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# The Åland Islands' Emigrant Institute

## A Swedish-speaking archipelago in the Baltic also had immigrants to America

BY EVA MEYER

The Emigrant Institute's goal is to document the emigration from the Åland Islands in the Baltic to the mainland of Finland and the rest of the world during different time periods. During the period of 1897–1924 ca. 7,200 individuals, about a quarter of the islands' population, received passports to travel abroad. The Institute's headquarter is located in Mariehamn since the middle of the 1990's. In the future we hope to widen our sphere of activities to include other forms of migration as well as the growing immigration to our own province.

### The origin of our Emigrant Institute

The initiative was taken by the Åland emigrant John Wennström (1916-1989) who immigrated to the U.S.A. at the age of 16 and spent his

life in New York. Later he was chairman of The Society Åland of New York for many years and there he had the idea of starting an emigrant institute on Åland in honor of and to recognize the many thousands of Åland emigrants who through skill, financial assistance, and increased knowledge, benefitted their homeland. He was also inspired by the Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö, Sweden.

The Åland Islands' Emigrant Institute was established in 1995 and in July the following year the then chairman of The Society Åland of New York, Jeanne Eriksson Widman, came to officially inaugurate our Institute. By the following summer our first project leader Susanne Österlund was hired for a three-month period, and during this time she made detailed plans for the Institute's future development, docu-

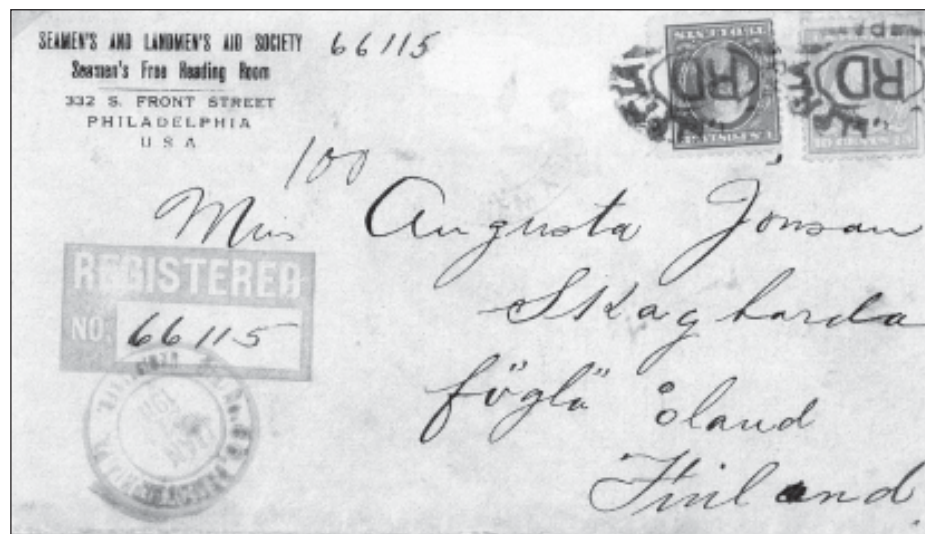
mented the available emigrant material, and made the first contacts both at home and in the U.S.A. The subject of emigration caught her interest enough for further advanced studies. Since 1999 the project leader is employed part-time.

### The Emigrant Institute's Sphere of Activities

The Institute's purpose is to create, maintain, and promote the interest and research into Åland emigration and to gather, protect, and share material of the emigration, and to function as a link for Ålanders the world over.

This means gathering documents, letters, and photos in connection with the Åland emigration. Part of this material is on display in the Institute's exhibition. In a personal way it tells the story of some Åland emigrants who made their living in the U.S.A, as well as in other parts of the world. The exhibition also features two well-known Åland emigrant descendants, both from Chicago, Ill., who made a name as artists with achievements known the world over. One is Warner Sallman (1892-1968) whose oil painting *The Head of Christ* is one of the world's most esteemed sacred painting. The other is Haddon Sundblom (1899-1976), well-known for his achievement in the advertising world and especially for his beloved Santa Claus for the Coca-Cola Co.

Another, very much appreciated, activity are the individual county



exhibitions in different communities, where each village has a chance to see photos of its own emigrants exhibited. These exhibitions usually last for a month or so and are mainly shown at the local libraries.

In spreading knowledge to the younger generation about the strong Åland emigrant tradition, the Institute has on several occasions cooperated with the Åland Vocational School. The theme has been the large Åland emigration to Sweden, the U.S.A., Australia, and New Zealand, resulting in an exhibition around Ålanders in Sweden, a short film about three Åland emigrants in the U.S.A., and a combination of material used for school geography lessons on emigration to Australia and New Zealand.

### “The Emigrants’ Day”

One of the yearly recurrent popular events that the Institute arranges is, no doubt, “The Emigrants’ Day,” featuring programs connected to our emigration. The guest speakers are usually guests from faraway lands, among them the director of the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, Wash., Marianne Forssblad, who a few years ago visited and told about the Scandinavian and Åland emigrant descendants in that part of the world. Another memorable day was held on a musical theme when the Åland descendant Garfield Sallman from Chicago travelled over the Atlantic in order to give us a piano concert. This year the guest speaker was David Jansson, Prof. at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, who spoke to a full house about his Åland ancestry and his America-Åland identity.

This event attracts more and more people every year and is appreciated not only by the emigrants and their visiting relatives, but also attracts Ålanders living in Sweden and the local people with emigrants in their family. Next year will be the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event! And the date will probably be 8 August.

## Collection of Emigrant Material

The Institute also collects emigrant information in the form of recorded interviews of emigrants who have returned home or are visiting their homeland, or emigrant descendants who are children and offspring. They come to Åland to seek their roots or to visit the village or remnants of the homesteads which their ancestors left so long ago. There is a growing interest today in wanting to know more about one’s forefathers’ background as the emigrants very rarely told their offspring about the poor conditions they came from.

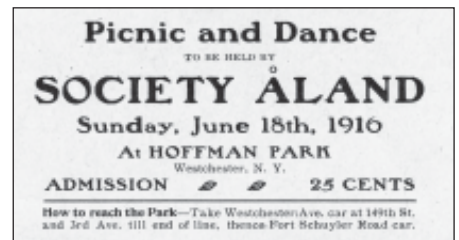
## Worldwide Contacts

The Åland Islands’ Emigrant Institute is also reaching out to other countries, and is receiving an increasing number of inquiries from abroad. Thanks to today’s technology, the major number of inquiries are by e-mail. Many are requesting assistance in finding their relatives on Åland, but there are also Ålanders seeking help in finding their relatives in the U.S.A. or in Australia. At our Institute we have tried our best to play detective – sometimes with a happy ending!

## Written documents of Åland emigration

Unfortunately, much too little has been written about the vast emigration from the Åland Islands. But one rather special emigrant story appears in a book which the Emigrant Institute released in 2003, and two years later in English. It is written by Hjördis Sundblom from Åland who shares her experiences in her book *En föglöemigrants memoarer*. The title in English is *My Name is Sunnu Now: A Scandinavian Emigrant’s Story*. At the age of 17, she ventured to the U.S.A. and returned to Åland in 1987, after almost 50 years of life in New York.

An academic publication dealing with identity among both the Finnish-Swedes and the Ålanders and their offspring in the U.S.A. is the



doctoral thesis *American Plus. Et-nisk identitet hos finlandssvenska ättlingar i Nordamerika. (American Plus. Ethnic Identity among Finnish-Swede descendants in North America)*. The thesis is written by Dr. Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch, the first coordinator of the Åland Islands’ Emigrant Institute.

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