



50 years!

50 years!



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Dear members and friends,

Founded 50 years ago in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood, the Swedish American Museum began in a small storefront, created by Kurt Mathiasson and passionate community members dedicated to preserving and sharing Swedish heritage. As interest and support grew, the Museum moved to its longtime home in the historic Lind Hardware building at 5211 N Clark St., where it established itself as a cultural cornerstone of the neighborhood.

Kurt's dream of having a Swedish American Museum where Swedes and Swedish-American could connect to their heritage soon became an Andersonville institution. Volunteers helped the Museum become established and in 1986 there was a need to start hiring staff and Kerstin Lane was hired as a part-time Executive Director. She had already been involved with the Museum as a volunteer and knew everyone involved. Other staff positions were slowly added and as the Museum made 5211 N Clark St. its home it added more activities and events. Kerstin Lane eventually started working full time and during her 20 years with the Museum she added positions for Education, Store, Programs and Operations to manage the increase of activities that the Museum was offering. In 2001, the Children's Museum of Immigration opened, offering an engaging, hands-on experience that help young visitors explore the immigrant journey and better understand the stories of those who built the community.

Under Kerstin's leadership, the Museum became one of the well-established museums in Chicago and when the Chicago Cultural Alliance was formed in 2006 her involvement was crucial to the organization. Kerstin has continued to be involved with the Museum, the Alliance and the not-for-profit network since she left her role as Executive Director in June 2006.

My personal connection to the Museum started shortly after moving to Chicago in 1982. I looked for Swedish things and found Andersonville. In those early days, at the first location of the Museum, I remember sitting on trunks as chairs during meetings. I became more active in the 1990s and volunteered for both the building of the "Dream of America" exhibit and was part of the Exhibit Committee from 2000 as we started developing the Children's Museum and then joined the Board of Directors in 2003. The next phase started in June 2006 when Kerstin Lane retired and I was hired as the Museum's second Executive Director.

Mission Statement

Through its arts and educational programs and its permanent collection, the Swedish American Museum interprets the immigrant experience for children and adults and promotes an appreciation of contemporary Swedish-American culture.

Flaggan

is published by the Swedish American Museum, 5211 N Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640. Phone 773.728.8111
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The Museum has continued to evolve and expand in meaningful ways - strengthening its connection to our community, improving the visitor experience and ensuring our long-term stability. The overall focus is sharing Swedish and Scandinavian design, crafts, traditions and food with visitors. Our visitors can get both traditional and newly designed items from Kerstin Andersson Museum Store and the taste of Sweden is offered by Mormors Café.

The Museum's growth has been guided by strategic opportunities and sometimes "leaps of faith." In 2013, when Nelson Funeral Home offered their parking lot, the Museum was able to purchase it - an important milestone that provided long-term access, convenience and sustainability for visitors and operations. As beloved neighborhood institutions such as Wikstrom's Deli and Erickson's Delicatessen closed, the Museum helped strengthen Andersonville's connection to Swedish food traditions and cultural experiences - keeping that heritage visible and accessible for new generations.

Another iconic moment came with the neighborhood's well-known Swedish water tower. After its removal in 2014, the Museum worked to preserve its presence and meaning, replacing it in 2017 with a new empty structure that continues to serve as a recognizable symbol and a point of pride for the community. That same year, the Museum expanded again with the acquisition of a second building, creating a new retail space and an inviting courtyard. Most recently, in 2024, the opening of Mormors Café added warmth and hospitality to the Museum experience, offering home baked items that invite guests to linger, gather, and connect. Another milestone in 2024 was the opening of "We Are America" our core immigration exhibit. The first immigration exhibit "Dream of America" had been in place for over 20 years and it was time to re-imagine and update the layout. The process took about 10 years but the end result has been well received and an important part of the Museum's story telling about immigration.

Today, the Swedish American Museum has a larger footprint and a dedicated parking lot, reflecting steady and thoughtful growth made possible by the generosity of its members, donors, and volunteers - and by the dedicated staff who have worked at the Museum over the years to bring its mission to life every day. The Museum has grown alongside Andersonville, a neighborhood that continues to celebrate and reconnect with its Swedish roots through beloved annual traditions such as Midsommarfest, Valborg, and Lucia celebration. Together, these milestones reflect 50 years of community, culture, and shared heritage - and a strong foundation for the Museum's future.

Thank you for being part of Our Journey!



Karin Moen Abercrombie
Executive Director



Curators Corner

By Sarah Hawkinson

Celebrating 50 Years of Heritage at the Swedish American Museum

Since 1976, the Swedish American Museum has been a cultural anchor for generations of Swedish Americans and a welcoming space for all people to explore the immigrant experience, Nordic traditions, and the evolving story of Swedish contributions to American life. From humble beginnings in a small storefront to becoming a community cornerstone, the Museum has grown and thrived over the past five decades.

So how did we get here? During the mid-to-late 19th century, Swedish immigrants were flocking to Chicago in search of work and opportunity. Initially settling north of the Chicago River on the Near North Side in what became known as Swede Town, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 prompted many Swedish immigrants to migrate further north, drawn by affordable land and the chance to rebuild their structures with wood. This was in light of post-fire legislation that had been passed requiring buildings to be constructed using fireproof materials within city limits – a prohibitively-costly undertaking for many. Edgewater (and the broader Lakeview Township) would not be annexed by the City of Chicago until 1889. By the early 20th century, Andersonville had grown into a distinctly Swedish American neighborhood, home to Swedish language newspapers, Lutheran churches, social halls, bakeries, tailor shops, and more. Clark Street became the neighborhood’s cultural and commercial spine, where Swedish was often spoken in storefronts and community members nurtured Swedish traditions, new and old.

By the 1950s and 1960s, change was in the air. Post-war suburbanization and generational shifts led to many Swedish families moving out of the city. As new communities moved into the neighborhood, Andersonville began to diversify and grow into the dynamic and inclusive community that we know today. In response to this, a wave of cultural pride swept through Chicago’s Swedish American network. Community leaders came together with a vision: to create a space that would preserve, interpret, and celebrate Swedish heritage in Chicago for present and future generations.



Construction work on the original Museum log cabin façade at 5248 North Clark Street

In 1976, amid the national celebration of America's Bicentennial, the Swedish American Museum was founded. This was the vision of Swedish-born Chicagoan Kurt Mathiasson, a passionate advocate for cultural preservation who wanted to create a space that honored the contributions of Swedish Americans while connecting future generations to their cultural roots. Selma Jacobson, Sven Flodstrom, and others were also active developers in the Museum's earliest days. With support from the local community and dignitaries on both sides of the Atlantic, the Museum opened its doors in a modest storefront log cabin at 5248 North Clark Street (where Cheetah Gym is now) in which family histories were collected. King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden visited the Museum during a state trip and officially opened the Museum in its original location, a moment that symbolized the strong bond between Sweden and the Swedish American community.

In 1987, the Museum moved to its current location at 5211 North Clark Street (which had formerly housed the Lind Hardware store, a hub for Swedish builders and tradespeople). This shift was made in the interest of expanding the Museum space for programming and exhibits. In 1988, the King and Queen of Sweden returned to attend the dedication of the new Swedish American Museum Center. This was done in tandem with the 350th anniversary of the founding of the New Sweden colony in America. Originally, the Museum used only the building's two lower levels. The main floor housed a gallery for meetings and exhibits, as well as a store stocked with items from and about Sweden. The second floor was devoted to the permanent exhibit, Dream of America: Swedish Immigration to Chicago, and staff offices.

Since the move to 5211, the Museum has continued to expand and grow its contributions, including the opening of The Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration in 2001, the continuation of popular seasonal celebrations such as Midsommarfest and Lucia, the expansion of genealogical research assistance offerings, the updating of the Museum's core exhibit, the opening of Mormors Café, and so much more. To learn more about the Museum's history over the past 50 years, we invite you to enjoy an upcoming Main Gallery exhibit on the topic later this year, opening on August 14!

The Swedish American Museum's mission continues to evolve, guided by the same spirit that brought Swedes to American shores. In the years ahead, we are excited to continue growing and serving the community as a gathering place and dynamic space for dialogue, where every person can explore their identity, heritage, and place in a changing world.

*The second
(and current)
home of the
Swedish
American
Museum at
5211 North
Clark Street.*



Museum Store

By Lydia Taylor

In the early days of the Museum, there was no gift shop. It was when the Museum moved to its current location on Clark Street in 1987, that a space was dedicated for the store. It officially opened for business two years later, in 1989.

In 2009, the Museum underwent major renovations throughout the building. It was at this time that the gift shop was named the Kerstin Andersson Museum Store. The entrance was painted blue, and the name was mounted above. Kerstin Andersson was the first volunteer to run the Store, and was pivotal to its early success. Because of her dedication, she was honored with the naming of the shop she helped bring to maturity.



MUSEUM STORE

The Museum Store remained in its space in 5211 Clark for many years, where it both flourished and weathered difficult times. 2018 and 2019 saw the introduction of the glass front fridge and freezer, respectively. These additions allowed for a vast increase in traditional Swedish food offerings – products that to this day remain bestsellers. Adapting to unprecedented situations, such as the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020, the Store has demonstrated flexibility and perseverance. During this difficult time, much of the selling moved online, and curbside pickup was introduced.



In 2017, the 5217 building was purchased. Though initially the first floor was used to host Tantalizing Treasure sales, it eventually became the new home of the Museum Store. In 2021, the Store temporarily occupied two storefronts during the holiday season, and in 2023, officially moved into 5217 for good, leaving the space in 5211 to be taken over by Mormors Café.



Over the years, the Store has participated in a variety of pop-up events outside of the Museum. During the summer, the Store sets up a booth at a number of festivals throughout the state, such as Rockford Midsommarfest and Scandinavian Day in Vasa Park. In 2012, the Museum Store debuted a stall at Christkindlmarkt in Daley Plaza, and returned again in 2013. The Store served as a vendor at Tall Ships Chicago in 2016, selling Viking themed items in honor of the Norwegian Viking Ship Draken Harald Hårfagre. In the fall of 2022, Nordic House launched on Michigan Ave. While the pop-up was a cross-cultural collaboration, celebrating the entire Nordic region, the retail aspect was an extension of the Museum Store – largely drawn from the usual stock with the addition of new items to fit the theme.



The Museum Store has grown into the new location in 5217 these last couple of years, and it continues to evolve. Projects both large and small are ongoing and upcoming, as to best make use of the space in both functionality and appearance. As celebrations commence for the Museum's 50-year anniversary, we remain grateful for those who have supported this institution through the Kerstin Andersson Museum Store – our members, staff, volunteers, and customers. Though the Store itself is not turning 50 this year, it has still seen decades of change and growth, and has established itself as a vital part of our community here. Thank you to all who have had a hand in our success over the years. Here is to old friends and new faces as we look forward to the future.

The Founding of Mormors Café

By Jeanette Saari Norlock

When the Swedish American Museum Café opened its doors, it felt less like the launch of something new and more like the natural evolution of the Museum's connection to the community. The idea was sparked by two major shifts in Andersonville: the Museum's purchase of the building next door and the closing of Andersonville's beloved Swedish Bakery. Together, they created both the space and the need for a new gathering place rooted in Swedish tradition. A major donor made sure that the dream of a Café could become a reality. What follows is the story of how the café came to life.

The name Mormors Café, Swedish for Grandma's Café, captures the heart of what the Museum wanted this space to represent. We started by calling it Swedish American Museum's Café but it didn't feel right. We engaged the community and received many different suggestions. The name that felt right was Mormors Café. Rather than positioning itself as an artisan bakery with elaborate pastries and high-concept presentations, Mormors Café embraces the feeling of stepping into a grandmother's kitchen.

The baked goods are made in small batches at the Museum, with real ingredients and flavors people instantly recognize. Everything looks and tastes homemade - because it is. The intention is comfort, warmth, and familiarity. Visitors should feel the same ease they might have felt at their own grandmother's table, where the coffee was always hot, the pastries were made with care, and the atmosphere invited you to linger.

Let's go back to the early days of the project. Board member, architect, designer, and longtime Museum member John Kolb designed the Café using his own experience and impressions from Sweden and welcomed input from the Facilities Committee, Board of Directors and Executive Director. John has been a regular visitor for years, serve on the board and is deeply invested in the Museum's future. As an architect and interior designer, he knew he could help shape the Café in a way that honored Swedish design and supported the Museum's mission. "It was a perfect blend of my professional skills and my love for this place. I wanted the Café to feel like it was always meant to be part of the Museum. And that the visitor get a sense of Swedish culture - through the food, the design, and the atmosphere."

As with many projects the Museum has embarked on it took a long time to get the permit but the actual construction went pretty well. It was exciting and a great surprise to discover that we could restore the existing wood floors. When the walls were painted and we were ready to open John asked if there was anything in the permanent collection that could be used and John's said "finding beautiful artwork in the basement archives, that was a highlight."

The time frame of getting the Café ready also had to do with the pandemic. During this time we offered cinnamon rolls for pre-order every Friday and sometimes added other special baked items. Customers could add Store items to the pickup of baked goods. When we opened for regular business we had Pop-up Cafés to continue the connection to baked goods in anticipation of the permanent Café.

The pop-up cafés served as a testing ground, a gathering place, and a reminder of how deeply Swedish baked goods were missed in the neighborhood. Regular volunteers Kevin Palmer and Frank Schneider were central to those early efforts. With food-handling certificates from Museum breakfast events and the flexibility to volunteer during the week, stepping in felt natural. As they put it, "When the pop-ups started, it just made sense to jump in. And honestly, where else would we want to be?"



What stood out most to them was the connection with visitors. “The best part was interacting with customers,” they recalled. Many guests were new to the Museum, and Kevin and Frank enjoyed sharing why the space mattered and encouraging people to return or become members. Seeing familiar faces from the Swedish community added another layer of meaning, turning each pop-up into a small reunion as much as a café experience.

Through these events, it became clear that a permanent café was not just an idea, but an inevitability. “Long before the Café opened, we saw how much interest there was in Swedish coffee and baked goods,” they said. The pop-ups offered a glimpse of what Mormors Café could become and continue to serve, even today, as “a unique doorway into the Museum.”

There were challenges along the way, and those challenges helped shape the Café’s future. Semla Day, in particular, became a turning point. “It used to be chaotic,” Kevin and Frank admitted, with pre-orders and walk-ins converging in one space. Over time, the process became more streamlined, with clearer flow and separate areas, lessons that directly influenced how the permanent Café operates. Several baked items that debuted during those early pop-ups have since found a home on the Café menu, a full-circle moment that reflects how organically the Café evolved.

For Kevin and Frank, being part of those early stages was especially rewarding. They enjoyed “watching how naturally the idea evolved” for Karin and the staff, noting that there was a clear neighborhood need for Swedish baked goods and, finally, the space to meet it. Most of all, they valued the atmosphere that emerged. “It’s wonderful seeing people come in to explore their Swedish roots,” they said. “It truly feels like a community gathering place.”

In the end, Mormors Café has become far more than a place to grab a cup of coffee. It is a continuation of a neighborhood tradition, a tribute to Swedish heritage, and a testament to community collaboration. John’s vision and design, paired with the energy and insight of volunteers like Kevin and Frank, helped shape a space that feels both new and deeply familiar.

In many ways, the Café is proof that dreams really do come true. For years, the idea lived quietly in the minds of Karin and many others. A hope and a wish, a “what if” held close to the heart. Today, that dream stands fully realized in the warmth of Mormors Café, just as imagined.

As the Swedish American Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, it feels especially meaningful to reflect on how the Café began. This milestone year will be filled with birthday moments and gatherings. What better way to celebrate than with fika, the Swedish tradition of enjoying coffee with a small bite, or kafferep, Sweden’s version of afternoon tea. These rituals of togetherness embody exactly what Mormors Café was created to offer: comfort, connection, and a taste of home.

Mormors Café now stands as a place where stories, flavors and community come together - and where the Museum’s next fifty years can begin, with warmth and a cup of coffee.



Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration

By Sanna Nyström

A Journey Through Time: The Children's Museum Celebrating 25 Years

Long before children stepped aboard a steamship on the third floor of the Swedish American Museum, there was a simple but powerful idea taking shape: history should be felt, not just read. As the Museum grew in its early decades, its mission was to preserve and share the Swedish American immigrant experience with people of all ages. The Museum wanted to include the next generation to experience the immigrant story for themselves by growing its exhibits and programs to engage visitors in deeper, more interactive ways.

In June, 2001, the Children's Museum of Immigration opened its doors on the third floor of the Swedish American Museum. The goal was to create a space dedicated entirely to children. The goal was not to simplify history, but to translate it into something tangible and alive. It was the first children's museum of its kind in the country focused specifically on the immigration experience, inviting children and families to explore history through play and interactive storytelling.

This vision ultimately became what is now the Brunk Children's Museum of immigration. Designed as a fully immersive journey, the exhibit guides children through the 19th century immigration experience, from a Swedish farmhouse, to the anticipation of departure, to a steamship crossing the Atlantic, and finally to a log cabin in Minnesota. Each space reflects the uncertainty, hope, and resilience that defined the immigrant experience, not only for Swedes, but for countless families who helped shape the United States during a time of immense change.

Authenticity was central to the Children's Museum from the beginning. Many of the objects on display are genuine artifacts that would have been familiar to Swedish immigrants in the 1800s, grounding imaginative play in real history. By placing these items into interactive settings, the exhibit allows children to learn not by observing from a distance, but by stepping directly into the story.



The Brunk family at the Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration



The opening of the Children’s Museum marked an important milestone for the Swedish American Museum. In April 1988, King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden visited Chicago to formally inaugurate the Swedish American Museum, and with the opening of the Children’s Museum in 2001, Queen Silvia of Sweden returned for a visit.

Over the years, the Children’s Museum has continued to grow. New elements, such as the famous Viking ship and the space dedicated to Swedish-American astronaut Buzz Aldrin and the Apollo 11 moon landing, connect Sweden’s past to its global influence and future achievements. Together, these spaces remind visitors that history is not static – it is a continuum shaped by exploration, courage, and innovation.

As the Swedish American Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, the Brunk Children’s Museum of Immigration stands as a lasting expression of the Museum’s mission. It is a place where stories are passed hand to hand, generation to generation, ensuring that the immigrant journey is not only remembered, but understood. Through curiosity, movement, and play, the Children’s Museum continues to invite children to ask the key question: what would it have been like to begin again?



Artist Lars Gillis from Gothenburg, Sweden painting the walls of the new Children’s Museum

Our History through the Eyes of our Volunteers

By Layne Borden

Volunteers are the backbone of any cultural institution, and the Swedish American Museum is no exception. Joining for a variety of reasons, our volunteers have always been the heart of what we do. In the early days of the Museum, the street was lined with Swedish bakeries, butchers, restaurants, and small family-run stores.

A lot of people's connection to this neighborhood was the stores, they're all gone now. The Museum makes it Swedish again. In those days, volunteering at the Museum was a whole community effort. If you lived in the neighborhood, you pitched in to help. Ruth Uddenberg recalled having to run across the street to pick up the Museum's key from SVEA Restaurant on weekends. The restaurant was previously owned by Kurt Mathiasson, one of our founders. The Museum was founded by Swedes from the neighborhood and they did their part to make it their own.

“When I first started, there were a lot of older Swedish women volunteers. Very strong, Swedish characters that were comforting and warm to be with. It supplemented the feeling that I got from being with my own family. While I'm probably one of those people now, I learned a lot from the Swedes that came before me.”
– Linda Flentye

Many of the Museum's volunteers came from Ebenezer Lutheran Church just a few blocks up Foster, or from the different Swedish organizations from around the city and suburbs. Our admissions desk and exhibits, then later our store and Children's Museum, were born as a labor of love, many people coming in from Swedish clubs and shouldering the hours of the growing organization.

“I came here for something and thought that volunteering might be fun.”
– Jim Haglund

As time went on and the neighborhood's demographics changed, the Museum's volunteer base grew from being those already in Chicago's Swedish community into those who would like to get connected with their Swedish roots.

“My first contact with the Museum was in 1996, after moving to Chicago from Germany. Shortly thereafter I learned I had been adopted in Sweden, and would be able to meet my birth mother. Fortunately for me, the Museum offered Swedish conversation classes, which helped me prepare for that momentous meeting in Malmö. From then on, I was a regular at the Museum, It put me back in touch with my roots and early years in Sweden.”
– Else-Britt DeLong

“I wanted to become more involved with getting to know my heritage. I grew up Swedish but I didn't have as many of those people around me anymore. I wanted to be involved in something that was culturally enriching.”
– Linda Flentye

We also welcomed many volunteers who had no prior connection to Swedish culture, many of whom lived in the neighborhood and felt at home at the Museum. The thing that has remained consistent through the years is how the Museum has made those volunteers feel.

“The other day someone asked me, “Well are you going to be home or are you going to the Museum?” and I said, “Well I'm going to be home at the Museum.” I didn't mean to say that at the time, but it's like a second home. It's a place I'm comfortable.”
– Judith Alida Bianchi

Volunteers recalled that when they had previously volunteered at the Museum, there wasn't much effort to connect volunteers with each other. In the early days, many volunteers knew members of the community from volunteering together, attending our normal events, or from being involved with other Swedish organizations.

“In the 20 plus years since I've been a volunteer, I feel that the Museum has not only reached out to more volunteers, but also to a wider net of visitors. Volunteering at Museum events or in the store has put me in contact with a larger Swedish community, for which I am grateful.”

– Else-Britt DeLong

As the volunteer base at the Museum has expanded, we make sure that we continue to feel like a community through an increase of volunteer specific events like Volunteer Fika.

“I love the other volunteers, and am able to keep up with people who I wouldn't see other places.”

– Judith Alida Bianchi

Our volunteers have been at the forefront of a lot of change at the Museum, from a change in buildings, to the creation of a store and its later expansion, the opening of Mormors Café and the development of the Children's Museum.

“In my time at the Museum there have been far more activities and far more emphasis of the upbringing of the next generation through the Children's Museum and educational programs.”

– Linda Flentye

We're honored to have such amazing people to assist us with our mission of celebrating Swedish culture, customs and traditions. We hope to continue the growth of the Museum and the connections our volunteers feel for both our community and each other.



The Museum founder, Kurt Mathiasson, performing at Andersonville Midsommarfest.



Svea Restaurant on Clark Street across from the Museum. One of the few Swedish businesses still in Andersonville today.

Genealogy Center in New Space

By Julie Benson

For more than 30 years, the Museum's genealogy group has served members by assisting with family research, providing translation services, and presenting monthly programs that help preserve and share Swedish-American heritage.

This year, as we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Swedish American Museum, we are especially thrilled to host our group tour, "Swedish Odyssey," a journey honoring our ancestors and expanding our understanding of the immigrant experience. Everyone is welcome—and warmly encouraged—to join us. See details online.

Looking ahead to 2026, we are proud to introduce the Swedish American Museum's new Swedish American Genealogy Center, a milestone development in our commitment to connecting visitors with their roots. The expanded center will feature a private research office, connected to a comprehensive resource library, and the Museum's newly constructed meeting and presentation space. The dedicated workspace for learning about our homeland and family immigration has more than doubled in size, and our Swedish researchers remain among the most experienced and respected in the country. We are grateful for the exceptional expertise of our research team. Kathy Meade, the North American Representative for ArkivDigital AD AB, brings decades of specialized knowledge in Swedish historical records. Having lived in both Sweden and Norway, Kathy is fluent in the languages and has spent more than 25 years helping individuals navigate Swedish genealogy. She is widely admired for making complex research not only simpler, but exciting.

We are equally fortunate to work with Dan Hubbard, whose professional path began in particle physics at CERN in Switzerland and later at Chicago's Fermilab. For over a decade, Dan has devoted himself fully to genealogy. Now based in Sweden's renowned university town of Lund, Dan brings over 30 years of family-history expertise. "I started in genealogy at the age of 11," he shares. "I never looked back."

In addition to Kathy and Dan, the Swedish American Genealogy Center is strengthened by a highly experienced team of Swedish American genealogists dedicated to assisting Museum members: Karin Moen Abercrombie, Vereen Nordstrom, Shirley Koenig, Joy Thorbjornson Coates, Marie Thourson Jones, Sue Jackson, Lori Johnson, Mindy Pierce, Sue Nordstrom, and Julie Anne Benson.

We warmly invite you, your friends, and your family to join the Swedish American Genealogical Society and to be part of our 2026 Swedish Odyssey. Membership offers unlimited opportunities to explore your heritage, including:

- Personalized genealogy research with experienced professionals
- Informative presentations on Swedish records and archives
- Translation services for documents and letters
- Gathering to meet fellow genealogists "Exploring Your Swedish Roots"

Please join us for a special Day of "Exploring Your Swedish Roots" from 10 a.m.–4 p.m. on Saturday, May 23, 2026, and be among the first to experience our expanded Swedish American Genealogy Center, opening in 2026. Thank you for your continued support. We look forward to assisting you in every way as you discover and celebrate your Swedish heritage. Call for appointments at 773-728-8111!

Genealogy at the Museum

Past, Present and Future

By Vereen Nordstrom

In the beginning, the Swedish American Museum was housed in a one-room log cabin storefront on Clark Street. It housed Swedish furniture and artifacts. But, at that time, there was no thought about genealogy. Once the Museum moved to larger quarters, members Edith Johnson and Maud Svendahl provided genealogy information once or twice a year. A 26-page booklet was the main source of information. Genealogy at the Museum has come a long way since then.

Museum member Marilyn Jeglum established a more formalized genealogical program in 1994 and the Nordic Family Research Center (original name) was born. Monthly topics such as beginning research, military records, and Scandinavian church records were given and one-to-one research help was provided weekly.

In 2005, nine founding members and three members of the NFRS established the Advisory Board and in 2015 the name changed to the Swedish American Genealogical Society (SAGS) to more appropriately reflect our Swedish focus.

The Society continued to provide interesting and thought-provoking monthly sessions, even during COVID. Zoom was an added feature and continues to this day. This format enabled speakers to be from any location, from Minnesota to Sweden, and attendees to participate from the north, south, east, and west. Two board members, Dan Hubbard and Kathy Meade, have been mainstay presenters discussing topics such as “Writing Your Family History” and “What’s New in ArkivDigital?” The Society wouldn’t have survived without them. Other professional genealogists discussed topics such as “Find the Unknown Father” and “Genealogy and Artificial Intelligence.”

Professional genealogists were not the only conduit of information. Movies such as “The American Dream” and books such as “The Moberg Saga” provided insight into the immigrant experience. Tours were made to The Family History Center in Wilmette and Bishop Hill.

We look to the past but also to the present and future. Visiting Sweden and searching records

are two ways to obtain information about your ancestors. And a reunion can be planned to meet your current relatives. A local trip to discover where your relatives lived can provide a glimpse of their life in America. And go forward in time via various software programs to find new relatives.

Daylong research events allowed participants to meet one-on-one with local and Swedish genealogists. Many smiling faces were observed as brick walls were broken. One of the most touching stories is attributed to researcher Shirley Koelling, who put an adopted Illinois man in touch with his biological mother, still living in Sweden. Long, excited conversations occurred with the thankful participants happily discovering their new family. This is the ultimate joy of research.

Originally, information about one’s ancestors came from family remembrances, the family Bible, and some written notes about births, deaths, ships, and residences. An early book, “Cradled In Sweden”, provided information about other resources but, without a ticket to Sweden, there was no easy way to obtain the records. As genealogy became more popular, dozens of books were published providing step-by-step directions. Local archives and microfilm or microfiche records were replaced by companies such as ArkivDigital, Sweden’s extensive online archive of digitized original records. How wonderful to actually see the record, view the ship, and obtain information first hand. Companies such as Ancestry provide access to records and give you a DNA profile with names of other possible relatives. Genealogy and the Center have come a long way!

One can still rely on the family Bible but firsthand knowledge offers a personal touch. The Genealogy Center is still available to get you started, provide guidance when a “brick wall” is hit, and present monthly speakers. Doing genealogy is not as easy as one advertisement states, “Just type a name and it is all there.” Nope! It takes work, time, and help from professionals.

What’s ahead for the Swedish American Genealogical Society? The Society is part of the Museum’s past, present, and future. Presentations will continue and a new research center will open in the expanded building. Please join us to learn about your ancestors.

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Annual Meeting & Birthday Party

Save the date: Sunday, April 19, 2026

Join us for the Annual Meeting as well as a Birthday Celebration.

Plans are currently in the making for a 50th birthday party in connection to the annual meeting this April. Join us for a day of celebrations where we look back at the past fifty years and how far we have come. Celebrating our major milestones. We will also be looking forward to the different ways we can continue to grow and connect with a larger community.