

Employment Activities Among the Women of Milwaukee's Swedish-American Community

by Harry H. Anderson

This article is about women's employment activities within Milwaukee's Swedish American community. Details on this subject are rather limited, due largely to the fact that this information was not normally recorded in one of the primary sources for the Swedish employment survey—the Milwaukee city directories. Thus, what is readily known about the subject is largely dependent upon less readily available sources such as private narratives (letters) or reminiscences and personal interviews.

Source insights, however, are also available from census records. For example, the 1860 census listed a pair of Swedish-born sisters employed as domestic servants in local households. This was an occupation that had involved Scandinavian immigrant girls (initially Norwegian) two decades earlier. The 1860 domestics we know of were the "Bussy" or more properly "Bussie" sisters Mathilda (age 15) and Mona (age 17). The latter worked in the household of John P. Johnson, the prominent Swedish-born jeweler and watchmaker.

Another form of household employment that involved primarily women and that helped augment a Swedish family's income was managing roomers and boarders in the private household. Anna Viden, wife of the machinist John Viden, served both types of non-family residents—two young (early 20's) American men who roomed or lodged in the household. In addition, the Viden home contained one metal worker who took meals with the family and was classified as a "boarder." Love bloomed at the breakfast and dinner table and he subsequently married a daughter of the household.

In the George Larson house on Scott Street, rooms were rented to single Swedish workers. One of these, at Christmas time, prepared his own lutfisk for the traditional holiday celebration. Keeping his sticks of frozen cod fish in a barrel outside his second floor room, the Swedish worker changed the water regularly each evening until it was ready for cooking on Christmas Eve by his landlady, Mrs. Larson.

Another form of income-producing household employment practiced by Swedish-American women was dressmaking. The mother of my informant, Ethel Hagland, was one of these skilled workers. She kept a notebook containing the physical measurements of her customers who, when they came for a fitting for a new dress or blouse, brought with them an illustration from a magazine or newspaper showing the style and/or color they desired. From this start, Carolina Erickson Hagland cut out an appropriate pattern from full sheets of newsprint. She had learned this technique and skill as a young woman in Sweden, and her daughter recalled years later the numerous rolls of dress patterns stored in her sewing room.

Perhaps the most successful example of a Swedish-American women's employment experience in the greater Milwaukee community was that of Charlotte Bergwall. Charlotte was born in 1855 in the Unonius colony near Pine Lake, Wisconsin, the oldest daughter of Ebba Marie Eleonora Hallstrom Peterson (emigrated 1843), one of the teenage Swedish apprentice tailors spoken about at the January meeting, and George Edward Bergwall (emigrated 1842), a native of Göteborg, Sweden. At an early age she expressed a strong desire for a career as an educator and, while still a teen-ager, secured employment as a teacher for three years in a Waukesha County country school. In 1869 she enrolled at the Whitewater Normal School for advanced training not only in primary subject matter and teaching skills but also for classes in academic administration. By the mid 1870's Charlotte had obtained a position in the Milwaukee school system. Her starting salary for 10 months of teaching was \$450, quite modest even for that time period but still noteworthy for a female offspring of immigrant parents.

In 1881, at the age of only 26 years, Charlotte Bergwall was appointed principal of the new 8th District Primary School built on Milwaukee's south side at South 10th and Madison Streets. She was the only female principal of a city primary school then serving in the Milwaukee system. Here her salary was double that of her first position in Milwaukee (\$900 annually), and she had four teachers serving under her on her staff. About this time her mother sold the family farm in Waukesha, moved to Milwaukee and built a new home for her family (including Charlotte) on Washington Street. In letters home to relatives in Sweden, Mrs. Bergwall wrote proudly of Charlotte's position and of the modern improvements in their new residence (gas for lighting, hot and cold running water, a second floor bathtub) which Charlotte's presence helped pay for.

Charlotte Bergwall died prematurely in 1893 at the age of 38, having reached a level of employment success in terms of status and salary that was well above many of her fellow Swedish Americans, both male and female.