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Swenson Center Report

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Chris Strunk
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As a migration scholar, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to spend a week this summer conducting research in the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center. During my three years at Augustana, my students and I have explored urban development and recent patterns of immigrant and refugee settlement in the Quad Cities. In places like the Floreciente neighborhood of Moline, located about a mile from Augustana's campus on the west side of the city, the Mexican and Mexican American community is transforming a landscape that had already been influenced by a much earlier wave of migration from Sweden. The success of the city's Swedish-born mayors – who dominated Moline politics between 1895 and 1918 – was based in large part on the heavy concentration of votes in the 1st, 2nd and 5th wards located in Moline's west end. By examining the influence of Swedish immigrants on the historical geography of Moline, my goal is to provide students with an opportunity to conduct original research on the ways in which migrants have shaped the politics, identity, and culture of the Quad Cities.

Much of my week in the Swenson Center this summer was spent developing an assignment for a new course on population geography. The class will be part of a “learning community” – two related courses that examine the same topic from distinct disciplinary perspectives – about migration in the Quad Cities taught with Dr. Araceli Masterson (Spanish). In order to learn about trans-Atlantic migration from the perspective of the people who undertook the journey, students will conduct primary research on “America Letters” written by immigrants to family members in Sweden. While the letters in the Swenson Center are all wonderfully unique, they provide crucial insights into why almost one-fourth of the population left Sweden during the 19th century as well as the importance of social networks and the hope (and rumors) of finding opportunity in the development of new migration patterns. Students will primarily search for perspectives on immigrants' journeys to and new lives in Moline, but will also have a great deal of archival materials on other early Swedish settlements in the region, including New Sweden, Iowa and Bishop Hill, Andover, and Galesburg in Illinois.

My research in the Swenson Center also explored the organizational life of Swedish migrants. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Moline became home to an array of Swedish civic, cultural, and religious organizations. While churches and other Swedish clubs were initially concentrated in the west end of Moline, they found new addresses over time as congregations grew, split, or followed members to new areas of Moline. Swedish migrants also developed extra-local and statewide connections through political organizations such as the Swedish-American Republican League and the Swedish-American Athletic League, which organized soccer games against Swedish teams from other cities in Illinois.

This preliminary exploration of the institutional geography of Swedish Moline led me to develop an assignment for a future Introduction to Geographic Information Systems (GIS) class. I envision that students will use Swenson Center archival material to identify and geo-reference important Swedish institutions and businesses over time. Through this historical GIS project, students will develop skills in both qualitative and quantitative research methods and explain how the Swedish community changed in relation to patterns of economic and urban development

in the Quad Cities. This assignment builds on the Senior Inquiry research of current Geography student Alex Mahaffey, who is examining the regional affiliation and transnational connections of Swedish institutions in 19th century Moline.

This interest in Swedish institutions is also a continuation of my previous research on migrant organizations. My dissertation explored the formation of Bolivian hometown associations in the suburbs of Washington D.C. Like Swedish institutions during the late 19th and early 20th century, faith-based and advocacy organizations in Washington D.C. and the Quad Cities today are helping to facilitate immigrant engagement in host communities through cultural festivals, politics, entrepreneurship, transnational ties, and, in a potentially new twist, community gardens. As I begin a project with immigrant and refugee community gardens this fall, I plan to continue exploring connections between historical and contemporary pathways of migrant incorporation in the Quad Cities, particularly whether previous waves of migrant settlement have shaped attitudes towards recent newcomers.