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News from the Swenson Center

Swedish-American lodges and other organizations

BY JILL SEAHOLM

One of the lesser-known aspects of the lives of Swedish immigrants in the U.S. and Canada is the organizations that they formed and belonged to. At the Swenson Center we generally point people to the Swedish-American church records and the information that they contain, and I admit that we often forget about the records of Swedish-American lodges, which occasionally contain a wealth of information about their Swedish immigrant members.

According to Dag Blanck's dissertation *Becoming Swedish-American*, during the mass migration period there were an estimated 115,000 members of secular Swedish-American organizations such as the Independent Order of Vikings, the Independent Order of Svithiod, the Vasa Order of America, and the Scandinavian Fraternity of America, to name a few. That number represented approximately 10% of first- and second-generation Swedish-Americans, which is partly why we at the Swenson Center concentrate more on the Swedish-American churches, which about 25% of Swedish immigrants joined (*Becoming Swedish-American*, p. 36-37).

The Swedish-American church population was bigger, and it was essentially here first. The earliest immigrants tended to come over as families, and the Swedish-American churches served their needs with those families in mind. Within the church, there were schools, social evenings, choirs, and youth groups to keep the immigrants occupied and out of trouble.

The social classes were separated by clubs for more successful or upper-class immigrants which excluded some people by charging substantial dues. The first known Swedish secular organization in the U.S. was started in 1836 in New York City and was called *Svenska Societeten*. It was formed by and attracted the educated and liberal. In Chicago in 1857 came *Svea*, which also catered to the "leading Chicago Swedes." It had its own library of Swedish-language books and newspapers and gave its members a place to go. It was so exclusive that at times it had trouble attracting new members. In 1867 came the first Swedish women's organization, *Svenska Fruntimmers-föreningen*.

The 1880s brought many young, single immigrants to the big cities, and secular organizations filled a void for a good number of the immigrants who preferred not to join a church. This tended to describe young, single Swedish male laborers who were not as likely to feel that they belonged within such a family-oriented church community the way the single immigrant women could fit in. Except as a place to find single Swedish women, the church did not hold much incentive for young, single men to join. Organizations such as lodges gave them a place to gather with other young men who were far from home and ease themselves into American life while still using the Swedish language and gathering with fellow countrymen. They held festivals, dances, picnics, concerts, theater performances, lectures, and

often took financial care of the immigrants by offering life and health insurance coverage for members and their families (Beijbom: *Scandinavia Overseas*).

Special Interests

Groups were formed based on common interests, too. There were Good Templars, numerous singing clubs, gymnastics clubs, labor organizations, and mutual aid societies, to name a few. The American Union of Swedish Singers (AUSS) still thrives today with choruses in 13 states, with choruses for men, women, and children. There were and still are groups of accordion players, fiddle players, key-fiddle players, and folk dancers, all coming together in their own way to make or enjoy Swedish music.

Historical groups

There were and still are organizations for immigrants from individual provinces or counties in Sweden, though nowadays the members are more likely descended from immigrants long ago. A small group of descendants of people from Kristdala parish in Kalmar län meets once a month in Andover, Illinois, to talk about Sweden, their Swedish ancestry, and to socialize. Others with no ancestry from Kristdala also join their meetings. Third- and fourth-generation Swedish descendants who are discovering their Swedish roots late in life are also discovering and starting new organizations. According to the *American Swedish Hand-*

book, which is published by Swedish Council of America in Minneapolis, there is a group called "Vestgota Gille of Chicago." Its description says "to unite men born in the province of Västergötland, Sweden, and their male offspring to revive memories of their birthplace and forefathers' virtues."

Orders

As more Swedish immigrants were living in the U.S. and the cities filled with young laborers, more organizations appeared to give them places to go. The lodges started to spread and formed stabilizing orders such as the Independent Orders of Svithiod [Svithiod is the viking age name for Sweden, Ed:s note.] and Vikings and the Scandinavian Fraternity of America. This provided constancy from one lodge to the next throughout each order. Women were allowed to join and to form their own lodges, making for more well-rounded groups that could sometimes take membership away from the churches. This made the churches frown upon the secular immigrant groups, calling them unchristian and denying church membership to such people (Beijbom: *Scandinavia Overseas*).

Some of the individual orders

The *Independent Order of Svithiod* was formed in 1880 in Chicago and chartered in 1881. The Svithiod Grand Lodge began in 1893 complete with its first Grand Master. Men were the sole members until 1916 when women were allowed to join,

and in 1962 it was decided that "persons of Scandinavian birth or extraction" (anyone from the five Nordic countries) could now join rather than only Swedes. Over 700 people attended events celebrating the Svithiod's 100th anniversary in 1980. Web site: <www.svithiod.org>

The Swenson Center has on microfilm Svithiod lodge records from Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Oregon, and Washington.

The *Independent Order of Vikings* was formed 115 years ago in Chicago by 11 Swedish immigrants with a desire "to establish a fraternal organization to help one another, both financially and communally" in order to alleviate their concerns about what would happen to their families should anything happen to them. They established "a sick benefit and a burial fund." In 1892 a Grand Lodge began.

"As the IOV expanded across the country, these men would advertise in local papers that a new lodge within the Independent Order of Vikings was going to hold its first meeting on a certain date at a local, rented hall. Swedish men of a certain age, generally from 16-50 = it differed from lodge to lodge = were invited to become Charter members. These Charter members must be of "good character" and must undergo a doctor's examination. The name of a local Swedish doctor, along with his telephone number and office hours, was usually included in the ad. Organizers were employed by the IOV from 1892 through 1929."

Another interesting tidbit from their web site: in 1896 an "Indepen-



dent Order of Viking's Band was organized and played in parades, at concerts, IOV meetings, and for private parties, often without remuneration. There were about 30 musicians, all in uniform, with the base drum imprinted with their name: IOViking's Band."

The Thor Lodge #9 in Moline, Illinois, organized in 1901, was the first successful lodge outside of Chicago. In 1905 Omaha formed the first Viking lodge outside of Illinois.

In 1904 the Independent Order Ladies of Vikings (I.O.L. of V.) came into existence, with the same constitution and bylaws as their male counterparts and their own Grand Lodge officers.

In 1934, however, Swedish women were allowed to become members in the IOV, which brought about the subsequent demise of the Independent Order Ladies of Vikings.

By the end of 1910, there were 36 lodges with membership of over 6,700. In 1919 there were 59 lodges with membership of 9,204. By 1929, 95 lodges in 19 states with membership of close to 15,000. Nowadays the



IOV consists of 27 lodges in 9 states with a membership totaling about 7,300. In 1986 the Grand Lodge moved from its lifelong space in Chicago to the suburb of Des Plaines.

The IOV sponsors the Scholarship Fund for high school, with grants to study Swedish at Uppsala University in Sweden and at the Concordia Language Villages in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Web site: <www.iovikings.org>

The Swenson Center has Viking lodge records on microfilm from California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin.

The *International Order of Good Templars*, an organization which thought that drinking was endemic and was directly affecting the growth of commercialism and industrialization, was begun in North America already in the 1840s. The Grand Lodge of New York was formed in 1852, and to meet the needs of all ages, women, youth, and children's sections were organized. More Good Templar lodges followed and by 1891 as many as 8 million people worldwide had pledged not to drink, including many who were at first hard drinkers.

In the late 1860s the movement spread throughout Europe and by the mid-1870s to the rest of the world, including Sweden, but by then the Swedish-Americans were already in it, and Swedish IOGT lodges started popping up in Chicago, Rockford, and Minneapolis.

A major split occurred from 1876 to 1887 on the issue of separate lodges for blacks and whites. Dual lodges and Grand Lodges had been allowed after the Civil War "to allow for the sensitivities of Southern states." Some thought that all races should be allowed, others did not.

Prohibition in the 1920s brought a decline in membership because Americans thought that the battle had been won, and after prohibition was repealed, Alcoholics Anonymous filled the role that had previously

been the IOGT's.

Web site: <www.iogt.org>

The Swenson Center has IOGT lodges on microfilm from California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin.

"The *Vasa Order of America* was founded in New Haven, Connecticut, on the 18th of September, 1896, by Swedish immigrants. The purpose at first was to assist those who through sickness needed help, but also to give



their countrymen the opportunity to get together during dignified meetings. Sweden got its first lodge in 1924.

"The VOA is open to all of Scandinavian descent, together with their spouses, regardless of their heritage. It is not necessary to have relatives or other contacts in the U.S.A. to be eligible for membership."

Starting in 1924, the Vasa Order of America has lodges in Sweden, too, sparked by a visit of Vasa children's clubs to Sweden. The first lodge in Sweden was in Göteborg, and some of its members were immigrants who had returned to Sweden. Today there are 43 local lodges in Sweden. They routinely send representatives to America for conferences and Grand Lodge meetings.

Web site: <www.vasaorden.se>

Web site: <www.vasaorder.org>

For Vasa records, contact the Vasa Archives, Box 101, Bishop Hill, IL 61419-0101, ph/fax 309.927.3898

The *Independent Order of Odd Fellows* began in England in the mid-1700s. According to a history on the

IOOF web site "There are several different reasons given for our strange name. One old and apparently authoritative history of Odd Fellowship gives the explanation, 'That common laboring men should associate themselves together and form a fraternity for social unity and fellowship and for mutual help was such a marked violation of the trends of the times (England in the 1700s) that they became known as 'peculiar' or 'odd,' and hence they were derided as 'Odd Fellows.' Because of the appropriateness of the name, those engaged in forming these unions accepted it. When legally incorporated the title 'Odd Fellows' was adopted. Another, similar explanation is that the original Odd Fellows were men who were engaged in various or odd trades, as there were organizations for some of the larger trades. Modern references state that the true reason for the name Odd Fellows isn't known or documented."

The first recorded O.F. Lodge in America was in New York City in 1806. Then as usual the lodges made their way westward. "The Odd Fellows started a Chicago Swedish lodge in 1872." (*Beijbom*). In Europe the O.F. did not catch on until the 1860s and '70s.

Web site: <www.ioof.org>

The Swenson Center has archival collections from IOOF's Swedish Olive Lodge and Rebekha Lodge in Moline, Illinois, and other smaller, local IOOF lodges. This material was donated to the Swenson Center in the early 1990s when the Swedish Olive Lodge ceased to exist. The Center also has microfilmed Swedish-American IOOF records from California, Colorado, Illinois, and Nebraska.

The *Scandinavian Fraternity of America* was founded in 1915, probably in Chicago, Illinois. The Scandinavian Fraternity's mission was principally to aid its membership in sickness, unemployment, or death. It was called a fraternity, but allowed women in its membership. The fraternity attracted new immigrant members through the early 1920s, and possibly after World War II,

reflecting the influx of Scandinavians in to the country, but only had about 2,500 members nationwide by 1991.

The theory on the Balch Institute website is that the organization's decline could partly be due to its members' ability to integrate into American society, marrying other ethnicities, "finding their social and cultural needs satisfied outside of ethnic constraints." The fact that it accepted all Scandinavian people and their non-Scandinavian spouses may have made the focus too broad in such a way that it was too hard to please everyone enough. (From the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies web site <www2.hsp.org/collections/Balch%20manuscript_guide/html/sfa.html> by Sandy Van Doren).

The Swenson Center has microfilmed records of Scandinavian Fraternity lodges in Idaho, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

One of the newest Swedish organizations is SWEA, the Swedish Women's Educational Association, which was started in 1979 and today has more than 8,000 members in 77 local chapters in 33 countries around the world.

The purpose of SWEA is to promote Swedish culture and the language and serve as a personal and professional network for Swedish women living abroad. This is accomplished with a wide variety of cultural programs such as lectures, exhibits, musical performances, and Swedish holiday celebrations, and at the international level by awarding annual scholarships to graduate students. SWEA International publishes a biannual newsletter that is available online and sent to all members. Most local chapters also have a website and a newsletter. To become a member of SWEA, you must be at least 18 years of age, have lived abroad for at least 1 year, and speak Swedish.

Web site <www.swea.org>.

The Swenson Center houses the SWEA archives, which includes meeting minutes, newsletters, financial papers and statements, and correspondence.

There are likely plenty of organizations for modern-day Swedish immigrants; one example is in the San Francisco Bay area and is called *Scandinavius*. It has a web site that is a directory of Scandinavian events and businesses in the Bay Area, such

as stores like IKEA and the Copenhagen Danish Bakery in Burlingame CA.

Web site: <www.scandinavius.com>

Some of the organizations that still exist today, according to the *American-Swedish Handbook*, are the Scandinavian Old-Time Fiddle Association in Duluth, Minnesota, and the Uff Da Band in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which plays Scandinavian music at Albuquerque's Scandinavian Club get-togethers, and for the Scandinavian Dancers of Albuquerque. Swedish heritage, historical, and genealogical societies are going strong in the U.S., and a few Swedish-American publications hang on today, such as *Swedish American Genealogist*.

Sources:

Becoming Swedish-American, Dag Blanck, Uppsala, 1997.

American-Swedish Handbook, Thirteenth Edition, Swedish Council of America, 2004.

"Swedish-American Organizational Life," by Ulf Beijbom, an article in *Scandinavia Overseas*, Dag Blanck & Harald Runblom, eds., 1986.



Dag Blanck is 50!

Dag Blanck, the director of the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center is turning 50 on 18 December, and SAG joins the long line of people that wants to congratulate him on reaching a mature age.

Dag Blanck was born in Uddevalla on the western coast of Sweden in 1956, where his father, a journalist, worked at that time. Later the family moved to Stockholm and Dag went to Stockholm University and to Augustana College. In 1997 he published his Ph.D. thesis *Becoming Swedish-American: The Construction of an Ethnic Identity in the*

Augustana Synod, 1860-1917 in Uppsala.

Since 1985 he has been the Director of the Swenson Center. He is also Director of the Centre for Multiethnic Research at Uppsala, and evidently spends a lot of time in the airspace between Uppsala and Rock Island. This gives him time to read and prepare many publications that have to do with being Swedish-American, both nowadays and in times past.

SAG says "Grattis!" and appreciates his continued support for the journal, and hopes for future articles.