

## **GUSTAV UNONIUS - SWEDISH PIONEER.**

The mid 1800's was a period of political and economic turmoil throughout Europe, and Sweden was no exception. The Swedish population had grown significantly and lands for farming were scarce. Economic hardship, and at times famine, were drivers to emigration, and many sailed to America in search of better lives. So it is that Gustav Unonius made the decision to embark and sail to the United States.

The year was 1841 when the First Swedish Settlement in Wisconsin was established, not far from where you are standing.

Gustav Elias Marius Unonius, with his bride, Charlotta Margareta Ohrstrommer, her servant, Christine Sodergren, and two friends, Carl Wilhelm Polman and Carl Gustaf Groth, booked passage on the "Minnet" (The Memory) from Gävle, Sweden, landing in Milwaukee via New York, Buffalo and Detroit, on October 4.

On October 7, guided by countryman, Olaf Gottfrid Lange, who had come to America a few years before, the men set off on foot, taking food, guns, ammunitions, and a letter of introduction from the land office to Mr. Pearmain of Delafield. Leaving the women behind, they followed the "Forest Trail", now roughly Highway 16, in search of a homestead. They finally came upon a log cabin which was a settler's home and Inn owned by the Pearmain's. The next morning Pearmain lead them along the Native American trails to Pine Lake.

Unonius, who kept a diary, said:

"At last, we came to the shores of one of the most beautiful of the many lakes we had seen on our trip. It was called Pine Lake, in the Indian language Chenequa, for the reason that the Pine, which as a rule does not grow in this part of Wisconsin, was found growing there in company with the red cedar in one or two places on the shore. The greater number of these trees, had, however, been cut down, most likely by the Indians, who use the easily worked logs for making canoes. On a small peninsula we found one of these boats left unfinished and partially burned."<sup>1</sup>

Unonius and Groth picked adjoining quarter sections as homesites. The land costs were \$1.25 an acre in 1841. They returned to Milwaukee and filed at the land

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<sup>1</sup> New Upsala, The First Swedish Settlement in Wisconsin by Filip A. Forsbeck, MD, Milwaukee, Wi., page 38

office under the Preemption Act<sup>2</sup> to settle on each one quarter section. This was the equivalent of 160 acres, given a Section is one square mile, or 640 acres. Having \$400 left between the two men, they bought a pair of oxen (Spak and Wallis) and a wagon for \$60 each. Returning to Pine Lake, they carved a large “C” on several trees, laying claim to their properties. (West ½ Section 33, town 8 north, range 18 east in the town of Merton).

As was the case with many new immigrants, Unonius wrote letters to his relatives and friends in the old country, generically called “America Letters”, describing the wonders of this new land. These letters were often published in Swedish newspapers, and in Norwegian periodicals, tempting many countrymen to follow him to this new world he called Nye Uppsala or New Upsala, after the university town of Uppsala, from where he had graduated at age 20. The name Uppsala, over many years, was commonly referred to as Upsala, with only one P instead of two P’s.<sup>3</sup>

Unonius told us that Carl Groth was the only one experienced with an ax, so the work of Unonius, Pearlmain and Groth was slow to construct a cabin. They needed 40-50 logs cut, dragging them to the site on the shores of Pine Lake. They hauled green oak slabs for the roof from Oconomowoc. Along the way they invited settlers to a house raising. Thus on October 29, 23 settlers raised the cabin in one day which had one door and two window openings. A stove and various cooking items brought from Milwaukee kept them warm and provided cooked food. Mudding and chinking soon began. The generous neighbors brought flour, potatoes, cows, and pigs in the following months as offerings, or exchanged them for something else.

Unonius said:

“Our home! How much does not lie hidden in the word, even though the home consisted of a small, incomplete cabin without floor, door, chairs, or even a table, only a large room with openings here and there through the rough log walls. Still it was a house, the first of our own since we had left our parental roofs and gone out into a strange world. It was a home built by our own hands, and though it lay

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<sup>2</sup> Preemption Act of 1841 was a response to the widespread act of squatting. It allowed any citizen or immigrant to purchase 160 acres of public land at the minimum price if it was cultivated and lived upon. [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)

<sup>3</sup> Swedes in Wisconsin, Fredrick Hale, WHS,2002, page 6.

far away in a foreign land, it was the home of our imagination, it was the goal of our ambition. It was the haven of rest after many months of nomadic existence with its wearisome restlessness, trials and disappointments. As yet void of even the least suggestion of the attractive finish of a modern dwelling, even of the simplest conveniences which civilized men may expect, it was, however a home, ready to receive the finishing touches, and though most modest in its pretensions, was rich, rich in love, rich in friendship, rich in faith in God that He would extend His blessing over our roof. It was our home; it was our New Upsala.”<sup>4</sup>

Continued immigration came to the Midwest and to Pine Lake. Norwegians and Danish settled on the west side of the lake. However, by the 1850’s many of the original settlers had moved on and Gustav Unonius had returned to Sweden. In the later years of the 19th century Germans and others migrated to this area. It was during this period, after most of the early Scandinavian settlers had left the region, that the name New Upsala faded and the community began to be referred to as Chenequa, the Potawatomi Native American word for Pine.

The same beauty that attracted Unonius and other immigrants to Pine Lake, led to increased population due to better transportation by rail and roads in the surrounding lake areas. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century hotels became destinations for medicinal spring waters and lake recreation. Dance halls and taverns brought more commercial development.

Robert Elias Friend, who was born unexpectedly at Pine Lake in 1886, had concerns about the rapidly increasing development in the area. He set out to protect Pine Lake and its immediate environs. In the summer in 1921, Robert singlehandedly went door to door, performing a herculean task, convincing over 90% of the riparian owners to restrict their deeds to prevent overdevelopment:

The deed restrictions read:

“For 99 years, from September 1, 1921, no public boat or aeroplane landing or livery, dance hall or place of public amusement, hotel, boarding house, institution, or resort of any kind shall be permitted on said land, and not more than one house per acre or per 150 feet of lake frontage shall be built upon it, and access to

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<sup>4</sup> <sup>4</sup> New Upsala, The First Swedish Settlement in Wisconsin by Filip A. Forsbeck, MD, Milwaukee, WI., pages 56-57

said lake shall not be given to more than one family for each 100 feet of lake frontage.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus began discussions to create the Village of Chenequa, incorporated in 1928, codifying these restrictions. Robert Friend’s diligence ensured that one of the pristine lakes in the area remained similar to when its original settlers came over 182 years ago.

In 1948 the Wisconsin Swedish Pioneer Centennial Commission decided to erect a small monument in Chenequa to commemorate the arrival of Gustav Unonius and his countrymen, and the founding of New Upsala. Unonius played an important role during his time in this area, and historians continue to document and celebrate his many contributions. The residents of the Village of Chenequa are proud of their “Founding Father” and thank you for coming today to help celebrate the work and vision of this Swedish pioneer and scholar.

Thank you.

Jo Ann Friend Villavicencio  
President, Village of Chenequa

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<sup>5</sup> History of Provident Reality, Bill Stark, 1963

