
NUGGETS OF HISTORY
VOLUME 37 SEPTEMBER 1999 NUMBER 3

ROCKFORD QUILT RECOGNITION



RUBY LANNING LUNDGREN'S 1937 "FAIRY QUILT"
RECEIVES DESIGNATION AS ONE OF THIS CENTURY'S
100 BEST QUILTS

Awarded by the Ultimate Quilt Search sponsored by
the International Quilt Festival, Quilters Newsletter Magazine,
Quiltmaker and McCall's Quilting.

Photo courtesy Elaine Carlson

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents accounts of Swedish immigrants with Rockford ties and of an award-winning quilt.

David Oberg, Museum Educator at Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum, entertains and educates students from grade school to senior high levels. In hands-on experiences with a trunkful of artifacts brought into area schools, he presents historical programs. One such presentation involves a Tinker/Swedish connection. A young Swedish immigrant, Nels Ekblad, served as coachman for Robert Tinker. For *Nuggets* publication, Dave rewrote his children's presentation about Nels and his sister Karna at an adult level.

Dave started his position at Tinker Museum in April 1998, following an eight-year stint on staff at The Time Museum. A graduate of East High School, he earned a B.A. at Rockford College and a Masters degree at NIU, DeKalb. He's always been an avid history buff, influenced by his father. "My dad read bedtime Civil War stories to me."

Elaine Carlson relates the story of her mother's 1930s artistic efforts to create heirloom quilts for three children. Now 62 years later, one of those quilts has received a significant award. Elaine, a Rockford native has been married to Russell for over 62 years. She currently serves as membership chair for Rockford Historical Society. Elaine's mother, a native of Belvidere, moved to Rockford after her 1910 marriage to G.H. "Hub" Lundgren. She died in 1951.


Peggy Jensen, Editor

Addition to Volume 37, Number 1

Riverdahl School was named for J.A. Riverdahl. He served 31 years as secretary-treasurer of Rock River School, the district that built the Riverdahl School prior to being annexed to the city.

Contributed by Margaret Stenstrom

Rockford Historical Society Calendar

Annual Meeting--Sunday, Oct. 3, 3 p.m. Save the date.

We welcome the following new society members as of May 1999.

Cathy Arnold, Laura Bachelder, Mrs. James Barton, Mrs. Richard Borden, Marian E. Buser, Dorothy Eaver, Johanna Koslofski, Mr. & Mrs. Don Manzullo, Ron "Skip" Mattison, Senator Dave Syverson, E. David Sbragia, William E. Sterling, Victor and Judy Zoellich and Macktown Living History Education Center.

LIFESTYLE CHOICES--SWEDEN OR AMERICA?

by
David Oberg

There the sun never goes down;
Everyone is family.
There, everything is full of joy and song;
The cellar is full of champagne...
What a pity that America,
lies so far away.

From the 1836 Swedish song "Brothers, We Have Far to Go"

Nels Henriksson was born into a world of poverty and want in 1864. The middle of three children, he and his siblings faced problems common to many Swedes. In Nels' native Vallosa, and the nation at large, population had outstripped available farm land. This in itself would not have been a problem, but Sweden had not yet experienced a level of industrial growth sufficient to absorb excess population. In short, not enough work existed to fulfill needs.

As a result of overpopulation and underemployment, many Swedes eked out a mean and marginal existence. They subsisted on a bland diet of porridge and potatoes, with a little meat reserved for holidays. Few advancement opportunities existed. Income from odd jobs and domestic service helped stave off starvation, but held little hope for the future. This environment faced Nels at age 14

when he was confirmed at the Old Church in Sjorup.

Nels' confirmation marked him as a man. Society expected him to begin making his way in the world. He began doing odd jobs for Marten Bengstrom and Ola Olsson, but steady employment eluded the young man. By age 20, he had little to show for his efforts beyond the clothes on his back.

Nels turned to the one institution that still offered some hope of advancement. He enlisted in the military, and donned the light blue uniform of the Skanska Regiment. The military provided him with a coal black horse, as well as a new name. As was the custom, Nels Henriksson took a soldier name and, for the rest of his life, was known as Nels Ekblad.

Nels had exchanged his name and his freedom in the hopes of rising through the ranks of the Skanska Regiment. His first assignment, however, dispelled

any illusions he had of rapid advancement. Nels' sole duty was to act as coachman and servant to the wife of Major Segerbaden. For the next four years, Nels would wait on her night and day.



Nels Ekblad in the uniform of the Skanska Regiment, 1886.

Meanwhile, Nels' family had problems of their own. His brother Anders had died of typhoid fever. His sister Karna struggled to make ends meet in the only way she could. She took work as a maid for a well-to-do family in the nearby town of Ystad. While her days were filled with toil and she earned little money, her life was not without joy. Occasionally, she would slip away to dance at a local establishment.

One evening, a young sailor playing the harmonica at the dance caught her eye. She often enjoyed the company of Frank Greenberg, but kept his identity secret from her family. Her mother did not approve of sailors who danced in Ystad.

In 1888, the lives of Nels and Karna took a decisive turn. Nels, now 24, resolved that he would not spend another year helping a woman in and out of the saddle. He planned a way to escape. Desertion from the military, however, would result in years of imprisonment. If Nels were to escape, he would have to put a great deal of distance between himself and the authorities.



The American Dream

America stood as the bright beacon of hope. Throughout the 19th century, millions of Swedes crossed the cold blue waters of the Atlantic to start life anew. Some from Vallosa had settled in Chicago and Rockford Swedish neighborhoods. Letters home celebrated the United States as a nation possessing rich land, as well as honest and sensible people. America assumed mythic qualities in Swedish folk songs and tales, celebrating trees as sweet as sugar and geese that flew fully cooked onto the table. The dizzying potential of America, contrasted with a life of toil and failure in Sweden, proved too much for Nels. On the night of May 1, 1888, he deserted his post and began the arduous journey to America.

Escape Route

Nels rode his coal-black horse to Marvinsholm's Station. There he could catch a train to his native village, Vallosa. Upon his arrival at the station, he parted with the horse and sent it back to the barracks. When Nels did not report to his post in the morning, he was replaced. The new recruit took not only Nels' place in the regiment, but his name as well.

Meanwhile, Nels arrived in Vallosa. His sister Karna and a friend Jons Otto Strandquist joined him. They said farewell to their parents and departed in haste. The police were now looking for Nels. The hasty departure caused Karna to leave her confirmation Bible behind. Nels would see his parents only two more times; Karna would never see them again.

The trio took an indirect route to America to avoid the police. Worried about being discovered at a Swedish port, they crossed into Denmark and booked passage from Copenhagen to Hull, England. Worried about being apprehended, Nels disguised himself as woman and signed under a false name.

Arriving safely in Hull, the three took a train to Liverpool. It proved to be a shock for these young Swedes accustomed to the quietude of Vallosa. Coarse women accosted them on the street and tried to sell cheap necklaces and rings. Nels wrote home, "As they reached out to us, one hand went in our pockets, but I got hold of one of them, and then they did not bother us any more. They were driving the police nuts, too, and the police did not have as much control as in Sweden."

Rough Passage

Finally, after 11 long days, Nels, Karna and Jons boarded ship for America. Heavily laden, the ship slowly pitched and rolled toward the New World. If Liverpool was noisy and dirty, the ship was worse. Nels recalled:

"The water streamed down in the hold of the boat and two-month-old babies were floating in the water. We helped as much as we could, but you can be sure it was a sight to see. Many men were screaming, sick and vomiting. The soup was like dishwater.... But that wasn't the worst. When the sea had calmed, people went up on deck and then, whether rich or poor, you could count the big lice on their backs."

After an agonizing voyage, Nels, Karna and Jons finally set foot in America at Castle Garden, the primary destination for many immigrant before Ellis Island opened. They joined thousand of weary, but hopeful, people from countless lands in an old opera house recently converted into a way station. Immigrants' letters home tell of Castle Garden's environment.

In the din of different voices, travelers would have heard a few familiar sounds. Swedish agents often came to Castle Garden to recruit

workers. Others Swedes came to save souls. They handed out copies of the New Testament in Swedish and English. Nels, Jons, and Karna would have been subjected to the usual battery of questions concerning morals, abilities and health. Finally, after a physical examination, the three would glimpse the "Promised Land" beyond the gates.

Often, the immigrants' first impressions did not live up to expectations. Nothing could compare to the image created by letters received in Sweden. Writers had omitted bad news and had exaggerated qualities of their new nation to keep relatives and friends from worrying.

Instead of finding proverbial streets paved with gold, Nels and his companions found something else. Nels wrote,

"The first thing we saw when we entered the gates was a dead rat and after that, we saw dead rats, cats, dogs, and piles of horse manure on the streets."

Nels, Karna and Jons would soon learn that life in America, like life in Sweden, had both good and bad.



O Give Me A Home

One of the first lessons the new immigrants learned was that finding a job in America was no easier than finding one in Sweden. The three journeyed to Rockford to join other Swedes from Vallosa who had settled on the city's southeast side. Not one spoke English yet, so the prospect of a "little Sweden" with a network of fellow countrymen must have been an inviting prospect. While Rockford may have offered some comfort, jobs proved hard to acquire. Only Karna found employment. She moved to a farm in Winnebago to work as a maid for a prosperous Scottish family. Nels and Jons had to leave Rockford's "Little Sweden."

The two finally landed jobs as lumberjacks in Canada. They spent their first Christmas at a logging camp. Braving bitter cold and without much cheer, Nels lamented, "Home in Sweden, we could be eating sylta and pickled beets until we fell out the door."

The rigorous lumberjack life did not appeal to Nels. He and Jons separated when Nels moved to Chicago. There he worked as a streetcar conductor. Eventually,

this career allowed him to rejoin his sister in Rockford where he also worked on a streetcar.



Attired in his new American-style clothes, Nels posed for a photographer, early 1890s.

Meanwhile, Karna had adjusted to life in America after initial difficulties. She could converse with several Swedish farmhands, but they teased her for not knowing English. Other Swedes proved helpful. Soon Karna attended social functions and dances. An unlikely reunion took place at a dance.

Karna found Frank Greenberg, the young harmonica player from Ystad. Now, separated by an ocean from her disapproving mother, Karna married the former sailor. She no longer needed to keep their relationship a secret. Frank and Karna had three children: Harold, Arvid and Alice. They all grew up in Rockford. Karna had found her American dream.

Frank, a talented woodworker, sent an elaborate frame with a photograph of Karna and him to her parents overseas. He worked as a machinist for the Rockford Chair and Furniture Company, where Nels also found work for a time. Unfortunately, Nels had yet to find his niche in America. He wrote home:

"I want to tell you about beautiful America that we all long for because money rains on your head when you enter this land. If anyone come to you and asks, you can tell them how I feel. Rockford is beautiful. But

if anyone wants a job, you must go to the country and work on a farm. There it is not good. There are no flower gardens. Do you ever hear a lark singing? Do you ever hear anyone say, 'Come in for a drink'--no. Never! here you will not find anything to compare to Sweden."

As Nels grew homesick, his father grew ill in Sweden. Nels returned for a short time to help him before he died. When Nels returned to America, he finally found a job a little more to his liking. As gardener and coachman for Robert Hall Tinker, he helped maintain the elaborate gardens surrounding the picturesque home. In later years, he looked back with some fondness on the seven years he worked in the employ of the Tinker family.



An 1890s photo of Nels during his employ at Tinker Cottage.

Mr. Tinker's diary sheds some light on the work Nels did for him. In addition to caring for horses and livestock, Nels raked, mowed and planted gardens on the grounds. He assisted with a variety of improvements and repairs to the home. He also helped Tinker create some of the exotic rootwood furniture still standing at Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum today. Then, after years of service, Nels received an urgent message from Sweden. His mother was dying. It was time to go home.

Across the Waters

Nels returned to Sweden in 1901, after 12 years in America. The military had given up its search for him. He could comfort his mother in peace. His New World adventure would end.

At home, he looked up his friend Per Hansson. Per's younger sister Maria, only 11 when Nels left on his adventure, now was a grown woman. Nels would marry Maria.

They had seven children and remained in Sweden for the rest of their lives. Nels used his American earnings to buy a home beside the Old Church in Sjorup, the site of his confirmation. Nels would lead efforts to

restore and to preserve the old building, still standing today.

Occasionally Jons Strandquist, the American-adventure friend, would visit. He had found a good job in a shoe factory in the United States and now was a successful businessman. The two men would converse about old times in English, much to the chagrin of Nels' wife and children who were unable to understand.

As for Karna, she became an American citizen. She and her children remained in Rockford and Karna never ventured across the ocean again. And though, as her daughter Alice recalled, her mother had become thoroughly "American" in dress and demeanor, she always had a brother back in Sweden. Such ties exist for many Swedish-Americans. Are you one of them?

Sources

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- Correspondence with Peter Larsson, grandson of Nels Ekblad.
- Diaries of Robert Hall Tinker and Marcia Dorr.
- Elstob, Eric. *Sweden: A Political and Cultural History*.
- Nels Ekblad interview by Sigurd and Helga Ekblad.
- Rockford City Directories
- Scott, Franklin Daniel. *Sweden, the Nation's History*.

Translations from Swedish provided by Mrs. Howard Hallden, Ruth Von Busch and Astrid Hagar.



Frank and Karma "Carrie" Henriksson Greenberg
with children

Harold, born 1891; Arvid, born 1892

Alice, born 1904.

Photos, pgs. 2, 5, 6, 8 courtesy Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum

THE FAIRY QUILT
by
Elaine Carlson

Back in the 1930s my mother, Ruby Lanning Lundgren, could not have imagined the attention one of her quilts would receive in 1999. Her fairy quilt has been chosen as one of the 100 Best American Quilts of the 20th Century.

She was a modest woman, a homemaker, gardener, needle woman as well as a loving wife and mother. During the Great Depression years, making quilts was one of her pleasures.

She told her three children she would make each a quilt if they would bring a pattern. My 12-year-old brother Bruce brought her the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, April 5, 1930. That was not what she had in mind. But it presented her with a challenge.

She completed a beautiful quilt of two Oriental figures--a lady standing on a little bridge and a man playing a mandolin. This quilt was so successful that she made another for my older brother Richard. It had a striking red background and an Oriental lady in a white gown reaching toward a white parrot in a cage.

Both Richard's quilt and the one I selected had appeared as advertisements in 1920s issues of *Printers Ink* magazine. I chose a picture of a fairy standing on a dew drop reaching to get nectar from a carnation. A beautiful blue formed the background.

Mother's reproduction method, in each case, was to stretch threads one inch apart, both horizontally and vertically across the picture to make one-inch squares. She enlarged these squares to one foot and drew patterns. Having purchased materials to approximate picture colors, she then cut the pieces. If she could not match colors, she embroidered designs.

My brothers and I admired her artistry and took loving care of our quilts. We did not realize how they would be regarded in the 1990s. "The Fairy" has been displayed more often at shows than the other two quilts.

A Garden Prairie resident saw "The Fairy" quilt at a 1985 show. When appointed to a committee to nominate quilts for the 20th-century "best" designation, June Culvey remembered "The Fairy." Research and interviews led her to me. She nominated mother's quilt as one of The 20th Century's 100 Best American Quilts. Then, a panel of judges from prestigious quilting magazines and associations selected 100 quilts from among 1790 entries, "The Fairy" among them.

Eighty of the 100 selected have been located and will be on display at the International Quilt Festival in Houston, Texas, October 21-24, 1999.

Editor's note: Elaine and Russell Carlson will attend the October festival in Houston. They will be joined by daughter Karen and son-in-law Steve Kahl of Texas; and son Craig and daughter-in-law Sylvia of California.

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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