Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 32 | Number 2 Article 16

6-1-2012

Book Reviews

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 Book Review Editor, Dennis L. Johnson, at <1_viking@verizon.net> or Dennis Johnson, 174 Stauffer Road, Bucktown Crossing, Pottstown, PA 19465, so he knows what you are working on.

The real last letter home

Nicholas, the Neighbor, who wrote "The Last Letter to Sweden," by Tord Ericsson, Qwack text and bild, 2010, 101 pages, softcover, illustrated, Qwack text and bild, Sweden, about $21.00 (140 SEK) plus shipping. More information from **http://qwack.se/**

The title of this book refers to the letter ending the last volume of Moberg's *The Emigrants* series, in which a neighbor of the fictional Karl-Oscar Nilsson writes to his sister in Sweden to inform her of the death of Karl-Oscar in Minnesota. The author, Tord Ericsson, has learned that Moberg used in his book (with some minor changes) an actual letter written by Nicholas Swenson to the relatives in Sweden of Nicholas's own neighbor, Andrew Peterson, on his death in Scandia, Minnesota. The letter by Swenson has actually survived in the hands of Ivar Wideen, organist in Skara Cathedral, who loaned a copy to Moberg in 1949.

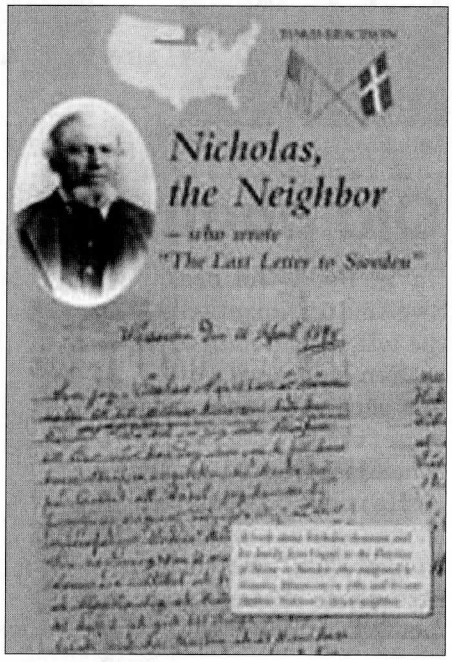
From this connection, Tord Ericsson has researched, in Sweden and with American descendants of Nicholas Swenson, the life of Nicholas in Sweden and as a pioneer immigrant in Scandia, Carver County, Minnesota. The book also includes materials about Swenson's wife Elna, their children, Nicholas's close neighbor and relative Andrew Peterson, and others who were his fellow immigrants, neighbors, and friends. He has dedicated his book to "Dena-Lynn Swenson Merwin, Joy E. Strommer, and all other descendants of Nicholas and Elna Swenson."

Nicholas (Swenson), the neighbor, was born in 1834 in Yngsjö, Skåne, the youngest of eight children of Sven Persson and Karna Hansdotter. He married Elna Persdotter from Åhus, born in 1829. The family immigrated to North America in 1861. Together with his family were Nicholas's older brother Per and his wife, and also Elna's mother Ingar Andersdotter. Nicholas's sister Pernilla followed two years later. Swenson settled in an area then called Scandia, near Waconia in Carver County, about 25 miles southwest of Minneapolis, in 1861. He claimed land next door to Andrew Peterson, also from Yngsjö in Skåne. The two men were second cousins and knew each other in Yngsjö. They were all part of a Baptist community of about 60 in Yngsjö who were then under sanctions from the (State Lutheran) church as potential heretics.

A small group of Swedish Baptists had begun the settlement in Scandia in 1855, and by 1861 had begun to build a church and cemetery known as the Scandia Church. Joined by the Swenson and Peterson families in 1861, services were for a time held in the home of Andrew Peterson. The two men built homes for their families and then set about the work of establishing their farms, crops, and animals.

Fortunately for historians, Andrew Peterson kept a diary over his lifetime which is used as an important reference by Tord Ericsson in *Nicholas, the Neighbor.* This same diary was also used as a resource by Vilhelm Moberg in writing *The Emigrants* series in the 1950's. In 1984, Peterson's diary was published as *Andrew Peterson and the Scandia Story*, by Josephine Mihelich and Ford Johnson Graphics, 202 pages.

Together with his own research in Sweden and the U.S., Tord Ericsson's book has provided a look into the lives of two Swedish pioneers and their families and neighbors in Minnesota, including their involvement with the American Civil War which began in 1861, the year of their arrival. One son, Hans, was drafted into the Minnesota Regiment at age fifteen and served for two years, 1864 and 1865, finally returning home. Many others from the area were also drafted, and many died of disease, in



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combat, or in the notorious Andersonville prison. The Dakota uprising of 1862 also had an impact on many settlers in the area, and frightened many more until the uprising was put down by the army, including soldiers drafted from the Scandia area.

The author includes other materials which give a picture of early farming activities at the time, the beginnings of the use of machine threshers, farm life, and the aging of the two close neighbors. They had supported each other and other neighbors for most of their years in Minnesota, often working together on each other's farms. Both, with their families, were active leaders of the Scandia Baptist Church. Elna Swenson, Nicholas's wife, died in 1895 after living 34 years in Minnesota.

Nicholas was six years younger than his friend Andrew, who died at the age of 79 years in 1898. The last entry in his diary on March 29 was two days before he died, he wrote: "The boys drove manure - I was in bed - it is fair weather, but not warm." Three weeks later, on April 18, Nicholas Swenson wrote to Ivar Wideen, a relative of Peterson, to tell him of Peterson's death. This is the letter on which Moberg based "The last letter home" in his book of that title.

Nicholas followed his friend Andrew in death five years later, in 1903, at age 79, and both are buried in the Baptist cemetery in Scandia. The author expresses regret that he could only portray a fraction of their lives, based on the information available to him. Like Karl Oscar in *The Emigrants*, Nicholas left a large family – three daughters and seven sons. His farms (two other farms in Kandiyohi County to the west were purchased by Nicholas later on) were inherited by the children and sold soon after his death, as the children pursued their own separate lives.

Some readers familiar with Minnesota and the Moberg books may be confused by the location where Nicholas and Andrew lived. The little village of Scandia in Carver County has since been absorbed into nearby Waconia, and no longer exists by that name. The area today is close enough to the southwest fringe of Minneapolis that it is now the object of suburban development, around Lake Waconia and other lakes nearby. The old log cabin Scandia Baptist Church, the second Baptist church to be built in Minnesota, is no longer there. It was sold in 1973 and removed to the campus of Bethel University in St. Paul, where it is preserved as a chapel at the college. The only remaining trace of Scandia is the small Scandia Baptist Cemetery along Island View Road, close to Clearwater Lake, and its Coney Island, the place where settlers took shelter during the Dakota War of 1862. Many of these original settlers and their families are buried in this cemetery.

Tord Ericsson's book adds another important dimension to the chronicles of Swedish pioneers in Minnesota, filling in many details about the families involved and their lives both in Sweden and after their settling in America. The book is well illustrated with photographs, maps, and other materials relating to the settlement and farm life during the period 1861 through 1900. This reviewer's own great-grandfather and his family homesteaded near Bernadotte, MN, only five years later and certainly faced similar challenges and circumstances on the prairie some 40 miles further southwest from Nicholas Swenson.

Reviewer's note to readers:
Moberg's settlers, "The Emigrants" readers will recall, claimed their land east of Minneapolis and up the St. Croix River near Taylors Falls. The present towns of Lindstrom, Scandia, and Forest Lake are all in this vicinity, and the existing Scandia in Washington County is not to be confused with Nicholas Swenson's no longer existing Scandia about 60 miles to the southwest. The well-known statue of Karl Oscar and Kristina Nilsson stands in the center of Lindstrom, MN, along with other Swedish-American sites and tourist attractions in the vicinity. It is easy to understand, however, how Moberg found inspiration from the Swenson letter and the Peterson diary to create his epic novels.

Dennis L. Johnson

A Chicago childhood

Whiskey Breakfast, My Swedish Family, My American Life, by Richard G. Lindberg, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, softcover, 300 pages, illustrated, Amazon.com softcover $17.24 plus shipping, Kindle, $13.77.

The author's father and his life is the theme around which Lindberg has created this book, which also provides a vivid picture of Sweden in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and immigrant life in Swedish Chicago through the next six decades. His father, Oskar Waldemar Lindberg, was born in Sweden Feb.2, 1897 on Kalleberga farm near Ronneby, in Blekinge. Oskar was the eighth of eleven children born to Kålle and Sophia Lindberg. The life story of Kålle and Sophia would be worth another book. Karl Johan Andersson

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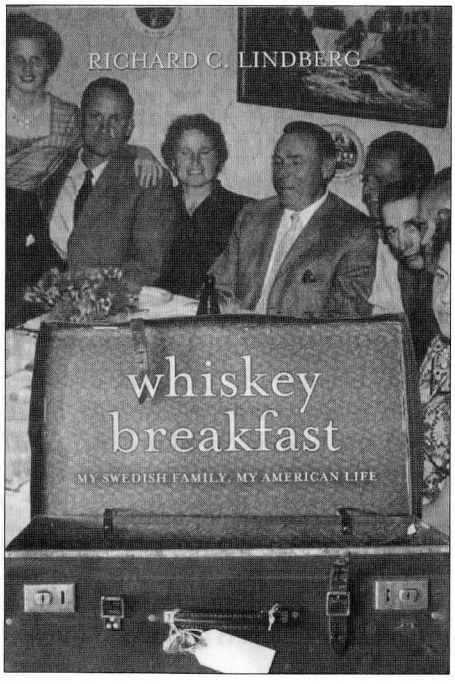
Lindberg was born March 3, 1856, in Finland. He was a soldier of fortune who had lived in America as a plainsman, scout, and eventually a farmer in the Dakotas and Minnesota. Sophia, born in Sweden, had married Kålle in Minnesota and they returned to Sweden with her stepfather to purchase Kalleberga with the stepfather's savings from America.

Oskar's was a hard childhood, with a shiftless and evil-tempered father and hard work for his mother and the many brothers and sisters. Oskar went to work by age fifteen in a dishware factory, and later a brickyard. He left home just before he turned eighteen, working in a public house until he had saved a thousand crowns, then moved to Göteborg to learn a trade. Along the way he became a socialist and admirer of Branting, Joe Hill, and many other radicals of the day and remained loyal to these radical views all his life.



In Göteborg, Oskar polished his skills as a carpenter, sired two children by two girlfriends, and became more deeply involved in the Labor movement. He sent a little money home to his mother, Sophia, who was in dire need after the death of his father Kålle om 1922. By 1924, at age 27, Oskar had decided to leave for America and Chicago to seek his fortune. He left behind a girlfriend, Elma, pregnant, with promises to send for her when he could. He never did.

Oskar sailed to Montreal, and made his way to Detroit, then to Chicago where he settled in Swedetown, a settlement hub for Swedes on the near north side where new arrivals, legal and illegal, first settled in Chicago. He found odd jobs as a carpenter and managed to survive the crash of 1929 and the Depression, even managing in 1932 to marry his first wife, Svea Anderson, the daughter of a man who had befriended him. He started his own business as a construction contractor soon after. He recruited some Swedish carpenter friends to work for him and managed to get a contract building Sears Roebuck pre-cut homes. This led to more contracts and his eventual career as a master-builder of custom homes in suburban Chicago. But Oskar's wife Svea was sickly and unable to bear children, eventually passing away of tuberculosis only seven years after their marriage.

By 1943, Oskar had met Evelyn Benson in the ballrooms of Chicago. Evelyn was the youngest and most lively daughter of an Evanston dairy farmer who had come to Chicago for its excitement. She was very much a social climber, and apparently found Oskar to her liking. After a few months of steady dating, she told that she was pregnant, and Oskar did the right thing by marrying her. Six months later, Charley was born. The marriage was a disaster, however, and Evelyn soon sued for divorce and moved to California to live with her sister. This short-lived "Aragon Ballroom" marriage provided the yet-to-be-born author only with a future half-brother, Charles.

By 1947, Oskar had met Helen Stone, daughter of one his closest employees, who was looking for a spouse for his only daughter. After a time, he proposed to her and Helen agreed, torn by the attraction of marrying an older, more wealthy man, but who was also looking for a mother for his son Charlie, a feisty seven-year-old. They were married in February, 1948, at the Methodist church near where she had lived as a child. After a brief period, Helen lost interest in the marriage and soon moved back to live with her parents, taking Charlie with her. They struggled along while Oskar continued his pattern of drinking with his friends and living in the house Helen had abandoned.

In late 1952, Helen felt badly and was finally convinced to see a doctor who, to everyone's surprise, including Helen's, declared that she was pregnant. This child, born in June of 1953, was our author, Richard Lindberg. He soon came home to his mother, grandmother, and half-brother Charles, now eight years old.(Helen's father had died the previous year, of cancer). This third marriage was now broken beyond repair amidst a messy divorce settlement that continued to leave Richard's mother, Helen, in poverty. Helen returned home to her

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mother again along with Richard, who in his book remembers visits with his father on occasion. New girlfriends were often present, and he was to marry for a fourth time. Oskar remained with his last wife, Marie, and eventually died in 1986, at the age of 89. His mother, Helen, died in 1992, thirty-seven years after her separation from Oskar.

Later in the book, the author adds diary passages that he had written soon after Oskar's death reflecting on his father's life. After earlier alienation, he has reconciled with his half-brother Charles, and together they returned to Sweden to make contact with relatives of his father.

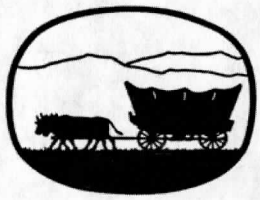
Help from Swedish relatives resulted in translations of many of his father's old letters that were valuable source materials for this book, and the author clearly engaged in much additional research in various archives, documents, and other papers to assemble the colorful descriptions of people and places in the book, especially Swedish Chicago.

While this book is interesting to the follower of stories about Swedish immigrants and their families in Chicago, it proved a hard book for me to like. Lindberg focuses much of the story on his father, Oskar Lindberg, and how his father never had much time or affection for him and treated him and his mother very badly. As one whose own father died when I was only 14, I had a little trouble relating to his view of his early life. Lindberg seems to view himself as a victim of a bad father and comes off as a bitter whiner, despite having attained some success as a writer. Perhaps this is because he is a child of the 1950's and has little understanding and no memory of the Great Depression, World War II, and the many hardships most Americans experienced prior to his childhood.

The central character, Oskar Lindberg, is described by his son as mainly an overbearing and insensitive brute, a womanizer, a heavy drinker, and cruel to all his wives and his two children, Charles and Richard.

Yet here is also a man, born into poverty, who with little education built a successful contracting business in Chicago, aided and supported his ex-wives and children, sent money home to his mother and others in Sweden, was very generous with employees, charities, and associates, and lived well in his homes, dressed well, and drove expensive cars. (It is ironic to note that this dedicated lifetime socialist attained financial success by hard work in the way of capitalists). Yet the son had little affection for him and had few kind words to say about him except faintly in an epilogue, from the later perspective of his own life as a writer.

The book will be of great interest to many for its portrayal of a number of Swedish American lives, and its vivid descriptions of the neighborhoods, gathering places, night life, and institutions of Swedish Chicago



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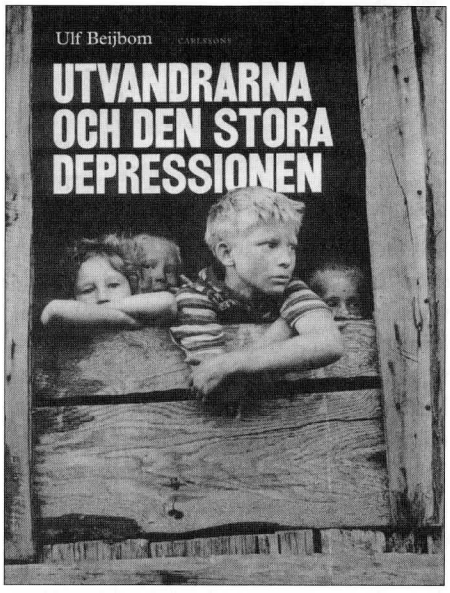
Depressing times



Utvandrarna och den stora depressionen, by Ulf Beijbom. Hardcover, 312 pages, illustrated. Carlsson *Bokförlag*. ISBN 978 91 7331 480 0. In **Swedish.**

Professor Ulf Beijbom, former director of the Swedish Emigrant Institute has now published a new book, in *Swedish,* about the Great Depression, and how it affected the Swedish-American population, especially in the Chicago and Rockford areas. He has used the oral history interviews done by Lennart Setterdahl, and also many other sources, suck as newspapers, and official statistics. In this book you hear the voices of the victims of the Depression. This is a book that should be translated into English, so the present-day Swedish -Americans can understand the elder generation better.

Elisabeth Thorsell

in the 1920's through the 1960's. In many ways, however, the reader learns as much about the author and his own outlook on life as about Swedish Chicago. All people, places, and events are described in an embittered, cynical way throughout. Few of the people in the book have idealistic motives or live happily or free of selfish ulterior motives or guilt. For me, an interesting book to read as one man's point of view, but a hard book to like.

Dennis L. Johnson

An allotment soldier's cottage, situated near Skövde in Västergötland. This soldier belonged to the Skaraborg infantry regiment.