

The Pillars of Swedish Heritage in Oregon —The Singing Societies

The background...

During the mid-19th century many Swedes suffering harsh economic times in their homeland, emigrated to the United States. As the Northern Pacific and Great Northern Railroads reached across the United States to Oregon in 1883, the number of Swedes in Oregon swelled. By 1910, Swedes were the second largest ethnic group in Oregon. In the 1920's the number of new immigrants tapered off with a change in U.S. immigration policy, but by then first and second generation Swedish Americans accounted for ca 125,000, as recorded by the US census.



Immigrants

The immigrants brought with them the very important Swedish tradition of “Allsång” (Unison Singing). “Allsång” originated from singing in churches, and at enjoyable occasions such as Walpurgis (Valborg), Midsummer, and “Kräftskiva” (Crayfish party). It was also very common at universities where many singing societies (choral singing groups) were established under the umbrella name of “Allmänna Sångern” (Public Singing Societies), established in the 1830s in university towns such as Uppsala. Their choral groups participated in, and won many international choral singing contests. You can say that the tradition “Allsång” (Public Unison Singing) was the foundation for the later establishment of Körsång (Choral singing).



Swedish School Songbook

Even in the middle school years the students were introduced to singing through music and singing classes, immigrants born in Sweden would remember “NU SKA VI SJUNGA” (Let Us Sing), the school song book used in Swedish schools for this purpose.

The Swedish Public Singing was a Swedish patriotic outbreak when Norway broke the union with Sweden on June 7, 1905. However, Swedish folk, stand up and adhere to the century old tradition of standing side by side and doing the same thing simultaneously....”åsså sjunger vi allihopa: lyssna på mig, uppå mig, uppå mig”...We were egged on in 1963 by Egon Kärrman, the most notable Allsång leader at Skansen in Stockholm. He was a pain to many people with a more noble understanding of the Swedish phenomena, “Allsången”.

When it came to more organized choral singing groups, we had the world famous choir leader in Eric Ericsson who started his career as chief conductor of OD (Orphei Drängar) in the 1950s.

Some say part of the skill of Swedish choirs can be attributed to the Swedish language, which is said to have a singing quality. Speaking the language helps groom a clear, brilliant voice quality, sought after in a singer.

The stories...

Undoubtedly Swedish singing is the most important and most universally acknowledged contribution made by the Swedish immigrants to our modern cosmopolitan culture. Swedes are noted for their love of singing. Almost everyone sings in Sweden and songs not die from their lips on arrival in America. Rather, many become more interested than ever in the songs of the homeland.

A Swedish immigrant in Portland said:

“Those old songs mean more to us here in America, I think, than they do to those we left behind, because they do not miss those things for which we have longings. The songs of the homeland hold us Swedish-born Americans together; they are a tie to the old home over there. We never forget the old familiar things of childhood and our songs, especially the ones about homeland scenes

and customs, seem to help us over that nostalgic feeling we have at times. We prize these songs, and no one here objects. Our singing concerts and conventions are so dear to us, and yet so popular, because we always render good music”.

“ It is nonsense talk that Swedes are too shy to sing. They yearn to sing in big crowds. Only if someone step forward and clear the way...”

Egon Kärrman, 1963 (Allsång leader at Skansen in Stockholm)

Det svenska folket behöver samla sig, icke blott i tanke, vilja och gärning....utan äfven i känsla. Och ett af de äldste känslans uttrycksmedel är sången”.

Alice Tegner (Sjung svenska folk), 1906

So the singing tradition is strong, even today, among immigrants when they come to their new homeland America. This is maybe their source of yearning for establishment of Swedish singing choirs in America, including the state of Oregon.

Singing Communities...

When it comes to organized choral groups, the Swedes in Oregon have been much slower than their countrymen in the neighboring states of California and Washington.

There was an excellent male choir in Portland as early as 1889, called “Luren” (The Horn), but of its ten members only two—C. B. Borquist and Andrew Holmquist—were Swedish. All the others was Norwegians, “Luren” was dissolved on October 8, 1889.



The Swedish Song Club Columbia and leader C.E. Holt early 1900s

Swedish quartet songs were enjoyed by Portland audiences prior to 1890, but later C. E. Holt, an American-born Swede and enthusiastic lover of quartet songs, gathered Swedish singers, rehearsed, gathered more singers and by July 13, 1903, the Swedish Song Club Columbia (“Svenska Sångklubben Columbia) was organized. In addition to singing, the early chorus participated in various productions under the artistic direction of Edward Boyse.

C. E. Holt was its first leader and he led the group until 1908, when he was succeeded by C. B. Borquist. He remained in charge of Columbia until July 1910, when C. E. Holt returned as leader of the group. Columbia has performed in public many times, and this group received much praise for its excellent harmonies, strong vocal resources, and artistic modulation at the singing competitions during the expositions in Portland 1905, in San Francisco 1907, and in Seattle 1909.

The prominent efforts of Swedish Song Club Columbia members, Edward Boyse and C.A. Appelgren, helped organize the United Swedish Singers of the Pacific Coast (*Svenska Sångarförbundet på Stilla Havskusten*) on July 28 1905, in Portland at the Lewis & Clark Exposition. Eighty-seven singers from the four Pacific Coast charter choruses, Swedish Song Club Columbia, Swedish Singing Society of San Francisco, Svea Male Chorus of Seattle and Svea of Everett (Washington), sang on Scandinavian Day, July 29th, at the exposition under the direction of C. E. Holt.

In 1919, Swedish Song Club Columbia changed its name to the Columbia Singing Society. The group performed at festivals from 1907-1928. In 1925 at the Everett convention, the Pacific choruses affiliated with the American Union of Swedish Singers (A.U.S.S.), becoming its Western Division. Around 1930 the Columbia Singing Society began to use the name “Swedish Male Chorus (Svenska Manskören).” In 1946, *Svenska Manskören* was admitted to the American Union of Swedish Singers.

Inevitable changes were coming with references to Swedish music. Indicative of this is the change of name in 1919 of the “Swedish Song Club Columbia” to “Columbia Male Chorus”. The Chorus would regularly sing “Stå Stark” (Be Strong) by Wennerberg, the Swedish Flag song, but in recent years it has appeared only infrequently in programs. It is used because it is good music, and not a song for which the audience rises, and when it is sung they don’t salute the Swedish flag. One of the immigrant singers said:

“The younger generations are coming up and we realize that they have a greater interest in America than in Sweden, and we cater to that inclination. We want to keep them with us and have them carry on an interest in Swedish songs, folklore, and history, but we want them to be a real American as well”.

In times of dwindling participation, the Portland Scandinavian singing groups began to merge. The combined Portland Swedish Male Chorus began to participate in national festivals.

In 1976, the Swedish Male Chorus and Norwegian Male Chorus joined together to form the Scandinavian Chorus of Portland. In 1979, Swedish women singers organized a sister chorus, the Scandia Ladies’ Chorus of Portland. Under the sponsorship of the Scandinavian Chorus, they were admitted to the A.U.S.S. in 1982. Currently, the two choruses hold joint concerts in the winter and spring.



Combined Chorus in Portland today



Men's Chorus in Portland today

The choruses perform often at local events in the Portland area, such as:

- Spring Concert (Norwegian Syttende Mai celebration),
- Scandinavian Midsummer Festival,
- Lucia Court Selection and Lucia Event,
- Portland ScanFair at Christmas time at the Norsk Julesangfest and Julotta Services

These performances are contributing to “keeping up” the Scandinavian heritage among the Scandinavian immigrant communities in the Portland area.



Men's Chorus in Portland in early 1900s

In 2008, A.U.S.S was a roaring success in Portland with 200 singers at Oregon Convention Center



Photo: Craig Peterson

A combination of Swedish and American choirs provided Portland with a performance that will be talked about for a long, long time! Among the best performances was: Serenad i Havanna, (Fragrancia) by the Swedish poet and troubadour Evert Taube.



Serenad i Havanna

I Cubas natt en röst från din estancia
och doft av rosor som är din aroma
sveper hit ner och talar O Fragrancia
talar ditt och kärlekens idiom

Hela mitt hjärta är uppfyllt av din ensamhet
fast du är borta äger jag dig här,
här i min själ, mitt innersta din kärlighet
blommar och doftar för mig var du är

Glömsk av mig själv jag uppfylls av dig till brädden
fastän du gömmer dig och inte blir mig när

Himmel! Du kom ändå till blomster bädden!

Månen går ner....Gitarren tystnar här

Fragrancia

In Cuba's night a voice from your estancia
And the fragrance of roses which is your aroma
Sweeps down here and speaks, O Fragrancia
Speaking yours and lovers idiom
All of me is filled with your loneliness
Whenever you are away, you are still here
Here in my soul, inside your beauty
Flowers and fragrance for me are wherever you are
All of me is filled with your loneliness
Whenever you are away, you are still here
Here in my soul, inside your beauty
Flowers and fragrance for me wherever you are
Obviously to myself, I am filled to the brim with you
Even though you hide yourself and are not close to me
Heaven, You came anyway to the flowerbed
The moon goes down, and guitar stops playing.

The Swedish tradition of Public Singing (Allsång) and Choral singing (Körsång) are still with us and very much appreciated by the Swedish immigrant community. The singing provided the immigrants solace for many years when homesickness was part of their daily life.

Story written by Leif Rosqvist, the editor for New Sweden Cultural Heritage Foundation and SRIO newsletter in Portland, Oregon

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Julie White, Scandia Ladies Chorus of Portland