

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish History Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 459

ELSIE JOHNSON

Interviewed

by

Kurt Helfrich

on

March 10, 1979

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ELSIE JOHNSON

INTERVIEWER: Kurt Helfrich

SUBJECT: Background, Swedish Covenant Church, Schooling

DATE: March 10, 1979

H: This is an interview with Elsie Johnson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Swedish History, by Kurt Helfrich at 124 Diana Drive on March 10, 1979, at 3:30 p.m.

J: My father left Sweden on February 9, 1883, and arrived in New York on March 1, 1883. He went to Sheffield, Pennsylvania, and stayed there a couple of months, and then moved to Kane, Pennsylvania and worked on the railroad for a few months. Finally, in the fall of the year, he came to Briar Hill. He worked in the steel mills there, in the blast furnace I think. Later on in life he was a custodian for schools.

I think the reason why most of the men at that time came to this country was to avoid military duty. The friends and relatives wrote and the young people always seemed to get the fever to want to come over to this country.

My mother came to this country in 1881. The reason she came was because she was the youngest of twelve children and some of her older brothers came to this country shortly after the Civil War. Then her father finally came. The mother died and the father came too, so practically the whole family came finally. They all came at different times, not at once. One of her brothers lived here in Haselton, a district on the east side of Youngstown, and that was the reason for settling here in this area.

Later on then, the Swedish people got together and they started a church. My mother and father were married in 1890, but even while they were still single in 1886 they were two of the twelve charter members of the First Covenant Church here in Youngstown. They were always very active in

church work. My father was treasurer of the First Covenant Church for twenty-five years and served in a lot of capacities. My mother was very active too in different organizations. Before my mother was married she worked for a family on Wick Avenue. The church spoke Swedish, of course, and in their social activities. Later on, the church gradually went to English because the young people weren't interested in learning the Swedish language.

H: Did they have any adjustment problems when they came to the States?

J: I never heard them say anything about that. I know my father sent money to his nephews for them to come over. Then he took out citizenship papers as soon as he could. He also helped anybody else who wanted to become a citizen; he would go to the courthouse with them.

H: What were some of your impressions as a young girl as a Swedish immigrant family? What was a typical day like?

J: We would go to school; we started at the age of six. I can remember the first day of school my father brought home two books; they didn't furnish books in the days when I started. I started school then with two books, and one of them was McGuffey's Reader. The second year they asked us to give our books to the school. I only had to do that in the first grade. In the second grade, they started to buy books for us.

H: What were some of the unique customs and practices of the Swedish?

J: The people in this country didn't celebrate Christmas like they did in Sweden. Christmas was a big, big thing in Sweden. One of the ladies my mother worked for wanted her to do the wash on Christmas Day. She just cried, so the lady told her she could do it the next day. This country didn't know how to celebrate Christmas the way they did in Sweden. We always had a nice time at Christmas. We always had a tree, and even before electric lights we had candles on it. Christmas Eve was always a nice, certain kind of dinner. We would have fish in cream sauce and a certain kind of homemade sausage, potato sausage. We would also have rice porridge. We always had our gifts on Christmas Eve after this special meal. Then we would get up really early on Christmas and go to church. Now church service is later in the day on Christmas Eve. We always had a nice meal on Christmas Day too.

Another thing too I can say about the Swedes is that most of them built their own homes. I know my mother and father didn't go on a honeymoon when they were first married, but they moved into a brand new house they had built with four rooms. I think my father built four homes in his lifetime, and each one got

better and bigger. I think this was customary with all of the Swedish people.

H: What were some of the other things the Swedish people did jobwise?

J: Many of them worked at General Fireproofing. My husband was a carpenter.

H: Did you live in a mostly Swedish neighborhood?

J: Yes, in the beginning it was mostly Swedish. Afterwards, as people got a little more affluent, they moved further out to the suburbs.

Another thing I wanted to mention is that in the summer time we had to go to Swede School in church. He had three different hours: 9:00 was for advanced, 10:00 for intermediate, and 11:00 for beginners. The preacher taught you Swedish there.

H: Didn't your parents teach you Swedish at home?

J: We understood them, but we didn't answer them in Swedish.

H: Do you have any family still there?

J: Yes, I have cousins there from both my father's and mother's side.

H: Was the school mostly Swedish that you went to?

J: It was a regular public school. The kids were mixed.

H: Do you still practice any of the old customs?

J: No, we don't celebrate Christmas like we used to.

H: Do you speak Swedish between the two of you?

J: No. I think it's something you have to do all of the time or it leaves you.

H: What events stand out as major significance during all this time? Is there anything important that happened to the community or Swedes?

J: I just think there is better living now.

H: Looking back, what changes would you have liked to have seen? Would you have rather lived in a different neighborhood?

J: I think it has been a most interesting age. I don't think I would change anything. Sometimes I wish they would have had

the money to send me to college; I would have appreciated a college education, but I made a living.

H: What kind of job did you do?

J: Stenographic work.

H: Do you belong to any ethnic groups, Swedish groups?

J: I belong to Vasa.

H: Do you know anything about the Swedish Salvation Army?

J: That has been disbanded. When there were no immigrants coming over anymore there didn't seem to be a need for it. They're quite strong in Sweden. They have some nice hotels over there.

H: Are many of your friends Swedish descent?

J: Yes, practically all of them.

H: Is there anything else that you think is important?

J: I don't think so.

H: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW