

## **The Founding and Early Years of the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin** **By Harry Anderson**

*(Following the annual meeting of our Society on October 9, 2010, a number of those present observed that my informal remarks on this organization's early years should be preserved in written form. What follows is offered in response to those requests.)*

The first meeting to plan for what became the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin took place in the afternoon of September 24, 1974 in the Marshall Street office of Anders Segerdahl, the honorary Swedish Consul for the State of Wisconsin. In addition to Consul Segerdahl, others who were present were Bertil Winstrom, former Grand Master, Vasa Order of America; Richard Horngren, an officer and active member of Linde Lodge, the local Vasa unit; and myself. The purpose of this gathering was to explore, at Segerdahl's suggestion, a method by which Milwaukee's Swedish American community could participate, in a meaningful way, in the celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution scheduled to be held in 1976. It was readily agreed by those present that some effort should be developed to identify contributions made by Wisconsin's Swedish Americans in this historical undertaking.

Additional meetings were held by this informal planning committee during the months that followed. These sessions, usually held in the evening, took place in the conference room at the Milwaukee County Historical Society which I had access to by virtue of my position with the Society. At the December meeting (December 2, 1974) it was unanimously agreed that the objectives of our proposed group should be expanded beyond activities focused only on the Bicentennial observance, and to create a permanent organization to preserve a record of the experiences of Swedish Americans in Wisconsin. Thus, the foundation for what became the Swedish American Historical Society of Wisconsin, Inc. was laid down.

From this significant beginning, meetings of the organizing committee continued to be held on almost a monthly basis. Participation was expanded to include other Wisconsinites of Swedish ancestry. These included Professor Ingrid Kamerini of the Scandinavian Studies department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Art Staves and Stig Wiren from Kenosha. Stig Wiren brought a useful perspective to the group, having previously served with the organizational body that in 1946 created the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society headquartered in Chicago and now known as the Swedish American Historical Society. Two local clergymen also became interested in the new local fledgling organization and helped spread the word of its objectives among their parishioners of Swedish descent. These were Pastor Jim Magnuson of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Wauwatosa and the Reverend Harold Swanson who served a Presbyterian congregation in Milwaukee.

Among other names that appear in the minutes as being present at these early meetings were Joe Shoquist, a member of the editorial board of the Milwaukee Journal; Eiler Hansen, an active member of Linde Lodge and a willing worker (in spite of his regularly boasting of his Norwegian heritage); and Erik Walquist, a Swedish American resident of Mequon.

The original organizing quartet continued to provide basic leadership, together with the valuable addition in early 1975 of John Ebert, then serving as chairman (presiding officer) of Linde Lodge, the local Vasa chapter. On May 6, 1975, two important steps were taken to officially create a permanent



organization. These were the formal election of an initial slate of officers and the filing of incorporation papers with Wisconsin's Secretary of State in Madison. Dick Horngren was selected to serve as Secretary, Andy Segerdahl as Treasurer and I was given the post of President. A \$25 filing fee was necessary to submit along with the Incorporation papers. Not yet having any financial resources to draw upon, the five incorporators—the three newly selected officers, along with Bertil Winstrom and John Ebert—each placed a \$5 bill on the table along with their signatures on the application to meet this essential requirement. The Incorporation filing was approved by the Secretary of State's office on May 9, 1975. On August 6, 1975, an application for federal tax exempt status was approved by the Internal Revenue Service. The necessary by-laws were drafted and approved, including provision to meet the need for future operating expenses by establishing a dues structure of \$3.00 for general membership and \$15.00 for the use of those who were more generously inclined. The very early membership lists that still survive show that a total of 23 persons signed up during these very first months. Thanks to the support and efforts of Directors Winstrom, Horngren, and Ebert, Linde Lodge generously agreed to provide the new Society with a loan of \$800 to meet the immediate need for administrative expenses and program costs. This loan was subsequently quickly repaid with a heartfelt "tack så mycket" through the efforts of Treasurer Segerdahl. The Trostel Tanning Company Foundation provided a grant of \$1,000 during this time period (Segerdahl just happened to be president of the Trostel firm at the time!). From all sources, the Society was able to boast of year-end bank balances of \$410.90 in 1975 and \$628.05 for 1976 after all outstanding obligations had been met.

The various activities proposed and considered for implementation during these first two years of activity were many and varied (some overly ambitious and far beyond the ability of the Society to achieve) but nevertheless received due consideration. They included: a Swedish building at Old World Wisconsin; the erection of historic markers at places of importance to Swedish settlement; participation in a visit by the Swedish King during the Bicentennial; programming for both the general public and our own membership; sponsorship of a Midsommar festival; contact with descendents of early Swedish settlers in Wisconsin; and some type of historic publications.

The celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution attracted widespread international attention in 1975-76, and this included touring groups from Sweden. In mid-June 1975, the Society along with Linde Lodge hosted a visit to Milwaukee by the "Enköping Folkdance Organization" which included a public performance by the dance group at the International Institute on Friday night and a picnic sponsored by both local organizations at the Horngren residence in Oak Creek the next day.

The following year, the Historical Society sponsored a visit to Wisconsin by descendents of the family of Carl Friman, the first Swede known to have settled in Wisconsin in 1838. This visit was coordinated from Sweden by Colonel Axel Friman, a retired Swedish Army officer and the great-grandson of Carl Friman. Together with his wife, Greta, and daughter, Viveka Larsen, Friman was joined by 14 other American descendents of the original Friman party who traveled to Wisconsin for this occasion from their homes in California, Washington, and Minnesota.

Historical Society officers had arranged for members of the Friman clan and our membership to meet on the morning of June 26, 1976, at the site of the original Friman pioneer homestead located just off Highway 50, two miles west of New Munster in Kenosha County for a reception at 10:30 a.m. Of course, coffee and refreshments were served in abundance and all in attendance had the opportunity to visit together and learn more about the Friman family's immigration experiences.



A luncheon was held later in the afternoon at the Honey Bear Farm near Genoa City. I have no recollection of what was served, or whether or not there were formal talks or a program following the meal. However, I do still vividly recall sitting at the bar at the Honey Bear with Bertil Winstrom, Axel Friman and others in attendance enjoying "boilermakers" while working up an appetite for lunch.

Probably the major event of the Society's participation in the Bicentennial observance in 1976 was arranging for a month-long showing in Milwaukee of the traveling exhibit, "The Dream of America—Swedish Emigration to the United States." Circulated in this country by SITES (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service), the exhibit had been prepared by the Emigration Institute in Växjö, Sweden. It occupied an entire gallery at the Milwaukee County Historical Society's downtown museum and consisted of numerous artifacts from Swedish sources related to the experiences of Swedish emigrants in their travel to the United States and their assimilation into American society. The fee of \$1,000 for rental of this exhibit had been met partly from the Trostel Foundation grant and partly from support by our Society members.

In conjunction with the "Dream of America" exhibit, two full-length motion pictures dealing with interpretation of Swedish emigration based upon the novels of Vilhelm Moberg accompanied the display. The films, "The Emigrants" and "The New Land," were both Hollywood productions distributed by Warner Brothers and featured two internationally known Scandinavian stars, Liv Ullmann and Max von Sydow. They were shown at the Milwaukee County Historical Society on the evenings of November 3 and 10. The "Dream of America" exhibit came to Milwaukee from the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis and from here was shipped to a museum facility in Trenton, NJ.

It was against this background of two busy years of organizational activity and program sponsorship that the Swedish American Historical Society began its existence. It has continued its operation for more than three decades, providing insights into the contributions of Swedish-Americans to the growth and development of Wisconsin and to the ongoing relationships many of us have to the Swedish homeland.

Two of my fellow incorporators who contributed so much (besides the \$5.00 each for the incorporation fee) towards the establishment of our Society now live in retirement in the South, Dick Horngren in Tennessee and John Ebert in Florida. Two others are deceased, Bertil Winstrom in 2001 and Andy Segerdahl just last summer, 2010. I am sure that I speak for all of these colleagues in observing that the continued participation and support by other officers and members for these 35 years have made our initial efforts most worthwhile!