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## A History of the Use of Swedish Language in New Sweden, Maine

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A HISTORY OF THE USE OF SWEDISH LANGUAGE IN NEW SWEDEN, MAINE

by

Kaitlyn E. Anderson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Anthropology)

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## ABSTRACT

Swedish has a significant role in the history of Aroostook County. In the 1870s, a group of Swedish immigrants settled in the then newly-formed Maine's Swedish Colony. They brought traditional Swedish customs, dress, food and language. Meanwhile in Sweden, a change was occurring in the Swedish language that led to the development of modern Swedish into the contemporary Swedish that continues to be spoken in Sweden today. While many of the oldest generation of Swedes in New Sweden know this older style of Swedish, the language was not readily passed down to their children or their children's children. Despite the fact that English is spoken in daily life, the Swedish language still has a presence in life today and continues to mark Swedish identity in Maine's Swedish Colony.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, Edmund and Eloise Anderson. By their example of enduring devotion to each other and to their family, I learned the meaning of everlasting love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Preface   | 1  |
| Introduction  | 5  |
| Methods and Approach  | 6  |
| Chapter 1 – <u>The Beginnings of New Sweden</u>               | 8  |
| The Founding of New Sweden                                    | 8  |
| The Early Years in the Colony                                 | 10 |
| Chapter 2 – <u>Linguistic Traits and Change in New Sweden</u> | 13 |
| The Swedish Language in Early New Sweden                      | 13 |
| Schools in New Sweden   | 15 |
| Swedish in the Church   | 18 |
| Swedish in Daily Life   | 20 |
| Chapter 3 – <u>Cultural Traditions in New Sweden Today</u>    | 23 |
| New Sweden’s Midsommar Festival                               | 23 |
| Conclusion  | 29 |
| Pictures  | 32 |
| Works Cited   | 34 |
| Author’s Biography  | 37 |

## **PREFACE**

### **A Brief Overview of Swedish Immigrant Trends in the United States**

Beginning in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over 1 million Swedes emigrated from Sweden to the United States. Although the emigration came in waves, there was, for many years an uninterrupted stream of Swedish emigrants in America. One of the main drivers of this exodus was the crop failure in Sweden, while in American land, as well we stories of prosperity, were abundant. Other forces of emigration, nearly always economic in cause, included crises that affected Swedish industry, and times of high unemployment. At those times when people in Sweden seemed to lose all hope, they looked towards America. For many, America represented the possibility of a better life for themselves and for their families. These one million Swedish immigrants settled in nearly every part of the country, most notably in the Midwest, sometimes establishing entire communities. While each of these communities undoubtedly have their own unique histories and experiences, most of them seemed to have followed a number of general trends in regards to cultural and linguistic assimilation. In most instances, these colonies were not simply the transplant of an old culture onto new soil. While many pieces of their culture remained unmistakably intact, most communities displayed a strong eagerness to embrace their new homeland and rapidly Americanize. In some parts of community life however, this transition occurred more slowly, such as in the church.

At the start of nearly all Swedish-American communities it was only natural for all of the churches to use Swedish as their main language. But as time passed the issue of whether or not to make the switch to English became of greater importance. For some



time it seemed that the majority opinion was that the conversion to English worship was inevitable. But after a huge surge of Swedish immigrants in the 1880s, the extended retention of the Swedish language seemed not only possible, but obligatory. This brought about a contentious time in which there was widespread debate over which language to use within the church. Those in favor of English believed it would secure the future of the Swedish-American church life. Swedish historian Lars Ljungmark in his study of Swedish immigration to America wrote:

“It was obvious to them that if the churches were to attract the second and third immigrant generations, most of whom had a poor knowledge of Swedish and had entered the mainstream of American society, they ought to concern themselves more about declining membership than the longevity of a minority language” (Ljungmark 1979, 118)

While this argument lasted for some time within the churches, it was eventually settled by outside factors. “World War I was the turning point in the life of the Swedish language” (Ljungmark 1979, 119). Not only did World War I cause a slowing in immigration of Swedes to the United States, but it also created a political and social climate that was suspicious of all things deemed foreign or non-American. It was during this time that most Swedish newspapers and publications, which had previously enjoyed relatively large readerships, diminished or died out. The use of Swedish was even frowned upon within Swedish societies, many of which began doing their record keeping in English at this time. The church was still slower to completely abandon all Swedish. Many churches attempted to offer services in both languages. But in nearly all cases, as soon as English was introduced, it gained irreversible momentum until all that remained was English.

In many Swedish communities, the churches were the first to establish schooling and continued to provide their students with religious studies and instruction in Swedish. However, in all public schools English was the official language and in most cases, the use of Swedish was not only discouraged, but banned. In more mixed communities, teasing and ridicule from the other American students was reinforcement enough to keep Swedish students from speaking their language.

In more urban areas, many Swedish-American organizations formed. While at first these resembled fraternal societies and were mainly designed to provide various kinds of health insurance, later these organizations turned into cultural heritage clubs (Ljungmark 1979, 123). Social organizations such as these were more likely to form in urban areas for two main reasons. In urban areas the sheer population meant there were more Swedes available to congregate. Additionally, a variety of other ethnicities were also present in cities and often proudly represented themselves with similar social groups, thus it was seen as an unspoken right to have their own representation.

At the same time, many immigrant groups, including Swedes, consider their rapid Americanization as a source of pride. Yet the study of this process has proven difficult to measure. Some suggest that the rate of assimilation can be determined by the amount of intermarriage. In this measure, Swedish-Americans have been slow to assimilate, largely due to their language barrier. Those who did intermarry were often those who held jobs that required them to speak English. The learning of English in itself may have also been used as a measurement of assimilate. Very few Swedish immigrants had received any schooling in English prior to entering the United States. "The language barrier spelled the difference between a rapid and tortuously slow pace of assimilation. One can easily

understand the pride they took in demonstrating their progress with the language...” (Ljungmark 1979, 127). Yet many Swedish-American organizations were divided on this issue, as they similarly were when faced with this linguistic dilemma within the church. Some felt that the Swedish language was a crucial part of maintaining and preserving Swedish immigrant culture. Others saw the retention of Swedish as a barrier preventing them from fully entering American society. The acceptance and implementation of English also depended on immigrants’ occupations and locations.

“The assimilation process met with some resistance in rural areas where Swedes had settled as compact enclaves and lived apart from the outside world. Here the Swedish language and customs retained more of their vitality, and the demands for rapid assimilation were much weaker” (Ljungmark 1979, 129).

This may be attributed to the homogeneous character of many of the earlier rural Swedish settlements, entire communities who often came from the same region or even village, thus resulting in linguistic and cultural isolation from their surroundings.

By the end of the 1930s, most Swedish immigrants across the United States had become fully integrated part of American society (Ljungmark 1979, 129). However, in the mid-1960s, changes in sociological thought encouraged Americans to reconsider themselves as not simply a product of a “melting-pot” society, but to rediscover and appreciate their ancestry. Today, Swedish heritage lives on in many communities as a “secondary ethnicity”, living their day-to-day lives as American citizens, while preserving elements of their Swedish culture and language. A study of Maine’s Swedish Colony provides an in-depth look at the history of the use of Swedish in one Swedish immigrant colony, examine how their story either reinforces or challenges the general trends found in other Swedish immigrant communities in the United States.

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Maine's Swedish Colony forms a unique and valuable chapter in our state's history. It is also one that is very dear to my heart, as it is the story of my own family and ancestors. The phrase "Maine's Swedish Colony" is a collective term that refers to the towns of New Sweden, Westmanland, Stockholm and Woodland, of which New Sweden was the first. While many other cultural colonies have sprung up throughout Maine's history, New Sweden is unique in that it was a very deliberate and carefully planned effort on the part of an American, William Widgery Thomas, Jr. It has been said that Thomas did no favors bringing that little group of Swedes to Aroostook county, but he knew these hardy people could withstand the harsh Maine winters and untamed landscape. Not only did they withstand it, they thrived; clearing thousands of acres of dense forest, they forever transformed the landscape of northern Aroostook county.

But not only did they leave their lasting mark on the land, they left an enduring essence of what it is to be Swedish and strong sense of pride in that cultural and linguistic heritage. It is present from the moment you enter the colony, greeted by the town sign with the words "Welcome" and "Välkommen" side by side. It is present in the names of people and places, from the dozens of Andersons in the phonebook to the villages with names like Jemtland and Stockholm. You can see it in the schools, where the mascot for the New Sweden School is "the Swede" and at Caribou High School, the Viking. At one time, Swedish was almost exclusively spoken, but as schools pushed an English-only education and more and more non-Swedes entered the community, it became a secondary language, one reminiscent of a previous time and place. But remnants of the language

remained, passed down through generation, and have a continued and cherished presence today. The Swedish language is an integral part of the New Sweden community and while very little Swedish is spoken in daily conversation, it has its own special place in the lives of New Sweden citizens.

In Maine's northern-most and largest county, a small band of Swedes were settled in a desolate wilderness. One hundred and forty two years later, the Swedish language still serves as a proud marker of Swedish identity.

### **Methods and Approach**

In researching this subject, I made a concerted effort to gather my information from voices of both the past and present. Part of my research therefore involved examining various primary documents, such as letters to and from Sweden, speeches from events and ceremonies, memoirs, and accounts of life from early settlers. In addition, I also sought and was granted IRB permission to conduct interviews with residents of the New Sweden community. Since only the oldest citizens are those who grew up speaking Swedish, it proved somewhat difficult to track down some of these individuals, and many were unable to meet due to health-related issues. I also spoke with other residents of the community, some of whom grew up in the community and some who moved there later. I kept an audio record of two interviews in particular because of the unique Swedish sound to the interviewees voices. These recordings will be archived in the Maine Folklife Center. Although not directly quoted, these interviews helped reinforce much of the information I had come across in my other research. My methods of research were all done in an attempt to gain a more complete insight into the ways that

different generations viewed the culture and especially what their relationship was with the Swedish language.

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINNING OF NEW SWEDEN**

Nothing was simply handed to those first Swedes. It was by their hard work and their humble but enduring strength, which made the colony come into being. And it is with that same ethic that the colony lives on today. Thus, it is not only fitting but entirely necessary to understand the beginning of Maine's Swedish Colony in order to grasp a sense of the character of the community today.

### **The Founding of New Sweden**

The history of Maine's Swedish Colony begins with the backdrop of the American Civil War. In the state of affairs during the war, President Lincoln designated some men, acting as War Consuls to visit certain countries in order to garner support for the Union cause. Portland native William Widgery Thomas, Jr. was one of those men. He was sent to Gothenburg, Sweden and lived there for three years (Thomas 1880, 15). While there, Thomas fell in love with the Swedish people, their language and culture.

Shortly after the end of the war, Maine's population began to drop. In addition to devastating loss of 25,000 young men in the war, the promise of Westward expansion and opportunity led many away from the East (Thomas 1880, 58). Additionally, the State was struggling to settle the North Woods and secure the northern border. It was Thomas who had the idea to settle this uninhabited forest with a colony of Swedes. In his own words, spoken at the colony's decennial celebration, Thomas said, "Fertile lands, exhaustless quarries, noble rivers, colossal water power, and harbors, countless and unrivaled, all are ours. We lack labor to utilize the resources' lying waste around us. Men are the wealth of a state. We lack men. The necessity of Maine was the cause of New Sweden." (Thomas

1880, 12)

Thomas recognized the similarity of the landscape to places he had seen in Sweden and could attest to the strong work ethic of its people. With approval of the state legislature and Governor Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Thomas traveled to Sweden to gather a diverse group of Swedes to be the first immigrants of a new colony. Among these people were 22 men, 11 women, and 18 children (Thomas 1880, 17) representing nearly every major region in Sweden. All of the men were farmers but nearly all also contributed a trade or skill that would be advantageous to the entire colony. “As only a limited number of families could be taken, none would be accepted unless they brought with them the highest testimonials as to character and proficiency in their callings ... No one was accepted unless it appeared clear that he would make a good and thrifty citizen of our good state of Maine” (Thomas 1880, 16). This was all according to Thomas’ plan, for he sincerely wanted to see this little colony of Swedes not only survive but thrive in the unbridled forest of northern Maine. After sailing to Halifax, they traveled by boat up the St. John River to Fredericton. As they made their way through Fort Fairfield, many people came out to welcome the new settlers. Some would walk a ways alongside the wagons, others simply looked on at the newcomers with curiosity. Thomas recalls a story of a brief but cheering friendship.

“A Swedish youth of twenty struck up an acquaintance with an American young man of about the same age. It mattered not that the Yankee did not speak a word of Swedish, nor the Swede a word of English, they chattered away at each other, made signs, nodded and laughed as heartily as though they understood it all. Then they picked up leaves, decorated each other with leafy garlands, and putting their arms around one another marched along at the head of the procession, singing away in the greatest good fellowship, as good friends as though they had known each other for a lifetime, and perfectly regardless of the little fact that neither of them could speak a word the other could understand. Youth and fraternity were to them a common language, and overleaped the confusion of



tongues.” (Thomas 1880, 20)

At some point the boys parted ways, and after making their way through miles of woods, those first fifty settlers arrived at their new home away from home, New Sweden: “a name at once commemorative of the past and auspicious of the future” (Thomas 1880, 21).

### **The Early Years in the Colony**

Because of their early arrival, July 23, 1870, the state has only completed six of the twenty-five cabins planned for the settlers (Thomas 1880, 24). But the Swedes went right to work and by late in the fall there were 26 homes built, as well as a building called the *Capitolium* (The Capitol), which served as a place for storage, meeting, school and worship. Roads were built, and workers could earn credit at the local general store for their labor. The teams of men were led by those individuals who were able to also speak English, so it became apparent from very early on that this was an advantageous skill to have. More Swedes had also arrived by this time, bringing the population up to 114. On August 21, the very first marriage in New Sweden took place. The ceremony was conducted in Swedish, “but according to American forms”(Thomas 1880, 28), a pattern that seemed to permeate many areas of settlement life and development.

During the summer and fall, the clearing of acreage was of top priority. As described by Thomas, “The primeval American forest rang from morn till eve with the blows of the Swedish axe. The prattle of Swedish children and the song of Swedish mothers made unwonted music in the wilds of Maine” (Thomas 1880, 25). But women also did their fair share of labor. It was a common sight during clearing and cutting to see

a man at one end of a cross-cut saw and his wife at the other. There are many accounts of women, carrying out what seem now to be extraordinary feats during as ordinary work. One account recalls a women who, when he husband fell ill, chopped down several cedar trees, cut them, carved out and shaved these into shingles (commonly used for exchange), which she then carried three miles through the woods to barter for medicine. “By such toil was this wilderness settled.” (Thomas 1880, 40).

Making cedar shingles served as popular work for farmers during the winter months, which were harsh by most standards, but relatively commonplace for most of the settlers and likely mild in comparison to those hailing from more northern regions of Sweden. Because every day since their arrival in July had been largely devoted to the clearing and cutting of woods, the settlers had no shortage of wood to keep them warm during the long winter months. At this time the Swedes introduced skiing to America. For them, this was commonplace in Sweden and served as much more than sport; it was a necessary means of transportation during the winter, when snow would accumulate by the foot.

The colony progressed steadily and successfully. A man from New Hampshire by the name of Albe Holmes owned a starch company and opened multiple factories in New Sweden (Hede 2001). This quickly became an important industry in the area. Several commercial centers were forming, including general stores, a hotel, a creamery and other places of business. This was aided by the extension of the B&A railroad from Caribou to New Sweden. Goods were then more easily transported and commerce developed quickly. Beginning in January of 1872, there was a weekly newspaper in Caribou called “The North Star” which had a column written entirely in Swedish. Appropriately named

the “*Swensk Column*”, it was mainly written by notable persons of the community, often times Pastors. “This was the first paper, or portion of a paper ever published in a Scandinavian language in New England,” (Thomas 1880, 43). Although it ran for little more than a year, it was extensively read in New Sweden. And those who had run advertisements in Swedish during the paper’s operation had received a great deal of business from Swedes (Hede 1970, C-3). By 1880, only a decade after the arrival of the original 50 Swedes, their population had grown to 787, an increase of 1474% (Thomas 1880, 48). Also in that time, 4438 acres of land had been cleared where dense forest had formerly stood, without the assistance of heavy machinery or electric tools. The community held a decennial celebration to celebrate this first decade of achievement. Many notable individuals were in attendance including the beloved William W. Thomas and former Governor and General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. During his speech in which he spoke very highly of the Swedes, Chamberlain said, “For we are of one blood, friends, and but little removed from each other in traits and temper, though you have kept nearer to the original stock. The same may be said of language. Of our two forms of speech the soul is the same and the features too, if not the flesh. Word answering to word, as the face of a friend.”(Chamberlain 1880, 53). At the end of the program, the American national anthem was sung. As recorded, “The audience all rose, and Swedes and Americans, each in their own language, but to the same music, sang their national anthem.” (Chamberlain 1880, 58). But just like the friendship between the American and Swedish boy traveling to the colony on the first day, this harmonious bilingual existence could not, and did not, last forever.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LINGUISTIC TRAITS AND CHANGE IN NEW SWEDEN**

Sweden is a vast country with an array of landscapes ranging from sweeping fields and forests, to frozen arctic tundra. And just as different and diverse as its land is its language. Traditionally, there are six distinct dialects of Swedish. Within each of these, vernaculars can vary from town to town and number in the hundreds. While there exist dozens of phonetic and phonological differences among these dialects, certain generalizations can be made to characterize each. It is well known, for instance, that those from Southern Sweden, particular the region of Skåne, pronounce their r's differently than most other Swedes. This is influenced by their close proximity (and former belonging) to Denmark (Dan Olson, pers. comm.). Or, for instance, a recent poll in Sweden determined that Gothenburg is the most charming of the Swedish accents, and advertisers readily seek out people with this melodic accent. Today in most areas of Sweden, the language has become so streamlined that the regional differences are little more than accents. But it is safe to say that there were, at one time, regional dialects so distinct from one another that communication between them was barely mutually intelligible.

### **The Swedish Language in Early New Sweden**

William W. Thomas understood that in many Scandinavian settlements in the Midwest, immigrants often came from the same villages or towns. While this provided a strong sense of cohesion within the community it also tended to give these groups a certain "cliquiness" and exclusivity. Thomas intentionally wanted to avoid this fate for Maine's Swedish Colony, so he searched for a more diversified population. While rallying interest in the colony, he purposefully sought out people of various crafts and

trades, as well as people from different areas of Sweden. This resulted in the early New Sweden area becoming a mixing pot of individuals with dialects so dissimilar, that communication was sometimes hindered.

“From every part of Sweden had come the immigrant settlers of the settlement, each bringing with his or her own way of speaking Swedish. One from Norrland could not understand the Scanian [from the Skåne region] dialect, nor the Scanian the Norrlandic. Those that hailed from Jemtland had their own, and our Scanian way of speaking was the butt of ridicule with all other Swedes, as well as Scanians themselves, for there were as many widely different dialects spoken within the province as without.” (Malmquist, J-64)

A brief anecdotal account demonstrates this well. Two families, early in the colony’s development, had farms across the road from one another, with one family from Norrland and the other from Skåne. One day, the lady of the house from the Norrlandic family, Mrs. Englund, went to visit the lady from the Skåne family, Mrs. Falk. After speaking for some time, Mrs. Englund returned home and excitedly informed her husband that she had just learned three English words: Yes, No, and “Tjuva”. As explained by Marie Malmquist in her account, “‘Tjuva’ is Scanian for pitchfork. Mr. Englund wondered how she ever learned to pronounce the last word,” (Malmquist, J-65).

Despite Thomas’ initial intentions, as more settlers arrived, Swedes began to congregate with those from their homeland regions. Those from the Skåne region, tended to live on East Rd, those from the Jemtland region, settled in the area known as Jemtland. The natural tendency to gather among those with whom you are most similar, did in part shape some areas of New Sweden, but as children grew up and married, these geographic and linguistic distinctions began to fade, a linguistic phenomenon known as generational leveling.

In 1902, a publication entitled “In Fair Aroostook, Where Acadia and Scandinavia’s Subtle Touch Turned a Wilderness into a Land of Plenty” was published by the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad Company. It was written by Clarence Pullen and was an account of his visit to Aroostook County and particularly the Swedish Colony. During his visit, he called upon the Tall family. Of the two daughters he wrote, “There was a piano, and the elder girl, to her own accompaniment, sang some Swedish hymns very sweetly. Both of the girls spoke perfect English with only a little of the crisp Swedish enunciation and softer voices to distinguish their accent from that of the average educated American girl.” (Pullen 1902, 70). The younger of the two girls mentioned is my great grandmother, Ethel Tall. From the perspective of an outsider who was, perhaps expecting to encounter immigrants struggling with English, it may have seemed that these girls had lost their linguistic heritage. But I know this not to be the case, as my great grandmother was indeed fluent in Swedish and remnants of that “crisp Swedish enunciation and softer voice” can still be heard in my grandmother’s speech today.

### **Schools in New Sweden**

While much Swedish was at first retained, it is undeniable that there was a strong push for English education right from the very beginning in New Sweden. The first formal schooling began in November of 1871 (Thomas 1880, 38). It took place at the *Capitolium*, which, as formerly noted, also served as the town meeting place, storage house, and place of worship. Andrew Wiren, a Lutheran pastor from Sweden, served as the teacher and was also a prominent colony leader. He has spent some time living in the west, where he had gained fluency in English. The first class consisted of seventy-seven

students, and their principal subject was English (Thomas 1880, 38). “To learn to read, write and speak English was of more importance than all else.”(Thomas 1880, 38). Pastor Wiren also taught evening classes for adults so that they could become proficient in English as well. Marie Malmquist, a student of Pastor Wiren, wrote that he had a unique style of teaching that was very effective. “The first day of school I learned to spell and pronounce a dozen words, the names of the sixteen counties of the State of Maine, and how to say yes and no with emphasis.”(Malmquist, J-62). Even after less than a year after the opening of the school, it was said that many could speak and read English well and that some could write well too. Having access to this public education was highly valued by the community and many would travel for miles to attend, even in the winter when they would ski to school (Thomas 1880, 42). By 1873, Thomas observes that schools were flourishing. “Such an advance had been made in English, that most of the children above ten years of age, could read and write out language tolerably, and speak it well. An American visiting the colony had no need of an interpreter, for every child that talked at all, could speak English.” (Thomas 1880, 46). This we know to be true from the observations made in “In Fair Aroostook”, where it seemed to the visitor that the Swedish girls’ English was practically indistinguishable from any other American girl. A woman by the name of Edith England taught at a one-room schoolhouse on Madawaska Road. One of her pupils, Hilma Hede, recalled that, “Edith England stressed the importance of turning her Swedish youngsters into Americans,”(Hede 1981, 27).

Eventually, English was no longer simply the goal of education, but also the medium, as all schooling eventually became entirely conducted in English. This was also true of other Swedish communities, where English was the only language accepted in

public schools. For many children, this meant that their first time they spoke English was their first day of school. There are many amusing stories of the confusion that this would sometimes cause. For instance, young Evald Folk Anderson had been told that in school he was only allowed to speak English, so when asked to state his name he said, "Evald People Anderson". 'Folk' means 'people' in Swedish. Another instance of first-day confusion occurred when a young boy named Uno was asked to give his name on the first day. He said "Uno" so which the non-Swedish teacher responded, "No, I don't know" It is said this on for a minute before the teacher understood (Dorothy Anderson, pers. comm.).

Although great progress was being made in the English education of the colony's youth, little was being actively done to preserve their native language. In an interview about her childhood in New Sweden, Alma Peterrson, who came to New Sweden as an infant in 1887, spoke about her schooling experience.

"Alma told us that they weren't allowed to speak Swedish, even though practically the whole class spoke it. If they did speak a word of "Swede" they would have to stand in the corner. Now she states that it was a good thing, for how else were they to learn the English language. At home, the parents were no help because they spoke Swedish all the time. "So," she adds, "we had to chew our fingernails and everything before we spoke any Swedish." (Soderberg 1976, 27)

Studies from other Swedish communities cite peer ridicule as being an important factor in discouraging the use of Swedish among school-aged children. While this was likely not the case in New Sweden, due to the homogenously Swedish make-up of the classes, teachers strictly enforced a no-Swedish policy, as evidenced above. But while English was pushed from the beginning at school, in church, Swedish remained an integral part of worship and remained present long after it had disappeared elsewhere.



## **Swedish in the Church**

In Maine's Swedish Colony, the church is and has always been at the center of community, family, and spiritual life. There are three main Christian denominations that have been ever-present in the colony's history: the Lutherans, the Baptists, and the Covenanters. The church that my family has always been a part of is the New Sweden Covenant Church. While its history is unique to its congregation, it can be safely assumed that the other churches in the community followed a similar path.

The church was founded in 1886, and originally named the "Fria Missions Kyrka" (Free Missions Church) (Anderson 2003, 36). The charter was signed on Nov. 27, 1886 by 17 community members including Lars P. and Amanda Larsson, my great, great grandparents. Winters were harsh, but Sunday service was not considered optional. My grandmother recalls the long 5-mile sleigh ride to church in the winter, and playing the piano on days so cold her fingers could barely play. Through these tough conditions, services continued.

The children of the church members attended Sunday School in Jemtland. Mr. John Berglind taught classes there for thirty-six years. Most children attended Sunday School from when they were 5 or 6 until they were confirmed, around age 12. They used Swedish Bibles and each week he assigned one student to read the text aloud in Swedish for the following week. My grandmother Eloise recalls this as being good practice for learning Swedish. Without this practice, Eloise would not have been ever taught how to write Swedish and she is a notable exception among her generation in retaining this ability. Likewise, in other Swedish communities Sunday school was the only place where any type of Swedish instruction seemed to occur, since English was the official language

of the classroom.

Every year the Jemtland Sunday School also put on a Christmas program at the Church. Each child was assigned a different piece to perform or contribute; my grandmother recalls one year when she had to recite from memory a 16-line Swedish poem.

For the first 56 years of the church's history, all sermons, Scripture readings, prayers and songs were in Swedish (Anderson 1986, 29). But as marriage between Swedes and non-Swedes became more common, a growing need to accommodate all members of the congregation became apparent. Eloise recalls that her confirmation had been conducted in "broken English" as this was the time when they began to incorporate English into the church. "While Pastor Lindgren was here he introduced an English service once a month, which expanded until we rarely used the Swedish" (Anderson 2003, 37-38). Attempting to offer services in both languages was popular for some time in Swedish communities around the nation, but as in this case, English soon became the dominant language shortly thereafter. 1943 marked an important year for the Covenant Church, during which it experienced changes in language, leadership, and affiliation. During the previous year, in the 1942 annual report of the church, the only English word used was "automobile" (Anderson 1986, 28). In 1943, Carolyn Peterson, who was standing in as acting secretary for Fritz Sjöberg, recorded the annual report, written for the first time, entirely in English (Anderson 1986, 29). In 1944 when Pastor Frykholm resigned, the request for a new pastor read "We desire someone who speaks, though not necessarily preaches in Swedish" (Anderson 1986, 30). Soon after, English Bibles replaced Swedish Bibles; most songs, although many still sung in their original language,

were translated. The language of the church was changing, responding to and reflecting the changing face of the community. But many who grew up with the traditional Swedish worship recall these services and memories with fondness. In a survey asking congregation members about their most beloved memories from the church, Louis P. Larsson, the cousin of my grandmother, said this: “Worship services and Sunday School were conducted in the Swedish language. It seemed to me as a child that communication with God was best achieved in Swedish.” (Anderson 1986, 42)

While many churches in Swedish communities began to abandon the Swedish language during World War I in New Sweden the Free Missions Church held onto their Swedish language until World War II. This could be because the colony had a somewhat later start than others around the country. Or it could be due to their relatively isolated location. Either way, in regards to the church acting more slowly in adopting English, New Sweden offers a good example.

### **Swedish in Daily Life**

Although Swedish was losing its presence in church services and certainly in schools, it persisted in other parts of daily life. It was common for people to be known by a Swedish nickname, whether among friends or throughout the community, these nicknames persisted throughout time and many stuck for life. Eloise recalls playtime with her friend Helen and calling each other *Shisha*, meaning sister (Anderson 2003, 41). She and her actual sister, Evelyn, also referred to their younger brother Everett as *Lilla Bror*, or little brother. Eloise herself was called *Lilla Lovisa* by her Grandfather, who she called *Moppa*, based on *morfar* (grandfather, or literally mother’s father). Other’s in the

community were known by their work, such as *Kuppa Stina*, named after her use of blood cupping as a lay healer (Dorothy Anderson, pers. comm.).

Swedish also remained present in the names of various places. Aside from the obvious Swedish names of villages such as Jemtland and Stockholm, stores and other buildings retained their Swedish names, such as Henry Anderson's filling station and store, *Kaffe Stuga*. The *Capitolium* remains thus named, and a restoration of one of the original settlers' cabin is suitably named *Lindsten Stuga*, after the family who originally lived there.

It is interesting to note that the Swedish that did remain in conversation among the older residents was actually very unique. This was the Swedish that had been spoken by their parents when they had left Sweden. But since that time, great changes had occurred in mainland Swedish, so much so that the Swedish that remained spoken in the colony was distinctly different from the contemporary form of the language. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not long after the emigration of most of the colony's first citizens, the government of Sweden established new rules in an attempt to create a more streamlined nationally singular language. This resulted in many changes in spelling and grammar rules. So while the language of Sweden was evolving into a new and standardized national orthography and syntax, the language spoken in Maine's Swedish Colony remained generally the same as it had been since the first settlers arrived. Additionally, the vocabulary of New Sweden's Swedes had not evolved with the changing times and failed to incorporate words for modern technology since there had been no words for these new things when their parents and grandparents had learned Swedish. This explains why the only English word in the 1942 annual report of the church had been

“automobile”. In an interview conducted for the documentary “Old Maine Swedish Farms”, Edmund and Eloise Anderson, my grandparents, are speaking in Swedish when Edmund stops and turning to Eloise, asks in Swedish, “What is the Swedish word for ‘Maytag’?” Eloise did not know because mechanized washing machines did not exist when she learned Swedish as a young girl. The Swedish that was spoken in New Sweden was unique in that it was no longer spoken anywhere else. As the Swedish community had grown, developed and adapted, its native language had remained, in a sense, frozen in time.

The children of this generation (my grandparents generation), who had been discouraged to utter a word of Swedish while in school, and whose parents did not readily teach their children their native tongue, were exposed to even less of the Swedish language. Most of my father’s generation was raised in English-speaking households, as their parents felt that Swedish no longer had practical applications in the daily life of their children. As my aunt, Dorothy Anderson explained, “We grew up hearing jokes told in Swedish by aunts and uncles etc., or the joke would be told in English and the punch line in Swedish, and when we asked what they were, we’d be told, “Oh, that doesn’t translate”.” She and my father also recall their parents speaking in Swedish around Christmas time or birthdays, when something was to be kept secret. So while this generation still learned many songs and prayers and a few sayings in Swedish, they were never taught the language, and for some this was convenient. Others tried to teach their children the language but found that they had little or no interest in learning. Those who do speak Swedish among this generation are all self-taught, and have therefore learned the more contemporary version of Swedish.

### **CHAPTER THREE: CULTURAL TRADITIONS IN NEW SWEDEN TODAY**

One of the biggest ways in which the Swedish language and culture is kept alive today is through the annual festivals and celebrations. In mid-December, the Santa Lucia festival brings together the various schools, churches, and families of the community, each of which designate a young girl to play of the role of Santa Lucia. In keeping with tradition, they wear long white robes and a crown of candles on their heads, signifying the bringing of light into the darkest time of the year. On July 23<sup>rd</sup> the community celebrates Founder's Day, commemorating the arrival of W.W. Thomas and the first group of settlers. On this day, there is traditional dancing and festivities at the New Sweden Museum. But the biggest of all the celebrations is Midsommar.

#### **New Sweden's Midsommar Celebration**

Midsommar is a traditional Swedish festival that celebrates the summer solstice, the day of the year that enjoys the longest hours of sunlight. In Scandinavia cultures, it is historically observed as being the most important holiday aside from Christmas. The festival usually lasts for several days around the time of the summer solstice, which changes each year but usually falls near the 20<sup>th</sup> of June. The celebrations include special songs, dances, food and dress.

While Midsommar was celebrated for the first few years of the colony's history, at some point in time the tradition of a community-wide celebration was lost. But in the early 1970's cultural revival efforts brought back this community celebration, and today it is one of the most popular annual events in the community.

## Traditional Dress

During many of the festivities, people will don their traditional Swedish garb. Often times, these outfits or portions of them, are handed down through generations. A traditional women's costume consists of several parts; a blouse (typically plain and white), a vest, a skirt and apron, and a hat, usually accessorized with either a belt or a pocket-bag. Men's costumes are usually more simplistic, consisting of a white dress shirt, vest, and knee-length pants and socks. For children, young girls often wear dresses, often blue or yellow with a red or yellow apron and bonnet; boys wear outfits similar to the men and also with blue and yellow colors. Just as the language varies across the country, the Swedish national costume varies from region to region and even from town to town. Certain patterns, colors and styles are specific to particular places. Many people with these traditional outfits know the region that theirs comes from, and some will recognize others as well. I know this from personal experience as I've been told more than once that my skirt is typical of Rattvik, a village in the province of Dalarna.

## Maypole (Majstång)

To begin the celebrations, the men, dressed in their traditional outfits, carry in the maypole; a large wooden mast-like structure with a cross beam at the top, from which hangs two wreaths; the entire maypole is covered in flowers and other greens. A group of children called the "Little Folk" dance group performs at this time, singing and dancing around the maypole, accompanied by traditional fiddle music. The kids in the group, mostly of elementary age, learn these simple traditional Swedish folk songs in Swedish and are taught the English translation as well so they have some sense of what they're singing. Any child can participate in the "Little Folk" group and do not need to be of

Swedish ancestry to participate, just as many participants who enjoy Midsommar have no Swedish roots, but as just as welcomed to join in all the festivities.

### Traditional Food

A central part of the Midsommar celebrations is the traditional feast, or Smörgåsbord. While the term has entered American culture as referring to a large array of assorted food items, it means something more particular in the context of Midsommar. The Smörgåsbord is a communal effort, prepared by many people who often contribute the same dish each year. It consists of a cold and warm buffet, each marked with traditional Swedish dishes. Staples of the cold buffet include a wide variety of gelatin-based salads, cheeses, bread, and fish, most popular being the laxfärs (salmon loaf) and inlagd sill (pickled herring). Highlights of the hot buffet include Köttbullar (traditional Swedish meatballs) and a well-liked potato based dish known as Janssons Frestelse (Janssons' Temptation). For dessert, rice pudding and spritz cookies (similar to shortbread) are customary.

| <b>MATSEDEL</b>  | <b>MENU</b>        |
|------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Kallrätt</b>  | <b>Cold Buffet</b> |
| Fruksoppa        | Fruit Soup         |
| Inlagd Sill      | Pickled Herring    |
| Råkost Tallrik   | Vegetable Plate    |
| Fyllda Ägghalvor | Stuffed Eggs       |
| Potatissallad    | Potato Salad       |
| Kålsallad        | Cabbage Slaw       |
| Bönsallad        | Bean Salad         |
| Sillsalad        | Herring Salad      |
| Tomat Aspik      | Tomato Aspik       |
| Fruktgelé        | Gelatin Salads     |
| Inlagd Gurka     | Cucumber Salad     |
| Limpa            | Rye Bread          |
| Ostbrickka       | Cheeses            |
| Ättikgurka       | Pickles            |



|                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Knäckebröd           | Hard Tack            |
| Lingon               | Lingonberries        |
| Korv                 | Sausage              |
| Leverpastej          | Liver Pate           |
| Laxfärs              | Salmon Loaf          |
| Kokt Tunga           | Beef Tongue          |
| Skinka               | Ham                  |
| <b>Varmrätt</b>      | <b>Hot Buffett</b>   |
| Rotmos               | Mashed Rutabaga      |
| Brunaböner           | Baked beans          |
| Köttbullar           | Meatballs            |
| Jansson's Frestelse  | Jansson's Temptation |
| Ugnsbakad Lax        | Baked Salmon         |
| <b>Efterrätt</b>     | <b>Dessert</b>       |
| Risgrynsgröt Pudding | Rice Pudding         |
| Spritsar             | Spritz               |

(New Sweden Covenant Women, v)

At every place setting is a small card with the traditional Swedish table prayer, “I Jesu namn till bords vi gå”.

“I Jesu namn till bords vi gå,  
 välsigna Gud den mat vi få.  
 Gud till ära, oss till gagn,  
 så få vi mat i Jesu namn.”

Translated, it means, “In Jesus’ name to the table we go, God bless the food we receive. To God the honor, us the gain, So we have food in Jesus' name.” This prayer is not only used on special occasion such as Midsommar, but has been commonly used as a daily table grace. I remember saying this before many meals at my grandparents’ house over the years, always in Swedish.

Whenever there is a birthday being celebrated, either at a Midsommar celebration (most years there are several), or after a church service, the Swedish birthday song is sung to the honoree(s). Not just a few, but the majority of people will join in and sing along. Even without a complete understanding of the significance of the lyrics, one can

typically hum or sing along to this simple and repetitive tune. The lyrics read:

“Ja, må du (han, hon, dom) leva,  
Ja, må du (han,hon, dom) leva,  
Ja, må du (han,hon, dom) leva uti hundra år.  
Ja, visst ska du (han, hon, dom) leva,  
Ja, visst ska du (han, hon, dom) leva,  
Ja, visst ska du (han, hon, dom) leva uti hundra år.  
Hurrah, hurrah, Hurrah hurrah!”

Which translates to:

“Yes, may you (he, she, they) live,  
Yes, may you (he, she, they) live,  
Yes, may you (he, she, they) live for a hundred years.  
Yes, indeed you (he, she, they) will live,  
Yes, indeed you (he, she, they) will live,  
Yes, indeed you (he, she, they) will live for a hundred years.  
Hurray, hurray, Hurray, hurray!”

### Song and Dance

After the Smörgåsbord is the evening program which features traditional Midsommar song and dance. Traditional Swedish dance music is traditionally performed by folk instruments such as the fiddle, guitar, accordion and sometimes piano. It traditionally consists of a single melodic line with an accompanying repetitive chord progression. There are four basic types of traditional Swedish dance tunes, each with their own style of dance. There is the Schottis, also called the Swedish hop, the Hambo (short for hambotakt), the waltz and the polka. These may be performed in any order and have a variety of dance steps associated with each. Some are performed in pairs, others in small groups, and some involve the entire group. The final song is one of the latter type, where everyone gets up and joins hands in a long moving line that snakes its way through the room until everyone ends up in a huge, tight-knit spiral of people.

At the start of the Sunday program, which includes musical performances, many

times in Swedish, as well as a sermon given by one of the local pastors, both the American and the Swedish national anthems are sung. As one might expect, the American national anthem receives a more complete contribution from the audience than does the Swedish. Yet the Swedish anthem still elicits a sincere attempt from much of the audience.

Today, New Sweden's Midsommar festival draws hundreds of participants from not only within the area but all across the country and some years, from Sweden. Many who have left the area return for this event as a way of reconnecting with the community, some who are not from the area attend to reconnect with their Swedish heritage, others simply come for the fun of it.

“As a testament to how well the preservation has succeeded thus far, many locals describe a similar reaction among Swedes who have traveled from Sweden to visit the Swedish-American Midsommar Celebration. "They say 'You're more Swedish than us!' and that 'This is more like Sweden than where I live in Sweden'," reports Rena Hultgren, manager of the New Sweden gift shop.” (Shippee 2001)

While it is certain that some places in Sweden carry on traditional celebrations and practices more than other areas, it may be unfair to compare this Swedish-American celebration to those in Sweden.

Either way, the Midsommar celebration serves as a meaningful way to keep Swedish culture and language alive and well in the New Sweden community. It fosters a sense of appreciation and pride in one's ancestry, and continues traditions that may have otherwise been lost. Midsommar helps preserve these customs; that they may be passed down to future generations to be upheld and enjoyed.

## CONCLUSION

The fifty Swedish settlers who arrived in July of 1870 likely could not have imagined what the future of their little colony would look like. They were however determined to succeed and create an honest and happy life for themselves and their families. In contrast to Lars Ljungmark's assertion that rural Swedish communities were much slower to assimilate and lived apart from the outside world, New Sweden embraced assimilation. This generalization was based on the type of Swedish community that had formed from word of mouth, where neighbors in American communities had been neighbors in Sweden. But Thomas had made efforts to avoid this fate for Maine's Swedish Colony, purposefully choosing Swedes from all around the diverse regions of Sweden. Their diverse backgrounds likely contributed to the more rapid assimilation of New Sweden than other rural Swedish communities in America. The early citizens of New Sweden made concerted efforts to become the picture of American homestead success, adopting some American ways of life and determinedly teaching their children the English language. As the colony grew and more people who were not Swedish moved to the area, the language became increasingly obsolete. When no effort was made to pass on the language to future generations, it was all but lost. Cultural revival efforts in the 1970s helped to bring back some of the lost traditions and celebrations, and with them, a part of the language that had been mostly forgotten. Yet if you look close enough, it is clear that in subtle but important ways, Swedish has always had its place in New Sweden. As in other historically Swedish communities, it lives on as a part of a "secondary ethnicity" (Ljungmark 1979, 129). You can see it in the names of families and places in the community; in the church hymnals, which include many songs with Swedish verses.

Swedish heritage is present in the naming of the schools' mascots and in the Swedish flag, which hangs in the gymnasium next to the American flag, side by side, two cultures represented in harmonious and unified existence.

In a letter written to Governor of Maine, a Swedish writer and thinker by the name of S. A. Hedlund, expressed the concern that his former fellow countrymen would lose their Swedish identity. He wrote, "The sons and daughters of old Sweden, will they maintain among your great nation their national character? Will they retain, at least, some remembrance of their native land? [...] Will they lose also, these American immigrants, the remembrance of their fatherland? Must the Swedish inhabitants of your country necessarily forget the language and customs of their ancestors?" The answer was apparent even then as he goes on to write, "No, sir, they will not do so, and the great people of America will not require it" Though perhaps unclear for some time, we now know this affirmation to be true. As confirmed by a recent publication,

"History and tradition are alive in northern Maine's Swedish colony and can be seen in restored buildings, annual festivals, publications about the community and activities of local historical societies. Swedish culture also is preserved within individual families as they celebrate holidays, prepare traditional foods, decorate their homes and raise their children. Residents don't forget the experience of growing up in this unique community and many come back to give their own children comparable experiences." (Olmstead 1998, 8)

Language is an intrinsic part of one's culture. It is not only a means by which to communicate, but also a way of conceptualizing our world and our lives. The "Swedishness" of New Sweden, Maine is one of lasting integrity. It is an approach to life that encourages simplicity and honesty; it involves working hard, living without excess and within your means. It calls for a devotion to your family, to your community, and maintains a sacred respect for your heritage. The traditions of Swedish culture and

language that are found in New Sweden today are not merely reenactments of a bygone era, but rather they serve as a recognition of and a living tribute to the strength of Swedish identity.

## PICTURES

(courtesy of <http://www.maineswedishcolony.info/>)



A one-room schoolhouse early in the colony's history.



The Little Folk dance group performing around the Maypole at Midsommar.

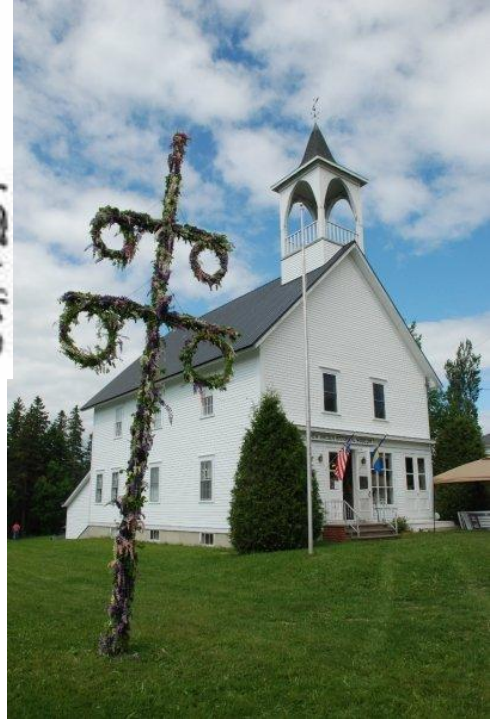


On the left, a picture of the New Sweden Covenant Church, on the right, a potato harvest.



Above, a line illustration of the *Capitolium* from the 1895 Quarter-Centennial Celebration publication.

On the right, the 1974 replica of the *Capitolium* (Photo by Richard Balagur)





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