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# News from the Swenson Center

## Integration of Swedish Immigrants in Seattle / King County since 1850

BY KATRIN LEINEWEBER

There is always one reaction when I talk about my PhD thesis: “So you are working on the Swedes in Seattle? But you are German!?” Most people perceive it interesting or strange that I am – as a German PhD student – working on Swedish immigration to the U.S.A., especially because I do not have Swedish roots.

However, I thought there is nothing strange about it, and I have started writing my PhD thesis about the social and cultural integration of Swedish immigrants in Seattle/ King County from 1850 until the Second World War. Most of the relevant sources are preserved in the U.S. So I am very grateful that I was chosen for the 2011 *Dagmar and Nils William Olsson Fellowship*. It enabled me to spend a seven week research period at the Swenson Center and five more weeks in Seattle to study the sources related to the Swedes and their life in Seattle.

Swedish immigrants were already among the pioneers of Washington Territory and helped establishing the state. From the beginning they also settled in the young city of Seattle (founded in 1869). After the great fire from 1889, which was unfortunately caused by a Swede named Berg, many Swedish craftsmen contributed to the rebuilding of the city. Some Swedish immigrants played also a special part in Seattle’s history, e.g. Dr. Nils August Johanson (founder of the *Swedish Hospital* in 1908), John E. Chilberg (among others president of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909), or Perry Polson (son of a Washington State pioneer and successful businessman). The Swedish community did a lot for the city but also for their own social group and tried to keep their heritage alive. They founded

*Svenska Klubben* (Swedish Club) already in 1892, built their churches, a hospital and a college (*Adelphia College*), and had different choirs as well as lodges. They also celebrated *midsommar* and had big picnics in Vasa Park or on Mercer Island. But there is also a dark part in the history of the Swedes in Seattle with the execution of Charles W. Nordström in 1901. After ten years in jail for murder he was the first one ever hanged legally in Seattle since Territory time.

The history of the Swedes and their way of integration into the community of Seattle / King County is a very interesting topic which raises many different questions like: What kind of cultural memory and predispositions did they bring from Sweden to their new home? In which way did they present themselves as Swedes to the “American community”? What were the possible disruptions and their reasons, which might have resulted in an “Americanization” of the Swedish immigrants? How did they construct their cultural self-image?

In order to answer these questions I was in need of different sources. Coming to the Swenson Center I had no idea what to expect. I just knew that I could find three Swedish-American newspapers from Seattle and some church records on microfilm. But with the excellent help of the staff (Jill Seaholm and Susanne Titus) I have found so much more than I had ever hoped for. Beside eight (!) different Swedish newspapers (e.g. *Svenska Pacific Tribune*, *Svenska Posten*, *Väktaren*) from Seattle on microfilm, whose articles are among others the main source for my thesis, I found lodge records, several important scrap-

books (*Skarstedt*, *O.A. Linder*) with pictures, personal notes, and newspaper articles (Swedish and English) concerning Swedish life in Seattle. I also found relevant research literature in the library. During my stay in Rock Island I also had the pleasure to meet some of the most distinguished historians in the field of Swedish-American history who discussed my thesis and provided good advice and suggestions for my further research. After twelve weeks in the Rock Island and Seattle area I am pretty sure that I made the right decision to write about the Swedes in Seattle!



Katrin Leineweber in the Swenson Center research room (Photo by Jill Seaholm).

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