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The Faithful Gather At The SAG Workshop

BY FRAN PAULSON

Each year in October a group of people with Swedish heritage meet in Salt Lake City, Utah, for the *Swedish American Genealogist Workshop* to dig into the ancestral records kept at the Family History Library. Much of their research is done reeling through microfilms copied from original parish records that are filed away in the library's countless banks of storage bins. These Swedish church records – *Husförhörslängd* (household examination records), *Födde* (births), *Vigde* (marriage), *Döde* (death), *Inflyttningslängd* and *Utflyttningslängd* (moving in and out) – were handwritten by a mix of people with very individual penmanship. The writing is so filled with confusing flourishes that even people who can read Swedish often find it difficult to decipher. Some pages have been blurred and stained, names were crossed out when families left the parish or immigrated to “Amerika” and pages come up missing. Many a researcher has given up in confusion and decided to confine his search to the family's early life in America. The workshop was designed to come to the aid of just such frustrated amateur genealogists and it has developed a devoted following.

The Start and Then...

The first SAG Workshop was held in 1992, organized by *Nils William Olsson*, SAG founder, with only twelve people in attendance; this year there were 61 participants, mostly repeaters, six staff members, and assorted camp followers. The first time I attended, four years ago, I heard one woman who said she had been coming for four years and still hadn't found anything about her family. I

wondered why these people kept coming if this was a common experience. It also seemed to me that once one learned how to do genealogy research one could strike out on one's own, especially with a computer as an assistant.

But not coming back isn't in the game plan for most of these people. As long as the workshops are held and they are able to travel, they will pack and tote heavy bags of notebooks, family charts, and document reprints to spend another week in the Family History Library. Some have been forced to skip a year or two for reason of poor health; either their own or a family member's. Others even take time away from therapy to attend, bringing spouses, canes, and walkers with them. *Hal*, former *SAG Quarterly* editor, suffered a stroke but was determined to return and he did, accompanied by his wife, *Carol*. *Lory* and *Sabra* of Vermont have also been battling physical problems but that doesn't stop them from coming so he can spend the week immersed in his family history.

Why Do They Come?

This year I decided to explore the almost mystical hold SAG workshops have on the attendees. What I found out might help explain this loyalty, possibly reaffirm a first timer's desire to return, and hopefully will intrigue new participants. The week is more than just research; it's a chance to reconnect with others who have become like extended family in their common search for family history. They laugh together, feel pride in their discoveries, and share disappointments. Staff members told me how much fun they have each

year; this year one said she hadn't laughed this much in years. The SAG Workshop can become a habit that is awfully hard to break.

Just Because...

The stories that follow come from the workshop this year that continues *Nils William Olsson's* legacy.

Lis who comes from New York State was at the first workshop in 1992 and remembers it well. She doesn't know where she saw the first copy of the *SAG Quarterly* but it inspired her to subscribe. When she saw the invitation to join the SLC genealogy trip she decided to attend. “I told my husband he could go fishing; I was going to the SAG Workshop.” There were only 12 participants so *Nils William*, his wife *Dagmar*, and *Carl-Erik Johansson* gave her and the others a lot of personal attention. By the end of the week she was hooked and she's been to every workshop since. *Lis* is still finding the bits and pieces that make up her family history and remains enthusiastic; this year she brought a friend, *Joan*, along.

Walter Erik of California also attended the first session and he keeps coming back each year. He made his first connection with SAG through a Swedish organization in California. He still remembers the first time he met *Nils William*. *Walter* was in Stockholm traveling with a group from Chicago. One early morning while out walking, he met *Nils William* who was also out for his constitutional. *Walter* recognized him as he had talked to the Chicago group. He introduced himself and brought *Nils William* back to the hotel where they shared breakfast.

A few years later, in 1988, Walter joined Nils William on a Historical and Genealogical tour that he remembers with awe, "We were treated royally, and I do mean royally." This was Walter's 3rd trip to Sweden and Nils William's 103rd. It seems only natural that when Nils William started the SAG Workshops, Walter would sign up; he did and he continues to come each year.

The majority of attendees I talked with had read about the workshop in the *SAG Quarterly* or heard of it through the Swenson Center. Two women, *Judy* and *Laura*, had been roommates as undergraduates at Augustana College. When they returned for a college reunion, they found each other again. One was going to attend the SAG Workshop and she urged her old friend to "come with me," they both decided to attend and now were back for the second time.

Augustana College and the Swenson Center introduced my cousin *Lorraine* and me to the workshop. We attended an Elderhostel class on the campus and I decided to subscribe to the *SAG Quarterly* to learn more about the Swenson Center. When I received an announcement about the SAG workshop I signed us up without consulting *Lorraine*. While I was not a genealogy aficionado, *Lorraine* had expressed an interest in visiting the Family History Library and this seemed like the way to go. I wanted to see if I could find something about my mother's father who was an unknown, he claimed to be a foundling. No one in the family knew if this was true or not. I spent the first days on a wild goose chase; Swenson was a common name and all I knew was his birthday with no idea where he had been born. I finally made a breakthrough when I found a name and birth date that was the same as his. I was warned by *Elisabeth* that this might not be the right person but I decided to continue the search. After I found immigration papers that listed Omaha as his final destination, I felt certain I had found the right person and *Elisabeth* agreed. *Lorraine* found army records relating to

her father's ancestor so she was eager to find out more. We decided to sign up for the next SAG workshop and we have just kept coming.

Lots from the Midwest

The group this year came from all over the U.S. with the largest numbers from the Midwest and the East Coast. *Lynn* and *Robert* moved to California from Minnesota in the 60's when *Robert* was offered a job at the University. They make the drive from Davis so that *Lynn* can search for her Värmland roots.

One Californian reported she had been coming from the beginning in 1992 but that she missed a few years because of her husband's illness. She says that she is past the easy stuff and each year it gets harder to find things but it's more rewarding when she does. This year, while she in SLC, her daughter called to say her 8-year old son had been given an assignment to make a family tree. She was going to pick up a big colorful chart and send it with enough information so that her daughter and grandson would learn something about their family's past while filling in the blanks.

New Sweden Research

Lynn, another California resident, arrived at the workshops via the back door, *Karna's* backdoor. She didn't read the *SAG Quarterly* or know about the Swenson Center. As a teenager in New Sweden, Maine, she had lived near *Karna* and had been her son's babysitter. *Lynn's* ancestors originally settled in New Sweden, and she had decided to research the history of this early settlement. Four years ago, she went to Maine on this mission and she stopped by to see *Karna*. *Lynn* mentioned her new found interest in genealogy and told *Karna* about what she was planning to do. *Karna* recognized a possible SAG member and workshop participant, she recruited her, and *Lynn* keeps coming back.

Two Sisters

Two sisters, one from Colorado, the other Wyoming, arrived in SLC ready to research but with little idea about how to do it. *Ruth* had started collecting information from family members, cousins, aunts, and uncles. An Iowa relative had done some research and gave her some FHL film numbers and told her about the Swenson Center. She contacted the center and decided to join SAG thinking someday she would go there for research. She read about the SLC workshop and talked her sister, *Joanne*, into joining her. They spent the week getting acquainted with the library, exploring its many resources and learning the how-to from staff and other participants, just as most of us had done when attending our first workshop. The sisters added lots of sparkle to the week and I, for one, hope they return.

Other Reasons

Disappointment when working on genealogy at local libraries or on the computer has brought many people to the workshop. One man told of spending lots of time on the internet without finding anything of interest. *Elisabeth* put the cherry on his sundae by solving the puzzle, some unfamiliar names; she found his family on one of her CD's.

He was eager to return to an Illinois cemetery where he had searched in vain now that he was armed with the correct names. Another man moaned about the problem he had when sending away for the parish films, waiting weeks for delivery and then finding the family had moved to another parish making it necessary to order another film. He found it much easier at the Family History Library where all the films were just a few steps away.

Looking in the wrong place can be an effort in futility. One man reported that North Park College had been recommended as the place to go when looking for Swedish genealogy but there's nothing there. It's all at the Swenson Center in Rock Island, Illinois.

Someone else wanted to check the accuracy of a Family Group Sheet that some family member had prepared. Ulla tried but couldn't find proof so she decided it was incorrect; perhaps the wrong person had been traced. He was hoping to find someone else to tell the woman that her chart was wrong. I remember hearing a similar story at a workshop a few years ago. Another woman had researched her family on the computer, found the wrong person, and ended up publishing a flawed book. The workshop participant telling the story had checked actual records and knew right from wrong.

A Way to Get to Bransom

Here are some more interesting stories told by attendees. The math teacher was flying to Chicago after attending a SAG Workshop and found she was sitting next to one of the Osmond brothers. He was reading, possibly studying, an algebra book and she ended up tutoring him. He repaid her with tickets to the Osmond's show in Branson, Mo.

Ginny of Seattle had come to the workshop with the mission of researching her Swedish mother-in-law's family. The old lady seemed to know little about them but this may have been by choice, not accident. A few years earlier, *Ginny* had found records of a child born out of wedlock

and "heaven help us," a *Finn*, mixed up with the family. The information caused her mother-in-law great pain so this time *Ginny* hoped she would find something to bring joy to the woman on her 95th birthday.

Shirley from Wisconsin didn't remember where she heard about the SAG workshops. She likes to go places and since she doesn't drive she's always looking for happenings that can be reached by plane, bus, or train. She has added SAG workshop to her destinations of choice. She makes yearly trips to Europe to attend concerts and musical performances so the Best Western City Plaza Hotel location and the fall meeting time is perfect; the Utah opera season begins and the Temple Choir sings right next door.

Robert learned about the workshops through the Worcester, MA, Swedish Ancestry Research Association (SARA). He had attended while *Nils William* was still conducting them and he remembers *Priscilla* helping him. He dropped out when his wife got ill and returned four years ago bringing his daughter, *Ginny*, with him. While *Robert* settles in with a microfilm reader, his daughter fetches, returns, and copies the films. She brings questions to the staff and the answers back to her father. *Ginny* and *Robert* are quiet and studious, making the most of some quality time together.

Greg comes from Saskatchewan, Canada. He and *Roger* are our computer experts, sharing sites and know-how with anyone who asks. Computers are bringing a whole new group into genealogy research and creating the need for assistance for some of us. This year *Greg* shared a Swedish Cultural Site [see link page] that featured pictures, some old, some new, of parish churches and country vistas. *Lorraine* and I found pictures of our grandfather's church, *Kropp*, in *Skåne*. One of the photographs was dated 1888 and when we compared it to a photo we had taken in 1998 we found little had changed. One of the road maps we had used on this trip listed the old church as a "National Curiosity" (Treasure); we felt we had found the treasure anew.

I wish I could have talked to each and everyone at the workshop to hear all of the stories waiting to be told, but time flew by too quickly and my own family research got in the way. After I printed the group photograph I studied each face, the ones I had talked to and the ones I missed. That's a good looking bunch of Swedes and I know it's an interesting group. No wonder *Karna* says "I can't say no to you."

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In the next issue she gives her comments on the staff.



The 2004 SAG Workshop in Salt Lake City. Photo: Daniel Sköld.