

RAMSEY COUNTY
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Winter, 1994

Volume 28, Number 4

A Ninety-year Run

Giesen's: Costumers to St. Paul—1872–1970

Page 4



A St. Paul Civic Opera Company production of "Martha" in 1934. Left to right are Mary Wigginton, Bill Lee and Antoinette (Tony) Bergquist. Giesen's was the official costumer for the Civic Opera. See the article about Minnesota's first commercial costume house beginning on page 4. Kenneth W. Wright photo from Walter Bergquist's collection.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 28, Number 4

Winter, 1994

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Thirty Down and Many More to Go

With this issue, *Ramsey County History* has completed thirty years of continuous publication. Founded in 1964 as a semi-annual magazine published by the Ramsey County Historical Society, *Ramsey County History* moved to a quarterly publication schedule in 1990. Over the years, it has served as a substantial source of information about the history, people, businesses, important events, architecture and historic sites, economics and philanthropy of Ramsey County for both local and national researchers and readers. Twice, in 1967 and 1993, *Ramsey County History* has won a certificate of commendation from the American Association for State and Local History for its outstanding quality as a historical magazine. Much of the credit for its sustained excellence is due to the work of its founder and only editor since 1964, Virginia Brainard Kunz.

—John M. Lindley, chairman, Editorial Board

Growing Up in St. Paul

A Grandchild's Journey Into a Swedish Past

John W. Larson

My earliest memories of my Swedish grandparents are somewhat confused impressions of the adult merrymaking that always took place at their home over Christmas and New Year's. We not only celebrated holidays with Joel and Alma, who lived in a big white house on a double lot at 83 East Jessamine Street in St. Paul's North End neighborhood, but we were there almost every weekend. We lived in a small house next door and, since I was not only an only child, but also an only grandchild, I now sense that I occupied an odd yet privileged position in the adult gatherings that took place in my grandparents' home.

I joined in when the men—my grandfather Joel, a steam-fitter in the Great Northern Railroad shops at Dale Street and Minnehaha; Uncle Art, a molder by trade; and my father Walter, who was a master machinist—gathered around the furnace in the basement talking, while drinking moonshine and home brew. Such men were the bedrock of their industrial era. They enjoyed the distinctive independence, security and satisfaction of highly skilled workers. They felt superior to the untrained and unskilled but saved their contempt for their social superiors, office workers, salesmen and middle management. Awe and respect were reserved for the tycoons, the giants of their industrial age, men like James J. Hill and Henry Ford.

I enjoyed the masculine atmosphere in the basement, near the furnace, the coal bin, the work bench, the stored jars of tomatoes and other preserves, the damp smell of brewer's yeast and malt, the pungent odor of Copenhagen snuff and the talk. The men chose the larger topics of conversation, politics and the economy, or the trade unions. Their political perspective was Farmer-Labor, midwestern—not revolutionary but leaning toward socialism. After 1929 their talk turned to the bad times, and after 1932 to Roosevelt whose



John Larson "and kitties" in 1927. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are from the author.

various programs for ending or softening the depression, the WPA, PWA, NRA and all the rest, provided topics for endless conversation.

The menfolk in my family never said how they really voted. Subject as they were to pressure from their unions, from employers and from the more politically zealous among their friends and neighbors, they valued the protection offered by the secret ballot. Nevertheless, in 1933, when I was ten, I remember that while we walked up the long Jackson Street hill on our way home from downtown, my father explained to me why it would be desirable for the government to own the nation's railroads and such major natural resources as coal and iron. I suspect that he voted for the socialist Norman Thomas in 1932, but I'll never know. What I do know is that by the time he died in 1984, he was a card-carrying Reagan Republican.

My father's progression from left wing socialism in the early 1930s to right wing

Republicanism in the 1980s was partly the result of broader social and economic changes. It was also an expression of the upward mobility and a change in his lifestyle. The shift became noticeable in the 1950s when the men no longer gathered in the basement to drink whiskey with one another and my father instead drank martinis with my mother and their friends before dinner.

During my childhood, older customs prevailed. Men and women had worlds of their own. While the men gathered in the basement, upstairs in the brightly lighted kitchen the women good-humoredly dismissed their "man talk" as "building the railroads," implying that it was gratuitous talk without deeper significance because, after all, the railroads already had been built. The women, my grandmother Alma, my mother Vivian and an aunt or two, would talk about things closer to home, preferably about people they knew and how they were faring.

When I tired of grown-up talk in the basement and kitchen, I would turn to a quiet and inexhaustible alternative, my grandmother's rich collection of scrap and photo albums which filled to capacity a tall oak cabinet on which stood the telephone (telephones "stood" in those days). My favorites were the scrapbooks that my grandmother had pasted together while in Chicago from 1898 to 1901.

In my earliest years, I looked at the pictures for themselves—colorful ads of all kinds. But the most eye-catching were the fashion illustrations from 1898 wherein statuesque and solid bosomed, incredibly narrow waisted women were shown full length, in full color, wearing beribboned and bustled fashions of the day.

Grandmother aspired, in her youthful years, to wearing such fashions. There is evidence of this in a studio photograph made in Chicago in 1898 of her and my grandfather shortly after their wedding there. Handsome and well-groomed in a

dark suit, an upright collar and white bow tie, Grandfather Joel is seated royally, if somewhat stiffly, in an ornate and throne-like wicker chair, while grandmother, tall and more slender than I ever knew her to be, stands beside him in an elongated skirt and a pretty shirtwaist, more casual but clearly inspired by the fashion plates.

Did grandfather sit and grandmother stand because her fashionable outfit showed off to advantage when viewed full length? I'll never know, but the image is clear. The impression is one of a competent, up-to-date conventional couple fully capable of launching and raising a family. That family was all about me now, as I sat in the living room in St. Paul poring over grandmother's Chicago albums and scrapbooks.

As I grew older, I began to wonder about the significance of many of the photos and other items collected there, for these were not scrapbooks and albums in the ordinary sense. They served grandmother, instead, as a kind of filing system. There were calling cards and addresses, newspaper clippings and letters from the old country. The books themselves were discarded account ledgers of the Pullman Company. My grandmother, I knew, was born in St. Paul in 1879 of parents who had emigrated from Sweden in the early 1870s. At the time of grandmother's birth, they lived on Commercial Street near Swede Hollow. However, by common agreement the history of the Larson family in America began in Chicago, and I believed that if I could disentangle the mysteries behind these mementos I would be able to piece together the story of the family's origins.

There was an oral tradition as well. Most persistent was the story that grandmother left St. Paul for Chicago in 1897 and had worked as a store detective in Marshall Field's department store. This helped to explain the sensitivity to fashion evident in her wedding picture. In any event, I readily believed the story, and imagined her walking about the store, elegant in one of the 1898 fashions, and carrying, hidden somewhere on her person, a little nickel-plated revolver. The revolver was not just an invention of my imagination. When I was barely a teenager, my father made me a present of the gun, but only after he had removed the firing pin with a hammer. I



The house at 83 East Jessamine Street in St. Paul's North End.



A family fishing trip to Bald Eagle Lake in 1938. The author's Aunt Maybelle is on the left, with his grandmother next to her. Next are Ralph, a friend; Lewis (Maybelle's husband); Walter, the author's father; and Aunt Rina. The youngster, of course, is the author

still have the gun somewhere.

Reflecting on the story as an adult, I could not help but wonder as to my grandmother's qualifications for store detective. She was, after all, barely over twenty at the time. Rather than dismiss such a fascinating story as pure fabrication, I have concluded that her bilingual talents, her mastery of both English and Swedish, would have made her useful in a Chicago department store at a time when that city was crowded with recent Swedish immigrants.

It was while working as a store detective in Chicago that Alma met my grandfather Joel Larson, who had come from Sweden some years earlier, in 1892. What I never understood is why the family myth

began in Chicago, why it did not reach back to 1892 and before, back to Sweden, to Charles the Twelfth, or Gustav Adolf.

The tone in my grandparents' home, except for the basement, was set by my grandmother. It was pre-World War I American, although Swedish-American. I knew from our neighbors that all Americans were hyphenated Americans of one kind or another, but my grandmother was more American than most of them. In her home there was no picture of Sweden's reigning King Gustav, nor do I remember a Swedish flag, and there were very few books in Swedish beyond a Bible or two, some religious tracts and a Lutheran catechism. There were many books in English, however, popular books accumulated by my aunts during their school days, but also more serious volumes, such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and a series, *The Blue and the Gray*, a popular history of the Civil War.

No ancestor of mine was in America during the Civil War, but as Sweden faded from the family memory it was replaced by the national memory of the new land. I still have an oval framed picture of the Abraham Lincoln family that hung in my grandparents' home, as well as my grandmother's collection of old American flags that had been folded and packed away as they became outdated by the addition of each new star.

Grandfather brought nothing tangible from the old country except a trunk filled with clothes made of homespun wool or linen, clothes that he regarded as city, not country, clothes. It would do him an injustice to assume he brought some regional Swedish costume. The trinkets now associated with Swedishness were not to be found in his baggage. To imagine them there would foolishly distort the significance of his youthful decision to leave the old country.

My grandparents were both caught up in the spirit of the new age. Its symbol was not the little brightly painted wooden horse we sometimes see in Swedish-American homes today, but the steam engine and the railroad. But I exaggerate. Grandfather did bring something with him. He brought a piece of the home-made bread that his mother, Anna Maria Petersdotter, had given him the day he left his south Swedish



Joel and his Norwegian friend. This heart-moving photograph of two seemingly half-grown immigrant youngsters was taken in Kansas where the two young men had found work in the wheat fields near Horton.

highland home at the Tuthult farm in Gullabo parish, of Smaland's Kalmar County. The bread was enshrined, in my childhood, in grandmother's curio cabinet.

Grandmother's scrapbooks contained other clues to a Swedish past: letters from Gullabo around the turn-of-the-century to my grandparents in Chicago or, later, Crystal Falls, Michigan. Since I knew no Swedish, it was years before I deciphered them, but I learned that they came from my grandfather's father, Lars Petersson, and from his youngest brother Erik.

A Victorian photo album covered with red velour and mounted with a heavy brass clasp contained brown and yellow photo-

graphs of my Swedish great grandparents, oddly dressed, stern looking, still and barely smiling old people. Although the photos confirmed our Swedish origins, I could not imagine what these odd-looking people had been like. Without someone to tell me about the Swedish past, there was no way that I, as a child, could follow the chain of circumstances back in time and space from St. Paul of the 1920s to rural Sweden of the late nineteenth century. Sweden remained inaccessible, a world apart, less real to me than stories of the boy George Washington cutting down the cherry tree.

Grandfather never romanticized the old

country. He never spoke of it in my presence and never expressed a desire to return. But I do not mean to imply that his coming to America had cost him nothing. The great price he had to pay, I believe, was in the loss of his language, of the opportunity to communicate in the language of his youth. The first eighteen years of his life remained packed up and stored away, like the bit of Swedish bread in grandmother's curio cabinet, with no opportunity of bringing it back to life in the language that had formed him.

As an adult, I learned of scholarly efforts to understand emigration and immigration in terms of the "push," usually economic, from the old country, and the "pull," also economic, of the new. Certainly, Joel expected to improve his lot in America, but he never said this, nor did he ever explain why he left Sweden. Perhaps Joel's going to America in 1892 was simply the thing to do, a family tradition. Three brothers, Swen, Per August and Karl, and a sister, Mia Matilda, preceded him there, while an uncle, his mother's brother, Erik Petersson, who had been to America once before, accompanied Joel on his voyage. His younger brother Erik followed Joel to America a few years later. One could almost assume that Joel left home for no better reason than having what the Swedes called the "America fever."

Having the "America fever" did not protect Joel from the shock that he must have experienced upon his arrival in the new land. If his journey was typical, he was shuttled along with a flock of others, hardly aware of what was happening, by ship from Gothenburg, on Sweden's western coast, to England, across England by rail to Liverpool, across the Atlantic rather quickly, if uncomfortably, and by steamship to New York. From there, it is my belief, he took the train to Crystal Falls in Michigan's Upper Peninsula where his brother, Karl Elof, and sister, Mia Matilda, already were living. Crystal Falls, it turns out, and not Chicago was the scene of the Larson family's first encounter with life in the new world.

Joel may have arrived in Crystal Falls early enough in the summer of 1892 to find work in the mines thereabouts, or he may have worked that first winter felling trees in the woods, but by early spring he would

have been laid off as the country entered the major economic depression that began in 1893. He probably left Crystal Falls early in 1893 in the company of this sister Mia and her Norwegian husband Edwin Steve, a butcher or grocer by trade, when they moved to Chicago. Later that summer, Joel traveled west looking for work along with a Norwegian friend, and near Horton, Kansas, the two of them found a Swedish community and work in the wheat harvest.

From this Kansas episode there survives a heart-moving picture of Joel and his Norwegian friend. It is moving because of Joel's startled expression, his stiffness before the camera, the disproportionate size of his hands and feet, which give him the look of a half-grown youngster, and his evident yet unsuccessful effort by means of a hat and a watch chain dangled across his vest to appear a grown-up man of the world.

Six years would elapse between Joel's Kansas photo and his wedding picture. Joel occupies a similar sitting position in both, yet in the intervening years he has grown into the handsome and apparently self-confident man he appears to have aspired to earlier. The Swedish country boy cries out from every feature of the Kansas photo. The urbane young man in the Chicago photo appears to have left Sweden behind him. In fact, we know little of the intervening years except that Joel spent much of this time in Chicago.

According to stories my father told me, Joel got to know the Chicago of the 1890s and its Swede Town on the near north side as a young bachelor living in a boarding house operated by his sister Mia. A large, gregarious and strong willed woman, Mia was not easily shocked and could hold her own in a masculine world. While she bullied her husband and rode close herd on her two daughters, she didn't interfere with her brother Joel. He was a paying guest and allowed to go his own way.

On Saturday nights, Joel did something no Smaland peasant could have done at home. He and his cronies dressed up, donned high top hats and put on Prince Albert coats. At the rear, these coats had long tails with inside pockets concealing flat pint bottles of whiskey. So outfitted, they set out for the federal government's breakwaters and piers which stretched far out



Joel and Alma's wedding picture. Handsome and well-groomed in a dark suit, upright collar and white bow tie—and a startling contrast to the youth photographed in Kansas—Joel is seated royally in a wicker chair while Alma stands beside him in her floor-length gown.

into Lake Michigan. This was a lawless area, beyond the jurisdiction of the Chicago police, and the scene of unbridled revelry and high jinks. A milder remnant of the spirit of these bachelor expeditions lingered on during my childhood in the all-male gatherings around the furnace in my

grandparents' basement.

Joel and Alma met at Mia's boarding house. Their marriage put an end to Joel's Saturday night expeditions and gave him something to write home to Sweden about. His letter home has been lost, but its reply, dated December 11, 1899, and written by

Erik, Joel's younger brother, found its way into one of grandmother's scrapbooks. Erik was twenty-two, the only child left at home and still living with his parents at the Tuthult farm. More time and care may have been given to his education than to his older brothers'.

Erik's letter is good humored and mildly teasing. The brothers appear to have been on good terms. Letters from Joel had become so rare, Erik wrote, that at Tuthult they thought he must have gone to Alaska to take part in the Klondike gold rush. Instead, they were pleased to learn that he had gotten married. "That," wrote Erik, "is an Alaska of quite a different sort."

No need for Joel to be concerned about what their parents thought, Erik continued. They approved of his getting married, and anyway, in Erik's opinion, "it is good that one does what one thinks best in such matters." Erik confided that, now that Joel is married, he will be giving marriage some thought himself. He hopes that Joel will keep in touch. "Now that you're married perhaps we will get a letter twice, instead of barely one, a year."

Erik closed, at his father's request, with lines for Joel from a church hymn. Old Lars Petersson was deeply religious, a pietist and a lay preacher. In his letters, Lars repeatedly admonished his children in America to cling to their faith. They may have been a source of embarrassment to Joel for, in America, he would have nothing to do with religion.

Once, when my father was about fourteen, a Lutheran pastor called at their house on Jessamine Avenue to induce him to take instruction prior to confirmation. My father, in connivance with my grandfather, hid out in the basement and was never confirmed. Back in Sweden, confirmation had been mandatory, but in America the *framstidslandet*, the land of the future, one was free to do as one pleased in this matter.

Joel looked to the future, but to what extent I have often wondered. Was he really Americanized during these Chicago years? He certainly learned English by the time he married, but I doubt if he had any schooling in this country, or truly learned to write the language. I possess a few examples of his handwriting, all extremely brief. One appears in Alma's "memory" album and is dated September, 1898. At first reading, it appears to record a curious sentiment for a young man who probably was already courting my grandmother. It reads, as written:

"A fiend in need . . . is a fiend in deed."

If Joel really knew sufficient English to know how funny this mangled quotation was, I would be impressed by his sense of humor. Had he really meant "A friend in need is a friend indeed," I would be less impressed but inclined to wonder which of the two, grandmother or grandfather, was the friend in need.

This leads me to the central mystery of

the Chicago years. Once, as she appeared over me while I was leafing through her Chicago scrapbooks, I looked up to ask, "Why, grandmother, did you go to Chicago in the first place?"

"That," she answered firmly and without hesitation, "is another story." Neither then nor later did she respond to this question, neither to me nor, so far as I know, to anyone else.

My father's sister Marinda, my Aunt Rina, was the youngest of four children and the only one of her generation to take an early interest in family history matters. She was able to provide a few details when I began my own efforts to unravel the family's mysteries. Although a genial person and close enough to me in age to tease me when I was young and to be a friend when I was older, she was an unreliable source when it came to family history. For example, she once revealed to me in all seriousness that she had discovered that Grandpa Larson descended from a noble Swedish family. It was a harmless notion, a not uncommon fantasy, and easily dismissed. But in the matter of Grandmother's reason for going to Chicago, she offered more troubling news.

Aunt Rina explained to me that she had learned from my grandmother's brother Uncle Ernie that Alma had married in St. Paul and had gone to Chicago to get a divorce. If she could convince the family of this, it would have greatly lightened the load of criticism she sensed my father harbored against her for her many husbands. I was suspicious, but Aunt Rina had given me something to ponder.

Some years ago I paid a visit to Uncle Ernie. He was over ninety and though totally blind lived alone on St. Paul's West Side. I shall never forget the visit. While we were there, Ernie's son William, my father's cousin, arrived. He looked out for the old man and tended his garden. We talked for a long while, and I discovered, and later confirmed it through the 1900 census records, that Uncle Ernie had lived with my grandparents for a time while they were in Chicago. If anyone still knew why Alma went to Chicago, it had to be Uncle Ernie.

While I questioned him, we stood with his son on the little porch at the back door. Instead of answering my question, Uncle



Four little girls on the railroad tracks above Swede Hollow. The Hamm mansion crowns the bluff in the background. The author's grandmother, Alma Larson, was born on nearby Commercial Street in 1879. Her parents had emigrated from Sweden in the early 1870s. Minnesota Historical Society photo.



Son of Mattathias, Judas, Soldier, Eleazar, Soldier, King Antiochus, High Priest, Mattathias, Soldier, Peasant, Soldier, Apelles, Son of Mattathias
**K. O. T. M. OF THE WORLD
 DEGREE TEAM.**

The Maccabees. Joel and Alma did not join a church in Chicago but a lodge, the Maccabees. Its program revolved around a fantasy world, but it had its practical side as well. The lodge's fabricated tradition was neutral. It had no ethnic stigma, was American, a step away from Swedishness.

Ernie, who had been a farmer, looked out with his un-seeing eyes over the small patch of corn in his garden. "You've been neglecting my corn," he admonished his son. My queries about Alma were lost in the father and son debate that followed.

Divorce, I've learned, was not uncommon in Chicago in the 1890s, but I finally dismissed Aunt Rina's story of Grandmother's previous marriage as highly unlikely. Too many people would have known about it. I came to realize that a more pressing reason for secrecy than marriage and divorce might have been a discovery by Alma that she was pregnant. Had she gone to Chicago to have, or perhaps abort, the baby? Was she the "friend in need" that Joel had in mind?

Not many years ago I made a pilgrimage to Chicago to seek out relatives of my grandfather and look for answers to some puzzling family questions. I found a retired school teacher, LeVerne Larson, who told me many stories about her grandfather Swen, Joel Larson's brother; her father, Elmer Larson, and her own youth in Chicago.

She also told me a story about a mysterious figure in their Swedish Mission Covenant Church who had been pointed out to her by her father as a relative. In what way he was related her father would not or could not say, and she was not allowed to

talk to the man herself. Did LeVerne tell me all she knew? Could my father have had a half brother? The thought would have shocked him beyond belief.

Joel and Alma did not join a church in Chicago, but they joined a lodge, the "Maccabees," a Detroit-based fraternal organization with perhaps 200,000 members. After 1902, when they moved back to St. Paul to live out their lives there, they kept up their membership. The Maccabees were organized broadly into "Knights of the Maccabees" and "Ladies of the Maccabees," with regional "tents" and local "hives." Its activities sometimes included ceremonial hocus pocus, ritual and pageantry. Its program revolved around a fantasy world that had little or nothing to do with the Maccabees of the Old Testament or any other identifiable tradition, but it had its practical side as well.

The Maccabees gave members an opportunity to believe themselves socially better off than they might otherwise have been. The men addressed one another as "Knight," the women as "Ladies." Joel, however, had too much common sense to become deeply involved. His primary Americanization took place, not in the lodge, but in the give and take of the world of work. In Chicago he was employed as a janitor in the Pullman building, an experience guaranteed to dispel notions of

grandeur.

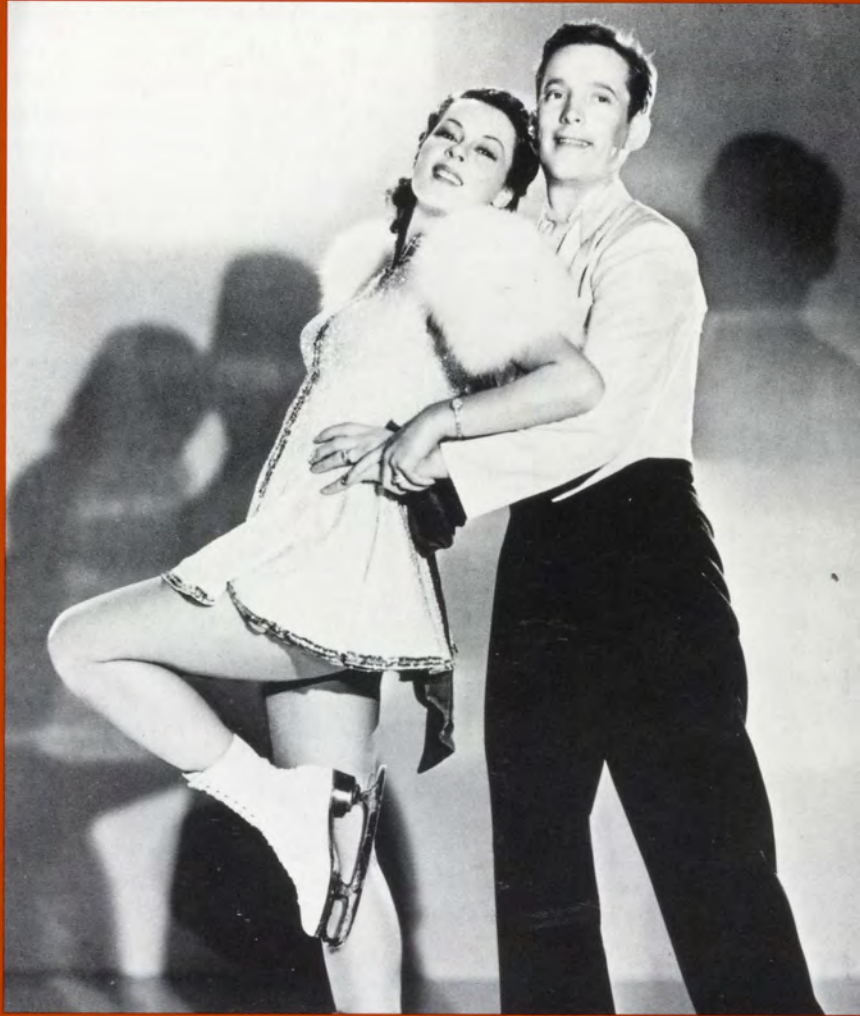
Alma, however, found a home in the "Ladies of the Maccabees." Some forty years later in St. Paul she was still an active member. The Maccabees absorbed the time and energy that she might otherwise have put into church activities. In an age and of a class that limited opportunities for married women, the Maccabees provided Alma with a world apart where she could employ her energies and exercise her talents. During the 1930s, the Maccabees were her consuming passion. As record keeper and dues collector for the Maccabees June Hive in St. Paul, she was even able to earn a small income of her own.

In my childhood, the Chicago of 1898 was the place and time of Joel and Alma's marriage, of the beginning of their life together. It was, I now realize, also a time when decisions were made that would set my grandparents' course through the decades ahead and long after their return for good to St. Paul.

Joining the Maccabees was one such decision. The lodge's fabricated "tradition" was neutral. It had no ethnic stigma, it was American, a step away from Swedishness. To me, during my childhood in St. Paul in the 1920s and 1930s, my grandparents seemed totally American. Still, they were Americans with a subtle Swedish difference, a difference that lay buried in their past and which, only now, I am beginning to understand.

John W. Larson grew up in St. Paul's North End neighborhood. He is a graduate of Haverford College in Pennsylvania and the University of Minnesota and served as a public affairs officer for the United States department of defense. Now retired to Taylor's Falls, he writes, among other things, histories for the U. S. Corps of Engineers.

A slightly edited version of this article was published and copyrighted in the October, 1993, issue of The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly, the publication of the Swedish-American Historical Society in Chicago, Illinois.



Ice Follies pair skaters Bess Ehrhardt and Roy Shipstad in 1938. They played later in the MGM movie, "Ice Follies of 1939." When Shipstads and Johnson were just starting out, Martin and Olga Giesen loaned them their costumes. See article beginning on page 4. Minnesota Historical Society photo.

R.C.H.S.
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