

“Very Welcome Home Mr. Swanson”: Swedish Americans Encounter Homeland Swedes

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***Abstract:** This article examines different patterns of interaction between Swedish Americans and the homeland, and my interest is in the significance and consequences of these encounters. The mass emigration of some 1,3 million Swedes in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a fundamental event in Swedish history, and as a result a separate social and cultural community—Swedish America—was created in the U.S. and a specific population group of Swedish Americans emerged. Close to a fifth of these Swedish Americans returned to Sweden, and in their interaction with the old homeland they were seen as a distinct group in Sweden and became carriers of a specific American experience. Swedish Americans thus became a visible sub-group in Sweden and it is the significance of this population that I am interested in. The article looks at both material and immaterial effects of the return migration and at the larger significance of Swedish America and Swedish Americans for Sweden.*

***Key words:** Swedish Americans, Return migration, immigration*

In April of 1957, a specially chartered SAS DC 6 landed at Bulltofta airport in Malmö in southern Sweden. On board were 70 passengers who had boarded the plane in Chicago the previous day. They were all Swedish Americans and relatives and friends of Ragnar Benson, the hugely successful Chicago contractor and Swedish immigrant, embarking on a twelve day family reunion tour of Ragnar Benson’s ancestral area in and around Älmhult in southern Småland. The tour generated a great deal of attention

in Sweden, and they were followed by both journalists and interested on-lookers as they traveled from *släktkalas* (family gathering) to *släktkalas* in Småland.

The return of the Bensons illustrates one fundamental aspect of Swedish immigration history, namely the return migration—temporary or permanent—of Swedish immigrants from the U.S. to Sweden and its significance for Sweden. The mass emigration of some 1.3 million Swedes in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a fundamental event in Swedish history, and as a result a separate social and cultural community—Swedish America—was created in the U.S. and the specific population group of Swedish Americans emerged. This article examines different patterns of interaction between Swedish Americans and the homeland, and my interest is in the significance and consequences of these encounters for Sweden.

Returning could mean many things. Official statistics show that overall about 19% of the Swedish migrants returned permanently.¹ The return rate increased noticeably over the almost century of Swedish immigration to the U.S. between 1840 and 1930. Of those who emigrated during the 1880s—which was one of the decades with significant and sustained emigration—about six per cent eventually returned, whereas in the 1910s and the 1920s between 20 per cent and a third of the migrants came back.² In a European perspective this is among the lowest rates of return, compared to 66 per cent of the migrants from Russia, 60 per cent of the south Italians or 46 per cent of the Greeks.³

Not all returning Swedish Americans stayed in Sweden. Some went back and forth between the two countries several times in circular migration patterns. And many others came back for visits, frequently in the summers, to see friends and relatives and, like the Bensons, often attracting great attention. All, however, contributed to tying Sweden and the United States closely together, to creating a trans-Atlantic network in which individuals and ideas flowed back and forth between the two countries, and to bringing different aspects and an awareness of the U.S. and Swedish-America to Sweden.

Through their interaction with the old homeland the returnees became carriers of a specific American experience, and Swedish Americans became

1 Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America. The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880.1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 12.

2 Ulf Beijbom, *Mot löftets land. Den svenska utvandringen* (Stockholm, 1995), 51.

3 Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America. The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880.1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 11.

a visible sub-group in Sweden. Ann-Kristin Wallengren has, for example, shown how both visiting Swedish-American and permanent returnees became an important part of popular Swedish films in the 1930s,⁴ and the very popular song "Very Welcome Home Mr. Swanson" from 1939 by Lasse Dahlquist describes the successful returnee Mr. Swanson who with his "pockets full of dollars" has returned to build factories, tall buildings and perhaps even a subway.⁵ This article, then, will focus on economic, social and cultural consequences of the returning Swedes and Swedish Americans.

It is necessary to underscore that the Swedish Americans in both the U.S. and in Sweden constituted a group that in many ways was distinct from the homeland Swedes. In his monumental study *A Folk Divided*, H. Arnold Barton has examined how the two groups viewed themselves over the course of a century.⁶ One of his main conclusions is that Swedish Americans "were not simply Swedes who happened to live in America... [or] Americans whose origins happened to be in Sweden." Instead, Barton argues, "[t]hey were a distinctive group, for better or for worse, with their own characteristics."⁷ His analysis shows that this was an awareness that was shared by homeland Swedes and by Swedish Americans alike.

The special traits that characterized the Swedish Americans and set them apart from their land of origin was a topic of intense discussion in Swedish America around the turn of the century 1900, but was also observed in the old homeland. A variety of answers to the question of what it meant to be Swedish in America emerged, often linked to religious, social, and political circumstances.⁸ Johan Person's 1912 book *Svensk-amerikanska studier* explicitly addresses the process through which a separate Swedish-American population was created. He argues that the eight-day Atlantic crossing laid the foundations for the transformation of the Swedish immigrants into "a Swedish-American people." Although not fully understood by either the

4 Ann Kristin Wallengren, *Välkommen hem Mr Swanson. Svenska emigranter och svenskhet på film* (Lund, 2013), chapter 3.

5 Wallengren, *Välkommen hem*, 52; Anders Wällhed, *Boken om Lasse Dahlquist. Inte bara Brännö brygga* (Göteborg, 2010), 443.

6 H. Arnold Barton, *A Folk Divided. Homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans, 1840-1940* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1994).

7 Barton, *A Folk Divided*, 114.

8 See, for example, Dag Blanck, *The Creation of an Ethnic Identity. Being Swedish American in the Augustana Synod 1860-1917* (Carbondale, Illinois, 2006); Barton, *A Folk Divided*, chapter 5, Anna Williams, *Skrämbent i Svensk-Amerika. Jakob Bonggren. Journalist och poet* (Uppsala, 1991).

Americans or the Swedes, the Swedish-American people had “a common language, common memories, common traditions, and common interests,” which, according to Person, were “neither Swedish, nor American...but a combination of both.” As long as these attributes existed in America, Person concluded, a Swedish-American people would exist.⁹

At the same time, homeland Swedes were keenly observing the cultural developments among the Swedish Americans. Discussions about the nature of the Swedish cultural and ethnic community in the United States began during the final decades of the 19th century and as Barton has shown the homeland Swedes expressed a variety of opinions, both positive and negative, about their kinspersons on the other side of the Atlantic. Importantly, he also emphasizes the growing distance and misunderstandings between Sweden and Swedish America.¹⁰

I will now turn to a more detailed, two part discussion of the significance of encounters between the Swedish Americans and the homeland Swedes. First I will discuss the return migration and the economic, social and technological effects it had on Sweden. Next I will argue that the substantial return migration of Swedish Americans to Sweden had an important cultural dimension in shaping a Swedish image of America and in preparing the ground in Sweden for the country’s strong orientation towards the United States.

The reasons for why the immigrants returned are one of the most discussed issues in immigration history, focusing on both failures and successes in the U.S. Many immigrants never succeeded in establishing themselves in their adopted land and its rapidly growing industrial, urban and capitalist economy, such as the Russian immigrant from Minsk who wrote of the difficult conditions in America to the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* in 1902: “Where is the golden land? Where are the golden people?” concluding “Cursed be Columbus, cursed be he for discovering America.” There were of course also successes among the immigrants, leading an Italian returnee to place Columbus in a different light by suggesting that “the portrait of Christopher Columbus should be carried with that of Jesus Christ.”¹¹

The return of successful immigrants, most scholars seem to argue, has to do with their original intention for migrating to the U.S; namely to accu-

9 Johan Person, *Svensk-amerikanska studier* (Rock Island, Illinois, 1912), 9-10.

10 H. Arnold Barton, “Crossings and Recrossings: America and Sweden in the Twentieth Century,” *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, 50 (July, 1999); Barton, *A Folk Divided*, chapter 8.

11 Quoted after Wyman, *Round-Trip to America*. 75.

mulate resources that could be put to use in the homeland both in what we can call both a forward looking and a backward looking manner. Examples of the former include Swedish landless agricultural workers—who made up a significant share of the Swedish migrants to the U.S.—who set out for America to earn money so that they could return and buy a farm or start a business. These migrants were forward looking and to them a period in the United States was seen as a vehicle for social advancement in Sweden. The opposite was also true; the period in America became a way of conserving a life style that was being threatened in Sweden. As the process of pauperization increased in the 19th century, and large strata of the population felt threatened by, downward social mobility, the accumulation of wealth in America became a way of defending and maintaining the old life style. In that sense, the move to America can be seen as conservative and backward looking.

A central question in the re-migration research has been the degree to which the re-migrants achieved their goals. Did the time in America pay off and what impact did it have on the sending countries? Were they able to either advance socially upon their return—or at least to hinder the downward social spiral that many found themselves in? Looking at Europe in general, Mark Wyman has concluded that “remigration tilted heavily toward land-hungry farmers” and that those who had accumulated resources in the U.S. were able to put them to use by buying land. He also suggests that for many this resulted in upward social mobility, and that the time in America thus may be said to have paid off.¹²

For Sweden, the picture is less clear, partly because of the relative paucity of scholarly work in the field. Studies focusing on the population exchange between north central Sweden and North America and some results regarding the social structure of Halmstad on the West Coast around the turn of the century 1900 suggest that, unlike many other Europeans remigrants, the Swedish returnees did not experience considerable social mobility. Lars-Göran Tedebrand concluded that “for most of the returnees, the stay in America was not a part of a process of social adjustment” as they tended to return to the same or similar occupational categories that they had occupied prior to leaving Sweden.¹³ Their American séjour was thus

¹² Wyman, *Round-Trip to America*, 132.

¹³ Lars Göran Tedebrand, *Västernorrland och Nordamerika 1875-1913. Utvandring och återinvandring* (Uppsala, 1972), 254.

at best used in a conservative manner, trying to maintain or to defend their social status in Sweden. The lack of social mobility among these Swedish returnees also deviates from findings in other countries, where upward social mobility among returnees in rural and agricultural areas was much more common.

The picture is complicated by a study of the return migration to the Bjäre peninsula in Skåne in southern Sweden instead concludes that social mobility did take place among the Bjäre returnees. The author concludes that only 16 per cent of the men and seven percent of the women experienced no social mobility, but that 27 per cent of the men and 31 per cent of the women had advanced socially.¹⁴ Magnus Persson thus views the migration process as more forward looking than conservative. Additional evidence for this perspective can be found in the so called Långasjö study, which is a remarkably complete compilation of the out and in migration from the parish of Långasjö in Småland, spanning half a century. Here, we can see that the majority of the returnees wanted to either buy land or to expand the size of their ancestral farm. This strategy was successful, and more than two million crowns were invested in land purchases in the parish, and as Ulf Beijbom has noted "these American funds would have been enough to buy half of all real estate in Långasjö in 1935." In addition, American money was used to invest in and to establish small industries of different kinds. The largest company in Långasjö, the lumber company Geijer and sons which was, for example, established with the help of 30,000 crown that the farmer's son Alfred Geijer has made in the Klondike gold rush.¹⁵

The impact of returnees on Swedish society was not only limited to social mobility or the purchase of land. A number of ideas and impulses, skills and know-how were brought back from America through the returnees. Technological inventions, techniques and tools are some examples and became prominent in for example the agricultural sector. Other impulses that have been identified include architectural styles in buildings, and the interior decorations of homes.¹⁶ A fascinating ethnographic study of the Lista region in southern Norway shows how American style homes and lifestyles

14 Magnus Persson, *Coming Full Circle. Return Migration and the Dynamics of Social Mobility on the Bjäre Peninsula 1860-1930* (Lund, 2007), 149.

15 Beijbom, *Mot löftets land*. 51.

16 See contributions to Per Clemensson et al., eds, *Göteborgs-Emigranten 6. Rapport från symposiet "Amerika tur och retur,"* (Göteborg, 1997).

were brought back to Norway, primarily by returnees in Brooklyn.¹⁷

Moreover, a number of Swedish businesses were established by Swedes who had spent significant time in the U.S. returnees. Examples include small enterprises in the Ljusnan River valley in Hälsingland, but also Johan Petter Åhlén who returned from the U.S. in 1914 with ideas and impulses from American department stores and mail order companies. Inspired by what he saw at Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward in Chicago he convinced the Swedish American John Henreksson from Montgomery Ward to return with him to Sweden, and help establish the highly successful Swedish mail order company Åhlén & Holm.¹⁸ Åhlén and others were not emigrants in the traditional sense, but like their compatriots who had spent much longer time in the U.S., they did bring back American ideas and business practices, thereby strengthening the trans-Atlantic Swedish-American networks.

In addition there were political and ideological influences from America that went beyond the tangible and material influences. In his survey of European re-migration Mark Wyman attaches considerable significance to the America political experiences of the returnees and the effects they had on the countries to which the immigrants returned. He notes, for example, a tendency among returnees to become involved in politics upon returning to their homeland. For example, three European Prime Ministers before World War II—of Finland, Latvia and Norway—also had significant American experiences.¹⁹

For Sweden, some scholars have even characterized the baggage the returnees brought back as a different American "life-style," suggesting that the time in America had given them a different outlook on life. It is, of course, difficult to quantify such phenomena but there are certainly testimonials in that direction. "There came with him something of a fresh breeze from the land of the West," a contemporary observer remarked about a Swedish born minister from the Swedish-American Lutheran Augustana Synod who had returned to his birth country to pursue a career in the Church of Sweden.²⁰ As Ulf Beijbom has observed, the returnees became accepted parts of the local communities to which they returned.

17 Siv Ringdal, *Det amerikanska Listan. Med 100 volt i huset* (Oslo, 2002)

18 Ingvar Henricson och Hans Lindblad, *Tur och retur Amerika. Utvandrare som förändrade Sverige* (Stockholm, 1995), 234ff.

19 Wyman, *Round Trip to America*, 99-124.

20 Sten Carlsson, "Augustana Lutheran Pastors in the Church of Sweden," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, 35 (July 1984), 246.

The Swedish American was a well-known category of inhabitants, together with the carpenter, school teacher or local shopkeeper. Beijbom claims that “his Americanized language, gold watch and urban manners often rendered him a place at the dinner tables of the local minister or the wealthiest and most influential farmer.” The title ‘Swedish-American’ seems to have been honorific, and often followed him to his grave, to which many tombstone inscriptions testify to.²¹ The ubiquity of Swedish Americans in the social and cultural landscape in mid 20th century Sweden can also, as already noted, be seen in the Swedish films of the time. At least seven films in the 1930s included Swedish American themes, often featuring Swedish Americans visiting Sweden. The 1947 film *Jens Månsson i Amerika*, featuring Edvard Persson looking for relatives in America—actually shot in the US with the lead actor speaking no English—illustrates the opposite phenomenon.²²

In addition to these material and immaterial influences, Swedish mass migration to the U.S.—including the returnees—played a significant role in the creation of Swedish world views, in particular the shaping of a Swedish image of the U.S. and in contributing to a Swedish orientation towards the United States. There have been Swedish discussions about the United States among the political and cultural elite in the country ever since the late 18th century, which in many ways have followed a general pattern of European estimations of the U.S.²³ To the majority of Swedes of the broader strata of the population, however, the emigrants or the returning Swedish Americans were the primary sources of information about the U.S. and life in the American republic. These broader Swedish images of America thus proceeded along their own trajectories, remaining fairly isolated from the elite discussions of the U.S.

One of the most important elements in the Swedish image of the U.S. is Vilhelm Moberg’s four novel epos dealing with the emigration from the south central Swedish province of Småland to Minnesota in the 1850s. Published during the decade 1949-59, these stories of mid-19th century emigrants and Swedish Americans played a crucial role for the mid-20th cen-

21 Beijbom, *Mot löftets land*, 51.

22 Wallengren, *Välkommen hem Mr Swanson*, 43-96.

23 See Dag Blanck, “Svenska uppfattningar om USA under två århundranden” in Erik Åsard ed., *Det blågula stjärnbaneret. USA:s närvaro och inflytande i Sverige* (Stockholm: forthcoming 2016) for a more detailed discussion of these images.

tury Swedish view of the U.S., placing the migration of Swedes to the U.S. front and center in Swedish literature. When *Sista brevet till Sverige*, the final novel in the series, was published in 1959 the commercial success was already great and the books had been established as a Swedish classics.²⁴ Their position was further strengthened by the films based on the books in the 1970s and the musical "Kristina från Duvemåla" from the 1990s. Jens Liljestrand has even argued that the emigrant series is not just about the U.S. but as played an equally great role for a sense of Swedish identity as it has become a part of the modern Swedish literary canon.²⁵ Indeed, when the Swedish literary TV program "Röda Rummet" arranged a vote in 1998 among its viewers about the most significant Swedish novel of the 20th century, the Emigrant series was the clear winner.²⁶

Moberg was not a returnee, but had grown up in the middle of the enduring Swedish-American networks in Småland, which made the U.S. present in his life from his childhood. Most of his relatives had emigrated and in 1966 he noted how the letters, newspapers, and pictures from American were an integral part of his early life and that "[e]very day we talked of our relatives over there." In fact, he "remember[ed] the word America as far back as the time when [he] could understand words," and had it not been for his parents, Moberg too would have gone to the U.S. This almost-emigrant and Swedish American therefore felt a particular closeness to Swedish America and the U.S. and that both were of special concern to Sweden, which was one reason that prompted him to write the emigrant series.²⁷ Undoubtedly he shared this feeling of a particular closeness with the U.S. through the Swedish Americans, with many other Swedes of his generation.

To Moberg, freedom was the central aspect of the U.S. During his first visit to the U.S. in 1949 to do research for the novels he wrote to his friend and fellow author Eyvind Johnson that "the freedom of the individual" was greater in the U.S. than in any other country he had visited and that it was thanks to the American atom bomb that peace reigned in the world.²⁸ In the novels the country is portrayed as one without classes and privileges and where each person

24 Jens Liljestrand, *Mobergland: Personligt och politiskt i Vilhelm Mobergs utvandrarserie* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2009), 188-190, 176-184.

25 Liljestrand, *Mobergland*, 219.

26 *Aftonbladet*, 25/4 1998, 19.

27 Vilhelm Moberg, "Why I Wrote the Novel About Swedish Emigrants," *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, 17 (April, 1966), 63-65. Quotes from 64.

28 Liljestrand, *Mobergland*, 119-120.

is judged only by his or her own abilities. The contrast to Sweden is fundamental, where the emigrants had lived under rulers whom they had not chosen themselves and even refused to accept.²⁹ As Liljestrand has convincingly shown, this image of the U.S was firmly anchored in a contemporary Cold War cultures, and must be seen in the light of his strong anti-communism.³⁰

During the 1960s Moberg became disappointed in the U.S. which suddenly seemed to be a threat to the freedom of a small country that sought to determine its own future. In an article from 1968 Moberg advocated an American exit from Vietnam and maintained that the American ideal of freedom had been corrupted or betrayed, even though he did attach hope to the youthful American antiwar generation, whom he saw as the embodiment of the American ideals.³¹

This shift towards a more critical assessment of the U.S. followed a larger development in Sweden, where the American wars in Southeast Asia were an important reason for a growing criticism of the U.S. Moberg's views of the U.S. shadowed those of the Swedish population at large. The 1950s represented a high point in for the U.S. in the Swedish mind. Although many other factors such as the beginning consumer society and popular culture contributed to this,³² Moberg's literary and imaginative portrayal of Swedish America and the Swedish Americans made them an enduring element of the Swedish conceptions of the United States.

The concluding part of the article returns to the Benson visit to Sweden in 1957 as it provides a clear illustration of how Swedish Americans directly contributed to the construction of an image of American in Sweden. The Bensons landed at Bulltofta on April 15 1957—the first time a flight from the U.S. had landed at the small Malmö airport.³³ As the plane landed a band played the ceremonial march of the Kronoberg County regiment, and when the chartered SAS DC-6 came to a halt *Dagens Nyheter* noted that “half of Älmhult [Benson's birth place] was there” and *Smålandsposten* estimated that five thousands persons were waiting to see the Bernson clan.

29 Vilhelm Moberg, *Nybyggarna* (Stockholm, 2013), 13.

30 Liljestrand, *Mobergland*, 117-120.

31 Vilhelm Moberg, *Den okända släkten: En bok om svenskarna och Amerika igår och idag* (Stockholm, 1968), 131.

32 Kim Salomon, *En femtiotalersberättelse: Populärkulturens kalla krig i Sverige* (Stockholm, 2007), 64-65, 119-123.

33 The following is based on the accounts of the arrival of the Benson party in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Smålandsposten*, 16 April 1957.

The program for the reception collapsed as reporters, photographers and relatives broke through the police barriers. The mayor of Malmö and representatives of Lion's Club greeted the Swedish American, the Swedish and American national anthems were played, and it was reported that the police had a difficult time holding back the crowds that surged forward towards the Swedish Americans. "Everybody wanted to see the man who had treated his family and friends to a \$60,000 journey to the Old Country."

There were seventy persons in the party, including his wife and children, other relatives, friend, and his minister Theodore Palmer from Benson's Lutheran church in Chicago. The presence of a minister was remarked upon in all newspaper accounts. The party then proceeded to Älmhult from where he had left at age 11 to go live with relatives in Chicago. Now followed a series of family reunions, coffee parties and trips in Småland. "Oceans of coffee" were drunk with nine kind of cookies and hundreds upon hundreds of his sister-in-law's homemade meatballs were eaten.

At the various dinners and receptions, Benson was greeted in a very positive manner. His business achievements in Chicago were praised and admired, and family and local politicians expressed their great pride in Benson.³⁴ Although he had become a quintessentially American success story, his Swedish hosts and the newspapers also underscored his Swedish background. In spite of his American success he had "never fully been able to separate himself from Småland and Sweden,"³⁵ *Smålandsposten* commented, also noting that all his machinery in Chicago was painted in the Swedish colors blue and yellow.

Benson had shipped an Oldsmobile to Älmhult, which he used during the trip and which attracted a great deal of attention, as did his promise to leave it behind with his nephew Gösta. Over the Easter holiday, Benson had been invited to preach in nearby Markaryd, and on annandag påsk (Easter Monday) he made his debut in a Swedish pulpit. *Dagens Nyheter* estimated that five thousand persons attended, a thousand in the church and four thousand waiting outside. The paper commented that the Markaryd church would never again attract such a crowd. "Thousands of cars were parked on fields and meadows" and "[t]here were people who had come from far away and only saw a glimpse of Benson and all his relatives as they marched in and took their especially reserved seats in the church." The sermon focused on

34 *Smålandsposten*, 18 April 1957

35 *Smålandsposten*, 18 April 1957.

the power of religion in Benson's life, and *Dagens Nyheter* commented that no one could doubt the "warm religiosity" of the Swedish American.³⁶

On April 29, the Bensons abandoned Småland and travelled to Stockholm: he had been called to the King, as the papers had it. Benson met the King wearing blue and yellow socks, and afterwards he was very positive: the monarch was "just like a person should be. I felt like meeting a brother and all nervousness disappeared immediately when the King shook hands with my wife and myself."³⁷ On May 5, the chartered DC6 took off from Bulltofta for Chicago "overloaded with souvenirs—1,400 kgs of cargo—and happy relatives." Before leaving Benson said that they had had a couple of wonderful weeks in Sweden, adding that they would be back in time for church when they landed in Chicago. The crowds gathered to say goodbye sent him off with traditional Swedish hurrahs.³⁸

The 1957 Benson tour of Sweden clearly highlighted Swedish Americans as a distinct group. Although they shared a common ancestry with the homeland Swedes, their Americanness also made them different. This difference was almost unanimously seen in a positive light. This is not surprising given the earlier discussed general positive image of the U.S. in Sweden in the late 1950s. Still, Sweden also harbored negative views of the U.S. as bashful, shallow, and materialistic.³⁹ No such criticism was voiced during the Benson visit. In fact *Dagens Nyheter's* reporter explicitly said that not even a "glimmer of suspicion exists" that Benson had arranged the tour to promote himself or his well renowned construction company. "He is so movingly sincere" in the midst of relatives and friends. "Not one bashful word, not one iota of ingratiating."⁴⁰

A second dimension has to do with the scale of the visit. All commentators reared on the enormity of the trip—the idea to charter an airplane, the number of people involved, the size of the coffee parties, the thousand who wanted to hear him, etc. "This is the way to return to the old country after 35 years in America—with wife, children, grandchildren, private physicians and minister, an entire DC-6 filled with people, and half of Älmhult at

36 *Dagens Nyheter*, 23 April 1957.

37 *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 May 1957.

38 *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 May 1957.

39 Blanck, "Svenska uppfattningar," 60-61.

40 *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 April 1957.

the tarmac with flowers in hand and tears in eyes,” wrote *Dagens Nyheter*.⁴¹ His popularity in Sweden was also great—Staffan Heimerson who covered the visit as a young journalist has written of a Benson psychosis and how the locals in Älmhult peaked through the windows to get a glimpse of what went on at the sumptuous *släkttkalas*.⁴² The fact that the country’s leading newspaper had Benson’s arrival in Malmö on the front page and covered his family reunions in Småland in great detail, is a further sign of this. The paper itself recognized this saying that “we Swedes do not even go this crazy when busty beauty Anita flies in to the same airport”—with a reference to the at the time very popular Swedish film actress Anita Ekberg, who hailed from Malmö. The returning Swedish American thus becomes a part of and strengthens the larger narrative of American size, plentitude, and ingenuity, which Sweden certainly admired—and also at times envied.

Even though the positive accounts dominated, the homeland Swedes did not seem to embrace all of Benson’s attributes. One such area had to do with his explicit and open religiosity, which one newspaper called “surprising.” The fact that the Rev. Palmer accompanied Benson was remarked on—it was unusual for prominent persons in Småland to have private ministers. In his words of greeting at Bulltofta after the DC 6 had landed, Benson spoke about looking out of the window and seeing the dark blue skies and the clear stars as they flew through the night, concluding that he felt as if the whole group “was being lifted through the air in the hands of God”. One young journalist commented a bit sarcastically that Benson seemed to have forgotten the significance of both the pilot and of Benson’s wallet.⁴³

More explicit criticism of Benson was voiced some 12 years later, in 1969. In an interview in *Aftonbladet* “blue and yellow Benson” (*blågule Benson*) said that Sweden was in decline, and that it had become both half communist and anti-American.⁴⁴ He also warned his old countrymen of the Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme and his foreign policies. (Palme had was a vocal critic of the U.S. war in Vietnam at the time, which had resulted in strained relations between Sweden and the U.S.)⁴⁵ The jour-

41 *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 April, 1957.

42 Staffan Heimerson, “Very very welcome home, mr Benson” in his *Med Dolly Parton i baksätet. 35 föreläsade resekåserier från Amerika* (Stockholm, 1997), 63.

43 Heimerson, “Very very welcome home,” 62.

44 The following based on Heimerson, “Very very welcome home,” 59-61.

45 Blanck, “Svenska uppfattningar,” 75-78.

nalist then brought up the subject of race, and the situation for the many black workers in Benson's construction company. Benson, however, denied any problem in his company and was optimistic about the future. Forty per cent of his workers were African Americans, and there had never been any racial problems in his companies. Benson even said that on Sundays he drove around and looking in on "my Negros," who lived nice and shiny houses and lived well financially. He predicted that in five years' time the U.S. would have solved its racial problems.

Benson's racist comments came at a time in Sweden when the situation for African Americans was increasingly discussed.⁴⁶ American race relations had been to subject for public debate since the late 1940s and leading intellectuals such as Gunnar Myrdal and Herbert Tingsten pointed to the inherent contradictions between the American promise of freedom and the legal segregation and social discrimination of African Americans. Still, the prevailing attitude in Sweden suggested that the U.S. would be able to solve the "American dilemma" that Myrdal had analyzed in such detail in his so influential book by the same name from 1944. By the late 1960s, however, the situation changed and more radical and pessimistic voices were heard. The Black Power movement reached Sweden, and a number of books positive to the movement and translations of works by Black Power activists were published in Sweden.⁴⁷ In 1967 a Swedish translation of Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* was published,⁴⁸ followed by a two day visit by the author to Sweden. Carmichael spoke to great acclaim to sold audiences in the Uppsala University aula magna and in the Stockholm Concert Hall, and in Uppsala he was hailed by over 2.000 students "with minutes long applause and very loud ovations."⁴⁹

It is obvious that Benson's paternalistic and racist opinions resulted in changed attitudes towards him in Sweden. The Swedish attention to American race relations meant that the celebrated Swedish American now helped the homeland Swedes focus on of the fundamental social American prob-

46 Blanck, "Svenska uppfattningar," 67 ff.

47 Some examples include Teddy Arnberg, *Revolutionära rörelser i USA* (Stockholm, 1968), Anna-Lisa Bäckman, *Svart – En resa i USA* (Stockholm, 1971), and Tom Hayden, *Revolt i svart ghetto: Våld uppifrån och motstånd nerifrån* (Stockholm, 1968).

48 Stokely Carmichael, *Black Power: Befrielsepolitiken i Amerika* (Stockholm, 1967).

49 Gunilla Ingmar, "Applåd för våldet," *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 2/12 1967, 4; Ewa Swedenmark & Ulla Lundström, "Dag för dag med Stokely," *Tidsignal*, nr 51/52, 1967, 21.

lems. In that way, the Swedish American continued to act as a catalyst for Swedes in the formation and re-formation of Swedish views of the U.S.

In conclusion, Swedish Americans did not only interact with other immigrant and ethnic groups in the U.S. They also played an important role vis-à-vis their ancestral country particularly in the middle of the 20th century. Many returnees brought back accumulated resources which enabled them to establish themselves in the old homeland by for example acquiring land. A study from southern Sweden also suggests that Swedish-American returnees experienced more social mobility than had previously been assumed. In addition, there is evidence of technology transfer of different kinds through both returnees and more temporary visitors to the U.S. This is also seems to be true when it comes to both political and religious ideas that were mediated and incorporated in Swedish society through the Swedish-America returnees.

Swedish America and Swedish Americans also contributed significantly to the evolving views of the U.S. in Sweden. This was particularly true for the broad strata of the population, who, like Vilhelm Moberg, had most of their friends and relatives in America. Their conceptions of the U.S. proceeded along a different trajectory than those of the political, social, and cultural elites of the country. In fact, the emigration of some 1,3 million Swedes resulted in an enormous network of contacts which spanned the Atlantic, and through which individuals, information, and impulses flowed back and forth. Even though the mass emigration of Swedes ended in the 1920s, the cultural and social long term effects of this migration continued to influence both countries throughout the 20th century. The creation of a distinct Swedish American community on the western side of the Atlantic played a major role in shaping homeland Swedish notions about the U.S. As the case of Ragnar Benson's spectacular return to Sweden in 1957 shows—which was followed by many more, later including chartered trains—actual returning Swedish Americans embodied many aspects of America and helped make the country familiar to large strata of the Swedish population. They often became respected and admired, but could also, as he case of Benson shows, embody negative aspects of America society. The Swedish Americans thus functioned as an intermediary between the two countries, at times challenging national, cultural, and social boundaries well into the 20th century. In that way they constitute an example of the long lasting cultural and social effects of the great migration between Sweden and the United States.