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Swedish Day –
Swedish-Americans and the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition

BY BRUCE R. GERHARDT

Between June 1 and November 1, 1898, more than 2.6 million people visited the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. While Swedish-Americans from all parts of the country came to the Exposition, two days were specifically designated to honor those of Swedish heritage who had made their new home in America. Those two days brought prominent Swedish-Americans together in Omaha. They celebrated with song, music, and poem, and reflected on what being a Swedish-American meant to them.

Most Americans viewed the World’s Columbian Exposition (also called the Chicago World’s Fair) in 1893 as a huge success for Chicago. Soon after, many prominent citizens in the American “West” proposed holding another great fair. They hoped such a fair would boost the economy of the western states and highlight their prosperity and recovery from the financial Panic of 1893. But financing another fair would be a huge undertaking. The Chicago World’s Fair had cost more than 25 million dollars. Hopeful cities such as Kansas City, Denver, and Minneapolis could not find a way to arrange the finances even for an exposition on a smaller scale. But a group of Nebraskans including William Jennings Bryan, either bold or fool-hardy (or both), brought a meeting of the Trans-Mississippi Congress to Omaha in 1894. Met with promises of the necessary financial support, the Congress agreed that a “Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition” would be held in Omaha in 1898.

Along with the buildings, attractions, and exhibits, the Exposition had a full calendar of special days and events planned for the summer of 1898. From the opening day on June 1 to the close on October 31, the Exposition needed crowds. Big crowds. Only by selling a huge number of admission tickets could it be a financial success. So special days or events were created for nearly every interest and group that could be drawn to Omaha and through the front gate: Illinois Day, Iowa Day, Kansas Day, Texas Melon Day, Flower Day, Lumberman’s Day, Shriner Day, Grape Day, Children’s Day, Railroad Week, and many more. Ethnic groups were also courted: German Day, Bohemian Day, and on June 24, Swedish-American Day. The day was planned to recognize “those emigrants from the ‘Land of the Midnight Sun’ to this land of freedom and prosperity [who] had not tarried in the East, but, following the instincts of their bright mental inheritance from sturdy forefathers, had drifted into the West.”

The day was “sweltering” hot, but it was reported that several thousand Swedish-Americans arrived for the fair. At 3:00 p.m., the Theodore Thomas Orchestra under the direction of Arthur Mees performed a program at the Auditorium. Admission for this special concert was 25 cents. The program started with the Swedish...
Välkommen hem!
Welcome home to your Swedish roots!

A road map will make your travels in Sweden a lot easier.
A family map of your roots will add other kinds of values to your travel.
Maybe your long lost relatives are waiting for you where it all started?

Or perhaps you are just curious about where and what kind of life your ancestors lived in that little country far up north, on the Arctic Circle.

The House of Genealogy, non-profit but professional, can help you discover your Swedish roots.
Our experienced researchers have access to church records from all over Sweden. We have all the necessary databases. We have a nationwide network that makes the search more effective.

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and very well known to most Swedish-Americans at the time. Many would have been subscribers. The poem is said to have dealt with the love and patriotism one has both for the adopted country as well as the native homeland. The Jubilee Chorus followed with “The Singers’ March” by J.A. Dahlstrom, before the main speech of the program was delivered by Rev. Carl Swensson, founder of Bethany College.

Swensson spoke for two hours in Swedish, and paid tribute to Sweden and the Swedish people. The achievements of Leif Ericsson and John Ericsson were touted, and Swensson urged the audience to the duty of rendering aid to the suffering in Cuba due to the ongoing Spanish-American War. Professor Edgren ended the program by conducting a “Jubilee Cantata,” highlighted with solos, duets, and mixed choruses.

The Swedish-American day was deemed a great success; the Nebraska State Journal reporting that despite the heat, the “Scorched Sons of North” numbered several thousand. The evening program “attracted one of the largest audiences which had occupied [the Auditorium] since the opening of the Exposition. There was not a vacant seat on the lower floor, and very few remaining in the gallery, when the exercises commenced.”

Interestingly, another Swedish Day was held on September 28. It was added to the schedule during the Exposition. Politics seemed to play some part, as the partisan Omaha World-Herald reported that the earlier Swedish Day was too early in the season, not well planned, and not a “satisfactory occasion.” Other papers had reported that the earlier Swedish Day was a great success. Reports after Swedish-American Day would also split along what seems to be party lines between the papers in some combination of political, commercial, and religious interests.

The Swedish Day

The program began 10:30 that morning in the Auditorium. Members of the Augustana Conservatory of Music provided music, beginning with Prof. A.D. Bodford playing a Mendelssohn sonata solo on the organ. The audience was greeted by Thaddeus S. Clarkson, the General Manager of the Exposition. Pastor P.J. Sward of Omaha, President of the Augustana Synod, provided a response in Swedish. Sward had been born in 1845 in Styra, (Östg.). In 1873 Sward was sent by the Missionary Society of Stockholm to establish a mission at New York Harbor for sailors. He remained there until 1878 when he was called by the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Red Wing, Minnesota. After a time of service in Nebraska, he became President of the Augustana Synod in 1891.

Soloist Edla Lund of the Augustana Conservatory sang “Bland Fielden” by Helland, before the main speech by Professor Olof Olsson, President of Augustana College. Olsson was born in 1841 in Karlskoga, (Värmland). In 1868 he immigrated to Lindsborg, Kansas, and helped found the Swedish Lutheran Church. He had been instrumental in calling Dr. Swensson to help found Bethany College. Olsson then moved to Rock Island, Illinois, to become a theology professor at Augustana College. Following Olsson, Edla Lund sang the folksong “Ack Värmland du sköna.”

An original poem was recited by Prof. Ludwig K. Holmes. Holmes helped found Bethesda Lutheran Church while a seminary student in New Haven, Connecticut. He was then a pastor in Grosvenor Dale, Connecticut, and at the time of the Exposition in 1898 was a pastor in Burlington, Iowa. The program concluded with a violin solo by Prof. Franz Zedeler: “Mazurka de Concert” by Masin.

An afternoon program commenced at 3:30, with Prof. Bodford playing an allegro by Niels Gade and “Festmarch” by Gustaf Hagg. The Honorable C.J.A. Ericson, Republican State Senator from Boone, Iowa, spoke. Ericson came to America in 1852 from Södra Vi, (Smål.). He was followed by a Zedeler violin solo of “La Melancolia” by Francois Prume. Professor and librarian J.S. Carlson of Gustavus Adolphus gave a speech, and the program concluded with two more musical pieces. Mrs. Lund sang “Irmelin Rose” by Wilhelm Petersson-Berger, and Prof. Bodford finished with an organ solo of “Fantas-
The Svea Quartet from Minnesota came on October 26 as part of Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition: an Interactive Website, (Lincoln, 2006), available at http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/musicstudent/4/


Nebraska State Journal, June 24, 1898.
Nebraska State Journal, June 25, 1898.
Nebraska State Journal, September 29, 1898.
Omaha World-Herald, September 28, 1898.
Omaha World-Herald, September 29, 1898.


Endnotes
1 Haynes, James B., History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, (St. Louis, Woodward and Tiernan Printing Co., 1910) at p. 382.
2 The precursor to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
3 The German composer Humperdinck (1854-1921), not the British pop singer of the 1960’s who took the same stage name.
4 Later to become a Democrat. Democratic U.S. Representative from Nebraska’s Second District.

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