Book Reviews

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Sad story of troubled families


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-
A young Swedish girl


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 Frände-fors 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,
many other places and people which
in Sweden, her home, her family, and
family photos of this period of her life
book is laced with many personal and
countries in the war in Europe. The
ian and military casualties for the
was invaded, Swedish aid to Finland
church bells in Sweden when Poland
including such items as her father's
a chronology of the war years, in-
home in Sweden.
U.S., but has returned often to her
education and eventually move to the
left her little village to continue her
the ending of her childhood. She soon
deferral of schooling, and other ef-
transit through Sweden of German
refugees from Finland and elsewhere,
entry into the war of the U.S., ref-
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 char-
coal, gasoline was so scarce. The
entry into the war of the U.S., ref-
geeves from Finland and elsewhere,
transit through Sweden of German
soldiers, disruptions to family life,
deferral of schooling, and other ef-
tects 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, in-
cluding 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 civil-
ian 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 differ-
ences. Few of us would have the
powers to recall the amazing degree
of detail that Lilly Setterdahl has
recorded in her memoir of that pe-
riod. Younger readers will also find
this book both engaging and illumin-
ating 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 Beer-
stål. 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 Fred-
rik Beerståhl has collected genea-
logical material about the family of
Polycarpus von Schneidau (1812-
1859), the famous Swedish daguer-
rotery 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 Ler-
dala parish, who was an illegitimate
but acknowledged son of Polycarpus's
grandfather's cousin Fredrik von
Sneidern (1734-1796). Hedda's broth-
er had issue, among which there were
emigrants, so there could be Ström-
bergs of von Sneidern paternal origin
still flourishing in the U.S. Beer-
stål's theory was that the Ström-
berg name is composed by Fredrik
von Sneidern himself through com-
bining the first part of his step-
mother's name Strömsten with the
last part of his mother's name Swed-
berg.

The title of Beerståhl's leaflet is
“Immigration and Emigration during
the 18th - 19th - 20th Century.” The
title is misleading: the Swedish im-
migrant 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 Schnei-
der(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
Franz Schneider, who had been
ennobled by the German emperor in
1649 with a typical German two-part
noble name, Schneider von Schnei-
dau. In Sweden, the von Sneidern-
von Schneidau family never was en-
nobled. 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 speci-
fically 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
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 (eds 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-
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 later died from the wounds. As the rumor was that he had buried his money in his backyard, many people dug 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

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**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.