

Collectors: Jim Leary & Greta Swenson

November 4, 1980

Informants: Verner & Naima Sandstrom
614 17th Avenue West, Ashland

The previous week's Daily Press carried a story about Ashland's Runeberg Society of Finland Swedes. Much of the information for that piece came from a history of the local Runeberg written by member Verner Sandstrom. Knowing that Fritz Swanson had played for Runeberg dances in the late 1940's and early 1950's, I hope to glean information from the Sandstroms about the local Scandinavian dance scene.

Greta Swenson - who was interested in meeting the Sandstroms with regard to her Ethnic Heritage Project - joined me as I visited the Sandstroms at 2:00 in their home on Ashland's once heavily Scandinavian west side. The couple invited us into their neat home and motioned us to chairs. We briefly explained our projects, Greta set up her tape recorder, and the session began.

I learned that both Sandstroms were of Finland Swede background, but both were born in Ashland: Verner in 1900, Naima a few years later. In 1909, Verner's father died and his mother returned to Jakobstadt in the Swedish area of Finland's west coast. There she remarried and Verner lived in the old country, learning Finnish in addition to his parents' Swedish, until his mother died and he felt "on his own." Verner had an uncle in Ashland to whom he wrote about employment. The uncle offered to send Verner passage to America, so he came over in 1923. Once here, Verner found work as an electrician - a trade in which he'd had training in Finland. He had to begin learning English and, because for a while he spoke only Swedish, Verner associated plenty with the local Swedes. Naima remarked that that was how they met.

Having assembled these biographical facts, I set to inquiring about Verner's musical knowledge. He admitted to owning a violin which he never played and he once picked tunes on the mandolin, although he no longer plays. He used to sing a bit too, but I gathered from our conversations that Verner's singing was largely confined to his school in Finland and to later Runeberg Lodge sessions. He did possess a songbook from which he reckoned he used to sing occasionally. Most of these songs were in Swedish with a few in Finnish. The books were:

- I. Appelberg and I. Rosquist, Sjung! (Hango: Hango - Bladets Trycker: Aktiebolog, 1921. This book contains 550 songs, but has no tunes. There is an accompanying book of tunes. Melodier Till Sjung (Helsingfors: Mercators Tryckeri Aktibolog, 1925.

With regard to dances, both Naima and Verner recalled that they went on regularly in the 20's and continued until around 1954. For awhile the Runeberg had their own

hall (Verner located it exactly on the taped interview), but by the 1940's they had moved into the Fraternal Hall (now Ward's warehouse) which they shared with other Scandinavians. Several times a year they would have a big dance featuring an auction of knit and other goods made by the women members. The dances would generally be polkas, waltzes, and schottisches and they would go on until midnight. Late in the evening, there would inevitably be a "little lunch" featuring sandwiches and the coffee which Swedes have "got to drink." The bands for these events were generally "hired." The Sandstroms mentioned that a man named Mattson (now deceased) handled the details for arranging many of the dances. Fritz Swanson often played for these events, but the Sandstroms recalled that Viola Turpeinen played for these dances in the 1930's. The last big dances came in about 1954 when, in mid-summer, the local Runeberg hosted a national convention in Ashland (I'll have to look this event up in the Daily Press).

Incidentally, Verner Sandstrom's history provides information on this gathering. As the history goes on to detail, the local Runeberg Lodge, although waning, maintains its ties with other lodges throughout the U. S. For instance, Verner and Naima had recently purchased an album circulated by Runeberg members in the San Francisco Bay Area: Hanuri (Rhythm) presented by "Johan and Ingemar, accompanied by Paul and ?" (Two accordions, guitar, drums.) The group plays waltzes, polkas, yenkas, ganglat, and schottis.

Having gained this information, I turned the interview over to Greta and she pursued questions about cookery, holiday traditions, carpentry, gardening, trips to the old country, and church events (see her log and notes for this information). While Greta questioned, I let my eyes roam about the place. There was considerable evidence of the couple's Finland Swede background: Swedish, Finnish and American flags; a painting of the church in Jakobstadt where Verner was confirmed; Swedish plaques; Naima's crocheted table cloths and window shades; newspapers and magazines from the old country. I also learned, through Greta's queries, that the couple had a huge trove of slides they'd taken - some of them documented the 1954 Runeberg convention in Ashland.

It also emerged that, beyond compiling his local account of the Runeberg, Verner maintained an active historical interest in Finland Swedes throughout the

U. S. Among other volumes, he possessed Anders Myhrman's massive Finland - Svenskar i Amerika (Helsingfors: Svenska Litteratur - sällskapet I Finland, 1972). The book, in Swedish, contains a section on Ashland. In its appendices are several interesting photographs. One shows a "Strangbandet" of the "Ebenezer for samlingen i Duluth, 1910." The group, both men and women, are formally attired and possess a songbook, two violins, autoharp, three guitars, and a piano. In contrast is a picture of three Michigan lumberjacks, dressed in work clothes, holding two button accordions and a fiddle. The picture isn't dated.

About 3:15 the Sandstroms gave us a tour of their place, pointing out Finland Swede artifacts and examples of Verner's exemplary carpentry work (see diagram). Without training Verner had, in typical Swede fashion, redone the house both inside and out: exterior siding, replastering, cabinets (including a record case and gun rack fashioned from mahogany taken from an old boat), a stairway, a bathroom addition, and a basement sauna. Verner was not, as the Swedish saying goes, "born with a thumb in the middle of his hand."

Following the tour, Mrs. Sandstrom offered us coffee (they customarily had afternoon coffee about 3:30) along with homemade cookies and slices of sweet bread. We departed about 4:00, with Greta making arrangements to return later on for a slide and interview session.