

Swedish in Seattle

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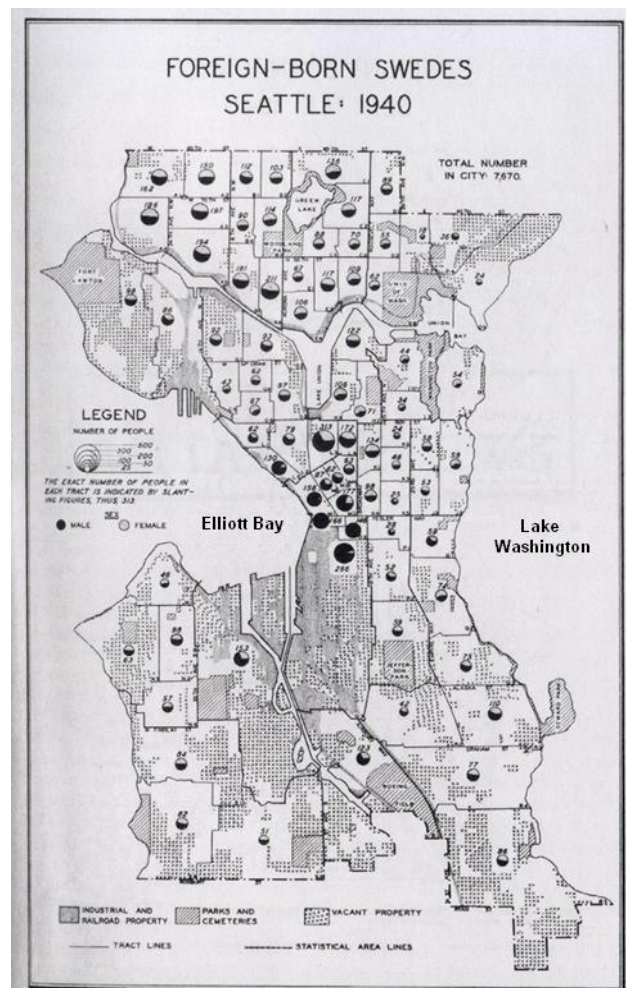
During the early 1900s, Seattle was full of Swedish organizations, churches, restaurants, stores, and things that marked Seattle as particularly Scandinavian. Sadly, many of these places have disappeared and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find things distinctly Swedish in Seattle. Not surprisingly, Swedish language maintenance and propagation has also suffered with the gradual fading of Swedish culture in Seattle.

According to the 1940 census figures provided by Norlen (2007), there was an immigrant population of 63,470 in a total population of 368,302 in Seattle. Swedes represented the third-largest group with 7,670 people making up 12.1 percent of the population. This trailed slightly behind the Norwegians with 8,436 people making up 13.3 percent. Many Scandinavian immigrants settled in Ballard because of its easy access to Puget Sound. Most of those that settled there were Norwegian fishermen.

“From the late 1870s until the turn of the century, Norwegian fishermen came to the Pacific Northwest to practice their traditional occupation, fishing the high seas off the coasts. . . By the 1930s, when the halibut industry reached its peak as the most lucrative fishing industry in the Northwest, 95 percent of the crews of the schooner fleet were Norwegian or of Norwegian descent. . . Norwegians still prevail as the national group among halibut fishermen.” (Veirs, 1982: 27.)

In contrast, Swedes spread themselves throughout Seattle. According to the 1940 census, 11.7 percent of Swedish immigrants settled in Ballard and another 9.4 percent in the adjacent neighborhoods of Fremont and Wallingford. The majority settled in other neighborhoods throughout Seattle. A map of the population density of foreign-born Swedes in 1940 is provided on the following page.

Swedish has lost many speakers in Seattle since 1940 and this becomes apparent when comparing the 1940 census with the 2000 census. In 1940,



there were 7,670 foreign-born Swedes recorded on the census. Since these were all first generation immigrants, it is safe to assume that this figure roughly equates to the number of Swedish speakers in Seattle at that time. On the 2000 census, there was no figure specific to Swedish speakers, but instead 1,994 people claimed to speak a Scandinavian language at home. Even if all 1,994 speakers of a Scandinavian language in 2000 were Swedes, they would still represent a significantly smaller group than the 7,670 Swedes of 1940.

Furthermore, most people with Scandinavian heritage in Seattle do not report speaking a Scandinavian language. According to the 2000 census, 66,218 people reported having Scandinavian heritage in Seattle, but again only 1,994 people claimed to speak a Scandinavian language at home. This means that only 3.01% of heritage Scandinavians speak a Scandinavian language at home. The accuracy of these numbers may not be precise because not every household participates in the census, but it is clear that there has been a steep drop in Scandinavian language speaking in Seattle. Most of the first generation of Swedish immigrants came to America between 1880 and 1930, so by 2000 most families were in their third or fourth generation.

For a more personal look into Swedish language maintenance in Seattle, I interviewed Linnea Donnen, who has been involved with Swedish language instruction for over 30 years. Linnea has worked for the University of Washington, Bellevue Community College, the Swedish Cultural Center, formerly known as the Swedish Club, and the Scandinavian Language Institute. She also taught at schools in Marysville and in Massachusetts. Most of her students have been adult learners, the majority of whom are of Swedish descent and/or have ties to Sweden and have an interest in their roots. Linnea is a third generation Swede in America and has experienced first hand the decrease in Swedish-ness of Seattle.

She was born and raised in Seattle and described the current state of Swedish in Seattle as a product of the first two generations of Swedish immigrants. The first generation was poor and did not have a chance to get an education. They were busy establishing their new lives and building homes so they learned English as best as they could, but were unable to fully learn the language or adapt to the new culture. They encouraged their children to fully integrate into the American culture and often times this included converting from Swedish to English as the language spoken at home, and Americanizing the spelling of their names. As a result, the second generation lost many traditions along with language skills. This phenomenon has left the third

and fourth generation at a loss, but there has been a resurgence of interest in heritage and language because of the gap in knowledge that the second generation created. Being part of the third generation, Linnea has been a leader in bringing back culture, tradition, and language to Swedes in Seattle. She has restored many traditions in her family and continues to teach Swedish locally. Linnea described having a steady class of 30 students in the 1970s, but now she is lucky to have 10 students. This is because the resurgence of interest in heritage has come at a time of technology and convenience. More and more people are turning to the convenience of learning languages online because they aren't able to devote the many hours required by classes. People are beginning to think languages can be learned at their own pace and this plays a huge role into the diminishing demand to learn Swedish in Seattle.

Although the demand is low, there are cultural activities around town that help maintain the language and traditions. Unfortunately, the number of Swedish organizations and publications is diminishing over time, along with membership, but some still exist and hold both annual and regular functions. *Lucia*, *Julotta*, and *Midsommar* are examples of annual traditional ceremonies that are still held in Seattle.

There are at least two different Lucia ceremonies that will be held in Seattle in 2007. The Swedish Cultural Center held their Lucia ceremony this year on Sunday, December 9th and the First Covenant Church held theirs on December 2nd. The actual date of Saint Lucia's Day is December 13th, which is the winter solstice according to the Julian calendar.

“The Lucia festival celebrates, according to one legend, the rescue of famine-stricken Swedes by St. Lucia, who came in a brightly lit ship with food for the starving people.” (Veirs, 1982: 42)

During the ceremony a girl chosen to act as Lucia walks wearing a crown of candles, ahead of a procession of other women holding a candle. All of the women sing the traditional Neapolitan song ‘Santa Lucia’ and then continue with the singing of other carols in Swedish. University of Washington Swedish language students are encouraged to participate in this ceremony each year.

Julotta is the early morning Christmas service that is done in old Swedish, and held at the Gethsemane Methodist Church downtown on Christmas morning. Choir groups such as the SVEA Male Chorus and the Swedish Women's Chorus participate in both ceremonies. Choirs

were large and very important to first generation Swedish immigrants, but now there are fewer choirs with fewer members.

Midsommarfest is a celebration of the summer solstice that takes place in June in many countries across Europe. In Sweden, it is celebrated from June 19th through June 25th. It involves the wearing of traditional folk costumes and dancing around the Scandinavian solstice pole (Maypole) along with singing traditional songs and enjoying the first potatoes, pickled herring, and strawberries of the season. Many also drink heavily. A very authentic celebration of Midsommarfest is hosted by the Skandia Folkdance Society in Kenmore, Washington (just north of Seattle) featuring a traditional Scandinavian solstice pole. It will be the 50th annual celebration in 2008.

The Swedish Cultural Center is one of the better-known Swedish organizations that organize many regular events. They hold a Swedish Pancake Breakfast every first Sunday of each month that offers Swedish style pancakes with lingonberries or strawberries, ham, milk, Swedish coffee, orange juice along with music and folk dancing. They also have a Scandinavian Lecture Series in which lectures are presented on a monthly basis in cooperation with the Scandinavian Department of the University of Washington. There is also a monthly Scandinavian Film Night in which Scandinavian films are shown with English subtitles. There are also Salmon Bakes, Swedish Meatball Dinners, Herring Brunches, Swedish Arts and Crafts Workshops, Member Meetings, Folkdance and Ballroom Dance Lessons, and Fashion Shows.

The Swedish Club at the University of Washington is comprised of students interested in Swedish culture and language. They hold weekly meetings, which often include an assortment of Swedish treats with Swedish coffee and a Swedish movie (with English subtitles.) Films are a great way to gain perspective into the culture and to hear how the language is spoken natively.

Some have already been mentioned, but here is an extensive list of Swedish organizations that exist in Seattle.

Local Swedish Organizations:

Department of Scandinavian Studies at the
- University of Washington
Department of Scandinavian Studies at
- Pacific Lutheran University
Nordic Heritage Museum
Swedish Cultural Center
Swedish Cultural Society
Skandia Folkdance Society
Swedish Women's Educational Association
SVEA Male Chorus
Swedish Women's Chorus
Scandinavian Language Institute

There are also several local businesses that were at least originally Swedish enterprises. These include IKEA – Home furnishings, Ivar's – Seafood Bars, Fish Bars, and Restaurants, Nordstrom – Department

Store, and Skanska – construction and development company.

In regards to leaders in the Swedish community, there is no single leader that is currently directing the whole community, but former U.S. Senators Henry Jackson and Warren Magnuson have been known to brag about their Scandinavian roots. Teachers and organizers of each organization can be considered leaders, but there is no strong moving force provided by any one of these leaders alone.

In regards to Swedish publications, few are left in Seattle. Most of the major Swedish newspapers are published in San Francisco, Minnesota, or Vancouver B.C. One major publication that existed in Seattle was called *Svenska Posten*. It existed from January of 1936 until December of 1976 and was a merger of the *Svenska Journalen*, *Puget Sound Posten*, *Oregon Posten*, and the *Svenska Pacific Tribunen*.



Although Swedish language and culture in Seattle is currently in decline, it is not impossible to learn about Sweden while in Seattle. In fact, in 2003, the Swedish Institute honored the Swedish Program at the University of Washington as one of the two best Swedish programs outside of Sweden. Maintaining a Swedish heritage is also made easier with a subscription to a remaining Swedish publication or a membership in a Swedish organization like the Swedish Cultural Center. Clearly, opportunities to embrace the Swedish do exist in Seattle; it is simply a matter of motivation.

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