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Bruce R. Gerhardt

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Swedish Day – Swedish-Americans and the Trans- Mississippi and International Exposition

BY BRUCE R. GERHARDT

Between June 1 and November 1, 1898, more than 2.6 million people visited the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. While Swedish-Americans from all parts of the country came to the Exposition, two days were specifically designated to honor those of Swedish heritage who had made their new home in America. Those two days brought prominent Swedish-Americans together in Omaha. They celebrated with song, music, and poem, and reflected on what being a Swedish-American meant to them.

Most Americans viewed the World's Columbian Exposition (also called the Chicago World's Fair) in 1893 as a huge success for Chicago. Soon after, many prominent citizens in the American "West" proposed holding another great fair. They hoped such a fair would boost the economy of the western states and highlight their prosperity and recovery from the financial Panic of 1893. But financing another fair would be a huge undertaking. The Chicago World's Fair had cost more than 25 million dollars. Hopeful cities such as Kansas City, Denver, and Minneapolis could not find a way to arrange the finances even for an exposition on a smaller scale. But a group of Nebraskans including William Jennings Bryan, either bold or fool-hardy (or both), brought a meeting of the Trans-Mississippi Congress to Omaha in 1894. Met with promises of the necessary financial support, the Congress agreed that a "Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition" would be held in Omaha in 1898.

Along with the buildings, attractions, and exhibits, the Exposition had a full calendar of special days and events planned for the summer of 1898. From the opening day on June 1 to the close on October 31, the Exposition needed crowds. Big crowds. Only by selling a huge number of admission tickets could it be a financial success. So special days or events were created for nearly every interest and group that could be drawn to Omaha and through the front gate: Illinois Day, Iowa Day, Kansas Day, Texas Melon Day, Flower Day, Lumberman's Day, Shriner Day, Grape Day, Children's Day, Railroad Week, and many more. Ethnic groups were also courted:

German Day, Bohemian Day, and on June 24, Swedish-American Day. The day was planned to recognize "those emigrants from the 'Land of the Midnight Sun' to this land of freedom and prosperity [who] had not tarried in the East, but, following the instincts of their bright mental inheritance from sturdy forefathers, had drifted into the West."¹

The day was "sweltering" hot, but it was reported that several thousand Swedish-Americans arrived for the fair. At 3:00 p.m., the Theodore Thomas Orchestra² under the direction of Arthur Mees performed a program at the Auditorium. Admission for this special concert was 25 cents. The program started with the Swedish



The Auditorium at the Exposition in Omaha 1898. (Courtesy of the Omaha Public Library).

National Hymn, followed by Andreas Hallen's "Swedish Rhapsody" and a piece by Beethoven. Englebert Humperdinck's³ Dream Music from "Hansel and Gretel," piano solos in the Barcarolle and Tarantelle style by Theodor Leschetitzky, and Johan August Söderman's "Swedish Wedding March" were next. The program concluded with the Strauss waltz "Sphären-Klänge," and "Bridal Procession," a Swedish folksong by Asger Hamerik.

The formal evening exercises began at 8:00 p.m. in the Auditorium. American flags decorated the stage, and the national colors of Sweden were displayed throughout. The program was introduced by Omaha city councilman Charles Otto Lobeck.⁴ Lobeck's mother, Anna Louisa Gustavson, and father Otto Lobeck, had both immigrated to Andover, Illinois. Anna Louisa had been born in Hägerstad, (Östg.). Otto Lobeck had been

born in Demmin, Prussia, but moved to Sweden to manage holdings for Baron Wachtmeister in Karlskrona. They had left Sweden separately, then met and married in Andover shortly after Anna Louisa was widowed during the cholera epidemics. The Lobecks moved to Omaha in the 1880's.

Joining Charles Lobeck in planning Swedish-American Day were prominent Omaha locals T.H. Johnson, Theodore G. Northwall,⁵ John S. Helgren,⁶ C.W. Johnson,⁷ C.W. Anderson, and Albin Liljegren. Lobeck introduced Exposition President Gurdon W. Wattles, who in a short introduction quipped that the crowd had come to hear music, not listen to speeches. Lobeck then introduced the Chair of the evening program: Pastor A.J. Lofgren of Lincoln, Presiding Elder of the Swedish Methodist Church. Lofgren greeted the assembly in Swedish, and praised that the

day had brought together many Swedes of various denominations in a day of national celebration.

To begin, 209 members of a "Swedish Jubilee Chorus," assembled for the occasion under the direction of Professor Adolph Edgren, sang Psalm 150. Miss Emma Moeller of Omaha sang a soprano solo, "With Verdure Clad" by Haydn. She was followed by a men's chorus of "Hear Us, Svea." Johan Alfred Hultman, formerly pastor of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Omaha, sang a baritone solo with an encore of "Jerusalem." Hultman was known as the "Sunshine Singer" for his splendid singing voice.⁸

A break in the singing occurred with a recitation of an original poem by Dr. Johan A. Enander. He had been born in 1842 in Skinnmon, Härja, (Vägö.). Enander was the publisher of the Swedish language newspaper *Hemlandet* in Chicago,

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and very well known to most Swedish-Americans at the time. Many would have been subscribers. The poem is said to have dealt with the love and patriotism one has both for the adopted country as well as the native homeland. The Jubilee Chorus followed with "The Singers' March" by J.A. Dahlstrom, before the main speech of the program was delivered by Rev. Carl Swensson, founder of Bethany College.

Swensson spoke for two hours in Swedish, and paid tribute to Sweden and the Swedish people. The achievements of Leif Ericsson and John Ericsson were touted, and Swensson urged the audience to the duty of rendering aid to the suffering in Cuba due to the ongoing Spanish-American War. Professor Edgren ended the program by conducting a "Jubilee Cantata," highlighted with solos, duets, and mixed choruses.

The Swedish-American day was deemed a great success; the *Nebraska State Journal* reporting that despite the heat, the "Scorched Sons of North" numbered several thousand. The evening program "attracted one of the largest audiences which had occupied [the Auditorium] since the opening of the Exposition. There was not a vacant seat on the lower floor, and very few remaining in the gallery, when the exercises commenced."⁹

Interestingly, another Swedish Day was held on September 28. It was added to the schedule during the Exposition. Politics seemed to play

some part, as the partisan *Omaha World-Herald* reported that the earlier Swedish Day was too early in the season, not well planned, and not a "satisfactory occasion." Other papers had reported that the earlier Swedish Day was a great success. Reports after Swedish-American Day would also split along what seems to be party lines between the papers in some combination of political, commercial, and religious interests.

The Swedish Day

The program began 10:30 that morning in the Auditorium. Members of the Augustana Conservatory of Music provided music, beginning with Prof. A.D. Bodford playing a Mendelssohn sonata solo on the organ. The audience was greeted by Thaddeus S. Clarkson, the General Manager of the Exposition. Pastor P.J. Sward of Omaha, President of the Augustana Synod, provided a response in Swedish. Sward had been born in 1845 in Styra, (Östg.). In 1873 Sward was sent by the Missionary Society of Stockholm to establish a mission at New York Harbor for sailors.¹⁰ He remained there until 1878 when he was called by the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Red Wing, Minnesota. After a time of service in Nebraska, he became President of the Augustana Synod in 1891.

Soloist Edla Lund of the Augustana Conservatory sang "*Bland Fjellen*" by Helland, before the main speech by Professor Olof Olsson, President of Augustana College. Olsson

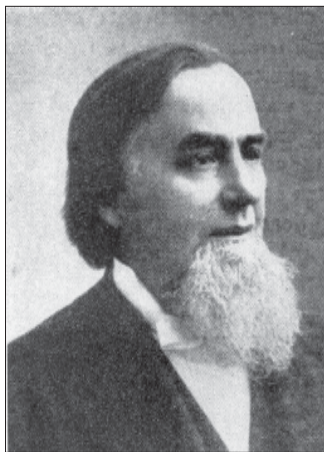
was born in 1841 in Karlskoga, (Värm.). In 1868 he immigrated to Lindsborg, Kansas, and helped found the Swedish Lutheran Church. He had been instrumental in calling Dr. Swensson to help found Bethany College. Olsson then moved to Rock Island, Illinois, to become a theology professor at Augustana College. Following Olsson, Edla Lund sang the folksong "Ack Värmeland du sköna."

An original poem was recited by Prof. Ludvig K. Holmes. Holmes helped found Bethesda Lutheran Church while a seminary student in New Haven, Connecticut. He was then a pastor in Grosvenor Dale, Connecticut, and at the time of the Exposition in 1898 was a pastor in Burlington, Iowa.¹¹ The program concluded with a violin solo by Prof. Franz Zedeler: "Mazurka de Concert" by Masin.

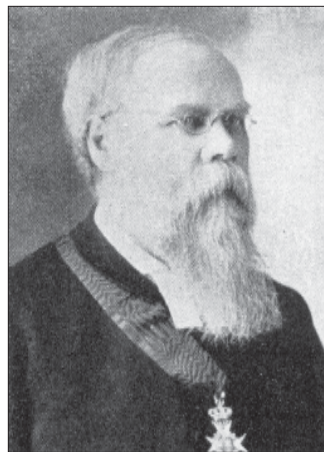
An afternoon program commenced at 3:30, with Prof. Bodford playing an allegro by Niels Gade and "Festmarch" by Gustaf Hagg. The Honorable C.J.A. Ericson,¹² Republican State Senator from Boone, Iowa, spoke. Ericson came to America in 1852 from Södra Vi, (Smål.). He was followed by a Zedeler violin solo of "La Melancolia" by Francois Prume. Professor and librarian J.S. Carlson of Gustavus Adolphus gave a speech, and the program concluded with two more musical pieces. Mrs. Lund sang "Irmelin Rose" by Wilhelm Petersen-Berger, and Prof. Bodford finished with an organ solo of "Fanta-



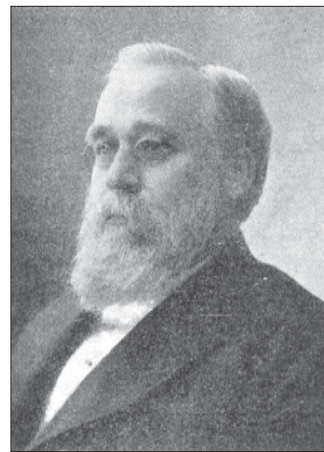
Carl Swenson, Lindsborg, Kansas.



Olof Olsson, Rock Island, Illinois.



P. J. Svärd, Omaha, Nebraska.



Johan A. Enander, Chicago.

sie on ‘O Sanctissima’” by Friedrich Lux. A special fireworks display concluded Swedish Day later that evening on the Exposition grounds.

The *World-Herald* touted that Swedish-Americans had turned out by the thousands. But the *Lincoln State Journal* and *Omaha Bee* reported that Swedish Day did not match the success of Swedish-American Day, speculating that people were waiting to attend the upcoming “Peace Jubilee Week” when President McKinley would attend. Whether caused by rivalry or a hope of boosting attendance, having two special days for the Swedes was unique in the five-month run of the Exposition.

Swedish-American Day and Swedish Day were not the only events involving Swedes in the Exposition. Shortly before Swedish-American Day in mid-June, the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant¹³ held its annual meeting in Omaha. The convention spanned several days and was well reported in the Omaha papers. Carl A. Bjork of Chicago was elected President of the Mission at the meeting. Bjork had come to Swede Bend, Iowa, and converted to Methodism. He was an organizer of the Covenant Church in 1885 and served as President until 1910. Many such conventions had been encouraged to come to Omaha near or during the Exposition, to boost attendance at the Exposition and the local economy. Another such group was the Swedish Epworth League, the youth order for the Swedish Methodist Church. The last Swedish-American touch to the Exposition came on October 26 as part of Tri-City Day.¹⁴ The Svea Quartet from Moline provided the music before speeches by Mayor Baker of Davenport and Mayor Medill of Rock Island. What they sang was not noted.

The success of the Swedish immigrants to America – especially in the farming areas of the Midwest – was highlighted and celebrated by the Exposition. “It was fitting that a day should be set apart for this people in order that the world might see and know the possibilities in this

land of the free.”¹⁵ Far from the shores of Sweden, on the shores of the Missouri River, thousands of Swedish-Americans came together on two separate days. Grounded in religion, they celebrated in song, speech, and verse their heritage and their new home.

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Endnotes

¹ Haynes, James B., *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (St. Louis, Woodward and Tiernan Printing Co., 1910) at p. 382.

² The precursor to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

³ The German composer Humperdinck (1854-1921), not the British pop singer of the 1960’s who took the same stage name.

⁴ Later to become a Democrat. Democratic U.S. Representative from Nebraska’s Second District.

⁵ President of T.G. Northwall Co., a wholesaler of agricultural implements and automobiles.

⁶ Employed by the Guarantee Fund Life Association.

⁷ State agent for the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company.

⁸ Pastor Hultman had made concert tours in the early 1890’s. On one such tour with a stop in Omaha, he decided he liked the city so much he would stay. By the time of the Exposition in 1898, Hultman lived in the Chicago area.

⁹ Haynes, p. 382.

¹⁰ Such a mission would parallel the Swedish Methodist “Bethel Ship” mission, under Olof Hedstrom. For further reading on the mission, read *The Hedstroms and the Bethel Ship Saga: Methodist Influence on Swedish Religious Life*, by Henry Whyman.

¹¹ Prof. Holmes would die in 1910 as Pastor at Augustana Lutheran Church in Evanston, Illinois.

¹² The football stadium at Augustana College in Rock Island is named for Ericson. He donated \$12,800 in 1898 with a challenge that it be matched. The resulting funds were used to purchase the property where the stadium and track were built.

¹³ This denomination established North Park University, North Park Theological Seminary, and Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago.

¹⁴ Then the term for Davenport, Iowa, and Moline and Rock Island, Illinois. Now commonly referred to as the Quad-Cities, including the town of Bettendorf, Iowa.

¹⁵ Haynes, p. 382.

The author is
Bruce R. Gerhardt
12822 Eagle Run Drive
Omaha, NE 68164.
E-mail:
<Bruce.Gerhardt@hdrinc.com>