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News from the Swenson Center

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News from the Swenson Center

Jag lever och har hälsan: A Conference on Letters and Diaries of Swedish Immigrants in North America

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 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 emigration to America. In 1883, the growing trans-Atlantic correspondence was noted by one Swedish observer, 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. Scholars have long recognized the importance of immigrant letters, and several collections have been already published. In addition, several archives on both sides of the Atlantic have systematically collected immigrant letters.

This conference, *Jag lever och har hälsan* (I am alive and well), will examine Swedish immigrant letters from a variety of perspectives, with some comparisons to Norwegian letters. It will discuss what the letters tell us about social, religious, political and cultural dimensions of Swedish immigrant life in North Amer-

ica. It will also address ways in which the immigrants related to events in both the new and the old countries, as well as ways in which they served to maintain contacts with friends and family on both sides of the Atlantic.

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. The peak experience for most emigrants 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.

The thousands of letters 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. Please join us for a conference which will explore a central and exciting dimension of Swedish-American history!

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Conference Schedule at Augustana College Campus

Friday, October 15

7:30 p.m.

Keynote address and 2004 O. Fritiof Ander Lecture, *Werner Sollors*, Harvard University

Saturday, October 16

9:00 a.m.

Orm Øverland, University of Bergen

10:00 a.m.

Jennifer Attebery, Idaho State University

Ulf Jonas Björk, Indiana University

Britt Liljewall, Göteborg University

11:30 a.m. Lunch

1:00 p.m.

Solveig Zempel, St. Olaf College

Joy Lintelman, Concordia College

2:15 p.m.

Eva St. Jean, University of Victoria, Canada

Maria Erling, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg

3:15 p.m. Coffee

3:45 p.m.

Concluding remarks, *Byron Nordstrom*, Gustavus Adolphus College

Registration Information

There is no registration fee to attend any of the lectures, but pre-registration is requested. Contact us to receive a brochure with registration form. The buffet lunch on Saturday will cost \$7.50 per person; reservations are required. If you wish to attend, we request that you send in your reservation and check to the Swenson Center by *October 1*.