



The following suggestions of research topics possible using Swenson Center resources was written by Dr. Dag Blanck, Director of the Swenson Center in November 2015.

Research Topics

The Swenson Center has extensive collections of printed and archival materials pertaining to Swedish immigration to North America. The archival collections are divided between personal and institutional papers and consist of about 800 linear feet. The library includes some 20,000 titles of both primary and secondary literature. The Center also has a premier collection of Swedish-American newspapers on microfilm.

A multitude of topics can and have been researched at the Center. A listing of some topics pursued by the winners of our Visiting Scholar Award, which enables scholars to come to the Center and use our resources, gives one indication of the kinds of topics our holdings lend themselves to. It should also be noted that like most other topics, the study of Swedish immigration always benefits from different theoretical approaches. It is perhaps not surprising that the different theoretical constructs surrounding ethnicity have often played a central role. It is, however, worth emphasizing that gender and class analyses can equally successfully be applied in all the contexts listed below.

In his magisterial history of Norwegian-American literature, Orm Øverland begins by stating that it is a study of American literature, thus emphasizing the American nature of immigrant and ethnic writing. This premise can be extended to other spheres of immigrant and ethnic life as well, meaning that many of the resources in the Swenson Center deal with issues relevant to both American and Swedish literature and history. In that sense, we are dealing with transnational phenomena. It is also worth emphasizing that if Swedish immigration history is viewed as a part of American history, recent discussions about intersections between Indian and immigration histories and the role of Swedish immigrants in the processes of Indian land dispossession in the Midwest should be taken seriously and considered as new topics of inquiry. [1]

1. Swedish-American literature is a topic that can be researched at the Swenson Center. If it is defined as poetry and prose written and published in Swedish in the United States, the Center has a fine collection of printed matters which can be supplemented with archival materials. The body of Swedish-American literary imprints covers different kinds of writers, publications and publishers. The major publishers often had some religious affiliation (e.g. the Augustana Book Concern and Engberg-Holmberg) which to some degree influenced their publication profiles. It is clear that among certain Swedish-American authors--Vilhelm Berger, Anna Olsson, Johan Persson and G.N. Malm---a sense of distinctiveness emerged as they sought to grapple with the question of identity and how that was reflected in their writing.

Swedish-American literature can also be seen as English-language writings dealing with the migration of Swedes to the U.S. or Swedish-Americans in different ways. Willa Cather could be one example. The English-language writings could also include Swedish-American

authors who wrote in English. Another approach is to study authors of Swedish extraction and to raise the question to what degree their ethnic background may have influenced their creative output. Carl Sandburg is sometimes mentioned in this category.

The ways in which Swedish immigrants related to American literature can also be explored. To what degree was American literature discussed and reviewed in the Swedish-language press? How were Swedish-American authors aware of and influenced by American literature? A final area to explore would be the ways in which Swedish literature reached an American readership. Who and what was translated and why? And how was it received and judged by American critics and readers? Fredrika Bremer was highly regarded (and translated) in mid-19th century America, which helped pave way for her very successful journey to the U.S. in 1849-51 and form the basis for her influential book *Hemmen i den nya världen* (1853-54), translated as *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* in 1854. The dynamics of that reception remain unexplored. For example, Bremer County in the state of Iowa (which she never visited) was named in her honor in 1850 by a governor who admired her, and twenty years after her death, Bremer's translator Mary Howitt noted that editions of *The Neighbors*, *The Home*, and *The H. Family*, translated before her journey, had "run like wildfire through the United States." [2]

2. As is evident from the above, one major aspect of Swedish-American cultural patterns was the development of specific senses of a Swedish-American distinctiveness; that as the author Johan Person put it 1912, "we are neither Swedes, nor Americans, but a combination of both." A separate **Swedish-American cultural identity** emerged in America, which can be observed in many cultural fields. The ways in which these identities were constructed constitute a rich field of inquiry, for which the Center has many resources. Examples include self-reflexive writings, such as Johan Person's *Svensk-amerikanska studier*, where the author explicitly discusses these questions. Other ways of analyzing this question include which aspects of Swedish and American culture that are discussed in the literary and cultural Swedish-American magazines that were published, such as *Ungdomsvännan*, *Prärieblomman*, or *Valkyrian*. Other approaches include analyses of celebrations of different kinds, at which the ethnic self-understanding may become visible, or how Swedish-Americans set out to write their history. In both these cases, one can observe attempts at the construction of "invented traditions" and the mixture of Swedish and American elements. It is, for example, possible to speak of a canon of specifically Swedish-American historical events and persons, stretching from the Vikings in the New World, the New Sweden Colony, Swedes and/in the Revolution and the Civil War to the time of mass immigration in the late 19th century.

3. Community studies are another major possibility. The Center has extensive records dealing with the social, cultural, and religious character of Swedish settlements throughout North America, small and large, rural and urban. The records lend themselves to classic demographic and social studies, asking questions of from where the immigrants came, the social and religious profiles of the communities, as well as changes over time and generational shifts. Which were the social, demographic, and religious profiles of different Swedish-American communities? What kind of geographic and social mobility took place? What kinds of migration chains were created between specific sending areas in Sweden and particular receiving areas in the U.S.? In what ways and for how long were they sustained? Can we detect interaction with other immigrant groups? If so, with whom and how?

Swedish-American onomastics is one interesting dimension of community studies. An examination of different naming practices over time in different family groups will yield insights into strategies concerning names and naming among Swedish Americans. Such studies should ideally extend over several generations and focus on both first and last names.

The Swedish-American church records are a primary source in for community studies, but also the local newspapers, American census records, and other local U.S. sources.

4. Immigrants and politics is a classic area of inquiry in American history, and the role ethnicity has played, especially, but not exclusively, on the local level has been the subject of many investigations. As someone has observed, it is virtually impossible to understand American politics on the local level in many of the major urban areas without considering the role played by the Irish. The role Swedes played in American politics has been partially explored, with most focus on Minnesota. Much more can be done, however, analyzing, for example, the ways in which they entered American politics, and managed to establish themselves there. Who voted for whom and why?

It would also be of great interest to analyze the ways in which Swedish immigrants encountered and conceived of American politics. To most immigrants, the American political system was alien and unknown. How did they conceptualize and make sense of it? The best sources for election and political analyses will be the newspapers, first the Swedish-language press but also the English-language papers. In addition, official records dealing with elections will be useful.

5. Inter-ethnic aspects have been alluded to above, but deserve a special section. Swedish immigrants were, of course, a part of a mass movement of migrants primarily from Europe but also from other areas. The ways in which these groups related to each other has been partially discussed, but much more can be done. What did the patterns of interaction look like? What kind of conflicts played out? Was there co-operation and/or co-existence?

The issue of race is of particular importance here, both in terms of how Swedish immigrants related to African Americans, but also the processes through which they came to occupy a privileged position in the American ethno-racial hierarchies. The latter question has received relatively little attention and is worth exploring more. It would link the Swedish Americans to discussions of "whiteness," but could also help clarify it, by examining how the Swedish Americans became a part of American society. [3]

6. Homeland questions have become increasingly important in immigration studies, as the focus has become more transnational, emphasizing the flow of persons, ideas, and goods back and forth across national boundaries as a consequence of the migration. This area of inquiry includes the question of return migration, various kinds of interchanges between Swedish America, Sweden, and the United States, and the discussions about and views of each other on both sides of the Atlantic. Sources include the many accounts published by Swedes and Swedish Americans about each other, demographic sources about return migration, the use of records such as SWEA--a modern organization for Swedish women living in the United States.

7. A different way of putting some of the above would be to say that many of the resources in the Swenson Center allow for analyses of how an immigrant group perceived American

society. The ways in which they created their own Swedish-American identity tells us something about what they perceived as being central in American society. Freedom (or liberty), for example, was obviously a central American trope. [4] It is interesting to see how Swedish (and other) immigrants quickly understood this, and in an attempt to integrate/gain a privileged position in American society sought to emphasize how they too came from a tradition in which freedom was central, and at times even had been the source of American freedom. In this way, it seems possible to "read" the ways in which American society was understood by Swedish immigrants through the ways they constructed their own dual identity.

8. Language was a fundamental dimension of Swedish-American culture and can form a starting point for many studies. One approach is to follow the seemingly ever-present discussion about the role of the Swedish language and the possibilities for its preservation in America. The many Swedish-language sources we have can also be used in the larger discussions of "multilingualism" in America, not least initiated by the work of Werner Sollors. [5] Finally, linguistic analyses of language change and language contact can be done, along the lines of work by, for example, Nils Hasselmo and Angela Hoffman.

Sources

Some of the more important sources that can be used include:

1. The Swedish-American press. Some 600 Swedish language newspapers were published over time in the U.S. and provide very rich sources for many different aspects of Swedish-American culture, the ways in which the ethnic community interacted with American society at large, and for contacts with Sweden. Some 300 of them have been microfilmed and are available at the Swenson Center. Through a trans-Atlantic project, the Swenson Center, the National Library of Sweden, the American Swedish Institute, and the Minnesota Historical Society we are currently digitizing some 20 of these titles.

2. Swedish-American churches and other organizations' records. A multitude of such groups were organized and we have many hundreds of these records on microfilm. Apart from listing members, they also provide very important insight into the cultural and religious lives of the ethnic community. Two recent additions are the records of Upsala College, which was founded in 1893 and closed in 1995, and which for many years served the educational needs of Swedish Americans on the East Coast, and the records of the American Union of Swedish Singers, an organization for choral and musical life among the immigrants. We are also the repository of a current Swedish-American organization--SWEA--founded in 1971 specifically for contemporary Swedish women who live in the U.S. This collection addresses the question of the significance of ethnicity for current Swedish immigrants in the U.S.

3. Individual papers. The Center also has the private papers of a number of prominent Swedish Americans. Some of them were quite active in cultural and literary circles and would be of great interest. Three such collections are those of Ernst Skarstedt, G.N. Swan, and Axel Lundeborg.

4. Our library includes a fine collection of **Swedish-American imprints**--that is books and pamphlets published in Swedish in the U.S. These publications vary greatly in nature, but do illustrate the cultural and literary life of an immigrant group. In recent years, we have worked hard to catalog these often rare publications.

[1] Karen Hansen, *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian settlers and the dispossession of Dakota Indians, 1890-1930* (New York, 2014) Gunlög Fur "Indians and Immigrants. Entangled Histories," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 33, (Spring 2014).

[2] Mary Howitt, "Fredrika Bremer," *The New York Times*, 14 March 1886.

[3] Dag Blanck, "'A Mixture of People with Different Roots': Swedish Immigrants in the American Ethno-Racial Hierarchies," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 33, (2014).

[4] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998).

[5] Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American literature* (New York, 1998).