

6-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Thorsell, Elisabeth (2004) "A Visit with Children in the Woods," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 24 : No. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol24/iss2/2>

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A Visit with the Children in the Woods



A short stay among the Swedes in Northern Maine

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

In late April of this year my husband, Bengt, and I had the opportunity to visit with Karna Olsson (daughter of Nils William Olsson, SAG Editor Emeritus) and her husband Phil Brown in their home in Belfast, Maine.

We were attracted not only by their company, but also by the possibility of a visit to the Swedish colony of *New Sweden* in northernmost Maine. Both Karna and her brother Chris, also living near Belfast, had lived for years in New Sweden, and Phil is also familiar with the area, as he had lived in Presque Isle and Caribou, the two bigger towns of the area.

So early one morning we all boarded Phil's huge van and headed north. After picking up Chris in Stockton Springs, we drove north for another hour and landed in Bangor. There was now time for breakfast at the famous truckstop *Dysarts*, where one can have breakfast 24 hours a day. It was interesting to see the different choices: bacon and eggs, fruit salad and omelet, hamburgers, blueberry pancakes, and huge cinnamon buns.

On the road again we continued north for another couple of hours and finally reached Presque Isle, the capital of Aroostook County. On our way north we had seen many of the peculiar potato barns, where the roof seems to meet with the ground, a method of keeping the right temperature for the potatoes.

By then we had said good-bye to the highway and were now driving on country roads through fairly open, but hilly, landscape towards a more forested area.

Gustavus Adolphus Church

Suddenly coming up a little hill, there was a church on the right side of the road, which turned out to be the now infamous church of the arsenic poisoning in the spring of 2003. It is hard to believe that such an event has happened here in this

rural and very quiet area, but the facts tell otherwise. One man died of poisoning and others are still feeling the effects of the deed. Why this happened is the big question. One man committed suicide the week after, which some take as a token of guilt, but other explanations are also possible. The police are still working on the case. Two books are in the making about this drama, one by outsider Christine Young, whose book is named *A Bitter Brew – Faith, Poison and Power in a small New England Town*. The other book is



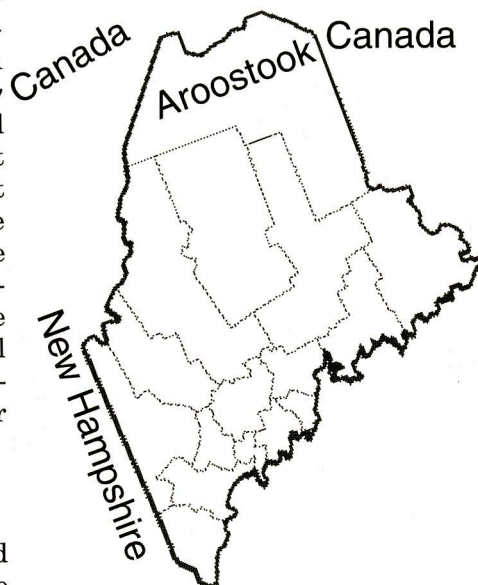
Gustavus Adolphus Church, New Sweden.

written by the local journalist Brenda Jepson and the title will be *Murder in Maine's Swedish Colony: A Memoir* (info from the *Bangor Daily News* Apr.15, 2004). In a closed community like New Sweden it might be easier for a local resident to get a more accurate sense of the feelings of the people in the area. The whole story might never be discovered, and New Sweden may have to learn to live with an eternal mystery, like who killed John F. Kennedy, or who killed Olof Palme, for us Swedes.

The cemetery

The next stop was the cemetery, and some of us walked and read the inscription on the stones. At other cemeteries we have visited, where old Swedish immigrants are buried, in Chisago and Center City, Minnesota, for instance, it seems to have been the custom to mention the home parish in Sweden. Here we found very few stones with that info, but from reading the dates, it was easy to guess where the early immigrants were buried.

For a Swede it is always a special



The location of Aroostook County.

feeling to visit a cemetery with those familiar names, knowing that they made their last home so far from their roots. One is inclined to guess if they were happy in their new land, pleased with what they had achieved here, which would not have been possible in the Old Country? Or if they ached for the old home, for parents and brothers and sisters that stayed?

During our visit to the cemetery an older man appeared and spoke to Bengt, and was much surprised when he heard that Bengt was a genuine Swede. At once this man changed to almost perfect Swedish, and presented himself as *Alwyn Espling*, of Swedish heritage. Alwyn mentioned that he had the keys to the local museum and offered to open it for us in the afternoon.

By noon we visited the friendly home of *Dan and Megan Olson*, who live in an older house that they are renovating. The talk became lively as the "genealogy" of the house was discussed. "Isn't this the house that so-and-so built in 1906, but has it been moved since?" was one of the questions. And all of them were quickly answered by Megan's mother *Helen Espling*, a long-time teacher/principal in New Sweden, who knows all family relationships like her own backyard. Unfortunately she has no intention of entering them into a computer program, and seemed satisfied with just knowing them. Maybe the younger generation can get started on that, when the house is done?



New Sweden Cemetery April 2004.

Christina Sunnergren

Helen told a fascinating story about her great-grandmother *Christina Sunnergren* from Kållandsö in Västergötland. She was married to a much older man, and they emigrated. He died and Christina remarried to a man named *Carl Johan Börjesson*, and lived in Woodland, south of New Sweden. The marriage was a mistake and Christina returned to Sweden, where she lived with a son from her first marriage. That turned out to be another mistake and Christina wanted to return to the U.S. and wrote her daughter Maja Lisa in Woodland, who sent her mother travel money, without telling her own husband. Christina lived with the younger family until she died, but supported herself by spinning and weaving for people.

This was just one of the stories about the pioneers that are very much in danger of being lost, if no one takes care that they are saved in some way, on paper, on tape, on video, or on the computer.

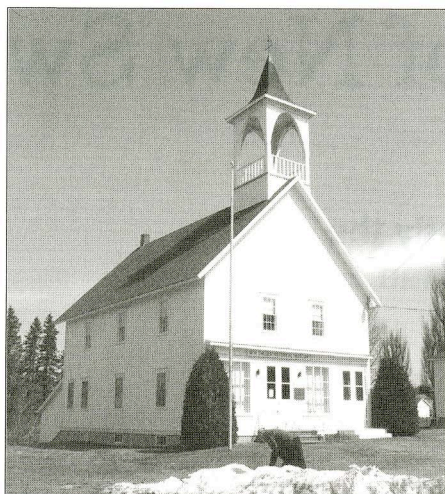
Dan, who works full-time in Caribou, seems to be one of the few younger ones in the area to take an interest in the history of New Sweden, but cannot cope by himself to rescue all traditions and stories.

Other discussions during lunch showed many similarities between New Sweden and many areas in Sweden, where people have been dependant on farming and forestry to make a living. When easier and better jobs are found in the cities the young people leave, and the original area has an aging population with very few young ones to care for them.

Many houses looked empty, but at least some of them get a new lease on life during the summer when descendants come back to enjoy life closer to nature than in the cities.

To the Capitol

After lunch we went back to the Museum, which we now understood was the old Capitol, one of the first buildings in the town, which had been used as a meeting place for the inhabitants for many years. Alwyn



The Museum in New Sweden.

now waited for us and was eager to show all the treasures that tell about people long gone but once important in the history of the town.

On the main floor were many huge photos of important men, furniture, and books, many in Swedish, and much more. Upstairs one could admire the long skis, used by the Swedes, to the amazement of their American neighbors. Here we also saw some big chests, used for transatlantic travel. One had the simplistic inscription "Signe Granlund, Kvebäck", her very own spelling of Quebec. Here one could also find numbers of old tools, including many well-worn axes and saws, from a time well before the advent of power tools.

After the tour of the museum we drove on and covered most of the New Sweden area, including Stockholm, which did not now amount to

much more than a crossroads. We passed the cemetery in Jemtland, and went through Westmanland. Those names are reminders that the New Sweden inhabitants came from many places in the Old Country. Karna and Chris did a running commentary on all the changes in the landscape since the early 1970s, mostly commenting on how overgrown many fields had become and how sad and lonely many abandoned and forgotten farms looked. The closure of an Airforce base in the area has not helped the job situation either. It is a familiar tune for us, as we spend time in the summer in the Bergslagen area in Sweden, where the mine jobs are no more, nor are many hands needed in the forests anymore after the big machines have come.

Despite problems with jobs and depopulation, one could see that New Sweden is still a living community. It needs more new people with new ideas on how to make the assets of the area useful for new jobs.

For the people of the big cities it is within commuting distance, and they would enjoy the forests, rivers, and lakes, and learn to appreciate the old Swedes that broke the land 135 years ago.

We hope that maybe more Swedes would come and find their emigrants in New Sweden's records, and we hope to be back ourselves one day.



Alwyn Espling and Chris Olsson in the New Sweden Museum April 2004.