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Book Reviews

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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.

Sad story of troubled families

Severed Ties and Silenced Voices, Separation and Adaptation in Two Swedish Immigrant Families, Roger McKnight, Nordic Studies Press, Chicago, 2008, 293 pages, Softcover, Illustrated, American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, \$15.00 plus shipping.

Not all immigrant stories are based on heroic figures who left Sweden to begin new and prosperous lives in America. This book by Roger McKnight records the stories of two Swedish families who came separately to Minnesota in the late 1860's and settled as neighbors on pioneer farms on the prairie near Kansas Lake in Watonwan County, near St. James, in southern Minnesota. (This was the same decade in which my own great-grandfather came with his family to settle in Bernadotte, west of St. Peter in Nicollet County, less than thirty-five miles from Kansas Lake). While the lives of my own ancestors came from very similar circumstances in Sweden to confront very similar conditions in Minnesota, there the parallels in the lives of these families with my own took a vastly different course.

The author, a professor of Scandinavian Studies and Swedish at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN, has written several books about the immigrant experience, has studied and taught in Sweden, and

is a student of Swedish American culture and social history in Minnesota. Not related to any of the persons who are the subjects of his book, Prof. McKnight, in the course of researching prison records in Stillwater State Prison in Minnesota came across the records of an inmate which, in turn, led him to research the families involved in a case of a murder which had taken place in the winter of 1872-73 near Kansas Lake. As the author unravels the stories of these families, the murder, and the aftermath of this incident, we learn a great deal more.

Woven into this story of the histories of the two families in Sweden, one from Värmland and one from Halland, are many rich details about the social conditions at the time in Sweden, local customs, economic conditions, folk culture at the time, and much more. The plight of the very poor and their lack of opportunity in their homeland, the separation of families and their uprooting to immigrate to America, and the difficulties of ocean travel are all described in great detail.

Finding their way to a destination in Minnesota and the difficulties of establishing farms on the prairie as pioneer settlers are all part of the background of this story, bringing to readers a highly colorful and vivid picture of what this immigrant life was like in the 1860's. A group of photographs are included to show many of the individuals involved in the story and the places they lived, both in Sweden and in the U.S.

This story centers around Lars Fredrik Johannesson Holm and Karolina Andersdotter who grew up

in troubled, impoverished families in Värmland in several parishes near Lake Vänern. They married in 1862 and, by 1868, immigrated with their two daughters, and an older sister and her family, to America. After three years of westward travel following the railroads, they settled in Watonwan County near Kansas Lake in Minnesota. The other central figure in the story was Anders Johannesson, born in 1833 in the parish of Breared in Halland, just across the strait from Denmark. Anders married Johanna Persdotter in 1862 and moved in with his parents to work their farm, his older brother having become a tenant farmer nearby. By 1867, after famine years and the loss of their farm, Anders left for America with his parents, brother, and sister. He left behind his wife and two sons. By 1869, Anders settled on homestead acreage near Kansas Lake.

The two families had met and become acquainted during their travels to Watonwan County and settled in as near neighbors on land opened up for settlement by railroad construction. Anders's name had become Americanized to Andrew Johnson, and Lars Johannesson Holm and Karolina became Lars and Caroline Johnson. (Several neighbors were also named Johnson, so the reader is pressed to keep all these unrelated Johnsons straight). Lars, with a history of bizarre behavior dating back to his years in Sweden, became increasingly unbalanced and efforts were made to have him committed to an asylum after several violent acts. He left home to go wandering shortly before the Novem-



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ber blizzard of 1872, and never returned. In the spring of 1873, his body was found with many head wounds on the shore of Kansas Lake.

Rumors flew, and Andrew Johnson was eventually charged with his murder. He and Caroline had run away together soon after the discovery, but he was found, returned to St. James, and convicted of the murder of Lars Johnson. He was sentenced to serve twenty years in Stillwater State Prison.

These tragic events shattered two families. Andrew is in prison, Carolina (the victim's wife) leaves to later remarry in Wisconsin, Andrew's family in Sweden is abandoned, and others go on with heavy hearts, carrying the tragic memories of their once hopeful lives. The author has followed the broken pieces of these families, along with several other participants in the tragic murder and trial, and reveals more of the details of their lives and that of their descendants. Many of these descendants remained unknown to each other, with no knowledge of the tragic events of 1872 until recently, when Prof. McKnight tracked them down to interview them. Also revealed are the final days of the released Andrew Johnson, who returned to farming in Kansas Lake, and later to work and retirement, living with a son in Duluth.

Severed Ties and Silent Voices is a sad story of troubled families, and a reminder that not all went well for all of the hundreds of thousands of Swedes who immigrated to America. This kind of story is no doubt repeated numerous times in many sad variations if one were to try and

chronicle every family who came to America in this period. Yet this massively researched and documented work by Prof. McKnight helps us all better understand the circumstances and difficulties faced by so many immigrants in dealing with troubled families, hardships, poverty, alcoholism, mental illness, separations, and the breakup of cultural and religious ties brought about for so many by the immigration experience. And this gives readers a better appreciation of the strengths of those who overcame all these hardships to keep their families intact and their heritage of cultural and religious ties strong as they became citizens of their new land.

Dennis L. Johnson

A young Swedish girl

Growing Up in Sweden in the Shadow of World War II, Lilly Setterdahl, Fidlars Doubleday, Inc. 2008, 167 pages, Softcover, Illustr., Amazon.com, \$11.00 plus shipping.

Those of us born in the 1930's and before all have vivid memories of life during World War II. We remember the bombing of Pearl Harbor, rationing, gasoline shortages, collecting scrap metals, relatives in military service, blackouts, news from the war fronts, and many other of the many changes to our lives during the five years that Americans were in the war.

This recent book by Lilly Setterdahl adds to our recollections the memories of a writer in the same age group who was experiencing the war

while growing up in Sweden. The author's astonishing memory for details from that time in her life provides a vivid picture not only of the effects of this war on neutral Sweden, but also a detailed look at daily family life in Sweden during those years.

Lilly Setterdahl was born in the small village of Sivikan, in Frändefors parish, Dalsland, near the south end of Lake Vänern, not far from Uddevalla. Her parents were Adrian and Elin Anderson; her father was a farmer and small businessman. Lilly began school in 1938, just before the war began in Europe, and she had an older brother and a younger sister and brother. Much later, in 1957, she married Lennart Setterdahl, and the couple immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Cleveland, OH. They both had a strong interest in learning more about Swedish-Americans, and this interest turned into a career for both of them.

Moving to Quad Cities in 1971 to pursue these interests, her husband became a chronicler of the records of Swedish-American organizations and numerous church records. Lennart amassed large collections of photographs and interviews, many of which are now at Augustana College, Bishop Hill, the Emigrant Institute in Växjö, the Royal Library in Stockholm, and other archives. His untimely death in 1995 ended this partnership but brought Lilly's work into more prominence. She has now authored some eleven books about Swedish-Americans in various cities in the U.S. and even a recent book of fiction. Lilly is well-known to the Swedish-American community and continues speaking and writing about Swedes in the U.S.

In **Growing Up In Sweden**, Lilly describes in some twenty chapters the many aspects of her life in Sweden during the World War II years, ranging from her home, her village, her parents, grandparents,



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siblings and pets, other relatives, her country school, her church, the town of Vänersborg, games, faith, fears, accidents, her parents' work, and more.

Ever-present in the background is the looming presence of the war in Europe and how it affected their lives.

She remembers well their fears of invasion as the neighboring countries of Denmark and Norway were occupied by German forces and the near-total cutoff of trade with the west, with food rationing, shortages, and substitutions for coffee and other favorites. Many Swedes with cars or trucks, such as her father, were forced to adapt them to run on charcoal, gasoline was so scarce. The entry into the war of the U.S., refugees from Finland and elsewhere, transit through Sweden of German soldiers, disruptions to family life, deferral of schooling, and other effects of the war are all remembered in detail. She concludes with a description of the ending of the war, and the ending of her childhood. She soon left her little village to continue her education and eventually move to the U.S., but has returned often to her home in Sweden.

In a brief epilogue, the author adds a chronology of the war years, including such items as her father's service record, the ringing of all the church bells in Sweden when Poland was invaded, Swedish aid to Finland and Norway, and a summary of civilian and military casualties for the countries in the war in Europe. The book is laced with many personal and family photos of this period of her life in Sweden, her home, her family, and many other places and people which

were part of her life at the time.

This is an engagingly readable book, filled with all of the details of daily life in Sweden during these war years. This is especially so for those having similar memories of the same years here in the U.S. who can relate to the similarities and the differences. Few of us would have the powers to recall the amazing degree of detail that Lilly Setterdahl has recorded in her memoir of that period. Younger readers will also find this book both engaging and illuminating about these remarkable years, and the effects on the lives of those who experienced them.

Dennis L. Johnson

Polycarpus von Schneidau and his family

Immigration och Emigration under 1700-tal - 1800-tal - 1900-tal. Med den svenske emigranten i Chicago Polycarpus von Schneidau som centralfigur, by Nils Fredrik Beerståhl. Falköping, 2009, A5 leaflet, 48 pp. Can be purchased from the author, Mössebergsgatan 11 D, SE-521 32 Falköping. (In Swedish)

For more than fifty years, Nils Fredrik Beerståhl has collected genealogical material about the family of Polycarpus von Schneidau (1812-1859), the famous Swedish daguerrotyper in Chicago. His interest comes from his own connection to the family. His maternal grandmother's paternal grandmother was Hedvig (Hedda) Elisabeth Strömberg, a daughter of Anders Strömberg (1772-1848), farmer (*lantbrukare*) in Lerdala parish, who was an illegitimate but acknowledged son of Polycarpus's

grandfather's cousin Fredrik von Sneidern (1734-1796). Hedda's brother had issue, among which there were emigrants, so there could be Strömbergs of von Sneidern paternal origin still flourishing in the U.S. Beerståhl's theory was that the Strömberg name is composed by Fredrik von Sneidern himself through combining the first part of his stepmother's name Strömsten with the last part of his mother's name Swedberg.

The title of Beerståhl's leaflet is "Immigration and Emigration during the 18th - 19th - 20th Century." The title is misleading: the Swedish immigrant in Chicago, Polycarpus von Schneidau, is the central figure and almost nothing on immigration and emigration in general is described. A more suitable title would have been "A Rhapsodical Overview of the von Sneidern-von Schneidau Family", since that is what Beerståhl has written. He goes as far back as the origin, when the name was Schneider(n) (German: 'tailor') later von Sneidern. This was changed by some family members to von Schneidau, because they thought – or hoped – that they were descended from Frantz Schneider, who had been ennobled by the German emperor in 1649 with a typical German two-part noble name, Schneider von Schneidau. In Sweden, the von Sneidern-von Schneidau family never was ennobled. As a family of officers they had social status on level with noble families, and Polycarpus's family tree gives proof of this – almost all of his ancestors, except on the paternal line, were nobles.

Beerståhl reveals some findings on the von Sneidern arms, more specifically the colors of it in an enamelled brooch, and has noted parts of merit lists of some of the officers of the family.

Magnus Bäckmark



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Swedes in Texas

Stuck in the mud at Post Oak Island, by Charlene Hanson Jordan, 1361 County Road 464, Elgin, TX 78621. E-mail: charlenehansonjordan@yahoo.com Price \$19.95 + tax 336 pages, letter format, ill., index, bibliography. 2008.

This well-researched book is about a small community in an oak grove in central Texas, not far from Elgin and Austin. There is much about the early history in the first section of the book. For instance the Confederate general Robert E. Lee was a guest in a home here before the Civil War.

During the later 1890s many Swedes settled in the area. Some of them were featured in *Svenskarne i Texas* (1916–1918), but many were also left out for various reasons. About 80 Scandinavian households eventually bought land and settled here.

The agricultural land was mostly black and gumlike soil, so some people left and moved to California, Colorado, Washington State, and Wisconsin among other places.

Here is also described how the Swedes kept themselves to themselves and did not interact so much with other ethnicities. The *lutfisk* became a cherished traditional dish, as in other Swedish-American communities (**ed:s note:** I have not eaten *lutfisk* since I became big enough to defend myself).

Most of the Swedes came from Småland, supposedly an effect of the

influence of early immigrant S.M. Swenson from Barkeryd. Others came from Västergötland, Närke, Hälsingland, and Skåne.

The central place in the area was called Type, where there was a post office for a few years and a general store, and even a printing press. There were also two churches in Type; one a Free Mission Church, and the other was Bethlehem Lutheran Church. There does not seem to be any microfilmed Swedish American church records from this area.

There are many memories told about the early life in the area, how

hailstones killed calves, rabbits, lambs, chickens, and even broke through the roof one year. Further misery was added when that family's milk cows ended up in a cattle drive, and never returned.

Later their luck changed and they could buy new cows and start a new crop.

A macabre story is told about an old couple who died in Sweden, and their son had them photographed in their coffins (they died within days of each other). Then he hanged an enlargement on the wall in his home, as the author, his granddaughter, re-

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members. Another story is about Willie Schiller who ran the grocery store in Type, and was said to carry his money in a molasses bucket across the street from the store and saloon to his home. Having problems with burglars, he rigged a shotgun in the store and loaded it with blanks the first time, but later with real ammunition, and then forgot all about it, and managed to shoot himself and later died from the wounds. As the rumor was that he had buried his money in his backyard, many people dugged there, but nothing was found.

Oil was of course important, and many of the settlers built derricks and drilled for liquid gold, and some were lucky, while for others it was just a dream.

There is a cemetery at Type, and in this book there is a list of the people buried there from 1908, mostly people with Swedish names, and there are even two tombstones with Swedish inscriptions. Those are for Anna Amalia Hanson (d. 1910) and Christina Fredrickson (d. 1915). There are very few people buried there after 1950, as the younger generation had become more assimilated and moved to the cities.

An important invention is also mentioned; the advent of the barbed wire around 1877, which made life so much easier for the farmer that wanted to grow crops, but of course was not liked by the cattlemen who preferred the huge, open prairie, where they could drive their cattle everywhere.

It is really rather fun to read all these memories from a way of life that is almost completely gone.

Then there is an appendix, which lists all the families in the area in alphabetical order, the first being August Adamson, born 25 March

1861 in Vistorp (VäGö), which tallies with the information in *Emibas*.

Dates do not seem to have been always checked in Swedish records, but rather found in *Svenskarna i Texas*. The part that is especially interesting to modern Swedes is the information on what happened next, how families grew and children moved. This is very difficult for us to find from afar, even though the internet has made that kind of research easier. Also very valuable is the notes on changing the surnames, like Björklund to Borkland, Björkman to Burkman, or just a Johannesson who chose to use the name Blomberg; so difficult to find for the one who is looking for him!

Anyone with relatives that went to Texas would do well to study this book. It has a good name index and a long list of literature and records that have been used in the compilation of this book, as well as informative endnotes.

Elisabeth Thorsell

New and Noteworthy

(short notes on interesting books and articles)

Ancestry Magazine Sept/Oct 2009 has a very good article on "Following the Footsteps of Ellis Island's Immigrants," which shows in details the immigrants' route through medical examinations and other inspections. Well worth reading.

Swedish genealogists Ted Rosvall and Anna-Lena Hultman have just released (in Swedish) a manual for Swedes on how to trace the immigrants in the U.S., *Emigrantforskning*, published by the *Sveriges Släktforskarförbund* (Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies). The book, 112 pages, describes how to search first in Swedish records, and then goes through various U.S. records, mostly those that can be found on Ancestry: census records, draft registration cards, and much more. Rootsweb is included as well as Familysearch, Findagrave and USGenweb, even Facebook. The Swedish-American church records are mentioned, but somewhat hard to access, as are the Swedish-American newspapers, but there is a project hopefully starting soon to digitize those papers. SAG is also mentioned. This book might be of interest to American researchers too, but you need to read Swedish!

The *Swedish American Historical Quarterly* 2/09 has an interesting article, by Claes H. Jacobson, about John Anderson a.k.a Johan Albin Andersson, born 25 March 1869 in Vinberg (Hall.), who left for the U.S. as a small child in 1870. The family settled in Pennsylvania, but went west in 1883 to Valentine, Nebr., close to the border of South Dakota and the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. Soon John had grown up and started to work as a carpenter, saved money and bought a camera. With this he started a second career as a photographer, and in this way saved much history about the Sioux and their ways of life.