

# Swedish Minnesota – A Unique Confluence

By Karen R. Nelson, American Swedish Institute

Many Minnesotans proudly claim Swedish heritage, and Swedes find Minnesota to be quite characteristically Swedish, in a rough translation of *Svenskbygderna*.

Minnesota and Scandinavia have been intertwined since the mid-1800s immigration surge. As part of this month's *Swedish Press* focus on Minneapolis, the *de facto* capital of Scandinavian America, we asked a variety of people with strong Swedish/Minnesota connections for their opinions on what has become uniquely Swedish-Minnesotan. Responses ranged from choirs, cabins and sports, to crafts, food and immigration.

Roland Thorstensson, a native Swede, 45-year Minnesota resident and professor emeritus of Scandinavian Studies at Gustavus Adolphus, suggested that with the unique aspect of *Svenskbygderna*, Swedes visiting Minnesota find much evidence of "Swedishness," especially around the Chisago Lakes area, northwest of the Twin Cities. While many Swedes did settle there, it gained a mythical quality as the setting for Sweden's extremely popular novels by Vilhelm Moberg (1950s), the films based on them (1970s), and later the highly successful musical *Kristina in Duvemåla* (1990s) by Benny Anderson and Björn Ullvaeus of ABBA and Mamma Mia fame. Thus, the mix of fact and fiction strengthened the aura of connection. Travelers and residents alike encounter signs in Swedish, the Swedish flag and names of Swedish sister cities.



Midsummer celebrations at ASI. Photo © ASI

## Founded by Immigrants

If you wonder why Scandinavian knowledge and cultural traditions remain so vital in Minnesota today, look no further than the many organizations that were founded by Nordic immigrants.

Educational and cultural institutions see the Nordic influence as dynamic and ever-changing and want their programming to reflect that, observed Thorstensson. Concordia College and its language villages, Gustavus Adolphus, the University of Minnesota and Saint Olaf College, for example, all have Scandinavian study opportunities. The American Swedish Institute (ASI) offers workshops, language and genealogy classes, exhibitions, festivals and more. Various Nordic churches, clubs and organizations including Gammelgården and Nisswa Stämman host traditional celebrations like *Midsommar* and Lucia.

While not founded by immigrants, the Vikings, Minnesota's professional football team, is the most obvious example of a uniquely Nordic-Minnesotan icon. With a new billion dollar stadium set to host the 2018 Super Bowl game, the name and symbols are clearly inspired by Scandinavia, yet the team is irrevocably Minnesotan.



Henrik Williams from Uppsala University advised on the authenticity of Vikings symbols depicted in the Minnesota Vikings logo.

## Food and Family Traditions

Literally 'taking the cake' of Swedish-Minnesota icons, are food and holiday rituals that have helped to generate the longest-lasting cultural links (and strongest aromas). Swedish meatballs, lutefisk, lefse, pepparkakor and glögg are staples of many Midwestern holiday tables. Ironically, these food traditions may have memorialized immigrant food items from a lost moment in time. According to acclaimed Swedish Chef Magnus Nilsson, who visited ASI in 2016 along with his Nordic and photographs

Sweden would opt for the reconstituted, lye-treated lutefisk when you could easily have a nice fresh piece of cod? Yet, lutefisk lives on in Minnesota.

Notable too, is the proliferation of top-notch Minnesota restaurants focused on modern Nordic cuisine. Among these are Upton 43, named 2016 Restaurant of the Year by the Star Tribune, the award-winning FIKA Café at ASI, and Bachelor Farmer, whose Chef Paul Bergland earned a 2016 James Beard Award. Related, Ingebretsen's market in Minneapolis, has been the go-to place since 1921 for herring, lingonberries, blood sausage and all things Scandinavian with lines out the door during the holidays.



Photo: Susanne Walström/image-bank.sweden.se

## Craft, Art and Culture

Similar to the food revival, the tradition of *slöjd* or handcraft revered in Swedish culture is very much in vogue now, as evidenced by participation in workshops at places including North House Folk School in Grand Marais and ASI.

Chelsea Bowen, ASI's Educational Programs Coordinator, says, "We see a pronounced interest by makers and art lovers in the traditional connection between the natural world and creative expression. *Slöjd* has shifted from a utilitarian necessity to an art form. Eating lunch with a spoon that you hand carved from fresh cut birch is a win-win." What's more, some crafts like woodworking and blacksmithing that have been, and in many cases still are, considered men's territory are increasingly mastered by women, both in Sweden and Minnesota. Women's Woodshop, now open in Minneapolis, empowers women through the art of woodcraft.

Bruce Karstadt, President/CEO of ASI, notes other cultural trends that have branched out from Swedish roots. According to *Sveriges Körförbund* (the Swedish choir union), Sweden has the largest number of choirs per capita in the world, strong choral traditions and a deep-seated culture of singing folk songs. Minnesota shares this choral affinity with its abundance of professional, amateur and church choirs.

"Cabin Culture" – or the *sommarstuga*, adds Karstadt, is another shared institution. There are nearly 600,000 summer houses in Sweden. Minnesotans, with their 10,000 lakes, long-ago discovered the attraction of a Swedish-like summer cottage, regularly going 'Up north to the cabin.'

Swedes and Minnesotans also possess a love of nature and a desire to share the landscape with others – hence Sweden's *Allemansrätt* – the right of people to wander freely in the countryside. Minnesotans, likewise, have a statewide park system and voted years ago to establish a Legacy fund to protect the wilderness.

## The Future

Some educators in the Twin Cities say they are witnessing something remarkable: the birth of a new and vibrant Scandinavian-American scene from the old immigrant foundation. Interest in genealogy is fed by increased access to digital records and



Turnblad Mansion. Photo © ASI

there is a growing interest in travel, learning languages, Nordic music (My Bubba and First Aid Kit), crime novels, films and TV series like *Bron/Broen*, and shopping at IKEA, H&M and Fjällräven. Younger people are embracing Nordic ideas regarding sustainability, gender issues, multiculturalism and fashion. The internet and social media easily feed these flames.

Sweden and Minnesota have both welcomed large populations of Somali and other immigrants that continue to shape their futures. Swedish-American journalist Klas Bergman, author of *Scandinavians in the State House: How Nordic Immigrants Shaped Minnesota Politics*, commented that this state's identity is now its own. "We should not say that Minnesota is the new Scandinavia. It has got its own strong political tradition and culture. It's that spirit – and not the national origin of the people who articulate it – that will give Minnesota a 21st-century advantage. In this century, societies that can incorporate immigrants successfully will have a competitive edge. They'll benefit from fresh ideas, entrepreneurial energy and multicultural savvy in a global economy."

Or, put another way, it's part of being uniquely Minnesotan.

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