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Nebraska

Betsey Brodahl

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NEBRASKA

Memories from yesteryears

BY BETSEY BRODAHL
(1922–2012)



The Swedish America in which I grew up was a small, rural community of immigrant settlers, their children, and grandchildren, living in close family relationships. It is to this third generation that I belong. The community, Saunders County, and more particularly the town of Wahoo, is a part of the eastern tier of counties in Nebraska settled by Swedes and Bohemians in the 1860's and 70's. The land, the railroad, and the church, each in its own way, drew the immigrants to the area.

Swedish roots

My four grandparents had come to Saunders County from Sweden in 1869-70. The men worked on the railroad to get money for land available through the Homestead Act and through railroad sales; the women worked as domestics in the homes of earlier arrivals. Once established on the land, they helped to build the community in which I was to live. Three of these pioneer grandparents lived into the time of my childhood. What they were, and what they had lived through in the development of the county, loomed large in my mind. The stories they told - and those told about them - of immigrants, the passage from Sweden, prairies, and Indians were the stories of my

childhood supplanting Mother Goose and the Grimms to fire the wonder and imagination of a child.

In my father's family where my grandmother had died before I was born and where my grandfather was a sick old man in the years I knew him, the influence was less vivid. Grandfather Brodahl lived in my mind as the tall young Swede striding the miles between Lincoln and Malmo. As an immigrant working his way west on the railroad, his last station had been the Lincoln railroad yards. Saturday at sundown when his work ended, he would set out on a night walk of thirty miles across country from Lincoln to Malmo to be able to spend Sunday with "his people." When he could afford it he would carry with him a fifty pound sack of flour as his gift to the household he was to visit. Arriving before sunrise he would sleep the few hours before morning chores, worship with the family at the country Swedish church, have Sunday dinner with the family, listen to the afternoon reading of Rosenius's sermons, and then start the walk back across prairie and through streams the thirty miles to Lincoln. This was the day of rest in the good life of a stalwart Swedish grandfather.

As I was growing up I traveled those same thirty miles several times a week to

study violin at the University and rehearse with the Lincoln Symphony Orchestra. I seldom allowed more than thirty minutes for the trip and did little thinking along the way. Yet those same miles which he measured out with his stride had been the final hurdle, were in many ways the measure of his real arrival - and of the arrival of all my grandparents. In Lincoln they were laborers, maids, part of the retinue of someone else's endeavor, playing somewhat the same kind of role they had had in Sweden. When they were able to make the big move from Lincoln to 30 miles north, the laborer was still to labor but as landowner; the maid, though keeping house in a sod dugout, was mistress of the household, nurturing her own American citizens.

My childhood was dominated by my mother's family, the Magnus (Martin to the American neighbors) Ericksons. Our life as a family was not the life of a single household but included my grandparents, Martin and Betsey, their seven daughters, two sons, and their large families. We were something of a tribe. My grandfather's house was the center for all these children and to it each family returned for Sundays and holidays. All of my aunts and uncles married Swedish immigrants or children of Swedish immigrants. All had been raised



Wahoo is the county seat of Saunders County. Malmo is the place where the Brodahl family settled.

in the Lutheran faith, all kept house and fed their families in what we believed to be the traditional Swedish manner. They bore beside the name Erickson, the names of Brodahl, Nordstrom, Thorston, Henrikson, and such given names as Annalena, Martina, Albertina, Christina, Augustinus, and Magnus. Everything about my own home, my Swedish parents, the Swedish way of doing things was reinforced by all these other households through which I moved.

With the grandparents

I was as at home in the home of my immigrant grandparents and the houses of their other children as in the house of my parent's, attended the weekly family gatherings (Sunday noon for the entire family and Tuesday noon for the cousins attending town school) and all the major holidays. We (my immediate family) actually moved into my maternal grandfather's home for the last three years of his life; It never occurred to anyone to move this man as he grew old. The family adapted to him and lived his way – which actually seemed better than our own. When it was our turn, we moved from our home to live with him in the house in town to which he had retired at the age of 50. Thus I lived not only in a household influenced by a Swedish immigrant but actually in his household.

Understanding Swedish?

Before we actually moved into his house, I was expected to make daily visits. After school I would come to the back door to find my grandparents at the west windows and would usually stay with them to *fira skymningen* – (to celebrate the twilight). It was a very special time and place for me. It was warm, there was food, I had their entire attention. The kitchen had a woodstove and cob box. My grandmother sat in her rocker, my grandfather in a high straight chair at the windows, and I on the oven door, listening to them as they recited scripture, poetry, and sang – all in Swedish. During the first years it really didn't occur to me that I didn't understand the language. The sound, like everything else in that setting, was familiar and I knew what it meant. I listened, recited, and spoke the language of the twilight and was rewarded

with apple slices, sweetened as they dried in the afternoon sun. It was the only time we spoke Swedish.

The importance of owning land

Land and independence were to remain the primary concerns for my grandparents and their sons and sons-in-law. Because they had gained their independence through land - and perhaps because one family had lost its independence through loss of land in Sweden - they valued these highly in America. My grandfathers retired and moved to town while still young men but their sons and most of their daughters lived on farms in neighborhoods predominantly Swedish Lutheran. Land was the real wealth, the dependable security, the means of independence.

Non-Swedish neighbors

Swedish Lutheran neighbors were an additional guarantee of stability. Bohemian Catholics moving into the neighborhood generated much concern, much heated discussion, then as it does with some of my relatives to this day. The country churches depended on the landowners of the surrounding area. Any time a Bohemian Catholic acquired land in the neighborhood, the support for the Swedish Lutheran Church would be that much diminished. (The Catholics didn't have country parishes but all belonged to the town church.) An equally crucial issue for them was support for the country school. When Bohemian Catholics sent their children to the parochial school in town, the rural public school would be placed in a precarious situation. Fortunately, the discipline for the Catholics in this regard was not consistently strict and the country schools were sometimes filled with Bohemian children and the support would be proportionately strong. While I always lived in town, I frequently visited School District 62 and thought on those occasions I was going to school with foreigners - this thought from a child whose older cousins had started school able to speak nothing but Swedish.

Churches and college

The Bohemian Catholics constituted the largest non-Swedish group in our community. Their town settlement was clustered

around their church in the south end of town; ours was to the north on the hill around the Lutheran Church and our college, Luther. Between these two were what we called the Americans or the Yankees and their churches, referred to as the "downtown churches."

I was never quite sure why we always lived with this middle group. When my grandfathers moved to town, each chose to live outside Swede Hill. My own parents, who moved frequently within the town, never once had a house in the Swedish neighborhood. I was troubled by this as a child and by the possibility that we weren't quite with the church and with the Swedes because we lived away from them. It was spelled out pretty clearly when I listened in on a conversation the president of the college had with my grandfather Erickson complaining that one of my cousins, a student at the college, was spending too much time in this part of town. What hope was there for the rest of us who lived there?

The college, an early endeavor of the Augustana (Swedish) Lutheran Church, was the pride of the Swedes in the area and a cultural and social center for Swede Hill. Its music and art departments served many Swedish young people who were not enrolled in its regular academic program. Art lessons and piano lessons were part of the preparation for the young ladies. The Christmas, May Day, midsummer celebrations, and the annual performance of Handel's *Messiah* at the college were events in which the whole Swedish community participated. Each May Day morning the "Sköna maj" serenade by the college students honored the older families. I don't remember my grandfathers being so recognized, but my parents were. My brother and I attended the college but attended public school instead of the academy.



"Old Main" Luther College, Wahoo, Nebr.



One of the Lutheran churches in Wahoo.

The church was a very important part of our Swedish America. Though all of its services and instruction had for years been conducted in Swedish, I have no remembrance of this. I do remember the transitional years when we retained a Swedish service along with the English on the first Sunday of each month. I attended this Swedish service with my grandfather Erickson, understanding nothing but what I regarded as a holy sound indeed and being fascinated by the long vowels in the psalm singing. The minister seemed very happy on these occasions. He was a Swedish immigrant himself and spoke English with a heavy accent. I was always embarrassed by this, but more especially when my “American” friends were present. I thought it a particularly sad failing since he had been able to go to school and my grandfather, without any formal schooling here or abroad, spoke what sounded to me to be such fine English.

Long after the change to English in the service of the church, we retained much of the Swedish tradition in the music. I associate this particularly with Advent and Christmas hymns and anthems. I don’t know if standing up for hymns, particularly verses of praise and those referring to the Trinity, is Swedish, but I have always thought so and have liked it and miss it when it isn’t done. As recently as Reformation Day, 1966, my father decided he must stand in order to sing the announced hymn. The first verse was pretty well gone before he got much of a following, but I have no doubt he would have stood alone through all six verses had no one followed his example.

Julotta, the center of the Christmas celebration, has remained a part of our church’s services. It is only in the last few years that it has given way to a midnight service. The congregation still discusses this question vigorously each year at

stämman [when church business is discussed].

There was never any question in our household about church attendance. If it was Sunday we were all in church. Sunday started for us when the bell tolled at six Saturday evening. Household work, except the never-ending cooking, was at an end. None of the women could iron, sweep, sew, or do any kind of handwork. I was never sure about Aunt Nell. She had an ironing board in her closet.

Swedish Pietist roots

The Swedes in our parish had been strongly influenced by the pietist movement. Faith was to be demonstrated by strict adherence to certain practices and abstinence from others. My own family asserted its independence in some areas. It was contrary to the prevailing thought that my parents played bridge, that we children learned to dance, and that we attended ball games on Sunday. (We did not go so far as to attend the Sunday movies.) I had confidence in my family’s decisions, but was troubled about the church’s teaching and preaching otherwise. In spite of the regularity of our churchgoing and our close contact with the local minister – he usually called at my grandfather’s house once a week – I felt that all of us, my grandfather included, had somehow separated from the majority of the congregation. Grandfather read his Swedish Bible, the sermons of the Swedish pietist, Carl Olof Rosenius, Swedish history every day, but made some decisions of his own. He had parted company with the Swede Hill pietists.

Supporting the church

Financial support of the church was another point of controversy. That Grandfather had no sympathy with the present concept of stewardship is certain. This may have stemmed from his Swedish state church background. Whatever the reason, the result was that a very generous man gave very little money to the church and spoke quite freely of his lack of faith in the competence of the church in its own stewardship. My father did not agree with him in this and has, perhaps, made up for it during the intervening years.

Prized possessions

The things we prized most in our homes were the Swedish things. Sleigh bells, a pocket knife, and a wooden butter dish are the cherished remnants of my Grandfather Brodahl’s immigrant trunk. In Grandfather Erickson’s household, the Swedish things were more grand, but represented not his immigrant furnishings, but what he had brought with him on his second trip from Sweden to America.

A visit to Sweden

For Grandfather the return visit to Sweden had been a dream from the first. When Grandmother Erickson left Sweden the first time it had been a final and conclusive step. Her Swedish life was over, and she was ready and determined to start a new life as an American. She never reminisced about the old country nor did she have any desire to return there. As an immigrant domestic worker she had refused to become part of a Swedish-American household and would take employment only in what she considered an American household. As Grandfather Ericsson’s wife, however, the day came when she was to accompany him and their four younger daughters on a return visit to Sweden.

Because my mother was a part of this entourage, the stories of the trip particularly interested me. The man and women who had travelled east to west in steerage, made the crossing west to east in luxury. The emigrants who had sat up all night on benches in Swedish railroad stations now lived in Stockholm at the Grand Hotel. As it happened, the journey gave my grandfather less satisfaction than he had hoped for. When he, with his little party, boarded the train at Hässleholm bound for Gothenburg that second time he was truly leaving Sweden. He held no further thoughts of going back. The break was final. He was no longer Magnus, son of Eric Tuvevson; he was Martin, citizen of the U.S.A., and father of nine Americans.

The things they brought back to America from that trip were the finest things in their household. The silver coffee service had engraved on the bottom ‘*Minne från Sverige.*’ With the Swedish I heard at the “sunsets” these were the first words I saw written and the first I learned to read in any language. This silver became a symbol of the finest and most beautiful of what

was Swedish in our home. When my grandparents' possessions were being distributed it was the one thing my mother requested.

Swedish handicrafts

Swedish weaving was also prominent in the household. The older daughters had learnt to weave while visiting in Sweden, and with their return, they brought with them bolts of drapery material, carpeting, and dress yardage. The carpeting – black and red – was for the stairways and the upper floors of the house. The drapery material was woven in broad bands of white with narrower bands of black, gold, blue, and deep red. Curtains were made for the entire house; they became the Christmas curtains and were always put up after Thanksgiving. To me, they were as important to Advent as “Prepare the Way, O Zion!” (*Bereden väg för Herren!*) and we still have the remnants of them and find ways to use the scraps somewhere in our Christmas decorations.

In my mind I always see my grandmother in housedresses made from the fabric her daughters had woven in Sweden. During my childhood we still had bolts of this material; some was sky blue, some pale grey, and others stripes of each with white. I was comforted against this fabric many times and can still see its smooth threads magnified through a child's tears. I started college in a dress made from what was left of the grey and white stripe. I suspect I might be using it yet, if one of my cousins hadn't needed it more.

I discover as I write that this has become, in many respects, the story of my Grandfather Erickson, the life he led as a Swedish-American, the land he developed for independence and security, the setting his home gave to his children and children's children, and the patterns of life he set in motion for us. Vigorously American, a pioneer in his thinking, young to the end in his expectations, it was his Swedish America in which we grew up. At the close of one lovely day, when this 94-year-old man and his bed were being readied for the night, he said, “The King of Sweden isn't put to bed any finer than I am.” No Swedish princess was ever more proud of her grandfather.

It was that night he died. The house was sold, the family has scattered, we work for

other people. Yet we hold to the land, the patterns of life we created, and perhaps a Swedish America for yet another generation.

Betsey A Brodahl Obituary

She attended Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Wahoo, and later First Lutheran Church in Moline Ill.

She attended Luther College for two years where she studied music and was a violinist in the Lincoln Symphony. She continued her education at Augustana College in Rock Island, Ill., graduating Summa Cum Laude with a bachelor's degree in history in 1944. She completed her master's at Syracuse University and continued graduate studies at Stanford University.

In 1947 she returned to Augustana to teach history. In 1948 she was appointed dean of women and assistant professor of history. She was a part of Augustana from 1948 until retiring as associate dean of students in 1987.

In 1976 she was awarded the Vasa Medal in Gold by the King of Sweden for her dedication to the development of international relations on the Augustana campus. In 1997 Augustana College dedicated the newly constructed Betsey Brodahl Building for student services in her honor.

She performed with and supported the Quad-City Symphony Orchestra for 25 years. She served on the Midland Lutheran Alumni Board, Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council, and Nebraska Historic Preservation Council. She held office in the Augustana Historical Society, American Scandinavian Association at Augustana, American Association of University, Foundation for Crippled Children and Adults, Friends of Art of Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, Lutheran Church of America and many more. She is survived by a sister-in-law, nephews and nieces, great-nieces and nephews, great-great nieces, and nephews.

(<http://www.wahoo-ashland-waverly.com> published 3 May 2012).

Betsey A Brodahl ancestors

As seen in this article all her four grandparents were born in Kristanstad *län* in Skåne province, and three out of the four left Sweden before the passenger lists for Malmö started in 1874, so their original destinations are not known.

Sources for this are the Swedish church records, records from local Swedish-American churches in Saunders Co., NE, and Findagrave.

1 *Betsey Ann Brodahl*, born 28 Aug 1922 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE, died 20 Apr 2012 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co., NE.

*** Generation I ***

2 f *Alfred Joseph Brodahl*, born 27 Dec 1890 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE, died 10 Sep 1975 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE.

In the U.S. Census 1900 he lives with parents and siblings in Center Precinct Colon village, Saunders, NE.

Married to the following ancestor.

3 m *Ruth Cordelia Erickson*, born 29 Sep 1893 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE, d 13 Feb 1985 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE.

*** Generation II ***

4 ff *John (Johan) Johansson Brodahl*, born 17 May 1853 in Västraby, Emmislöv, L, died 17 Jul 1936 in Malmö, Saunders, NE.

He is most probably identical with *John Johansson*, born 1853 May 17 in Västraby, Emmislöv, L, Sweden.

Before 1868 he, his parents, and their other children had moved from Emmislöv to Haganäs in Östra Broby, L.

From there son John immigrated in 1872 April 3. His new American surname was probably based on the name of his home parish.

Married 1883 to the following ancestor.

5 fm *Anna Nilsson*, born 18 Aug 1861 in Östra Ejaröd, Nävlinge, L, died 13 Jan 1909 in Saunders Co., NE.

Moved 25 Nov 1881 from Attarp, Nävlinge, L to U.S.A. According to database *Emihamn* she had a ticket for Oakland, NE.

6 mf Magnus (Martin) Erickson, born 14 May 1847 in Mattered, L, died 21 Feb 1941 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE.

Moved 29 Apr 1869 from Hjortaröd, Mattered, L to U.S.A.

Married 12 Mar 1872 in Swedeburg, NE, to the following ancestor.

7 mm Bengta (Betsey) Svensdotter Didriksson (Dedreck), born 19 Aug 1847 in Österslöv, L, died 11 Jul 1936 in Wahoo, Saunders, Co. NE.

Moved 1868 from Attarp, Västra Torup, L. to U.S.A.

Editor's note:

The Betsey Brodahl story was submitted by Curt Hauffman, Järfälla, Sweden, whose late wife was related to Martin Erickson's older brother Olof, who stayed in Sweden.



Part of a parish map for Kristianstad län, from *Karta över Rikets indelningar 1992*, published by the Bureau of Statistics Sweden.

The new *Kinship Center* rises from the ashes

In 1960 the number of emigrants from Värmland inspired the teacher Sigurd Gustafsson to start the *Emigrant Register*, based in Karlstad, the county seat for Värmland.

Many volunteers joined the organization and started to explore who the emigrants were and what happened to them.

The English name was: *The Kinship Center*, later the *Sweden America Center*.

The Emigrant Register made a pioneer effort within emigrant research. Together with the *Emigrant Institute* in Växjö and *Göteborgsemigranten* in Gothenburg, the Emigrant Register developed a CD containing information from mainly passenger lists in the Swedish emigrant ports, known as *Emigranten Populär*. This database has 10 different databases, and there are about 1.5 million names and related information about the ocean voyage.

During the early 2010s the institution changed its name to *The Swedish Migration Center*, and extended its activities in many ways. It started many workplaces around the country where unemployed people could get work. That was mainly paid for by the local or county communities.

However, when those found that there were other uses for public money, they diminished their contributions to the Migration Center, which resulted in bankruptcy in March 2017.

The problem was what would happen to all the resources that had been collected

from 1960 onwards? There is also the useful web site *Emiweb*, where many databases can be accessed for a small subscription. Also the continued life of the journal *Sweden & America* was in danger.

In late spring a new organization appeared, called the *Kinship Center*, which will take over all assets, archives, databases, the journal, and slowly build a new more stable economy to enable the basic work to go on and become secure for the future.

The president will be Mrs. Eva Eriksson, former county governor of Värmland and former chairperson of the Migration Center. The business leader will be Mr. Erik

Gustavson, the former secretary of the Sweden America Center.

The new Kinship Center has the backing of the Karlstad City Council, the Värmland Regional Authority, and the Swedish National Archives.



Erik Gustavson and Eva Eriksson.