

## AMERICAN FRIENDS OF THE EMIGRANT INSTITUTE OF SWEDEN, INC.

The *Drottningholm* passed the Statue of Liberty one day in August 1923 carrying Valborg Hilstrom to the New World. "We thought it was a beautiful thing," she recalls. A member of the ship's staff explained this monument to those on board who hoped to become American citizens. But after the ship arrived at the dock in New York City, the mood changed. As the immigrants on board moved to a smaller vessel for transport to Ellis Island, a crowd of Americans began shouting at them. "They hollered at us . . . they were telling us, go back so and so, and were cussing." That is how Valborg remembers her "welcome" to the New World.

Valborg Hilstrom's interview is only one of approximately 1000 interviews with Swedish-Americans conducted since 1984 by the American Friends of the Emigrant Institute of Sweden. The American Friends organization was founded in the mid-1980s, largely at the instigation of Lennart Setterdahl who had already spent about fifteen years traveling around the country to microfilm the records of nearly two thousand Swedish-American churches, lodges, and individuals. He did his work mainly for the Emigrant Institute of Sweden in Växjö. When this work was completed, the next step was a logical one — to record the "spoken memories" of Swedish immigrants and their offspring.

The proposal to initiate an oral history program was supported by the Emigrant Institute of Sweden and its director, Dr. Ulf Beijbom. He stated that oral history offered a last chance to "involve the voices of the last Swedish immigrants" in current immigration research. He was referring to the fact that the last large wave of immigration from Sweden occurred in



*Niel Johnson interviewing 99-year-old Ida Pauline Garrett in 1986. Ida Garrett immigrated in 1892.*

the 1920s when nearly 100,000 Swedes left for the New World. Clearly, it was time to interview as many as we could who were representative of that earlier generation, and to capture the memories of second and third generations of Swedish-Americans as well. Since the Emigrant Institute, as one of the premier collectors of material on Swedish immigration, stood to benefit substantially from this kind of program, it agreed to a name that identified this new organization with the institute in Växjö.

The objective of the American Friends organization is to conduct oral history interviews that will help present and future generations gain a better understanding of how the immigrants became assimilated into American society and the manner in which Old World values and traditions survived, changed, or vanished in the New World culture. These interviews also provide another source of information for the writing of local history, including the development of local businesses and social and religious organizations. Moreover, as we conduct these interviews, we seek to uncover manuscript sources that will contribute to the historical record.

In reaching toward these goals, we seek to interview people belonging to a wide spectrum of occupations and income groups. We place emphasis on

interviewing women; the role and viewpoints of women in immigration history have often been neglected.

The questions that we use in our interviews cover several broad categories, such as genealogy, early life and education in Sweden and America, causes of immigration, occupations, membership in ethnic or other social organizations, religious affiliation and activities, customs practiced in the home, contacts with kinfolk in Sweden, and personal values.

In 1990 the American Friends of the Emigrant Institute of Sweden continues to pursue its goals. The results of its work will be tested by researchers now and long into the future. We are confident that the information we are creating and collecting will prove to be a rich lode for those who study and interpret the role of immigrants in the shaping of America's history. The challenge at the moment is to obtain the means for converting taped interviews into transcripts and to enlarge access by finding additional purchasers for our oral history interviews. We invite interested persons to write to Lennart Setterdahl, 3452 Fourth St., East Moline, Illinois 61244.

— Niel M. Johnson

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