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## Book Reviews

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# Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps.

If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the SAG Editor, at <sag@etgenealogy.se> so we know what you are working on.

## A small place in Wisconsin

*Growing Up in Holmen*, by Arlan Helgeson. Published for the Holmen Area Historical Society by Otter Bay Books, Baltimore, MD, 2009, 220 pages. Softcover, illustr. \$20 plus shipping. More information at <www.holmenhistory.org/>

Holmen, Wisconsin, is a small city of some 7,000 people located near the Mississippi River, fifteen miles north of the “big city” of La Crosse.

When Arlan Helgeson (born in 1921) was young, it was a tight-knit village of 500 or 600 residents, almost entirely Norwegian in ethnic background. Helgeson, a retired professor of history, dean of the graduate school, and acting provost of Illinois State University, has written this charming and unaffected memoir of childhood through high-school graduation in what one now can hardly resist calling a Wisconsin Lake Wobegon. There was no Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, since the

only church in town at that time, the Holmen Lutheran Church, was the spiritual home of ninety percent of the populace. The cheer for the Holmen Vikings was *Lutefisk and lefse! Copenhagen Snuss! Holmen High School Won't let loose!* Snuff was also the stuff of Helgeson's teaching; with the Scandinavian awareness of Leif Erickson, he writes “after I became a history professor I always told my classes that when Columbus approached the West Indies he was hailed by a canoe full of Indians who called out: ‘*Har du naa Copenhagen Snuss?*’”

Holmen in the 1920s and 1930s was a place where Norwegian – although adulterated sometimes to the extent of “*Jeg skal sveepa snow ifraa sidevalken*” – was in common parlance. Here the food included *lutefisk*, *lefse*, *romme grout* (*rømmegrøt*), head cheese, the blood sausage *krub* (*klub*), and *sandbakkles* (*sandbakkleser*), while the holiday traditions kept the Christmas Fooling of *jahr bukken* (*julebukken*), groups going door-to-door in disguises to have their identities guessed and to receive yuletide treats.

It was also the place of a seemingly idyllic boyhood: fishing in the millpond, sledding and skiing on the Bare Spot, teaching your dog to ride on your bike, making toys, slingshots, bows and arrows, using your trusty BB gun or .22 rifle, keeping your Boy Scout diary, brewing root beer, and living amongst colorful local characters. The young Helgeson made some money by trapping gophers and other rodents for the five-cent bounty, retrieving milk bottles for the creamery for another nickel apiece, and later by “pitching bundles” in the

threshing of grain. For there was a darker side as well: it was the Depression, and his father never had steady work after losing his job with the county due to seizures, while his mother took in laundry and did housework for others, as well as renting rooms to boarders for fear of losing the house. Even darker were the diseases: polio, diphtheria, scarlet fever, blood poisoning, and especially tuberculosis, which carried away friends and relatives before their time.

In fifty-seven short chapters, Helgeson records the small-town activities still familiar to me a generation later in a different place: the unchanging Memorial Day ritual with recitation of “In Flanders Field” and the Gettysburg Address; the ceremonial volleys by the veterans' rifle squad; “rubbering” on the party-line telephones, the Civil War-era tunes in *The Golden Book of Favorite Songs*, and even the classic “Have you got Prince Albert in the can?” prank call.

Familiar to me, too, as a child of a “mixed marriage” – my mother's ancestry was Swedish, but we lived on my Norwegian grandfather's farm and went to the Norwegian Lutheran church a half-mile down the road – was the mostly good-natured joking of “A Swede is a Norwegian with his brains knocked out” (readily reversible) and “Ten thousand svedes ran tru da weeds, chased by vun Norwegian.”

Here we come to the point of reviewing this book in SAG. Helgeson includes some family history, particularly about his mother's parents, who were Norwegian immigrants. He knew them and had to speak Norwegian with them. But, while his

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paternal grandparents had died before his birth, he was well aware that the Helgeson heritage was Swedish. In fact, as he only learned years later on a visit to Norway, he spoke “a little Svedish.” His Norwegian was “laced with Swedish (with the rules of grammar being freely violated in both languages),” but no one had ever bothered to tell him that.

Helgeson takes pride in his great-grandfather, Johannes Helgeson, as an early settler from Sweden, and he writes of the Helgeson family cemetery out in the country. He and his Wall cousins lived in the last houses on State Street in Holmen before it turns into Halfway Creek Road. Although Helgeson does not speak to it directly, three miles up this road lies the Halfway Creek Lutheran Church, an historically Norwegian institution from 1856, which is proud of being the original home of what became Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. The church lies at the entrance to Sweden Coulee, and it was here, in *Svenskedalen* as recorded in the church records, that Johannes Helgeson, Niklas Eriksson Wall, and a few other Swedes established themselves from 1852 onwards. There was a tiny Swedish presence at an early date in western Wisconsin, nowhere recorded, as far as I know, in the standard literature of Swedish settlement.<sup>1</sup> This was no doubt because it was too small to establish any Swedish institution, with the Swedes quickly intermarrying with the much more numerous Norwegians and integrating into the Norwegian Lutheran church. Only Otto Robert Landelius’s *Swedish Place-Names in North America* records Sweden

Coulee as a place and includes Holmen among “Additional Place-Names of Probable Swedish Origin in Wisconsin.”

The Johannes Helgeson (Helgeson) family, including seven children and a related farm hand, along with Niklas Wall – who married a Helgeson daughter – arrived in New York in 1852 among 46 Swedes on a small iron-trade schooner, the *Arethusa*. They, as well as most of the other passengers, were the first emigrants from their parishes in Västergötland. In November of that year, Helgeson wrote a “Letter from America” that was published in the Swedish news-

paper *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* in the spring of 1853. That led to another small Swedish settlement of Baptists across the Mississippi River in Minnesota, an interesting story in itself, but beyond the scope of this book review. For now, it suffices that, in the lingo of this day, the *über*-Scandinavian small-town of Helgeson’s youth, with its Swedish tinge, is so affectionately recalled in his book. In 2009, the 88-year-old Helgeson and a cousin were the only remaining members of the Swedish-descended Helgeson-Wall enclave in Holmen.

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# Book Reviews

## Endnote:

1) Since drafting this review, I have written about the establishment of the settlement in: Johnson, Ronald J. "Letter from Onalaska: *Svenskedalen*, the Very First Swedish Settlement in Western Wisconsin." *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, 64:3 (July 2013), 140-175.

The Sweden Coulee settlement is also the background for: Brita Butler-Wall, "An American Baseball Team with Roots in Västergötland," *Swedish American Genealogist*, 31:2 (June 2011), 19.

Ronald J. Johnson

## Swedes of Cleveland

*True immigrant stories: Swedes of Cleveland Ohio 1873-2013*, by Lilly Setterdahl. Nobel-Monitor Lodge No. 130 of Vasa Order of America, 2014. Available at Amazon.com, for \$26.95.

Lilly Setterdahl and her late husband Lennart devoted their careers to first microfilming the Swedish-American church records, and later to tracking the oral histories of Swedish immigrants to America. Lilly has also written about the *S/S Titanic*. Swedes were the third largest ethnic group on board the *Titanic*, after the Americans and British.

This book contains a brief history of the Swedish immigrants living in Cleveland. Cleveland was settled in the 1820's & 1830's due to the completion of the Ohio-Erie Canal, although Swedes didn't begin arriving until the 1870's. Among the items

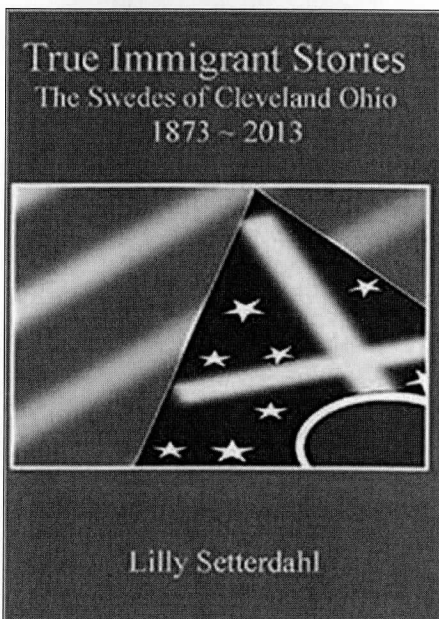
mentioned are that many steel workers came from Värmland and from other parts of the U.S. Machinists and carpenters were the most common occupations in Cleveland in the early 1900's. Their political affiliation was dominantly Republican. There are articles on the businesses established by Swedes, histories of the churches, and the organizations they formed. Some obtained the education necessary to become professionals.

For most people mentioned in the book the information given includes the immigrants' background in Sweden, their voyage to America, first jobs, struggles, and achievements. This information was obtained primarily through extensive interviews by Lennart Setterdahl and research in records in the U.S.

If you have family mentioned in this book you are very lucky because you will probably learn valuable information about them.

The section containing augmented histories covers iron workers, Swedes with roots in Halland, and Swedes from other provinces.

Additional items include a reprint of the 1898 Swedish City Directory of Cleveland, Appendix to Norden-skjold Lodge, a list of voice recordings



## SAG needs your help!

We regard the reviews as a very important part of SAG, as the readers are spread all over the U.S., Canada, and Sweden and a lone subscriber even in Australia.

For all of them it is very difficult to keep track of the many interesting books (and movies) that are published with a *Swedish* or *Swedish-American* theme.

We need you to keep your eyes open. And we are extremely pleased if you will write a review and send it to the SAG editor.

Family histories, church histories, local group histories, and lodge histories are among the things we would like to present in SAG. And all in English.

A good book review contains the full title of the book, name of author, year of printing, name of publisher, where it can be bought, and the price of the book.

Send all book reviews to the SAG editor!

Elisabeth Thorsell  
SAG editor

made by the Setterdahls, and a name index to this book.

Janet Frye

(This review first published in *Tidningen* 2014:4, the journal of the Swedish American Genealogical Society of Minnesota).

## Swedes in Canada!

The long awaited book by Elinor Berglund Barr about the *Swedes in Canada: Invisible immigrants* will now be released by the University of Toronto Press in the middle of April 2015.

The book can be preordered from the publishers by using the link on page 30.