magnolia, Alberta, where he met up with some old friends from Ulricehamn, and, later, during the harvest season, he was employed in Saskatchewan. Martin even became a part owner of a homestead in Alberta and bought a second-hand truck, some chickens, and a cow. Lack of financing, however, forced him to work for more established farmers, which prevented him from clearing the land or from doing other necessary improvements needed to hold the title. Then several farmers, because of their own distraught situation, reneged on his wages, and when Martin's only cow succumbed to oat poisoning his situation became untenable. Johansson gave up on Canada. He caught a freight train to the east coast, where he signed on as a deckhand on a ship, and worked his way across the Atlantic and home to Sweden.

⁴⁰Later, in 1932, he complained: "The Swedes are worse of them all, they try by any means possible to cheat their countrymen & are unfair and envious in all manners possible. Other nationalities value one's work & wish to pay & help one in any way, but Swedes try their best to hold one down." FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Folke Johansson, 16 October 1932.

⁴¹FU, SIE, Martin Johansson to Johansson Family, 19 December 1930.

⁴²Open letter, Martin Johansson to Johansson Family, 6 March 1931.

How did Johansson's experiences in Canada shape his political views in the long run? His engagement with a politics of class proved fleeting. After his homecoming he became an independent entrepreneur in Sweden. Together with his brothers he opened a knitting factory, where he stayed for fifteen years. A disagreement among the brothers, however, caused a restless Martin to leave the family business for employment in a glass factory, where he remained until retirement. He never became a "revolutionary," either in Canada or in Sweden. On the contrary, when he feared that the discontent among workers in Canada could have violent repercussions he wrote, "If I could arrange it so that I was deported it wouldn't be too bad. It looks like it will be a revolution eventually and then it will be dangerous to be here."⁴³ Then again, he remained convinced that workers needed political representation, and there could be no retreat to his initial trust in higher authorities. But he was never a union activist, nor did he even passively attend left-wing political meetings in Sweden.

The letters do cast some new light on sojourning, and address the fluctuating process of working-class identity.⁴⁴ But it is questionable if it was Johansson's migratory position that guided his political responses in Canada. Johansson's willingness to join the protest march in Nelson, and his sometime vitriolic outbursts

⁴³ Martin Johansson to Lydia Johansson, 10 September 1932.

⁴⁴ Historians have sometimes used the term sojourner to explain immigrant behaviours, in particularly those related to working-class activism. For example, Mark Wyman argues that sojourners had no long-term interest in improving work conditions, and were therefore less concerned with unions and unwilling to strike. Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880-1930* (1993), 204. Carmela Patrias, however, shows that despite a common argument that sojourners were notoriously difficult to engage in worker protests, immigrant workers at times participated in and even organized strikes. Carmela Patrias, "Relief Strikes: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930-1935," in Franca Iacovetta *et al.*, ed., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (Toronto 1998), 322-58. Studies on Chinese immigrants in BC suggest that the concept of sojourning is tainted. Timothy Stanley protests that historians only apply the term to labourers, while middle-class men, however temporarily their stay in Canada was, are not described as sojourners. Timothy Stanley, "'Chinamen, Wherever We Go': Chinese Nationalism and Guangdong Merchants in British Columbia, 1871-1911," in C.M. Wallace and R.M. Bray eds., *Reappraisals in Canadian History: Post Confederation*, Third Edition (Scarborough 1999), 224-5. Anthony Chan sees the term as imposed, since "few Chinese actually saw themselves as mere sojourners." Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver 1983), 128. Several studies have also been done on Italian sojourners in Canada. For example, see Robert F. Harney, "Boarding and Belonging: Thoughts on Sojourner Institutions," in Wallace and Bray eds., *Reappraisals in Canadian History*, 284-305; and Bruno Ramirez and Michele Del Balzo, "The Italians of Montréal: From Sojourning to Settlement, 1900-1921," in Robert F Harney and J. Vicenza Scarpace eds., *Little Italies in North America* (Toronto 1981), 63-84.

against governments and corporations suggest that seeds of activism were germinating despite his temporary stay. Moreover, had it been Johansson's sojourning status in Canada that prevented participation in the Canadian labour movement, one could expect a fuller engagement in Swedish labour issues after his return to Sweden. Martin did, however, believe that the Social Democratic Labour Party was the only logical choice for Sweden's workers.⁴⁵ Considering the party's strength in the Swedish working class after the 1930s, it is possible that Martin would have turned to social democracy even without his stay abroad, but the contrast between powerless migrant workers and the ruthlessness of unrestrained employers conditioned a life-long conviction that workers must be politically conscious, and that they could not trust in capitalism's capacities to better their lives.

I would like to express my gratitude to Roy and Frida Unge who shared both memories and pictures of their father and grandfather, and to Bryan Palmer and Eric Sager who provided constructive comments and suggestions on the text. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their support, and the Swedish Institute of Emigration whose generous research grant made possible a study trip to Sweden.

⁴⁵Interview with Roy Unge, November 2000 and August 2001.



Editor

Leon Fink

Reviews Editor

Julie Greene

Editorial Committee

Dorothy Sue Cobble

Cindy Hahamovitch

Bruce Laurie

Nelson Lichtenstein

Vicki Ruiz

Julie Saville

Duke University Press is pleased to announce the publication of a new journal.

LABOR

**Studies in Working-Class History
of the Americas**

The labor question—who will do the work and under what economic and political terms?—beckons today with renewed global urgency. Rising to this challenge, a new journal, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, provides a more holistic framework for understanding the roots of our current labor dilemmas.

While still paying critical homage to the tradition from which the journal derives its energy, *Labor* expands the field's scope, giving equal attention to other critical labor systems (slavery, agricultural work, unpaid and domestic labor, the informal sector, and the professions) and social contexts (race, gender, class, and ethnicity).

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Four issues annually

Institutions: \$200 / Individuals: \$40 / Students: \$25 (with copy of valid student I.D.)

Single issues: \$14 each

Canadian orders: Please include 7% GST and \$12 postage.

Orders outside the U.S. and Canada: Please include \$16 postage.

To place your order using a credit card, please call 888-651-0122 (within the U.S. and Canada) or 919-687-3602; or e-mail subscriptions@dukeupress.edu.

For more information, visit www.dukeupress.edu/labor.