

# The Pillars of Swedish Heritage in Oregon—Linnea Society

by Leif Rosqvist, Editor of New Sweden Newsletter

*The stories...*

Undoubtedly, Linnea has meant much to many immigrants. **Charles W. Swenson, charter member of the society**, said: “Linnea is like expanding your family to include hundreds of good friends – and they are good friends. If something should happen to me and I should need help, friends would come to me from everywhere through the society – and it is the same for all others”.

Then an **elderly woman** spoke in glowing praise of the organization. She was lonely when she came from Sweden before she had learned that Linnea was admitting women and so she joined. At the time the society meant far more to them than it has in later years. “At the time”, she said, “we were all ignorant greenhorns. Most of us could not use English and no one, outside of our own people, would have anything to do with us socially. I experienced many disappointments here – nothing was as good as I imagined it would be. But, good old Linnea was just like a mother, a sister and a brother to all of us young girls”.

Similar are the stories you will find in the well-known Swedish-American journalist Ernst Skarstedt’s third volume in his trilogy of **Swedes in the Far West, published 1911**, where *Oregon och dess svenska befolkning* [Oregon and its Swedish population] was a part. The book covered the period 1880 to 1910, and it was organized in the same way as its two predecessors about California and Washington – it began with a general history of the state, moved on to the various activities of the Swedes, and concluded with a substantial biographical section of prominent Swedish immigrants.



E. Skarstedt

Today, these stories have become a gold mine of information for both genealogists and readers interested in ethnography, immigration and history in the state of Oregon. Many of the biographies you will find at the Swedish Roots In Oregon (SRIO) website, They are very interesting and educational reading.

*The immigration...*

In a nation of immigrants, Oregonians’ relationship with immigrant newcomers always has been ambivalent – just like across America. Many immigrants have thrived, but at times, laws and prejudice limited rights or banned certain ethnicities altogether. Immigrants of Swedish origin did not in general face this problem.



The Immigrants

Swedish immigration to Oregon over the period 1880 – 1990 as shown by US census, peaked in the 1910 – 30’ period, after which immigration gradually was greatly reduced.

	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
<b>Swedish immigration</b>												
<b>in to Oregon 1880 - 1990</b>	983	3,774	4,555	10,099	10,502	11,032	8,498	6,904	4,538	2,396	1,594	1,031

According to the US Census, more than 125,000 Oregonians identify themselves as Swedish-Americans, which is a significant base for Swedish interest.

SRIO has translated about 100 biographies compiled and edited by the Swedish author Ernest Skarstedt, covering Swedish immigration into Oregon and Portland during the period from late 1800s and early 1900s. In all of these biographies, there is a common thread, and that is “The Swedish Society of Linnea”, one of the oldest Swedish societies in Oregon, or in the entire West for that matter, clearly becoming a “Pillar of Swedish Heritage” in Oregon.

### *Building a community...*

Linnea was organized October 29, 1888, as “Svenska Bröderna” (The Swedish Brothers), and was founded by Philip W. Liljeson, the driving force behind the formation of a sick-benefit and funeral organization for Swedish immigrants.

After four years, on November 30, 1892, the organization changed its name to “Svenska Sällskapet Linnea” (Swedish Society of Linnea). At this time they started to admit women, and after some time there were almost equal numbers of men and women in the organization.

This is well in line with the old Swedish saying; “för mannen är det ej godt att vara allena” (“it is not good for the man to be alone”).



Cote of Arms over the doorway at Linnea Hall

### *The charter...*

The main charter of The Swedish Society of Linnea was, to help and steady the weak and faltering, to aid its members to grow both intellectually and morally, to nourish a consciousness of our national heritage, and to protect our treasured Swedish language.

One key benefit that Swedish Society of Linnea provided the immigrant community was help with benefits during unemployment and funds to cover the sick and funeral costs. This was an extra ordinary performance of an immigration based society in the early 1900s and was very generous in its dealings with the Swedish population in general

The Swedish Society of Linnea was one significant “pillar” of support for Swedish immigrants and their heritage, at the time when immigrant needed it the most, in the early 1900s.

The Society played a very important role in the cultural and historical development of Swedish heritage in Portland as documented by SRIO and others. The Society sponsored a variety of programs to make it easy for new immigrants to fit in the new foreign environment and to develop contacts for employment and relationships. This was done through activities such as picnics and parties, very much as we do today, and at all occasions Swedish was spoken, Swedish food was prepared and music played, and the Swedish folk tradition was observed.



Gents night 1931 at Linnea Hall. The men cooked the dinner for the night.



Portland Swedish Folkdance group 1930-1940.

Besides covering the operational costs for the society itself, paying for sick and funeral expenses, the society has always been punctual in paying benefits to its members and being very generous in its dealing with the Swedish population in general.

*The meeting place...*

A new building, was planned and constructed, by E. J. Grahs, in Scandinavian Baroque Revival style with a construction system that included: stucco, weatherboards, metal and wood. The building was completed in 1910, located at 2066 NW Irving St, Portland. On the lower floor was a banquet hall as well as spaces for a caretaker, furnace, etc. A meeting hall and reception rooms were located on the second floor, and the actual club rooms were located on the third floor.



E. J. Grahs and his wife

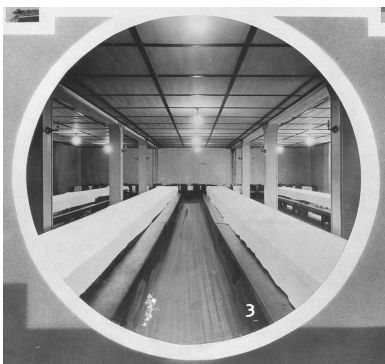


Linnea Hall then in 1910

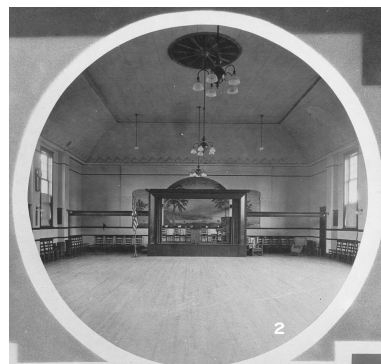


Linnea Hall today in 2009

Interior of Linnea Hall in 1923, old classics long gone...



Old Dining Hall



Theater Stage



Ballroom Dancing Hall

The cornerstone to the building, Linnea Hall, was placed in the foundation on September 5, 1910. Though the membership reached an estimated 500 in the early 1920, it declined in the 1930s.

By 1946 it had shrunk to 125, and in 1979 the Linnea Hall was sold. In 1980 Linnea Hall was named a Portland historical landmark.



## *Linnea today...*

Linnea is still serving the immigrant community together with several other Swedish organizations such as the Vasa Lodges, New Sweden Cultural Heritage Society and the Scandinavian Heritage Foundation. The membership is today stable at about 40 members, several being long time members. Judy Rust, the Linnea president, is indicating that current changes in our American society, is reshaping the Linnea Society to become more of a social club and charity organization, servicing the current Swedish immigrant population.



Judy Rust, President



Swedish-American symbols



Judy Rust, President and Ross Fogelquist Vice Council Emeritus



Long time members enjoying themselves

## *In perspective...*

These immigration stories illustrate the shared tenacity and will that Swedish immigrants possessed in their search for a better life in the promised land of America.

When the immigrants came to America, whether Oregon or not, they searched for support from what could be called “Pillars of Heritage”. This support system made their adjustment to their new life in America easier.

In Oregon and Portland some of the most important such “pillars” were The Swedish Society of Linnea together with the churches and other social clubs, providing the immigrants with support so they could build a purposeful life in their new country.

## References and Sources:

The book “Oregon och dess Svenska Befolkning”, by the author Ernst Skarstedt

SRIO: The book **“Swedish Oregon”**, edited by Lars Nordström and **“The Swedish Society of Linnea”**, written by E. J. Grahs. **Swedes of Oregon**, William Carlson Smith.

## Recommended reading:

Material from Swedish Roots In Oregon (SRIO) web site such as books, like **“Swedish Oregon,”** booklets covering immigration topics, and immigrant biographies from Ernst Skarstedt’s book “Oregon and its Swedish Population”.

