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Indexing of Värmland Names in Swedish American Parish Records

Bertil Grundström*

In the early 1970s a great many Swedish American parish records were microfilmed, thanks to the initiative of the Emigrant Institute in Växjö. This unique material is now recorded on approximately 1,500 rolls of microfilm. The Emigrant Register in Karlstad acquired about 500 of these rolls, those dealing primarily with areas in the United States, where most of the immigrants from Värmland settled.

These records cover most of the activities of a parish, but the part which is of the greatest importance to the genealogist is what we in Sweden usually term the parish records, i.e. household examination rolls, registers of births, marriages and deaths as well as occasional lists of members taken into a parish and those who for some reason moved from a parish.

These parish membership records are constructed much like our own household examination rolls. Add to these membership rolls also the registers of such ministerial acts as births, marriages and burials.

These microfilms are well indexed so far as the names of the Swedish American congregations are concerned, but leave much to be desired so far as the indexing of the parish members. Thus it is naturally quite impossible to find a "lost" emigrant, since there is no name index to consult.

During the years 1985-1986 certain pilot studies were conducted in order to determine how to make better use of this valuable genealogical material and how much better it could be used if programmed on a data base.

The approximately 500 microfilm rolls at the Emigrant Register in Karlstad have thus been the subject of an excerpting process by which persons tied to the province of Värmland have been culled—either those persons who emigrated from this province or those who actually were born there.

These rolls of microfilms have been thoroughly searched and the membership registers have been excerpted for all "värmlänningar" residing in the states of Minnesota, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Iowa, Ohio, North Dakota, South Dakota, Indiana and New York.

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The excerpts for each state have then been divided into two main groups and this material has then been reproduced into an index.

The first group deals with those persons who emigrated from Värmland, altogether 6,389 persons. Since the immigrant's name upon arrival in the United States sometimes changed, the name itself does not lend itself to an accurate search. Thus the material in this group has been sorted and reproduced into three sub-indexes with the emphasis on the immigrant's birth data, his or her parish of emigration and the year the immigrant arrived in the United States. Thus we have available to the seacher a total of four separate indexes for every parish member.

The second group deals with those persons born in Värmland and also here there are three sub-indexes, which in addition to the emigrant's name also give his or her birth data, parish of birth and the year of arrival in the United States. All of these indexes also refer to the number of the film from which the material was excerpted. Here the total of names indexed was 6,790.

The total number of registered names is greater than the number of persons involved due to the fact that the name is indexed each time it appears in a register. Sometimes the clergyman duplicated the entry and there are instances where an immigrant moved from one parish to another.

The Swedish American parish records differ very much in quality. The oldest records are by far the best, since the scribe, whether it was the clergyman or the church secretary, usually born in Sweden, was acquainted with the spelling of Swedish place names. Later on, when the scribe perhaps was born in the United States, it is apparent that there is a definite deterioration in the way the place names are spelled. As we approach the 20th century we also note that the scribe did not bother to document the birth or exit parish in Sweden, resorting rather to the laconic form—Sweden.

For some denominations it was not usual to record the birth data of the church member.

In checking the corresponding parish records in Sweden we found that there were far more divergencies and discrepancies in the American material than we had earlier surmised.

These indexes are first of all useful for the person who wishes to research a person who emigrated to the United States. One should keep in mind, however, that an affiliation with a Swedish American congregation was totally voluntary and did not affect more than approximately 25% of the immigrants.

The various indexes and registers described above may be found in both the Emigrant Register in Karlstad as well as the Emigrant Institute in Växjö.