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The Environmental History of Swedish America

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Brian James Leech

Swenson Center

Faculty Research Report: The Environmental History of Swedish America

In August of 2019 I had the privilege of spending a week doing research at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. The goal for this research was to locate resources for new courses on environmental history that I'm teaching under the re-formed semester curriculum at Augustana College. This successful research stint helped me to identify an excellent set of materials for my co-taught course on animal studies for the honors program, Honors 201: Nature. I also found many resources for my upcoming course in the history department, History 133: American Environmental History, as well as some materials that I plan to use in future personal research.

My jointly-taught Honors course focuses on the history of human-animal relations. Geographer Matthew Fockler and I are hoping to get students to think seriously about animals' place in their lives. Students' final assignment will ask them to use newspapers, archives, and other materials from the past to explain the change in people's use of and beliefs about one particular animal of their choice. To show them how to do an animal history (and to get them started on their projects), we now plan to take them for a class visit to the Swenson Center. This plan for our assignment came due to my time at the Swenson Center. Through the help of Lisa Huntsha, I identified four excellent sets of materials for my students to examine—both as a class and, should they choose a relevant animal for their project, as individuals.

The first is Elmer Oberg's unpublished memoir, "The Farm Life of a Swedish Immigrant in Illinois" (SAC P:21). It provides a colorful discussion of animal agriculture during the first half of the 20th century. This farming memoir gives a number of great examples of very close human-animal relations that will likely feel strange to students from urban and suburban areas—from consuming raw eggs and unpasteurized milk, to learning how to trap wild animals, to chopping up woodchucks to feed hens, to trying to encourage bowel regularity by asking constipated family members to ride on horses. I also located excellent materials for this animal history class in the John Olof Viking Papers (MSS P: 4). This Swedish-American resident of Michigan created a number of scrapbooks that contain clippings about animals. Some are stories about wild animals and reserves; others contain clippings about goofy pets. These early- and mid-twentieth century clippings will prove useful to many students' projects. Third, the collection of Ernst Teofil Skarstedt (MSS P: 149) includes another wonderful scrapbook in box 12 with many pieces of advice for farmers about how to handle livestock. Finally, the center holds an 1837 Illinois Migration guide, which includes a wonderful (and hopeful) description of both the wild and domestic animals during Illinois' early years as a state.

To enhance History 133: American Environmental History, I found a variety of additional materials. There is an interview at the center with Alex Erickson (SAC P:80), which concerns his time working in the Iowa coal towns of Pershing and Buxton, the latter of which became known for its racial integration and tolerance in the 1910s. Erickson unfortunately does not racial issues in his interview, but he does talk at some length about being one of many Swedes who worked in one coal mining area, only to have the Railroad company move their houses to “Swede Town” in Buxton due to the original area’s declining coal reserves. This interview could certainly be used to explore the often temporary nature of natural resource industries—resources like coal can easily be exhausted. There is also an intriguing set of diaries by Peter Nelson (MSS P:227). Within these pocket diaries the author describes his work in the timber and cattle industries. These diaries might prove difficult to use for students; he never divulges too much information at any one time, so I’m uncertain about how I might use his daily logs. Perhaps more helpful to students will be the Charles and Sofia Haag papers (MSS P: 175), as they contain an excellent write-up on Charles Haag’s nature-focused sculptures as well as some nice photographs of his artworks. In an earlier version of this environmental history course, I asked students to analyze different views of the natural world by comparing art from different eras. I think the Haag collection will help with this kind of assignment.

One of my favorite collections came via a recommendation by Lisa Huntsha towards the end of my week at the center. The Collection on the Andover Children’s Home (I/O 68) describes a home for orphans and endangered youth, which operated from 1868 to 1970. Surprising to me, the home also served as a working farm. For much of the time, children living at the home were also expected to work at the farm, partly as a way to help fund the enterprise, partly as a way to learn work ethic, and partly as a way to understand farming, which, especially in the home’s early days, was a likely occupation for children after becoming adults. The farm eventually cultivated over 300 acres of land, although changes in 1950s labor law meant that boys at the orphanage could no longer be required to work on the farm. Materials about this home could be used to teach students about how important farming and the behaviors it purportedly taught were to nineteenth and early-twentieth century Americans. Those who ran the children’s home clearly saw cultivating flora, fauna, and children as related projects. This collection will certainly find its way into my environmental history course. I may also use it later in my own research about local environmental history. It fits well with my interests in the history of agriculture and environmental education.