

# **Birds, Eggs and Witches Swedish folk customs and superstitions regarding Easter**

By Harry H. Anderson

The fine program at our March membership meeting provided delightful insights into Swedish traditions and practices for the historic celebration of the Easter holiday. As a follow-up, additional details on this subject are described below. They are paraphrased from an article which appeared in 1871 in a leading American magazine under the title "Folk Life in Sweden." The author had traveled extensively throughout rural areas of that country, recording information on customs and traditions from what was then predominantly an agricultural society. (A census in 1865 disclosed that only approximately 15% of Sweden's population resided in its principal cities and towns.) The observations which follow thus reflect how from rural sources what was still a major religious holiday observance was also infused with strong secular superstitious overtones

## BIRDS

There were many bird-related legends connected to the crucifixion and death of Jesus on Good Friday. One related that as he hung on the cross, a small bird perched on the wooden frame twittering, "svala, svala honom" ("console, console him"). As a result, the bird was given the name svala, or swallow, and in memory of its pity for the suffering Savior, it became customary that blessings should always be given to those who protected this feathery creature. Among Swedes it was considered wicked to molest the sparrow or destroy its nest.

Another bird was said to have hovered over the cross, crying "styrk, styrk honom" ("strengthen, strengthen him"). This bird subsequently received the name stork and was henceforth regarded with affection and became a welcome visitor throughout Sweden. It was believed that the gift of peace and happiness came to households where the stork was permitted to build her nest and raise her young unmolested.

## EGGS

For many Swedish country folk, the egg was regarded as an important symbol of the Easter observance. Although appearing to be lifeless matter, the egg within itself contained a germ that, when vivified, burst its shell and flew about as a rejoicing bird, the symbol of the resurrection. For those who believed, hard-boiled eggs were eagerly prepared and eaten, while others were gaily decorated and exchanged among friends and family with the joyful exclamation, "Christ is Risen."

## WITCHES

In rural Sweden, the strangest and seemingly most irreligious folk superstition related to Easter week took place on Maundy Thursday. On the evening of that day, the "Påsk Käirngar" ("Easter Witches") were said to embark on their annual journey to Blue Hill, the fictitious habitat of the Devil, to pay homage to their Satanic master. The witches flew up Swedish chimneys on rakes and broomsticks, so it was traditional that none of these implements were to be left around in the open, readily available for the old hags to utilize for their journey. No fires were lit after nightfall, nor relit until after sunrise the next morning; neither was smoke permitted to come forth from the chimney after sunset, so as not to assist the witches starting on their flight. These creatures supposedly began their trip by reciting a traditional phrase, "In Satan's name, straight up and away past every corner to the end of the world." Once, according to

Swedish legend, an ignorant servant girl thought it would be fun to follow her old mistress on such a trip. She mounted a broomstick, but having forgotten the proper incantation, mistakenly said, "In Satan's name straight up and down." As a result, she was dragged up and down the chimney all night long. The witches remained away until early on Easter morning when they began their journey homeward. It was believed at this point that they could be safely shot and killed if the shooter used bullets made of silver or steel and fired at the witch while standing on the manure pile at the stable door!

