

Dressing for the Occasion

BY G. R. REVELLE

I took the stairs two at a time, rounding the corner and crossing the pine floor landing. In the farm house kitchen, I stopped abruptly, still damp from the shower and wearing only my socks and trousers. My Swedish cousin Helena and her sister-in-law, Christina, into whose kitchen I was running, stood barring my way.

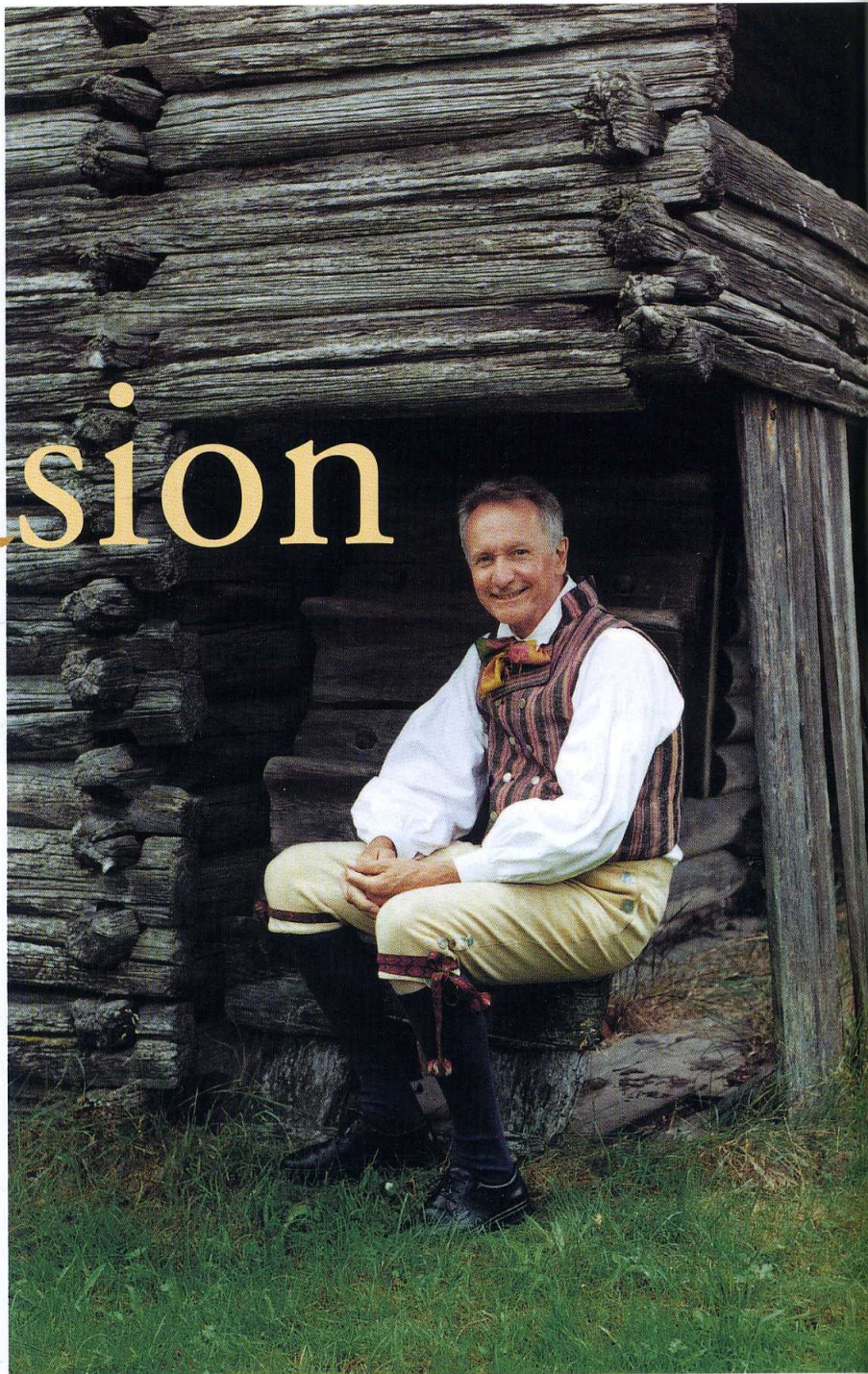
"Take off your pants," my cousin snapped, shaking something big and brown at me.

Earlier, her farmer brother Staffan had pulled me away from the morning milking and told me to shower quickly. They had a surprise for me, he said.

"We're going to eat already?" I thought, always a welcome notion at the end of three hours of milking 55 cows, plus feeding the calves. But I knew better, there was still another hour of milking to do. Something was up.

Seeing my puzzled look, Staffan smiled and said, "We shall help them row the *kyrkbåt* (church boat) this morning and I have borrowed the special clothes for you to wear. Carl-Erik will finish the milking."

In the old days, there were few roads in northern Sweden and people had to travel to and from church the fastest way they could. They turned to the rivers and would deploy large boats that could carry as many as 30 people to and from church. There are few church boats today in Sweden; the only boats still in use are in Dalarna. In northern Dalarna, the boats are somewhat of a tourist



G. R. Revelle models *Daladräkt*, period clothing from the Dalarna province that tradition dictates be worn in the *kyrkbåt* or church boat.

attraction, and have become a source of entertainment for both locals and tourists, particularly on summer holidays. I was in Dalarna visiting cousins just south of Lake Siljan at Frömansgården in Skålö, a small farming community on the Västerdalsälven river. Here a single church boat is maintained by an aged crew, who seem to regard rowing and traveling in this boat as a somewhat spiritual experience. Certainly, the boat's arrival at church with an 18th-century-garbed crew is entertainment in itself, but also a source of

pride for this community, which takes its traditions very seriously. It was an honor for me (a distant American cousin) to be asked to participate in this custom.

Back upstairs in the kitchen, Helena was still waving the brown bundle at me. It turned out to be a pair of moose skin trousers, part of my *Daladräkt* (period clothing from the Dalarna province) that tradition dictates must be worn in a church boat.

"I can't," I responded to her command that I disrobe. Unable to look at her, I twisted slightly to one side in embarrassment.

"Why not?" she demanded. "You must hurry. The boat will not wait long for you in Hulån. They will go without you." She reached for my waistband.

"I don't have any underwear on," I blurted, looking down at the floor like a small boy caught in some mischief.

These Swedes really have no shame, I thought. Unlike Americans, they think of underwear as just another garment, and it's difficult to get used to that idea if you had a more old-fashioned upbringing like mine. After all, my great-great-grandparents probably left Sweden in the first place because of their links to the then-budding and very conservative Swedish Baptist church, where clothes were definitely mandatory.

"Where are they?" Helena said, undaunted.

"In my pocket," I said sheepishly. Staffan came up from his shower and smiled broadly as he passed, already buttoning his shirt. "Lucky dog," I thought. "Why me?"

And sure enough, Helena persisted. "Well put them on quickly so you can try these on," she said. I got my first look at my Sunday rowing costume as she unrolled the trousers.

The ladies stood back slightly as if to give me maneuvering room, but not far enough to suggest that I could leave the area for privacy. Staffan's wife, Christina, fingered a pair of colorful *hängslen* (suspenders), eyeing me narrowly. They continued to stare at me as if I would be struck dead if I didn't reach for my waistband sometime soon.

I glanced behind the two women at my pretty, teenaged (female) cousins, who had been silently witnessing my humiliation. They appeared to be serious, but I could see them stifling amused looks behind slender hands, unable to conceal their smiles.

Frantically, I grabbed the trousers from Helena and bolted sideways like a Swedish soccer goalie into an adjoining bedroom, where I finally dropped my pants. Fishing my fresh shorts from my pocket, I chastised myself for waiting until after I showered to put on my underwear. Before I could put on the trousers, Christina strode unconcernedly into the room, thrusting a white, blowzy shirt at me.

"This is ready," she said matter-of-factly, hardly glancing at me as I commenced a one-legged dance on the bare wood floor, finally succeeding in getting the elastic waistband of my underwear pulled up just when other heads appeared in the doorway.

This was taking on an air of entertainment.

A vest in one hand and shoes and hose in the other, Helena approached, thrusting both handfuls at me.

I found the moose skin pants surprisingly heavy, considering they had such short legs. With both cousins itching to help, I barely got my second leg in before they took over. One cousin began pulling on the waistband and muttering something under her breath about the brass buttons. The legs of the trousers were too short and the waist was too large.

I reckoned I should abandon the trousers, but I barely got one arm into the shirt before I apparently needed more help.

Grimacing, the other cousin took over, earnestly tucking and buttoning, then pinning and clamping, some tying, a yank or two, and a lot of sliding and twisting, until soon, the trousers were up, the shirt was in, and the suspenders adjusted. This pulled the over-size waistband and crotch up so high I must have resembled a Munchkin from the *Wizard of Oz*. I didn't know what to do with my hands. Each time I attempted to do something, one of the cousins would push my hands aside and mumble something unintelligible, giving me a warning look as they bent with earnest to their individual tasks. When I leaned forward to look at my shoes and knee-length stockings, the bottom of the too-short trouser legs pulled up over the top of the hose, exposing two pink rings of flesh between my knees and stocking tops. This brought more frowns from the cousins, a yank or two, and an admonition to stand straight. This proved a problem later when I had to sit down to swing the massive oar, bending my knees for leverage.

Finished dressing at last, the would-be window dressers stood

"Take off your pants,"
my cousin snapped, shaking something big and brown at me.



In the old days, many Swedes relied on these large boats to travel to and from church. Today, the only boats still in use in Sweden are found in Dalarna, where they have become both a source of entertainment and pride.

back to admire their work. My doe-colored trousers came just below the knee. Navy blue stockings were tucked beneath the bottom of each trouser cuff and secured with several brass buttons on the outside edge, displaying my bandy-legged calves. A multi-colored, gaiter-like linen band was wrapped round twice over these cuffs and tied and knotted where trouser and stocking met, finishing off with a pair of colorful tassels dangling and bobbing jauntily from the outside of each leg.

The white, cotton shirt had long, blowzy sleeves and was ringed by a large, round collar. It appeared to have been styled in the 18th century. A multi-colored silk scarf was soon neatly tied (thank you, cousin) in a big, drooping bow below my neck. The finishing touch was a beautiful, double-breasted vest, striped in rust and dark brown. It, too, had small brass buttons and a short tunic collar, reflecting the Dalarna dress tradition of centuries past.

Not bad, I thought to myself, wishing I could look in a mirror.

The teenaged girls looked on silently in serious appraisal, their bemused looks gone for the moment. I was finally decked out in the requisite outfit for the boat. Since my cousin Staffan had

The aged crew seem to regard rowing and traveling in this boat as a somewhat spiritual experience.

secured a special place in the boat for me this Sunday morning as one of the rowers, I must meet Swedish standards. They wouldn't let me be seen in Järna Hembygdsgården, the meeting house in Dala-Järna, without first passing their own critical inspection. It was the final destination for the church boat. I wasn't aware until later that my borrowed clothes belonged to a former rower who had died. In retrospect, I like to believe he might have enjoyed coming along for the belated ride, spiritually speaking.

Before I had a chance to find a mirror, my cousins whisked me outside to a waiting automobile with Staffan ready at the wheel. He put the car into gear and then paused for a second. He looked back at me, somewhat panicked, and said, "You can row, can't you?"

S&A

The chief executive officer of a technology firm in western Wisconsin, G. R. Revelle says he works in order to travel. He enjoys writing about his experiences traveling around the world. His trips to Sweden, he says, have proved that you can go home again.