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## Conference on Immigrant Letters

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# Swenson Center Hosts Conference on Immigrant Letters

## A short summary of the recent conference

BY DAG BLANCK

The great majority of the 1.3 million Swedish immigrants who settled in North America between 1840 and 1930 were literate. For this group the act of writing was important, and over the years hundreds of thousands of letters were sent from immigrants in America to their friends and family in Sweden. The so-called "America letter" became a regular feature of Swedish life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it played a highly significant role in creating an awareness of America in Sweden and in assisting and promoting Swedish immigration to America. Many immigrants also kept diaries.

The growing transatlantic correspondence was noted by one Swedish observer in 1883 who said that "Thousands, millions of such letters fall like flakes from a snow cloud over the entire land from Skåne to Lapland." Letters did not only cross the Atlantic in one direction. Significant numbers of letters were sent from Sweden to North America as well, and became highly important in the process through which Swedish immigrants maintained ties with their ancestral country and culture.

In October 2004 the Swenson Center hosted a conference addressing a variety of topics dealing with immigrant letters and diaries among Swedish and Norwegian immigrants in the United States and Canada.

Scholars of other ethnic groups have long recognized the importance of immigrant letters, and a number of collections have been published. Several collections of Swedish immi-

grant letters exist. Several have been published by the Augustana Historical Society, including, in recent years, *Letters from Andover to Högarps, Sweden 1858-1898* (1988) and *America reality and dream: The Freeman letters from America & Sweden, 1841-1862* (1996).

The most comprehensive collection is H. Arnold Barton's *Letters from the Promised Land: Swedes in America, 1840-1914* from 1975. Collections of Norwegian immigrant letters include Theodore Blegen's *Land of their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home* (1955), Solveig Zempel's *In Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants* (1991), and Orm Øverland's on-going four volume series *Fra Amerika til Norge: I norske utvandrerbrev*, which, so far, covers the years 1838-1884. Numerous articles have also been written, taking individual letters or series of correspondence as their points of departure. In addition, several archives on both sides of the Atlantic have systematically collected immigrant letters.

The thousands of letters written by Swedish immigrants have helped us gain a deeper understanding of the Swedish immigrant experience. Through them we can learn about many aspects of the lives that the immigrants lived, and of their hopes, aspirations, and disappointments. There are, however, also some problems involved with using the letters. One problem has to do with how representative the surviving letters are. We do not know why the letters we have today survived to our times,

although it would seem natural to assume they are the letters of greater intrinsic interest – due to content, style, originality, or the attractive personalities of their writers.

Moreover, the question of who wrote home and who did not is important. Persons successful in their new lives may have been more likely to write home and share their experiences with friends and family than those who were unsuccessful. We should thus ask ourselves not only what the letters talk about but also what they do not talk about. A related question is what the immigrants were most likely – or least likely – to write home about. While a few immigrants faithfully and regularly corresponded with family and friends in the homeland all through their lives, most tended to write most frequently and at greatest length at certain crucial times. The peak experience for most immigrants was unquestionably the Great Journey to the new land, for which reason we still have any number of detailed descriptions of the departure from home, the Atlantic crossing, and the arrival at American destinations. Thereafter, immigrants normally wrote home most often during their earlier years of adjustment to new conditions and during the period of greatest nostalgia for home.

Some historians who turned to Swedish immigrant letters as sources for the study of Swedish immigration history in the 1960s and 1970s were somewhat disappointed that they did not learn as much about



Swedish immigrant life as they had hoped. They felt that the letters often were formulaic and contained less factual information than they had hoped for. The historians' discussion, which also has dealt with other kinds of immigrant writings such as short stories, novels, plays, autobiographies, etc., and involved, among others, Dorothy Burton Skårdahl, tended to assume some kind of causal or semi-causal relationship between the written account – be it a letter or a short story – and the actual or factual circumstances of the immigrants' lives.

Scholars working with immigrant letters today have moved beyond the question of how “authentic” or “correct” the immigrant writings are, and instead tend to interpret the letters using new approaches. Questions of identity and world views have instead come to the fore in the work of Werner Sollors, David Gerber, Jennifer Eastman Attebery, and others.

The conference attracted close to 150 participants, and the speakers came from the U.S., Sweden, and Canada. The following talks were given:

**Werner Sollors**, Harvard University, *Gustaf Jarlson's 'America lett-*

*ers' and the Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves.* (2004 O. Fritiof Ander Lecture in Immigration History)

**Orm Øverland**, University of Bergen, *Reading Letters - Reading People - Reading History*

**Jennifer Attebery**, Idaho State University, *Peasant Letters Revisited: The Immigrant Letter from a Folklorist's Perspective*

**Ulf Jonas Björk**, Indiana University, *Perhaps there is someone who wants to know how we live: 'Public' Immigrant Letters in Swedish-American Newspapers*

**Britt Liljewall**, Göteborg University, *Emigration, Literacy, and Networks: Forty Letters from Sweden to Rockford, Illinois, 1853-1876*

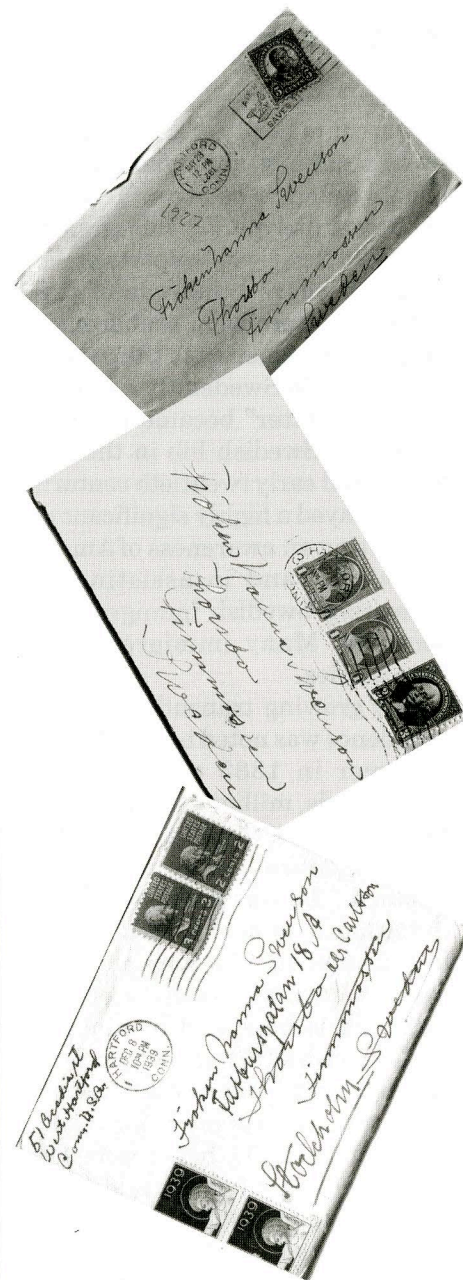
**Solveig Zempel**, St. Olaf College, *'My book I have neglected you sorely': Reading the Kravik-Lokensgaard Diaries*

**Joy Lintelman**, Concordia College, *Between the Mundane and the Memorable: The Letters of Single and Married Swedish Immigrant Women*

**Eva St. Jean**, University of Victoria, *'Letters from the Promised Land': The Ambiguous Radical-*

*ization of a Swedish Immigrant, 1928-1934*

**Maria Erling**, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, *The Connections Correspondence Made: How Letters Contributed to the Formation of the Augustana Synod*



## New Chairman at the Swenson Center Advisory Board

At the meeting of the Swenson Center Advisory Board on 15 October 2004 longtime chairman *Glen E. Brolander* stepped down after 22 years. Dr. Brolander was immediately named Chairman Emeritus.

Dr. *Dag Blanck*, Director of the Swenson Center presented Dr. Brolander with a nice photograph of himself, which now hangs in the Center's Plym Research Room.

Dr. Brolander was succeeded by *Douglas Nelson*, Ph.D., current Professor of Mathematics at Augustana College.

In 1998 Dr. Brolander received the Swedish-American of the Year Award, as a tribute to his work for the Swenson Center. But his career has not been spent on Swenson affairs solely, rather four decades in the ser-



vice of Augustana College has kept him busy as vice president of financial affairs and much more. The Brolander Courtyard at Augustana Campus shows the college's appreciation.