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Emigration from Sweden to America: the example of Signe Karlsdotter



Fig. 1 Two unidentified small farmers outside a timber hut in Idaho. It's an American saying that the Swedes introduced the log cabin | The Swedish Emigrant Institute, Albin Widén Collection

Mass emigration from Sweden to America began after the 1860s, in the wake of an agricultural crisis, in which crops failed and the growing size of families caused even greater poverty. Improved agricultural tools, vaccines and potatoes led to a population growth that made the countryside overpopulated. Urbanization did not stop the emigration, since conditions in the cities were poor. Between 1840 and 1930 about 1.3 million Swedes emigrated, one fifth of the entire population. Out of the European countries, only Great Britain and Norway surpassed Sweden's emigration in proportion to the population of the home country. One out of 25 Americans living today has Swedish ancestors (see Beijbom 2003).

After overcoming severe hardships, the immigrants adapted well to their new environment. A Swedish-American culture developed in the United States. This culture merged with the already hybrid culture of the United States. The Swedes contributed to the development of the new nation. The emigration led to mutual benefits and understanding, for both the emigrants and the people that stayed, for both the United States and Sweden.

The immigrants had to overcome great efforts before becoming successful in America. This meant commitment and a strong intention to work hard and adapt instead of repulse the new country and culture. The journey to America was not easy; it could take weeks or months at sea. When they finally landed, only half the route was completed, and the trip continued westwards. The vast majority of Swedish immigrants had to start from the bottom level of American society.

Even skilled artisans met severe difficulties, because they could not speak English. In Chicago, the men were hired as labourers while the girls became maids or seamstresses.

The reality of the early immigrant's life was not as utopian as advertisements or letters that were sent back to Sweden claimed. Their first homes were simple and primitive cabins. The prairie was entirely different from the landscapes of Sweden. ▶ Fig. 1

A Swedish-American culture began to form. The immigrants' language and customs were different from those of America. Densely populated settlements, large Swedish dominated areas, mainly in Chicago and Minnesota, became the birthplace of the Swedish-American culture. There were Swedish churches, clubs, schools and newspapers. In the 1860s it was virtually possible to live in these areas without knowing any English at all. Chicago got its own Swede Town.

Swedes helped building the United States' fundamental infrastructure, like the railroad transportation system. President Lincoln's Homestead Act of 1862, which gave people free land, as well as the expanding industries of the North, were important "pull" factors. The Homestead Act designated immigrants to Minnesota, which became the "Swede State of America". Swedish settlements also grew up around the new railroads, for example Rockford, Illinois. The labour market of the big city had more to offer to the poor immigrants, than the farm regions. A great number of them worked in the building industry. There is a saying that "the Swedes built Chicago" (Beijbom 1971).

1.3 million Swedes emigrated to America, but approximately 300,000 came back to Sweden after several years there. One of them was Signe Karlsdotter.

Signe Karlsdotter was born on January 31st, 1897, in the Swedish province Småland, in the village Brunamåla, Långasjö parish, Kronoberg County. Her parents, Helena Svensdotter and Karl-Oscar Gustavsson, were 34 and 44 years old at that time, and already had two children, Edla 11 years and Karl-Erik 6 years. Even though Signe's parents had their own farm, it was not an easy life. The farm was very small and sometimes it was hard to get food on the table.

During her first years Signe experienced how many people in her parish left Sweden to go abroad, mainly to the USA and Canada. It was not strange or uncommon to go to America and get at job there. In Långasjö alone, over 1,400 people left in the years between 1850 and 1930 – some hundreds returned during the same period. In 1908, Signe's family sold the farm in Brunamåla. At this time, almost 15 young men and women left Signe's village Brunamåla, with the intent to travel to America.

We do not know why Signe's parents sold the farm, perhaps they wanted to forget the tragic death of their son Karl-Erikin 1903. The same year, Signe got a little sister, Nanny, born the 17th of July. When the family moved to Älmeboda – a parish nearby – in spring 1908, it consisted of Signe, her parents, one older and one younger sister. In Älmeboda, Signe attended Källebacken elementary School, and in Älmeboda Church she was educated by the parish vicar and confirmed

her Christian faith, like most of the children in those days.

In the year 1911, Signe's older sister, Edla, married and moved back to Långasjö and Ingemundebo, a village next to Brunamåla. Four years later, Signe's mother Helena died, due to a heart attack. The rest of the family—Karl-Oskar, Signe and Nanny—moved back to Långasjö in 1917, and settled down with Edla and her husband Ernst Carlsson. Almost immediately, Signe went to the town Karlskrona for training in how to prepare and manage the Cold buffet—one of the most important parts of the well-known Swedish Smörgåsbord. After training she worked at a hotel in Växjö for a while, managing the Cold buffet there.

In the fall of 1919, Signe decided to leave Sweden and on the 18th of November she boarded a ship in Gothenburg, bound for New York. She had relatives there to guide her, namely her sister Edla's sister in law Charlotta. Signe soon got hired as kitchen maid and worked, mostly for wealthier families. Probably her training to prepare the cold buffet was a success, and she seems to have been very well liked. One of her letters of recommendation from a Doctor's family, in which she served for almost five years, tells us: "Signe Karlsson is honest, sober, respectable, competent, neat and clean. She has given thorough satisfaction." (The Smålands Museum Archives, no. M 48575). ▶ Fig. 2

In the USA, her last name was changed to Karlson—they probably saw Karlsdotter as strange patronymic form and were more used to Scandinavian names to end with "-son" instead of actually being someone's son or daughter. Signe got her name Karlsdotter simply since she was Karl's daughter.

The letter of recommendation above was written in June 1926 and the year after Signe returned to Sweden and Långasjö, but she was not alone to return. Already in 1923, when she was 20 years old, Signe's little sister Nanny had left Sweden for the USA, and it is likely that Signe took care of her when she arrived to New York. What we do know is that the two sisters returned to Sweden in autumn of 1927. As far as we know Nanny stayed in Sweden for the rest of her life, but Signe only stayed for nine months, and left for New York in September 1928. Signe kept working as a kitchen maid for ten years and maybe also did some work as a seamstress, facts remain a bit unclear. Since 1939, and during the war, it was hard to keep in touch for Signe and the family in Sweden. Letters took a very long time to be sent over the Atlantic, and sometimes they went

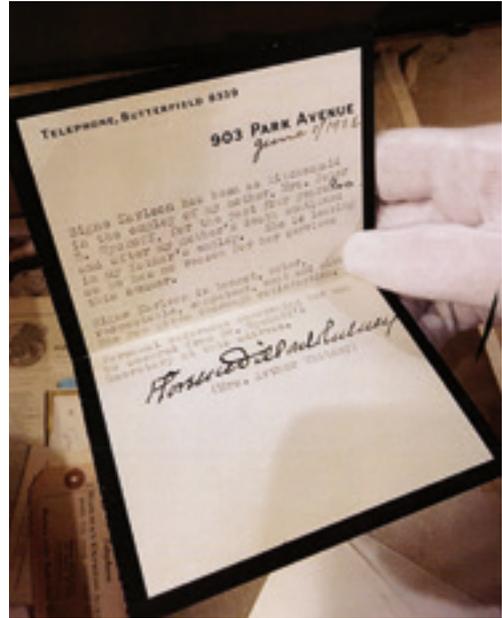


Fig. 2 Signe's letter of recommendation 1926
| The Smålands Museum Archives, Signe Karlsdotter Collection

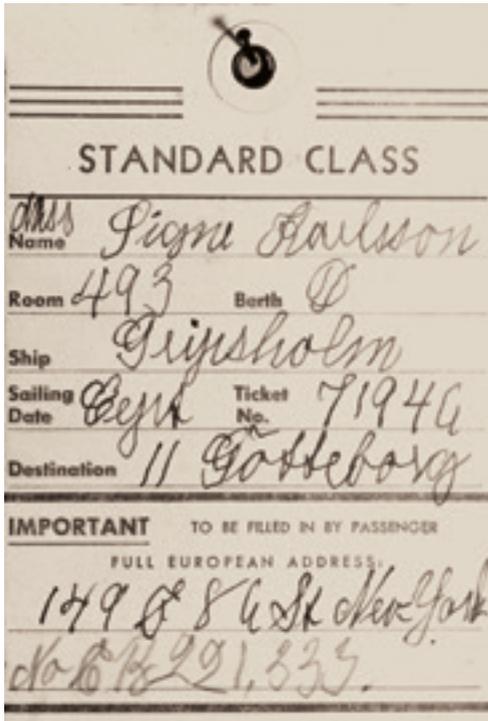


Fig. 3 The badge from Signe's trunk during the Atlantic crossing in 1946 | The Smålands Museum Archives, Signe Karlsdotter Collection

down with a ship. One day in October 1946, Signe arrived with a fairly big trunk, knocked on her sister Edla's door in Ingemundebo in Långasjö, and simply said: "I'm home". After this, she never left Sweden again. The trunk was stowed away in a barn and Signe got on with her life, helping her sister, and her sister's grown up children with house-keeping. ▶ Fig. 3

Signe spent her last years in a Nursing home in Emmaboda. She died in 1981, and it was not until then—after 35 years—that her relatives opened the trunk that was stowed away in 1946, and a small part of Signe Karlsdotter's life in the USA came to light. She had never talked much about it. Maybe she saw it as many Swedes and Europeans did: "It was just a job, like any other job I had during my life—but it happened to take place in the USA." ▶ Fig. 4

Sources

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The Smålands Museum Archives,
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Literature

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Id. (2003): *Images of Swedish-America. Swedish-American immigrant photos from "The Dream of America" exhibit and other collections at the Swedish Emigrant Institute.* Växjö.



Fig. 4 Signe Karlsdotter in Långsjö, between 1960 and 1970s | The Smålands Museum Archives, Signe Karlsdotter Collection