

Memories of a Swedish-American "CHRISTMAS PAST"

by Harry H. Anderson

More than a quarter-century ago I conducted several interviews with 89-year-old Reuben Bergman, recording his memories of boyhood in the Milwaukee Swedish-American community. His recollections of "Christmas Past" were part of this experience. The Bergman family were active members of what was officially known as the Swedish Congregational Church of Milwaukee, but was in reality a forerunner of what was later known as the Swedish Covenant Church, or the "Mission Friends" among local Swedes.

As the youngest child in the Bergman household, Reuben had delightful memories of the Jultide season which he shared with me, and I pass along herewith. I note with pleasure that Rube's daughter, Carol Gauger and her husband, Dave, are today active members of our Historical Society.

Reuben recalled, for me, such incidents as the Christmas Eve dinner in his boyhood home, carried out with the traditional menu from the Old Country: brown beans, herring, cheeses, rice pudding and meat balls, etc. A feature of this was the serving of lutefisk, a great favorite of his father's, but a liking for which Reuben did not share. One Christmas Eve, a guest at the table noted Rube had not taken a serving of lutefisk and asked "What kind of Swede are you, not eating lutefisk at Christmas?" Rube responded by pointing to several forks and spoons nearby on the table which already had begun to turn black from the fish, and responded, "Look what it is doing to Mother's silverware. Imagine what it will do to my stomach!"

Following dinner, the Bergmans sang the usual Swedish Christmas hymns and exchanged and enjoyed gifts, prior to retiring fairly early due to the need to attend the Julotta service at the "Mission Friends" Church which began at 5:30 a.m. The trip from the Bergman home on N. Oakland Avenue, on the east side, to the church on Scott Street was by street car, no matter how infrequently they ran at that hour, accompanied by the usual snow and freezing cold.

Like the traditional Swedish practice, the front windows of the church were brightly lit with candles. Inside, the raised platform at the front of the worship area held a piano, the pulpit, room for the choir, and a pair of Christmas trees also lit with candles. Nearby were two men of the congregation equipped with long poles, pails of water, with rags and sponges for use in event the trees caught fire from the candles.

Sometimes as part of this service or special holiday meetings for the Sunday School, the children, including young Reuben, recited their usual Christmas "pieces" in both English and Swedish.

One year, in the middle of Rube's recital, the 2-year-old son of his sister, Esther, climbed onto the platform, took Rube's hand and joined in the presentation.

The Julotta service concluded with wishes expressed to all for a God Jul och Gott Nytt År, and of course, coffee and baked goods.

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