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Nils William Olsson: The Genealogist of Swedish America

Glen E. Brolander*

Of the many aspects of Nils William Olsson's activities in Swedish-American affairs, his interest in genealogy covers the longest time period and probably represents his greatest legacy. It began in 1934, when he received a letter from his grandfather in Sweden. This sparked his interest in researching his own family history and began his interest in genealogy, an interest that grew during early visits to Sweden.

During the years 1952 to 1957, while serving in the United States Foreign Service as Public Affairs Officer and First Secretary at the American Embassy in Stockholm, his biographical and genealogical interests expanded greatly as he realized the importance of these studies to the cultural relations between the two countries. His expertise was recognized as early as 1957, when he was elected foreign Corresponding Member of Sweden's Royal Academy of Belles Lettres, History and Antiquities.

It was also during this period that he started collecting books on Swedish history and related topics. This eventually led to a personal library of approximately 9,000 volumes.

Nils William soon became a resource for persons interested in their own family history. Beginning in 1958, he provided a regular section in the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* on "Personal Pioneer History." This section continued until 1980. In 1962, he wrote a definitive article for the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* on "Tracing Your Swedish Ancestry." This guide was then published by the Royal Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 1965 and revised in 1974. Countless Americans of Swedish descent have used this little volume as they researched their own family history.

While in Stockholm, Nils William began a monumental project of tracing the origins and family relationships of the early Swedish immigrants from

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Sweden who arrived in American ports of entry. With enormous care and diligence, he examined more than 33,000 ships' manifests as well as information in Swedish archives to document the arrival of approximately 4,000 Swedes at the Port of New York during the period 1820-1850.

This study led to the publication in 1967 of *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850*. His work was expanded in 1979 by the publication of a companion volume, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 except New York*, which identified 1,000 additional early Swedish arrivals. After continued research, a revision combining the two volumes, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850*, was published in 1995. This indispensable reference was co-authored by Nils William and Erik Wikén.

In 1981 Nils William fulfilled a long-held dream to develop a journal devoted to Swedish American genealogy. In that year, he founded the quarterly publication *Swedish American Genealogist* and served as its publisher and editor. This journal quickly became the leading publication for anyone interested in Swedish-American biography, personal history, or genealogy.

Swedish American Genealogist became a true labor of love for Nils William, and he personally wrote a large number of the articles. In 1992 the function of publisher was transferred to the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. He continued as editor until January of 1998, when the editorial function was turned over to James E. Erickson. Nils William was then named Editor Emeritus.

In 1981 the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center was organized at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. Nils William took an immediate interest in what was to become the largest center in America for preservation and interpretation of records regarding Swedish immigrants. He became a charter member of the Advisory Committee, a position he continues to hold.

In 1986 he suggested that he might be interested in transferring his vast personal collection of Swedish-American books and files to the Swenson Center. The collection consists of over 4,000 volumes and is particularly strong in Swedish-American genealogy and local and regional history. The transfer was made possible partially by a gift from the Olssons and partially by contract purchase. The bulk of the collection was transferred in 1991, and cataloging was supported by grants from the Wallenberg Foundation.

Nils William's devotion to helping Americans of Swedish descent trace their family roots is further exemplified by the annual genealogical workshops that he has sponsored at the Genealogical Society in Salt Lake City. He has led

these for eight years, beginning in 1991. He has also led genealogical trips to Europe and has lectured extensively on Swedish history and culture.

In 1994 Nils William presented the Sixth Annual Ander Lecture at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. He spoke on the topic "Naming Patterns Among Swedish-American." That same year, the Swedish Federation of Genealogical Societies presented its Victor Örnberg Award to him for his "outstanding work in emigration history, for his editing and publishing of *Swedish American Genealogist* and for his continued work in strengthening the ties between Sweden and the Swedes in America."

Even now, as he approaches his ninetieth birthday, he is engaged in another major project—identifying the 6,400 Swedish voters who were registered in Chicago in 1888.

Certainly there is no other person who has done more to identify the persons who were included in the Swedish migration to America and to assist Swedish Americans interested in knowing more about their Swedish ancestors or relatives. The results of his work will live on in the strong personal relationships that have developed between the United States and Sweden.