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# Nels Hokanson (1885–1978)

Franklin D. Scott\*

Nels Magnus Hokanson was a Swede who was born in Denmark and who lived his life in the United States from age 2 to 93 — a life as full as it was long.<sup>1</sup> His reminiscences of early childhood in Swede Hollow, Saint Paul, MN, have inspired the development of that slum ravine into a city park. His later career was such that if he was not the model for a Horatio Alger story, he should have been.

When the family moved from Saint Paul to Aitkin, MN, the mother still took in washing, the father worked on the city streets (and finally became street commissioner), and the boy worked at the hotel. Here he swept floors and cleaned the spittoons, but was also hired for the more congenial task of digging angle worms for the fishermen vacationing from the banks and businesses of Chicago and the Twin Cities, and to show the visiting notables the best fishing holes. He made friends and listened avidly to mens' discussions of economics and politics, as he earlier had listened to his father's acquaintances as they wrestled with religious problems and opinions.

In high school Nels came under the influence of I. A. Thorsen, one of those rare souls with a knack for teaching and who also organized both a football team and a band. The young student became enthused with the trombone, and one summer took a job with a circus band touring the small towns of Illinois — Bosco's Congress of Trained Wild Animals. Mr. Bosco had three lions, four performing ponies, two non-performing monkeys and a snake charmer, and he depended on the band to entice the townspeople to come to the show.

Nels had followed his favorite teacher to Madelia, MN, and when Thorsen moved yet farther away, his pupil was delegated to take charge of athletics and the band for the high school there. After graduation he enrolled briefly at the University of Minnesota, where he joined the Minneapolis College Band. But opportunity beckoned elsewhere when Mr. Thorsen re-

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commended him for a fill-in appointment as band instructor at Spearfish Normal School in South Dakota. Success there led him to seek further education and he obtained a band scholarship to the University of Chicago. He went early and got some experience with several regimental bands, and this eventually made it possible for him to travel with the band of Battery B to Washington, DC for the inaugural of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901.

Gradually his studies at the University, from which he was graduated in 1910, and a job with boys at Hull House, weaned Nels away from music. Soon he married one of the socialite volunteers at the settlement house, Naomi Catherwood. Her once promising inheritance was consumed by a family feud, but Nels got a job with the State Bank of Chicago (a well-known Scandinavian bank), and pursued the study of law at the John Marshall Law School. He had joined the prestigious City Club, and his circle of high-placed acquaintances grew.

The coming of World War I led to work promoting the sale of Liberty Bonds among Scandinavians in Chicago, and to the chairmanship of the Foreign Speaking Division of the drive in Washington, DC. In 1920 he became active in the campaign of Warren G. Harding for the presidency, and this brought him to the attention of William Widgery Thomas, Jr., the man responsible for the establishing of the Swedish colony in New Sweden, ME, masterminded after his stint as U.S. consul in Göteborg, Sweden during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Thomas, who also had served as minister plenipotentiary to the court of Sweden on two separate occasions, was eager for a third appointment and hired Hokanson as his special agent. Harding, however, could not be persuaded to honor the eighty-year-old veteran, despite his flowing white beard and distinguished appearance.

Soon after his return to Chicago Nels left his banking career and formed a real estate partnership with Herbert Jenks in Evanston, IL. He was active in civic affairs in Evanston, and among other things served as president of the University Club. When time came for retirement, the firm was sold to one of its own agents, Lois Stewart, who retained the proud name of Hokanson and Jenks.

The Hokanson writing career began during his residence in Washington, DC, for he discovered that at the time a total of six senators and sixteen members of the Congress were of Scandinavian descent. He wrote an article about them, entitled "The Scandinavian Element in Congress", published in the *American Scandinavian Review* (Sept., 1921, pp. 598–621).

His major contribution, however, was his book, *Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time*, published by Harper's in New York in 1942, for which he got Carl Sandburg to write the foreword (this book was reprinted by the Arno Press in 1979). Later there came from his pen a long series of articles — reminiscences of Swede Hollow, of his boyhood in Aitkin, the tour as a circus musician, "famous rides in American history" (among other that of Juan Flaco from Los Angeles to San Francisco in 1846. Flaco, a Swede,

supposedly came from Karlskrona) — and other articles, published in various journals such as *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, *Minnesota History*, *Minnesota Volunteer*, *The Journal of the Illinois Historical Society*, and *The Pacific Historian*.

With his first wife Nels had one daughter, Mary Alan, who married William Louis Weber, and who in turn had one daughter, Devra Anna Naomi Catherwood Weber. After his first wife died, Nels married Esther Hutchison Darrow (the widow of William Darrow). With her he managed, for a few years, a farm in southern Wisconsin, until they retired to Claremont, CA. Their last years were spent in the retirement home of Mt. San Antonio Gardens. While Esther kept writing her autobiography, Nels continued to nurse his prized Swedish heritage. He had lived a happy and productive life as a musician, banker, realtor and scholar.

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<sup>1</sup> Nils Magnus Håkansson was born in the suburb of Frederiksberg, on the outskirts of Copenhagen, on or about May 6, 1885, the son of Karl and Botilda Håkansson. He died in Claremont, CA. July 19, 1978.

## Ashtabula Naturalizations Available

Mim Miller, one of the faithful subscribers to *SAG*, and member of the Ashtabula County Genealogical Society of Ashtabula, OH, writes to inform the readers of *SAG* of the recent microfilming of all of the U.S. naturalizations in Ashtabula Co. from 1875 to 1906. The index to these naturalizations sells for \$5.00. Four rolls of microfilms contain the individual records for this period. Each roll sells for \$20.00, which includes shipping and handling. Since quite a few Swedes and Finns settled in this particular county, these rolls should be quite valuable to the searcher having Ashtabula connections. For information concerning the index and films, write to Mrs. Miriam Larson Miller, P. O. Box 293, North Kingsville, OH 44068.