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Nils William Olsson: Father of Swedish Council of America

Roger F. Bauman*

The idea of an umbrella organization to unite all the disparate Swedish-American clubs, institutes, museums, societies, and associations was not new. Credit actually belongs to the late Vilas Johnson of Chicago, who was the chair of the Chicago chapter of the Swedish Pioneer Centennial in 1948.

Out of the pioneer observance evolved The Swedish Pioneer Historical Society (known today as The Swedish-American Historical Society). Johnson was serving as the Society's president, and he suggested to Nils William Olsson the concept of uniting the Pioneers with the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis and the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia to create a large national institution. Together they traveled to Minneapolis and Philadelphia, but came away unsuccessful.

The idea then lay dormant until 1957, when it sprouted anew under the leadership of then Swedish ambassador to Washington Gunnar Jarring. Nils William met occasionally to discuss Swedish-American cultural relations, which pointed up Sweden's frustrations with navigating a course among dozens of Swedish-American organizations, each with its own concerns. Johnson's idea was resurrected with high hopes, but Jarring was soon transferred to Moscow, the impetus was lost, and the idea for this project went into hibernation again.

Another ten years passed. The Swedish ambassador in Washington was now Hubert de Beche, and the idea was reawakened when the ambassador called a special conference in Washington. Representatives from various Swedish-American organizations were invited to discuss the umbrella idea at an all-day session. Nils William was by that time the director of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, and he attended as its representative. The result this time was a consensus that a national umbrella should be created.

As the meeting broke up, Ambassador de Beche called Nils William into his office and bluntly informed him that now that the decision was made, it was up to him (Nils William) to get the job done. "Get someone else to run the

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Institute," de Beche told him. "Your task is to implement the concept we have worked so hard to achieve."

After some considerable thought, Nils William accepted the challenge and resigned his post at ASI to begin the daunting task of welding together all the disparate Swedish groups from the four corners of the country under the umbrella of the new national organization. He likened his decision to that of leaving a battleship to climb into a rowboat on stormy waters.

Using his considerable talents and wide network of contacts, Nils William managed the process of creating the new organization. In the spring of 1972 he gathered representatives from the three aforementioned major Swedish American cultural institutions from Minneapolis, Chicago and Philadelphia for an informal session to find a formula that would appeal to a majority of Swedish-American organizations. Dr. Nils Y. Wessell, then president of the Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Foundation in New York, who also represented the board of the Philadelphia museum, agreed to assume the presidency of the board of the fledgling organization. At the very next meeting, these three organizations were joined by the Detroit Swedish Council, and in May, 1972, Swedish Council of America was incorporated as a Minnesota non-profit corporation.

Nils William took the job as the first executive secretary of the organization, doing the day-to-day administration of the Council's business. Under his tireless leadership, the Council's activities increased and the membership grew to some fifty organizations by the mid-1980s, when Nils William "retired" and the Council hired Chris Olsson, his son, to take over the administrative duties as executive director.

The simple fact of the matter is this: it is primarily due to Nils William's tireless efforts over many years that Swedish Council came into being and grew steadily from its humble beginnings to the point where today it counts nearly 200 organizations as members and is truly the national Swedish-American umbrella.