Minnesota Historical Society
– a treasure chamber for all Minnesota researchers

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) was founded already in 1849 at the initiative of Governor Alexander Ramsey as a non-profit educational and cultural institution. The MHS does this in many ways: museum exhibits, libraries and collections, historic sites, educational programs, and book publishing.

The SAG editor had the opportunity to visit with Dee and Ray Kleinow in October who took me to the impressive MHS building, The Minnesota History Center, from the early 1990s, located in Saint Paul, with a glorious view of the State Capitol.

We had limited time. So it was only a short visit to the archives this time, I have to come back another year to explore the museum exhibitions and much more.

Fortunately, we met with archivist Duane P. Swanson, the curator of manuscripts, who took us on a quick tour of the archives, the reading room, and even a visit to the huge stacks down underground. There they have some 100,000 linear feet with just as many archival storage boxes.

Duane told us that the MHS is the official repository for all Minnesota government records, in a way like a Swedish landsarkiv. They have all county court records until about 1950, 80,000 rolls of microfilmed newspapers, and a Visual Research Database of some 200,000 pictures. The MHS also has records from Protestant-Episcopal and Congregational churches, and hopes to get records from other denominations too.

The MHS also has a huge library and the catalog is online. By just searching on the keyword “Swedish” I got 2,825 hits, which will take some time to go through.
The online presence

For all of us who can not for various reasons visit the MHS in St. Paul, there is a very useful web site, address below.

Two of the most important parts are the Birth Certificates Index and the Death Certificates Index.

The Birth Certificates Index covers the period of the years 1900-1934, supplemented by about 2,700 pre-1900 records. It shows the name and surname, date of birth and name of the county, and the mother’s maiden name. You can order a non-certified copy of a birth certificate for $9, and then get a link to the copy in your e-mail inbox. There are good instructions in the FAQ page on how to do this. Records of out-of-wedlock births will not be available until 100 years have passed.

The Death Certificates Index covers death certificates from 1908 to 2001, supplemented by death cards from 1904 to 1907. Copies can be bought for the same fee as birth certificates, $9, as above.

Another helpful set of databases are the Indexes for the Minnesota State Censuses. This Index includes Minnesota state census records from 1849, 1850, 1853, 1855, 1857, 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, and 1905.

The use of these very helpful indexes is free and requires no registration.

Then we have the Visual Resources Database which contains photos, pictures of art, and posters. A search done with the keyword “Swedish” turned up more than 400 pictures with some Swedish connection. One of them was of Swede Hollow in Saint Paul, and gave a very clear view of this small and closely built-up community of poor Swedish immigrants. There are innumerable pictures of Swedish American churches, and hospitals and nurses, and you can certainly spend hours browsing this collection.

The MHS also has a very active publication program, and you can find their catalog on the web site. There is also a book blog:
http://discussions.mnhs.org/10000books/

And then the MHS magazine Minnesota History Quarterly. The 2010 Fall issue has articles on bicycling in Minneapolis, The MN Immigrant Experience, and much more. On the website you can find a good index to all articles back to 1915, and older articles, from 2003 backwards, are downloadable!

http://www.mnhs.org/index.htm