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# The Emigrant Register of Karlstad

Erik Gustavson\*

The Emigrant Register in Karlstad, in the province of Värmland, was founded in 1960 and thereby became the first institution of its kind in Sweden. There was, however, an extensive period of preparatory work.

Interest in contacts with Swedish America has always existed in Sweden. In several locations, for example, there are Sweden America Day celebrations of long standing. When Sigurd Gustavson, the founder of the Emigrant Register, invited the then Swedish Consul General in Minneapolis, Carl Fredrik Hellström, to one such celebration, the Consul General accepted the invitation with the following words: "It's all very well with festivals, but they are soon over, and as a rule nothing further happens. If you knew the warm feelings which the Swedish descendants in America have for the Swedes, you would certainly do something more". These words became the seeds from which the expanded activity within the Värmland Historical Society was to flower.

This new activity commenced with the famed "Värmland Gift", which consisted of a separate gift from every parish in Värmland, to the Swedish descendants in America. These gifts varied greatly, but in most cases they were typical items used in those localities which contributed them. One can view these gifts as bits of local history, replete with their traditions, events and human destinies. Altogether, the "Värmland Gift" was made up of some one hundred items, presented to the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, MN in June of 1952. The collection still remains there as a reminder of the good will which emanated from Värmland and constitutes a key exhibit, viewed by tens of thousands annually.

The "Värmland Gift" had spawned the thought that a monument should be erected in Värmland as a concrete reminder of the more than one million Swedes who journeyed to the great land in the West. The thought expanded to also include the folk groups in Värmland, whose ancestral roots from the earliest times had been in Finland. The monument was raised in the heart of the Selma Lagerlöf country, near Rottneros, created in the geographical shape of Värmland, crowned by a sculptured eagle, with wings outstretched, ready for flight. *Stamfrändemonumentet* (The Kinship Monument) became a reality and on its base are chiseled the words "To commemorate the bonds which tie kinfolk together across the seas, to the West and to the East".

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\* Erik Gustavson is the Director of the Emigrant Register in Karlstad, Sweden.

Still, the desire for something more became all the more evident, and in 1960, the Emigrant Register was founded as a research center for scholars, students, researchers and genealogists, where these might at first hand receive information concerning those sons and daughters of the province, who had left to seek a living elsewhere. Among the first tasks tackled by the Register was to compile a record over all of the emigrants from the province of Värmland, who had departed for America. In addition to the alphabetical lists, chronological emigration lists were drawn up for each parish based on the exit lists and the parish household examination rolls. For each emigrant a questionnaire was prepared on a specially prepared and printed form. The data from the parish records were added to these questionnaire lists, as were the answers to the questions, given by Swedish relatives of the emigrant, or the emigrant himself, if he was alive, either if he dropped by in person on a visit from America to Sweden, or by corresponding, if it was known where he was residing in the U.S. If the emigrant was deceased an attempt was made to locate his next-of-kin and if this was not possible, other persons, such as old neighbors, friends, both in Sweden and the United States, who were knowledgeable about the individual would be contacted.

This task is of course wholly dependent upon our contacts throughout the province. For certain parishes these information sheets are nearly completed, while for others there are still large gaps in our information. The work with filling out the questionnaires goes on even in the United States. Many are the questionnaires which have been requisitioned by private researchers for completion and they have been returned containing valuable information. The attempt to secure documentation from persons who experienced and have good memories of their emigration is very important to the collection of oral history.

The collections of Swedish American newspapers on deposit in the Royal Library of Stockholm have been combed for articles dealing with the emigration phenomenon and have been excerpted. The same thing can be said of the various local Swedish newspapers. From these we use everything which touches on America, whether it is news, announcements, and advertisements. This gives us a true picture of how intensive the concept of "America" was reflected in the newspapers during the years of heavy emigration. Present day newspapers are also studied. Articles dealing with birthdays, weddings as well as obituaries are clipped and filed according to the parish. Certain details from these vital notices are then transferred to the questionnaire files.

Passenger lists from ports of embarkation have been requisitioned for copying and excerpting. When it comes to Norwegian ports, and records of departure are on microfilm, these have been requisitioned and also excerpted. For many emigrants from Värmland, the port of Kristiania (nowadays Oslo) played a vital role in the emigration experience and it is important to exhaust the resources of this embarkation port.

Our microfilm archives contain information from various Swedish parishes, but only for the years up to and including 1895. The microfilms from Sweden's Central Bureau of Statistics, which include information concerning those who have left the parishes for foreign parts, and kept in intervals of five years, are also included in our holdings, as are the previously mentioned Norwegian port of embarkation records.



Sigurd Gustavson



The Kinship Monument

Our library at the Register contains about 5,000 volumes, much of it dealing with the emigration theme, but also heavy in topographic and biographical content. We are constantly on the lookout for titles missing in our collection by studying book catalogues, visiting antiquarian book shops and watching out for book auctions. We therefore possess a great deal of real rarities. In this field, the Emigrant Register has benefitted by receiving strong support from Birger Swenson of Rock Island, IL, former book publisher and together with wife, Lyal, the main benefactor in the establishment recently of the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Rock Island, IL. Mr. Swenson has greatly enhanced our library with his many gifts.

The Emigrant Register also organizes and assembles exhibits and supplies Vasa Order lodges and historical societies with material dealing with American emigration for local 'emigrant days' and similar occasions. Several tours have also been arranged for visiting Swedish organizations in America.

For some time the Emigrant Register has been involved in a joint research project with the Department of History of the University of Uppsala. The Register and staff members from the Department's American History Section have labored gathering information and recording oral traditions

concerning emigration and the labor migration from Värmland to Norrland in northern Sweden and Norway. The result of this research has shown us that concerning the labor migration, we were out late, but when it comes to the emigration phenomenon this is still alive in people's memories. The material from the joint effort with the University of Uppsala remains largely unprocessed. The experience has taught us that the collecting of oral traditions concerning emigration is very urgent, both in the United States and Sweden.

During the existence of the Emigrant Register a great many conferences have been held, which have addressed the problems of emigration to North America and the labor migrations. The cooperative efforts, foremost then with the University of Uppsala, with the inspired leadership of Prof. Sten Carlsson, as well as with the universities in Lund and Oslo, have been of tremendous value in this connection. We have in this manner been able to combine formal academic research with the more informal work going on at the community level. This blending of two forces, working toward one goal, has been to say the least very exciting for everyone involved.

Across the years we have also at the Emigrant Register been able to accumulate a significant biographical archives of letters, photographs and the especially valuable material from the emigrant agents active in Sweden at the height of the emigration period. In order to make this material more easily accessible, we have set up a reference index, dealing with both names and subjects. Additionally we also have a separate photographic archives, which has been very valuable when it comes to the publishing of our quarterly journal.

The Emigrant Register has built up a solid network of contacts, primarily in the province of Värmland, but extending also into other parts of Sweden. This network operates as a rule through the various local historical societies (*hembygdsföreningar*). These contacts are of inestimable value for personal research, for it means that we always have someone we can alert, when a visitor of Swedish descent arrives from America, bent on seeing his ancestral home. In the United States our best contacts are with the various Swedish American organizations, spread all over the American continent. There is no doubt that the Emigrant Register today stands out as a foremost source of information on emigration from the province of Värmland. Additionally it has built up across the years a preeminent position as a leading institution in this field in the Scandinavian countries.

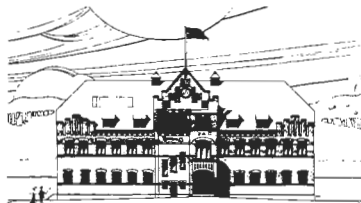
From the very start, the Emigrant Register has emphasized its dual role as an institution. One of its purposes is to be a collection agency for the ingathering of information concerning emigration and labor migration and to make this material available to students and researchers on all levels.

The second purpose is the strengthening of the ties between kinsmen on both sides of the Atlantic. This purpose also seeks to guarantee that material in America, which deals with emigration from Sweden, and which is of vital

interest to Sweden, not be lost. As an essential part of this task, the Emigrant Register, together with our supporting organization, *Samfundet Emigrantforskningens Främjande* (The Society for the Promotion of Emigration Research), publishes the quarterly journal *Bryggan* and its English language counterpart, *The Bridge*, which together have a circulation of ca. 3,000. *Bryggan/The Bridge* desires to stimulate research in the field of emigration on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus we can be aware of what is transpiring on various levels. The activities of the Swedish American organizations are reflected here. Collaboration between the editor and his readers is carried out by the contribution of articles from the readers themselves. Thus we look upon *Bryggan/The Bridge* as the primary publication for everyone interested in emigration research.

In order to acquaint people more readily concerning our activities, the Emigrant Register has produced a slide show program which portrays the contacts between Sweden and America across several centuries. The program has proved to be very popular in our two countries. Historical societies, Vasa Order lodges, study circles and school classes have attended the showings. Inspired by the success of this program, (which incidentally also carries the same symbolic title as our quarterly journal, has likewise been produced in both English and Swedish versions), we have produced another slide program, one which deals perhaps with the most famous Swedish emigrant, John Ericsson. He emigrated to the United States in 1839. Though he cannot be classified as a typical emigrant, he had to struggle like most of them to become successful. He also shared with the majority of the emigrants an intense longing for home. In Värmland we celebrate annually our Swedish America Day, which we call John Ericsson Day. During the past year we had a premiere performance of the show about him.

From its earliest beginnings, the Emigrant Register has always kept in view the dream of some time finding suitable quarters for its operation. This dream is about to be fulfilled. In the near future the Emigrant Register will begin moving into an old cultural landmark in Karlstad, a building which has been renovated from top to bottom to fulfill our requirements. This new Kinship Center will provide work space, rooms for lectures, research, a library and exhibits, among other things. The Kinship Center is conveniently located near the business district of Karlstad, in a lovely spot on the banks of the Klar River (*Klarälven*). The Center will be open to all persons interested in the great migration, and everyone is cordially invited to visit us.



The Kinship Center