



There are about 1,000 local history museums in Sweden encompassing around 6,000 buildings. This is the Ovensjö local history museum in Storvik in Gästrikland. [Photo: Hilding Mickelsson]

Keeping Local History Alive... in Sweden

The Swedish local history movement is, to the greatest degree, a living popular movement. Its lifeblood is volunteerism—that is, the contribution of many individuals' time and effort on which the work of the local history associations is based. Payments to individuals for services are extremely rare. Membership fees and donations are used almost exclusively for the necessary repairs on the various local history museums or other buildings maintained by the local organizations.

Today there are about 2,000 local history associations in Sweden, of which about 1,600 are part of the national local history movement. The local organizations' territories follow the old parish boundaries. These groups are organized into 26 districts, called county and provincial associations. These associations in turn are members of Sweden's Local History Association (*Sveriges Hembygdsförbund*). The regional associations often work with the various county museums, which make available their staff experts and specialists. The Swedish Local History Association calculates that about 450,000 people are tied in some way to the local history movement—perhaps a small number to Americans, but this number is more than twice the total population of Iceland!

There are local history associations

with several thousand members, but also those that work on a smaller scale. The conditions vary depending upon the place where one lives. "Local" can mean many things—the old village in a rural farming area, an archipelago or coastal shire, a city or a built-up area, an old industrial community, or an expanding suburb. All associations share the desire to preserve the home district and to make it livable for its inhabitants. Of course, every local association worthy of the name organizes the bonfire on *Valborgsmässoafton* (Walpurgis Night—April 30), the annual Midsummer festival, and "handicrafts days" at the local history museum. A new tradition of organizing so-called "Homecoming Days" has begun: those who have emigrated earlier from the home district can return and participate in specially arranged festivals. It is not unusual for Swedes who live overseas to renew contacts with their old home area in this manner. In those districts from whence many Swedish emigrated, the local history associations have made great efforts to research the genealogies of the old families. This has been done in Småland and Halland, where all are well aware of the history of emigration of those provinces. Many local associations have visited the Swedish areas of the United States and Australia, often after

many years of local study circle investigations. But the local history associations do not in general carry out genealogical research in its purest form; that's left to the various genealogical associations, many of which are tied to the local history associations. It goes without saying that anyone interested in making contact with his or her old home district should not hesitate to notify the local history association in that area. One can often discover unpublished stories and oral traditions about the family which will help the individual find his or her personal roots.

The local history associations know about the small details in their surroundings; they keep track of the district's changes through time. An abandoned croft in the middle of the woods is seldom a mystery to those involved in the local history association. These associations also preserve interesting archives and photographic collections. These resources complement the knowledge gained through more traditional genealogical research.

Nearly every local association publishes a newsletter and sometimes even a parish yearbook. Here one can find a historical picture of life as it was lived in the past. This is also a way to learn about the parish's current situation. For those interested in researching a particular area and the people who lived there, leafing through old yearbooks of this type can be very valuable.

Anyone interested in following today's developments in the movement to preserve the local history in Sweden can easily subscribe to the magazine *Bygd och Natur*, published five times a year by

the Swedish Local History Association. The magazine comes with membership, as does the Local History Association yearbook. This publication has a different theme each year; in 1994 it will focus on the local history museum.

Samfundet för Hembygdsvård (The Society for the Preservation of the Home District), a predecessor to Sweden's Local History Association, was founded in 1916. It was a national advisory group to the developing local history movement. The Society organized building preservation courses, established a planning consultation service, and participated in the environmental debate of the day.

It can be safely said that the local history movement has had great influence on the development of the Swedish community. Many of the Society's activities in its early days have now been taken over by government agencies and other cultural organizations. We at the Association's office are often contacted by young researchers who wish to peruse the Society's archival materials in search of a famous architect or well-known environmentalist active when the Society was new. We have written our movement's history in the book *Återblickar*, published on the occasion of the Association's 75th anniversary in 1991.

It wasn't until 1976 that the Society was re-formed as a national organization. Today we are more than an advisory organization. Individual members have a say in the national organization as well as in their local association. And the work in these local associations is becoming

all the more complicated. Today it isn't just the traditional festivals. A local history association takes an active part in the development of its community and often testifies at public hearings. Often the local associations form alliances with other local like-minded groups to stop unnecessary building demolitions or unwanted highway developments. The many rules and ordinances that cover, for example, the preservation of cultural treasures, means that association members must be well-read and informed. A current threat, for instance, is the danger of our old place names being eliminated by the post office's address system and other governmental "reforms." A major campaign right now is to enact a law that will protect the old place names. All local history association members are agreed on this issue, and the views of the movement are respected.

Anyone interested in making contact with a specific local history association in a particular place can write to Sweden's Local History Association, Box 301 93, 104 25 Stockholm, Sweden. We are preparing a new membership list, but as yet do not have a finished inventory of all local history associations in Sweden. We will help by forwarding local addresses as best we can.

- Gunilla Lindberg

Gunilla Lindberg is the Information Director for Sweden's Local History Association. She edited the book, Det Började Vid Delaware, published by the Association in honor of the New Sweden '88 year.



Almost all local history associations try to involve the younger generation in the preservation of the cultural heritage. During so-called "Skantzen Days" in Hallstahammar, children act out scenes from the area's history. On the left, children in medieval costume are dyeing wool while others perform a 19th century wedding ceremony, with the bride wearing black. [All photos courtesy of Sweden's Local History Association]