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Book Reviews

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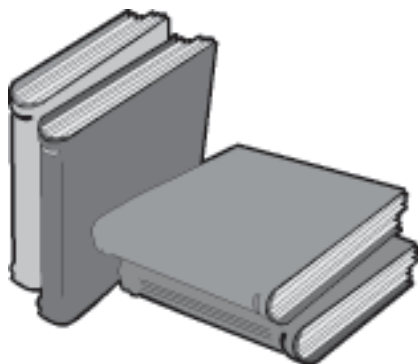
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Book Reviews

Here you will find information about interesting books on the immigration experience, genealogical manuals, books on Swedish customs, and much more. We welcome contacts with SAG readers, suggestions on books to review perhaps. If you want to review a book yourself, please contact the Book Review Editor, Dennis L. Johnson, at <1_viking@verizon.net> or Dennis Johnson, 174 Stauffer Road, Bucktown Crossing, Pottstown, PA 19465, so he knows what you are working on.

The Swedish maid solves the crime

Crimson Snow, by Jeanne M. Dams
Palo Alto and McKinleyville, CA:
Perseverance Press/John Daniel &
Company, 2005. Paperback, 246
pages, ISBN 1880284790.
Amazon.com \$13.85.

Jeanne M. Dams's Hilda Johansson mystery novels offer something special for Swedish-American genealogists: a turn-of-the-century Swedish immigrant as a heroine, and well-researched historical plots that dramatize the immigrant experience.

When the series begins in 1900, Hilda is 19 years old and working as a housemaid for the wealthy Studebaker family in South Bend, Indiana (the home of author Jeanne Dams, herself a descendant of Swedish immigrants). *Death in Lacquer Red* introduces Hilda as an immigrant heroine. When she discovers a murder victim behind the lilac hedge at the Studebaker mansion, she fears that the police will try to scapegoat a foreigner, and discovers that she has a talent for detective work herself.

While Hilda is a fictional character, the Studebaker family (yes, the automobile manufacturers) and their mansion really existed, and the mysteries Hilda solves are inspired by historical events. The experiences of immigrants provide many key plot points. In *Red, White, and Blue Murder* the threat of anarchists and the

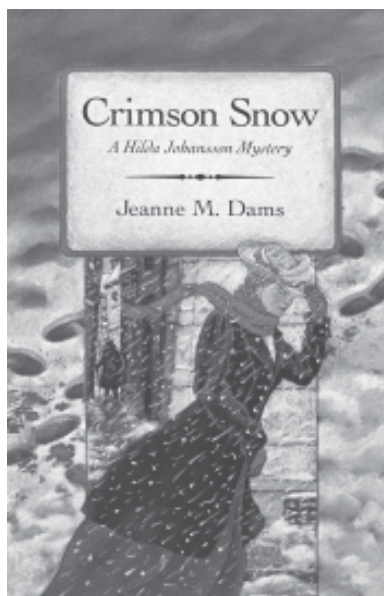
1901 assassination of President McKinley cause ordinary immigrant workers to come under suspicion. In *Green Grow the Victims*, when a local political candidate is found murdered, the mystery turns out to be mixed up with crooked immigration agents; Hilda and her siblings have given their savings from five years of work in the U.S.A. to an agent who promises to arrange passage for the rest of the family from Sweden. The daily challenges of immigrant life make for compelling characterizations.

The author depicts the lives of servants in vivid detail. In addition to Hilda, the Studebaker household staff includes an Irish waitress, an English butler, and a half dozen other immigrants, an ethnic mix that broadens Hilda's horizons. We learn the servants' schedules, the endless chores – from scrubbing the floor to polishing the chandeliers – and what

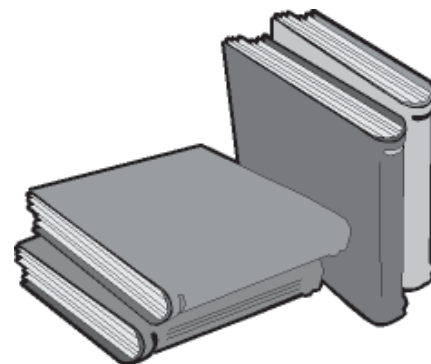
they do for fun on their precious afternoons off. We see Hilda sweating in her winter uniform on a warm spring day because uniforms were dictated by the calendar, not the weather. In addition to solving crimes, Hilda ponders mysteries of the heart, such as: can a Swedish maid and an Irish fireman live happily ever after? “An Irish Catholic was not an appropriate friend for a Swedish Lutheran,” worries Hilda's older sister in *Green Grow the Victims*.

As the series develops, Hilda assimilates, becoming more American and serious about her Irish Catholic beau. Yet she remains proud of her origins; when the police Americanize her name to Hilda “Johnson,” she makes sure they correct the name to “Johansson.” And she maintains strong family ties. In *Silence Is Golden* we see her going to church every Sunday, followed by dinner with her family: “It was Hilda's one chance in the week to see her family, to speak Swedish, to eat Swedish food, to revive fading memories of her roots.” By the time of *Crimson Snow*, the housemaid finds herself entering the middle class: “Hilda, for the first time in her life, pulled a bell rope and thought again about America, where a servant, one to be summoned at her master's will, was now the summoner.”

Many of us have a female Swedish ancestor whose occupation, on an Ellis Island ship manifest or a census form, is given as servant, maid, or housekeeper. In my case, it was a great-grandmother who immigrated on her own in 1903 at age 24. I know almost nothing about her working



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life in America, so I was delighted to meet Hilda Johansson. Jeanne Dams's entertaining series solved some mysteries for me about what my great-grandmother's daily life might have been like, minus the body behind the lilac hedge ... at least as far as I know!

These are the other Hilda mysteries:

Death in Lacquer Red

New York: Walker & Company, 1999. Hardcover, 225 pages, ISBN 0802733298

Red, White, and Blue Murder

New York: Walker & Company, 2000. Hardcover, 189 pages, ISBN 0802733417

Green Grow the Victims

New York: Walker & Company, 2001. Hardcover, 216 pages, ISBN 0802733557

Silence Is Golden

New York: Walker & Company, 2002. Hardcover, 226 pages, ISBN 0802733735

Erica Olsen

The Swedish maid and her sisters

Utvandrarkvinnor. Svenska kvinnoöden i Amerika, av Ulf Beijbom. Norstedts 2006. ISBN 91-1-301494-5. Hardcover, 450 pages, ill., index. Ca. 200 SEK + postage.

Professor Ulf Beijbom, former director of the House of Emigrants in Växjö, and a prolific writer, has done it again. His new book, on female immigrants contains a wealth of information. The female destinies you will find in this book could well be the material for several novels and movies.

Unfortunately the book is yet only

available in Swedish, but we hope for a translation as it contains so many things that would be of interest to all the descendants of the Swedish female immigrants.

In the first chapter, Dr. Beijbom discusses the conditions for women in past times in Sweden, when she was mostly "legally incapable" (*omyndig*) and had to have the consent of her closest male relative (father, brother, uncle) whenever she wanted to do something. Only as a widow was she regarded as a person who could make her own decisions.

The female immigrants were about just as many as the male ones, and one of the reasons for that was that there was a surplus of women in the Swedish population in the 1800s, and everyone could not count on getting married. Still they had to find ways to support themselves, which was especially difficult for educated women, who could not do farm labor, and most other jobs were a male privilege. During the second half of the 1800s the authorities recognized the problem and abandoned most of the stricter rules. Now women could work as telegraphists or as

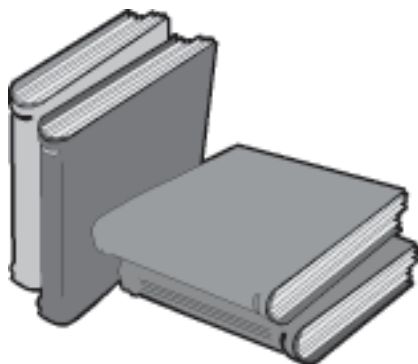


bank tellers. They were also allowed access to the higher schools and universities.

During the first period of immigration it was mostly families who left Sweden, and often they also brought their servants. After about 1880 most of the immigrants were young and single. But that is not the start of female immigrants. To find them we have to go back to New Sweden and the 1630s and for instance make the acquaintance of Armegott Printz, the daughter of "Big Belly" Printz, the first governor of New Sweden and married to his lieutenant Johan Papegoja. Armegott ran her own farm for a while in New Sweden and had to take part in many court cases to protect her property. She also received a permit to produce aquavit and kept an inn, before she sold everything and returned to Sweden, where she died in 1695.

The women immigrants who ended up on the prairie or in the huge forests often had a hard time to adjust to the primitive way of life on the frontier. They had left a fairly comfortable dwelling at home and now had to make do with a sod hut with a grass roof, where snakes could curl in, or a drafty log cabin with just the old chest as a table and tree stumps to sit on. At home they might have lived in a village with neighbors close by, and now they were alone with the children and the closest neighbor a mile away. Often the male members of the household went away for long periods to work on railroads etc., to earn some badly needed cash, so they could buy farm implements, and seeds.

But soon more immigrants came,



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perhaps relatives they had managed to send tickets to, churches were founded, and social activities started, and life got better.

The typical female immigrant of the later period seems to have been a girl ca. 20 years old, with a very basic schooling and used to heavy farmwork, but hoping for an easier life as a domestic servant.

A table shows that in 1900 the vast majority of the females born in Sweden worked as domestics (61.5%) or as seamstresses (12.9%), laundresses (6.1%) or housekeepers (3.7%). For the next generation, born in the U.S., the figures show that women now expanded into other areas also. We still see a lot of domestics (44.5%), more seamstresses (19.9%), but also teachers (9.1%) and women employed in trade and communications (13.5%). These figures probably have something to do with younger women being able to use English easily and correctly.

The domestic positions were well-paid when compared to what a maid could earn in Sweden. The conditions maids lived under in America also sounded almost too good to be true. Back at home the maid may have slept in the kitchen in a sofa bed, perhaps sharing it with another maid. From America she heard rumors of having her own room and even having time off on Thursday afternoons and Sundays, which sounded like a dream.

The majority of the Swedish maids lived in the cities and could take part in the lively Swedish-American social life, either at one of the churches or one of the many lodges that started at the end of the 1800s.

Male immigrants more often had temporary jobs, and in the period between jobs they often relied on sisters or girlfriends to support them, which they did.

The domestic jobs often became a way of life, and the maid stayed for years with “her” family, and became almost a family member. But if she wanted to change her position, she could give notice and leave after a week, which also was a big difference to Sweden, where you had to stay a year, and where the bailiff might arrest you if you left early.

One problem for the “raw” girl from Sweden was her lack of knowledge of English, but usually they learned fast, especially if they were to take care of the children in the family, as those helped her with words.

My father’s cousin Anna left the Värmland countryside in 1916, and wrote many letters home to her aunt. After about three months in McKeesport she wrote “I like it fine here, the American way of cooking is much easier than at home, and now I am starting to understand what the Old lady [the lady of the house] says. But I still need someone to come with me, when I want to go shopping, as I don’t know the words.”

In the latter half of the book we meet with many stories about Swedish females that had successful lives in the U.S. A step up from being a domestic was to start a boarding-house or a restaurant, of which there are many examples, from Johanna Wirström who kept a hotel in California during the Gold Rush, to Ingrid Bergström, who kept the Verdandi Restaurant in Chicago in the 1960s.

Nobel Prize laureate Harry Martinson’s mother left him and her other children and went to Portland, Oregon, and ran a popular lunch counter there for years, but never saw her son again.

As Swedish girls were good seamstresses, they often obtained work in the big textile factories in Chicago, where they earned good wages. The job was stressful, but several opened their own workshops later and sewed for society people.

There were around 1900 several Swedish hospitals, and they often also started schools for nurses, where ambitious girls could get a good education and then go on to good positions. Some even made it into medical schools and became proper doctors.

Many others felt the lure of the printed word and became journalists or writers of various kinds. One of these was Lina Knutson from Värmland who for several years owned the weekly *Skandinavia*, published in Worcester, Mass. They all had a market in the numerous Swedish-American newspapers and calendars that were published in the early 1900s, but are now mostly forgotten.

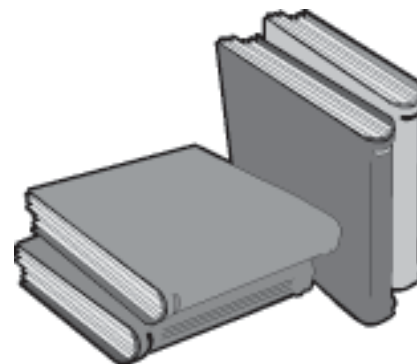
Many Swedes are good singers and some of the immigrants made a career in music, like the famous Jenny Norelli, born in 1863. A strange observation is that male choruses were very common, but female choruses were unusual, but today I think the opposite is correct, at least in Sweden.

Swedish actresses have made their mark, especially in the movie industry, from Anna Q. Nilsson and Greta Garbo in the early 1900s to Lena Olin and Maggie Gyllenhaal in the early 2000s.

This is just a small sample of the rich content of this book, and we must all sincerely hope that it will be available in English within the foreseeable future.

Elisabeth Thorsell

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Swedish estates and farms

Svenska gods och gårdar. DVD publication by Mats Ekedahl, Visby. 2006. 3 DVD discs, each 399 SEK + postage. All three for 999 SEK + postage. See link on link page.

In the 1940s almost 50 books were published in Sweden about many estates and farms, province by province. Each farm had a picture of the farmhouse and a little description of the farm's history and the present owner. The books are in Swedish, but the information should still not be too difficult to understand. Each book has an index in front where you can find the parish you want, and then you just have to scroll through the parish until you find the place. However, people had to pay to



Matsbo, Janpers

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Areal: Total 43,5 har, därav 22,5 åker, 21 skog. Tax.-v. 25.900.

Jordart: Lätt jord o. mulljord. Skogsbest.: Barrskog. Manbyggn. uppf. omkr. 1840. Ekonomibyggn. uppf.: Stall o. loge 1875, ladug. 1916. 3 hästar, 1 unghäst, 14 kor, 2 ungdj., 6 svin, 30 häns. Reakt.-fri besättn. av bl. ras. Gården till släkten 1910 genom köp. Ag.: Per Torsell f. 25/12 1876. Son till Erik Andersson o. h. h. Margareta Andersdotter. Gift 04 med Elin Matilda Johansson f. 9/11 1881. Barn: Per Gunnar f. 25/12 04, Johan Elis f. 31/7 06, Nils David f. 1/5 08, Erik Holmfrid f. 17/11 09, Klas Gösta f. 17/6 12, Inga Kristina f. 7/1 14.

Ag.: F. d. led. av komm.-fullm., led. av styr. för Södra Dalarnes hästnämnd.

get into the book, so there are many places that are missing.

The books have been very much sought after, but now they are available on three DVDs that are easy to navigate. You can open the pages in a picture program and cut and paste as much as you like. This is still something new, so the web site is still

in Swedish, but Mats Ekedahl has promised to have an English version in early 2007. You can e-mail him also, if you have questions.

This is a very nice resource and gives a fine picture of Sweden in the 1940s, before houses were torn down or "modernized."

Elisabeth Thorsell

New and Noteworthy

(short notes on interesting books and articles)

A good book about life in Rockford, *A Swedish-American Family (My Early Years in Rockford, Illinois)* was written by Rudolph E. Peterson and published in 1978 by himself, sponsored by the Swedish Historical Society of Rockford. Mr. Peterson was born 1901 in Oregon, Illinois, to Olof Peterson (born 1871 June 29 in Skogsberg, Sunne, Värm.) and his first wife Selma Pettersson (from near Lännäs, Närk., who died in 1905). In 1906 Olof Pettersson remarried the widow Alma Larsson Härnquist (from Västergötland), the only mother little Rudolph remembered. In his book he gives a very detailed description of daily life, customs at home, and during the year, and in school and society, pranks boys played and much more.

In the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* one always finds useful and interesting articles. In SAHQ 2/06 Joy K. Lintelman writes about Peter Bergstrom: Worker and Entrepreneur in Moorhead, Minnesota 1898–1940, who had a mixed career. He had a restaurant and candystore, then moved on to farming, and next to the police force, did some real estate deals, kept a hotel, and many other things. James M. Kaplan describes "The Swedish Pavilion at the Panama Pacific International Exhibition of 1915," which was held in San Francisco. Among the book reviews we will mention that "Enfield: A Swedish-American Farm Community 1850–2002" by Dean Anderson, published in 2003 by Arcadia Publishing in their "Images of America Series" tells a lot about a small Swedish farming community in Wright County, Minnesota.

In SAHQ 3/06 editor Byron Nordstrom discusses migration to and from Sweden through the ages in "Editor's Corner." Then Per Anders Rudling writes about "Scandinavians in Canada: A community in the Shadow of the United States," which is so true; there is very little written about this part of the migration history.