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The Vasa Archives

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The Vasa Archives – another treasure in the Midwest

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

Bishop Hill is certainly one of the “must see” places if you come to western Illinois. It has so many reminders of the early Swedish Janssonist immigrants, and it is certainly possible to spend a day there, touring the museums and having a nice meal at one of the restaurants. One must not overlook the “Colony Store” either, which is filled with Swedish goodies, *pepparkakor*, *västerbottenost*, and a big assortment of *tomtar*.

When you have tired of arts & crafts, it might be time for a little genealogy. There is a Swedish archive in Bishop Hill that seems to be very little known.

The Vasa Order of America

The Vasa Order of America began more than a century ago (1896) as a benefit fraternal society for Swedish immigrants to the United States. Membership at the time was limited to Swedish born men who through the Vasa Order met others who needed to learn the new language and the ways of the new country. A benefit fund provided a small income to members during sickness, and a death benefit at the time would cover final expenses. The order is named for Gustav Vasa, who liberated the

country in the 16th century and became the first king of modern Sweden. The name of Vasa reflects the order's roots as a Swedish American fraternal organization.

Over the past century, many things have changed, and the Vasa Order has grown to meet the new needs of the Scandinavian American community. While in the past members looked to Vasa to help them learn the ways of the new country and provide them a means to share problems and solutions with their countrymen, today Vasa provides members a means to share their rich heritage with fellow Americans, and helps them to learn or remember the meaningful ways and values of the “Old Country.”

There are nearly three hundred lodges in the Vasa Order, governed by 19 district lodges in the United States, Sweden (2), and Canada.

The archives

The Vasa Order realized that much knowledge and history was fast disappearing with their elderly members. So it was decided to build an archives and it was soon settled that it was to be placed in Bishop Hill, Illinois, one of the most historic Swedish places in the U.S.

The building was completed in 1974, and has since then been enlarged. The main exhibit room is the first to be entered. Portraits relating to the Vasa Order are prominently displayed on the walls: These include an imposing likeness of Gustaf Vasa, donated by the South Side Vasa Club



The archives building of the Vasa Order of America in Bishop Hill, Illinois.

in Chicago, the hand-painted original charter of the Vasa Order, and our Swedish royal honorary members (Their Majesties Gustaf V, Gustaf VI Adolf, Carl XVI Gustaf, and Queen Silvia). Carl XVI Gustaf received his honorary membership in this room in 1976, a part of his observance of America's Bicentennial. District Lodge Connecticut No. 1 commissioned a fine portrait of Nils Pearson, the first Grand Master. An especially fine stained glass Vasa Emblem donated by friends in memory of past Grand Master Andrew Wendell graces a window in this room.

Exhibit room No. 2 is at present used to display various paintings and trophies in beautiful cabinets donated by lodges and friends in memory of departed members. Here, large glass enclosed cabinets hold different gifts that have been received over the years. Items on display are considered irreplaceable and add to the overall dignity of the archives. The appointment and honoring of the *Swedish American of the Year* is an annual event sponsored by the Swedish government and the Vasa Order in Sweden. An attractive display of photographs of these honorees enhances the appearance of the room. Some published works by these Swedish-Americans have been donated to our library, as has parts of Dr. Albin Widen's collection.

The main research room is also on the main floor. The main record room has four racks containing 250 acid proof archival storage boxes. They contain recorded minute books, programs, histories, etc., sent in by individuals and by local and district lodges, and a large amount of Grand lodge material. There is more material out there in Vasa Land. It should be in the archives to add to Vasa history. The metal shelving in this room contains the collection of yearly bound copies of the *Vasa Star*. Sorry to say, there are several bound copies missing.

Lars Jenner, Ph.D., is the present archivist and really seems to enjoy his work with the Vasa Order Archives. Dr. Jenner has earlier been a



Dr. Lars Jenner in the main records room of the Vasa Archives. (Photo 2007 by E. Thorsell)

teacher of Swedish at Augustana College in Rock Island, but his present work is more in his line of interest: Swedish folklore.

During a short visit with Dr. Jenner in 2007 he told the SAG editor that the database that he works on now has about 85,000 individuals, members, and former members of the Vasa Order. An older version is available to the public on the CD *Emigranten Populär*. It only has around 60,000 individuals, so the database has grown nicely since.

Contact information

Vasa National Archives
Box 101

Bishop Hill, IL 61419

Tel./Fax: 309-927-3898

E-mail:

research@vasaarchives.org

**http://www.vasaorder.com/
bishophill/**

Visitors are welcome, but preferably by previous appointment.

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Namn:      ANDERS UNO ANDERSSON
Födelsetid: 1906-02-24
Födelseort: BÖDA ÖLAND
Födödlän:  H
Yrke:      SNICKARE
Hemstat:   PA
Adress:    639 N 19TH STR PHILADELPHIA
Dödsdatum:      Ort:
Logenr:    172      Medlem/år: 1926
Anmärkning: DR 19281222
  
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An example of the information that might be found in the Vasa database.