

REMINISCENCES OF CHICAGO AND ENGLEWOOD

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History has always held me spellbound—world history, the thrilling story of America, and the specific tale of Chicago, my home town. Much have I learned and enjoyed at the Chicago Historical Society in Lincoln Park. The exhibitions and dioramas there have acquainted me with the history of the Windy City. But this did not completely satisfy me. Not until I stood on the exact site of the origin of the Chicago Fire of 1871 did I recall something from my earliest memories.

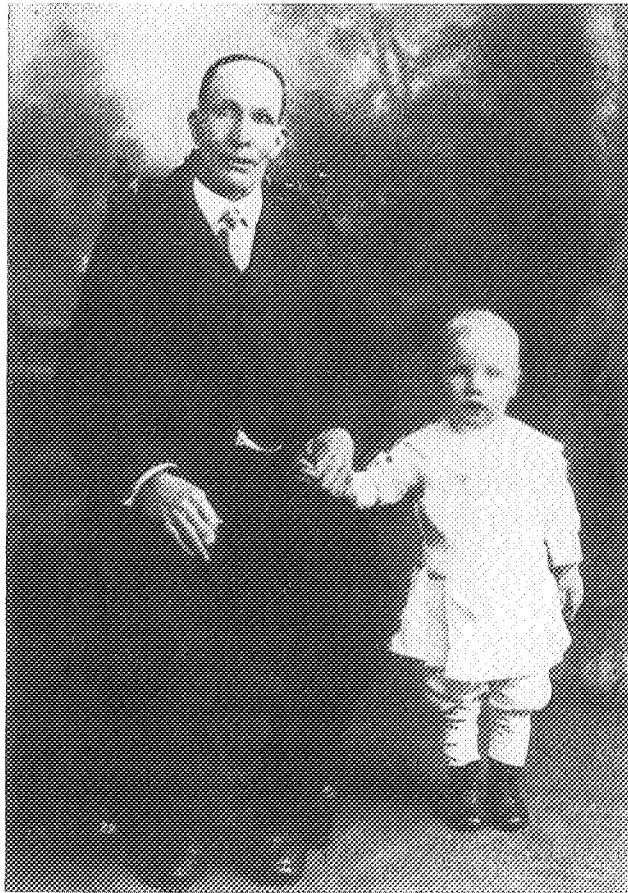
My grandfather had told me stories about his boyhood in Värmland. Among the many tales was one that became impressed on my mind and memory more than any other. When my grandfather was fifteen years old, news of the great Chicago Fire had reached his home town of Gunnarskog near Arvika. All Swedes must have been shocked that a city larger than Stockholm had burned to the ground.

Inside the foyer of the Chicago Fire Academy is a bronze plaque that states: "On this site stood the home and barn of Mrs. O'Leary where the Chicago Fire of 1871 started. Although there are many versions of its origin, the real cause of the fire has never been determined." I was surprised to learn that the famous address, 137 De Koven Street, was so close to the downtown area. Visiting the Academy on one of my return trips to Chicago, I stepped up on the cement block, twelve by eighteen inches in size, and viewed a diorama of the fire. Another plaque told me: "You are now standing on the spot of the origin of the great Chicago Fire on the night of 8 October 1871." There were also many photographs of its aftermath in their collection.

As I pondered all this, I thought again about my grandfather Anders Osberg. Born in poverty on 21 June 1856, he was a teenager at the time of this fire. He never told me this, but he must have thought a great deal about the new American nation and very possibly Chicago, too. I feel sure that he never harbored any thought of actually going there himself. He knew that many

Swedes from other provinces, even some from Värmland, had emigrated to the United States. This is what he read in the newspapers, and I believe he often wondered why many had left the old country and where they all had settled. In his own community there was vague talk about such faraway places as New York, Brooklyn, Jamestown, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Bellingham; but this was all too remote to be taken seriously.

Grandfather had often mentioned whenever I complained about needing to go to school that he had only 172 days of education in Sweden. By the time he was fifteen—while Chicago



Anders Osberg and his grandson Edward, 1913.

burned—he was doing a man’s job draining and tilling the wet fields of western Värmland and helping his family eke out a living on their small acreage. Married at twenty-four, he and my grandmother became the parents of two children, their daughter Emma and their son Hjalmar, who many years later in Chicago became my father.

During these years, Chicago had recovered from the disastrous fire and was moving steadily toward becoming a major city. The downtown area was totally restored, Swift and Armour had developed the great stockyards, and the southern city limits had already extended to 39th Street. Some seers ventured the opinion that one day Chicago would reach all the way to Blue Island.

In the meantime nearly equidistant between 39th Street and Blue Island, a small and struggling community was developing around the junction of two railroads. This little community had no real name yet. Some called it the Junction, some the Chicago Junction, others Junction Grove, and still others the Rock Island Junction. It was a small portion of Lake Township, a vast and sprawling unincorporated area of wet marshland extending from Hyde Park on Lake Michigan to Summit, Illinois.

Just before the Chicago Fire of 1871, a newcomer to Junction Grove suggested that the place be named Englewood after her home town in New Jersey. So Charles R. Hatch, the superintendent of the Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana Railway, posted an order stating that “the name of the station at Chicago Junction has been changed to Englewood.” This made it official in everyone’s mind. Incorporation soon followed, and it has been known as Englewood ever since.

In the large-scale immigration that came from all over Europe following the American Civil War, Swedes were counted in ever increasing numbers. For some reason, many of the pioneer Swedish immigrants seemed to favor this new town six miles south of Chicago. Immediately after the fire, there was a virtual stampede for lots and homes in Englewood. The newly drained land was good, streets and walkways were being plotted, and a great building boom was on.

Traditionally, it seems that the Irish became policemen and firemen, precinct captains and politicians; the Poles and other Eastern Europeans steelworkers and laborers in the stockyards and factories; but the Swedes—at least the Englewood ones—became tradesmen and shopkeepers. Hardly a building in En-

glewood was erected without the precise and painstaking work of Swedish carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, plasterers, and cement finishers.

At the time of the Fire, there were Swedes living in Chicago; but it was really not until the 1880s and 1890s that the great avalanche began. Emigration from Sweden was picking up momentum, and the forty years following 1880 saw tens of thousands of Swedes arriving in America each year. Chicago, the city arising from the ashes of the Fire, got its fair share of these Swedes. They settled mainly in four areas: the Belmont and Andersonville districts, both on the north side, and the large Englewood area and Grand Crossing at 75th and Cottage Grove, on the south side.

My father Hjalmar Osberg came to America in 1899 at the age of nineteen. He first tried his luck in the woods of northern Minnesota as a lumberjack during the winter and on the farms of North Dakota as a field hand during the summer. After several years, he came to Chicago to learn the barbering trade and landed on 59th Street in the very center of the Swedish part of Englewood. Within a few years, he was able to bring his mother and father from Värmland to America. He had met my mother Signe Anderson at night classes in English at Englewood High School, where dozens of Swedes came to learn the new language. The night school English classes at Englewood High proved to be invaluable to the newly arrived immigrants. Not only did they learn the language quickly but they also had much fun and frivolity. Many romantic matches for life were made there, and my parents are prime examples of this.

My mother Signe had emigrated from Eskilstuna, Södermanland, in the spring of 1903 at the age of fourteen together with her mother and father and a younger brother. Four older ones and a sister had preceded them to Chicago several years earlier to gain a foothold in the land of promise. They had all become residents of the Swedish community in Englewood.

At the age of seventeen, my mother became a charter member of the Linnea Aid Society. It was formed on 9 February 1906 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. N. A. Nelson, who lived on West 60th Street near Englewood High School. Twenty women from three Swedish churches were the founders; and at the first meeting Dr. A. P. Fors, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church, was present. At this meeting the name Linnea was adopted. They decided to



Signe A. Anderson, Chicago, 1907. Married Hjalmar Osberg, 1910.

meet regularly at Bethel Church, and membership invitations were sent to the women of all the Swedish churches in Englewood. An overwhelming response brought about the election of officers and the writing of a constitution. One of their first projects was to supply linen and completely furnish a ward in the newly erected Englewood Hospital. They also paid for this hospital's patients who were without financial means.

Mother wore her Linnea pin proudly, and even as a small boy I was aware of the vast scope of this organization. In 1909 the society decided to expand the area of its work by aiding patients in more hospitals and many other needy persons of Swedish de-

scent on the south side. Several Swedish homes for the aged in Chicago have benefitted from and been cheered by visits from the women of Linnea.

The membership dues were only ten cents a month, and within twenty years there were about 1,000 women in the society. Contributions by more affluent members far exceeded the dues. The principal source of income, however, came each fall from the proceeds of the annual concert by the Swedish Choral Society, which usually performed Handel's *Messiah* at Orchestra Hall accompanied by an ensemble from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This was the musical highlight of the year, and my mother would rather miss a meal than this extraordinary production.

In unity there is strength, and it can be said that the Linnea Aid Society brought about greater cooperation among the people of different denominations in Englewood. Linnea has always been true to its botanical name, for during its existence it has strewn many a flower and spread much sunshine on the hard paths of life—to uplift, cheer, and encourage human beings in need.

Englewood was annexed to Chicago on 29 June 1889, eighteen years after the Fire. When my father came here a dozen years later, he was most happily surprized to find a large colony of Swedes. The Englewood Businessmen's Association was an outstanding civic organization. One of its first presidents was Clarence O. Rosen, a Swedish realtor and a leader of the rapidly growing Swedish community. Englewood sent a governor to Springfield and later to Washington as a U.S. senator—Charles G. Deneen. Many Swedes wanted him to run for the presidency. His sister Florence was an excellent teacher at Englewood High School for forty years.

My father's bank and the one for most of the Swedish businessmen was the United State Bank of Englewood at 60th and South Halsted streets. It opened on 14 January 1914 with Simon Heck as president and Carl Lundberg as cashier. The well-known Swedish physicians and surgeons, Virelius and Dahlberg, had just opened their South Shore Hospital, and the Swedes streamed to them for health care. My own grandfather was one of Dr. Dahlberg's first patients for treatment of a lip cancer with the new radium regimen.

When Englewood needed a second high school, the officials

decided to name it the Robert Lindblom Technical High School for Robert Lindblom, a member of the Board of Education from 1893 to 1896 and of the Civil Service Commission from 1898 to 1902. He was born in Örebro, Sweden, in 1844, migrated to America at twenty years of age, and became a successful Chicago businessman. He survived the Fire and later became one of the most influential promoters of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition as well as one of its directors.

The great Swedish immigration to the Englewood district continued unabated all through the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century. Then just before the calamitous stock market crash, it came to a sudden halt. Perhaps Swedes were finding other locales in other states, but in Englewood times were changing. The community, once a stronghold of Svea, was becoming multilingual. The Swedes who still were living there hung on during the Great Depression; but as the war years came and went, post-war affluence seemed to beckon to many Swedes, who moved to other parts of the city, to the suburbs, and even to other states.

This town of Englewood means a great deal to me. If I should live to be 100, I shall never forget it. I was born there, of Swedish immigrant parents at 5959 South Ada Street (our beloved "*fem tusen*") in 1911 and spent all of my youth in Englewood at 5915 South May Street. My grade school was old Copernicus at 60th and Throop streets, and my high school Lindblom at 61st Street and Wolcott Avenue. I love the memory of Englewood generally and the immediate vicinity of 59th and May streets in particular. All the happy memories of my youth and young adulthood are there. It was really home to me—and even though I am now living on the West Coast, it is still my "home."

My grandfather and parents often spoke wistfully of "back home in Sweden;" and I now know what they meant, because my wife and I speak about "back home in Englewood." Nostalgically, my mind returns there often, even though I know that it is all gone with the wind like Scarlett O'Hara's Tara. Yes, gone with the wind of change that comes to every great city in our land. It is true that people still live there, certainly many fine people, but none of my own. No kinfolk, family, relatives, or friends—they have all moved away in search of better living conditions, more room, greener pastures. Many have found these things in the same city, some in suburban communities,

and others two thousand miles away, as I have done. But about one thing I sincerely believe we are all agreed—that no matter where we now are living, no matter what we have experienced, those early days in wonderful old Englewood meant security, happiness, and home, sweet home for us!