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Swedish Burial Records in Chicago Cemeteries

Nils William Olsson

The city of Chicago, at one time the second largest Swedish city next to Stockholm, has since the 1850's attracted tens of thousands of Swedish immigrants. While many of these newcomers remained in Chicago just long enough to get their bearings, before striking out for greener pastures farther West, vast numbers of them settled in Chicago, carved out their careers there, married and raised families there, and ultimately died there. Their final remains, therefore, came to rest in one of the more than sixty cemeteries to be found in the present-day Chicago Metropolitan area.

For the genealogist a cemetery can be an important place in which to locate pertinent material for the family history. To name and locate all of the Chicago cemeteries is beyond the scope of this short study. Three cemeteries exist in Chicago, however, which across the years have become the final resting place for thousands and thousands of Swedish immigrants. These cemeteries, all non-sectarian, are all more than a century old, and have served the Swedish population of Chicago for almost 125 years. These are — Graceland and Rosehill on the North Side and Oak Woods on the South Side. All are private grave yards, which have maintained excellent burial records for the time of their existence, thus enabling the researcher to find clues in identifying kinfolk who arrived in Chicago as far back as before 1850. All of these cemeteries have records which antedate the Chicago Fire in 1871, which makes these cemetery records even more valuable, considering the destruction of most of Chicago's vital statistics in that conflagration.

Rosehill Cemetery

Rosehill is the largest non-sectarian cemetery in the Chicago area, occupying some 350 acres on Chicago's North Side, bounded on the east by Ravenswood Ave., on the west by Western Ave., on the north by Peterson Ave., and on the south by Bryn Mawr and Bowmanville Aves. It was chartered by the Illinois State Legislature on Feb. 11, 1859 and the first burial took place there July 11 of that year, shortly before the dedication of the cemetery July 28, 1859. Since that time close to 200,000 persons have been interred here. Every grave is registered and there is a card for every person buried in this cemetery. These cards are on file in the offices of the cemetery association and carry such pertinent information as name of the person, age at time of death, time of death, date of burial and location of the burial plot. There is also a chronological account of all burials, where, if one knows the name of the person, one may also procure such additional details as the cause of death, residence at the time of death, and in some

instances the names of the attending physician and mortician.¹

The management does not charge for an inquiry or two, but discourages multiple queries, because of an overworked staff, and may in such instances charge for each inquiry. For those submitting queries it is recommended that one or at the most two questions be submitted, accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. Send all inquiries to Rosehill Cemetery, 5800 Ravenswood Ave., Chicago, IL 60660.

A sampling of the information available proved that here was a veritable gold mine of information. I had for years been looking for information of what happened to a Swedish pharmacist by the name of Pehr Olof Rosin, who originally emigrated to New York in 1843 and was living as a druggist in New York in 1850.² He subsequently returned to Sweden, married and had several children. In 1880 he re-emigrated to Chicago, where he continued his career as a druggist. The last word concerning him reached Sweden in 1899. A quick check of the Rosehill Cemetery records showed that Peter O. Rosin died in Chicago April 25, 1900 and that he was buried in Rosehill. Furthermore I learned that Pehr Olof's son, Conrad, who also had emigrated to Chicago, was buried in Rosehill together with his wife, Justina. While no tombstone could be found for the elder Rosin, there were headstones for both the son and the daughter-in-law.

Graceland Cemetery

The other large cemetery on Chicago's North Side is the Graceland Cemetery, which received its charter from the Illinois State Legislature Feb. 11, 1861. Graceland is smaller than Rosehill, comprising about 119 acres. It is bounded on the west by Clark Street, on the north by Montrose Ave., on the east by Eastwood Ave., and on the south by Irving Park Road. This cemetery also maintains excellent burial records, which are available to the scholar for a fee of \$3.00 per inquiry. For this amount the searcher receives a xerox copy of the grave plot history with the names and the dates of persons buried there, their dates of death as well as age at the time of death. Send all inquiries to Graceland Cemetery Company and Crematorium, 4001 North Clark St., Chicago, IL 60613.

Here I also wished to check a record, to see what information was available. I picked at random the name of John Matthias Schönbeck, one of the oldest settlers in Chicago, who had arrived there in 1847. He had been very active in the Swedish colony, had served as a vestryman in the St. Ansgarius Episcopal Church and had been one of the founders of the Svea Society in Chicago in 1857. He had died Oct. 2, 1873, but I did not know where he was buried.³ A cursory examination of the card file indicated that indeed John M. Schonbeck was interred in Graceland Cemetery in 1873. His wife, Johanna Bergvall, who had arrived in Chicago 1849, had died March 1, 1910 and she is also buried here as is her daughter, Agnes Wimmermark, who died as recently as 1953. To show that a family plot continues to be used by the family over a period of years, I found a notation that a granddaughter, who lived and died in Philadelphia, had been interred in the Schonbeck family plot in 1960. The first burial had been in 1870

when Schonbeck's 18 year old daughter had been buried here. Thus the card file indicates a history of 90 years of Schonbeck burials in this cemetery.

Occasionally a grave stone will also give information of the birth place of the person interred. While I did not spot any Swedish stones with this type of information during the very short visit, I found the following headstone giving information concerning a Danish immigrant by the name of Niels Uhrenholdt, born in Hobro, Denmark April 23, 1828. He died in Chicago Nov. 19, 1883.

Oak Woods Cemetery

Oak Woods Cemetery on Chicago's South Side was organized by a group of Chicago leaders in 1853 and thus antedates both Rosehill and Graceland. It comprises 183 acres and boasts of a special area within the cemetery known as the Swedish Section. More than 175,000 persons have here found their final resting place. The cemetery is bounded on the north by East 67th Street, on the west by Cottage Grove Ave., and on the south by East 71st Street. The records maintained by the management are in excellent condition, dating back to the Civil War. The first Swedish burial was that of Charles William Pettison, who died July 10, 1865 and was buried in Oak Woods July 11, 1865. He was born in Sweden in 1846 and had resided in Woodlawn with his parents, Peter and Christine Carlston (sic!). The cause of death was given as typhoid fever.

The management welcomes inquiries regarding persons interred here but charges \$2.00 per inquiry plus a stamped and self-addressed envelope. For this sum the management will furnish the name of the deceased, date of death, date of interment, age at time of death, place of birth (information which neither Rosehill nor Graceland could furnish), place of death and the next of kin as well as information concerning the grave plot. Inquiries should be directed to The Oak Woods Cemetery Association, 1035 E. 67th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

If the researcher does not know in which Chicago cemetery the object of the search is buried, it is possible to procure this information by writing to the Department of Health, Burial Permit Office, Richard J. Daley Center, Randolph and Clark Streets, Chicago, IL 60602. The charge for each search is \$3.00, for which the inquirer receives an affidavit showing the name of the deceased person, his or her date of death, the cause of death, the name of the mortician, the age at time of death and the important information concerning the cemetery where the person is buried.

The brief visit to these three Chicago cemeteries convinced me that here was a valuable source of information concerning persons who have died and have been buried in Chicago. The inventory of the remaining Chicago cemeteries would doubtless reveal additional information, but that will have to wait until another time.

¹ I am grateful to the managements of the Rosehill, Graceland and Oak Woods Cemeteries for providing me with much pertinent information concerning these three cemeteries.

² Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* (Stockholm and Chicago, 1967), p. 53.

³ Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 (except New York)* (Stockholm and St. Paul, MN, 1979), p. 14.