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Chicago, Chicago!

By Elisabeth Thorsell

Last year, in September of 2011, my friend and colleague, Ingrid Nilsson from Trelleborg, and I travelled together in the U.S.

We started by flying into Springfield, IL, to take part of the annual conference of the Federation of Genealogical Societies, which was very interesting. In the fine early fall weather we walked around and saw many sights, and it felt good to be back in the U.S. again.

Among other things we went on a tour of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (ALPL), which seems to be a very good place for Illinois research. They even told us that they had old Swedish language newspapers.

The ALPL in Springfield.

One of the benefits of going to these conferences is all the people you meet, and the interesting items in the exhibition hall. In the evenings there were all kinds of social events that did not remind us of Sweden at all.

One evening we had the opportunity to see Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, but we could not hear his speech, because of the “genealogical noise” in the room.

To Chicago

Some of our Chicago friends that come to Salt Lake City thought we needed to be updated on our knowledge of the “Windy City,” where so many Swedes made their homes (several visits to O’Hare Airport did not count), and arranged many interesting things for us to see during a couple of days.

The first day we spent in the company of Julie Benson, who had made the plans.

Julie and Ingrid.

Julie took us on a walk along Michigan Avenue, which ended at the Architectural Cruise on the Chicago River. The boat and the guide took us to see many of the skyscrapers. Many of them were designed by famous architects, but probably built by Swedes. Next we walked around the Millennium Park and saw many modern sculptures and old fountains, a perfect walk on a sunny day. Then a bus down to the Hancock Building, with its 94 floors one of the tallest buildings in Chicago. An incredible

Part of the Chicago shore.
view from up there! By now we were
tired, so a horse-and-buggy ride back
to the hotel was just perfect.

Next day (Monday) was a day of
rest; we just explored the area of the
hotel just a block off Michigan Av-

eue.

Tuesday our friend Wayne Nelson
picked us up and drove us to the New-
berry Library, where a librarian told
of their resources for Chicago re-
search, which were extensive, even
some Swedish church records. We also
met with Grace DuMelle, whom we
talked to in Springfield, and who has
written an informative book, Finding
Your Chicago Ancestors.

The next stop was North Park Uni-

versity, where the Archives and Spe-
cial Collections are located in the
lower level of Brandel Library. Re-
searchers will find records of histori-
cal value and significance regarding
North Park University, the Evangel-
gical Covenant Church, and Swedish-Americans in the Chicago area.

We met with archivist Anne Jen-
er, who used to work at the Swenson
Center, and who showed us lots of
interesting archives that are very
valuable for all serious scholars on
the Swedes in Chicago.

Lunch at the Tre Kronor restau-

rant was also a treat.

Wednesday Wayne again picked us
up and took us to the Swedish Amer-
ican Museum on 5211 North Clark
Street in the old Swedish area, where
a nice young curator showed us sev-
eral interiors that also gave an in-
sight into the life of the immigrants,
or at least those that succeeded.

Waiting was a big part of the immigrants
life. The plaques on the wall are inscribed
with immigrant names.

This was a rainy day, so we could not
walk around in the area, which would
otherwise have been fun.

In the evening Wayne took us to
Sue Jackson's house way north of
Chicago, where she had invited us
and some other friends for a meal,
and a nice social evening.

Gene Anderson, Wayne Nelson, Sue
Jackson. Louise Anderson was also there.

Thursday Shirley Koelling came and
took us south of the city. First we saw
the statue of Carl von Linné (Lin-
naeus) on a high pedestal in the gar-
den of University of Chicago. We had
seen the day before in the North Park
Archives the boxes of records of ma-
king the statue and then the records
from when it had to be moved in
1976.

Pullman next

The rest of the day was mostly spent
in visiting the town of Pullman.

“Historic Pullman was built in the
1880s by George Pullman for his
eponymous railroad car company, the
Pullman Palace Car Company. Pull-
man's architect Solon Spencer Be-
man was said to be so proud of his
creation that he asked George Pull-
man if the neighborhood could be
named for himself. Pullman re-
sponded to the effect, “Sure, we’ll
take the first half of my name, and
the second half of yours.”

“In a day when most workers lived
in shabby tenements near their fac-
tories, Pullman seemed a dream,
being voted “the world’s most perfect
town” by the jury of the second In-
ternational Hygienic and Pharma-
ceutical Exposition in 1896. Every-
thing, from stores to townhouses,
were owned by the company. “The
design was pleasing, and all of the
workers’ needs were met within the
neighborhood. The houses were com-
fortable by standards of the day, and
contained such amenities as indoor
plumbing, gas, and sewers.

“Pullman’s misfortune came dur-
ing the depression which followed
the Panic of 1893. When demand for
Pullman cars slackened, the Pullman
company laid off hundreds of work-
ers, and switched many more to pay-
per-piece work. This work, while
paying more per hour, reduced total
worker income. Despite these cut-
backs, the company did not reduce
rents for those that lived in the town
of Pullman. The Pullman strike
began in 1894 and lasted for 2
months, eventually leading to inter-
vention by the U.S. government. The
Strike Commission set up in 1894
thought that the aesthetic features
admired by visitors had little mone-
tary value for employees.

“George Pullman himself died in
1897. The Illinois Supreme Court re-
quired the company to sell off the
town because the running of the
town was outside the company’s
charter. It was then annexed by the
city of Chicago. Within ten years, all
non-manufacturing property – the
houses, the public buildings – were sold off to the individual occupants.

"Pullman Car Works manufactured its last car in early 1981. In 1991 the state of Illinois purchased a section of the plant intending to create a museum of the history of the company and the Pullman community. This plan was called into question as the result of a fire in December 1998.

"In 1960 the original town of Pullman, approximately between 111th and 115th Streets, was threatened with total demolition for an industrial park.

"By 1972 the Pullman Historic District had obtained national, state, and city landmark status to protect the original 900 rowhouses and public buildings built by George Pullman."


We went to the Visitors’ Center, which was full of tools, pictures, plans, and many other things.

Pullman was a place that attracted many Swedish carpenters, and some 1,100 Swedes were employed by the company in the late 1800s. They were the second largest foreign ethnic group in Pullman; only the Germans were a larger group.

Swedish ethnologist Allan T. Nilsson has written a book about those of the Pullman Swedes that came from a special area in Västergotland, Ryfors in Mullsjö community. Mr. Nilsson’s book is called De byggde järnvägsvagnar – Emigranterna från Ryfors hos Pullmans i Chicago (1999).

After having spent most of the afternoon in Pullman we went on to the South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society (SSGHS) in Hazel Crest, Illinois, where we visited their library. Our friend Shirley is the 1st vice president, and another friend, Judy O. Baouab, is the 2nd vice president. The society has a large library and seems to be quite active. They have published several volumes of clippings of interest from local newspapers, and even translated two chapters from the above-mentioned book by Allan T. Nilsson. They have also published “The Greater Roseland Area of Chicago – Svenska Evangelical Lutheran Elim Församlingen (Elim Lutheran Church) 1885 - 1900,” which has extracted records for this period.

Perhaps the most valuable documents in the possession of the SSGHS are the Pullman Car Works records. The collection holds records for about 200,000 individuals. A record might be just a card with a name on it, or an entire employee file, including birth certificate, military records, pictures, family relationships, work history, education, and cause of death. The collection is not open to the public. Research can be requested by the web site.

Next day we flew to SLC!