

The Swedish Texans



Fred and Olga Nygren Bergman with Ruth

Most immigrants coming from Sweden to Texas arrived in a 60-year period, from 1848 to about 1910.

The first group of Swedes was recruited by Swen Magnus Swenson, who had come to Texas in 1838 and profited from a plantation in Ft. Bend County. Friend to Sam Houston, Swenson was convinced to help bring Swedish families to Texas. An initial group of 25 came in 1848.

Soon, Swenson's uncle, Swante Palm, had arrived, and the two became successful business partners. They operated an informal immigration company which paid travel expenses on credit or in return for indentured labor.

Other individuals and families from Sweden and the north-central United States heard about Texas possibilities and came. By the turn of the century, more than 4,000 Swedes were in the state.

Swedish settlement was rural at first but near urban centers. Later settlement patterns were urban. Svenska kullen, or "Swedish hill," in downtown Austin was home to almost 50 Swedish families. Settlers located in and near Austin, Dallas, Ft. Worth, and Waco, as well as smaller towns. Some Texas place names indicate a Swedish origin or

namesake, even though all did not become places of exclusive Swedish settlement: Lund, New Sweden, Swedonia, West Sweden, Palm Valley, Swensondale, Stockholm, Ericksdahl (Ericdale), and Govalle (dialect for "good grazing").

From 1896 to 1982, the Texas-Posten was the newspaper for Swedes in Texas. Two others, the Södra Vecko-Posten (1882) and the Texas-Bladet (1900-1909) had short but influential lives.

Swedish interests established Trinity Lutheran College in Round Rock and Texas Wesleyan College in Austin, but both ceased operations because of a lack of financial backing.

Today, over 160,000 individuals in Texas claim Swedish descent. In some locations, families still prepare "traditional" foods, and some individuals take pride in learning Swedish. In fact, Texas Swedish as a spoken (or read) language has been remarkably durable. Even though Swedish Lutheran and Methodist churches abandoned the language over a generation ago, the Texas-Posten published a quarter of its copy in Swedish until its end. In the 1980s the SVEA Nytt, a newsletter, was published by an organization of Swedish-speaking women.

For the most part, however, descendants today are almost completely assimilated into the host culture.

A number of cultural events were held in 1988 on the 150th anniversary of the first arrivals, including an official visit by King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden.

The Bergman Letters

Few narrative accounts exist today written by early Swedish Texans. Of wonderful exception are the letters from the Bergman brothers.

Carl Johan Bergman and his brother, Clæs Frederick (called "Fred"), came to Texas, choosing the New Sweden area east of Austin in 1883. They soon operated a farm in the community of Lund and wrote many letters over the decades to their sisters in Sweden.

The letters give a remarkably detailed account of how Texas was seen by the immigrants. Often signing letters together, they compliment and criticize Texas. One thing new was the ever-shifting Texas weather, as Carl writes:

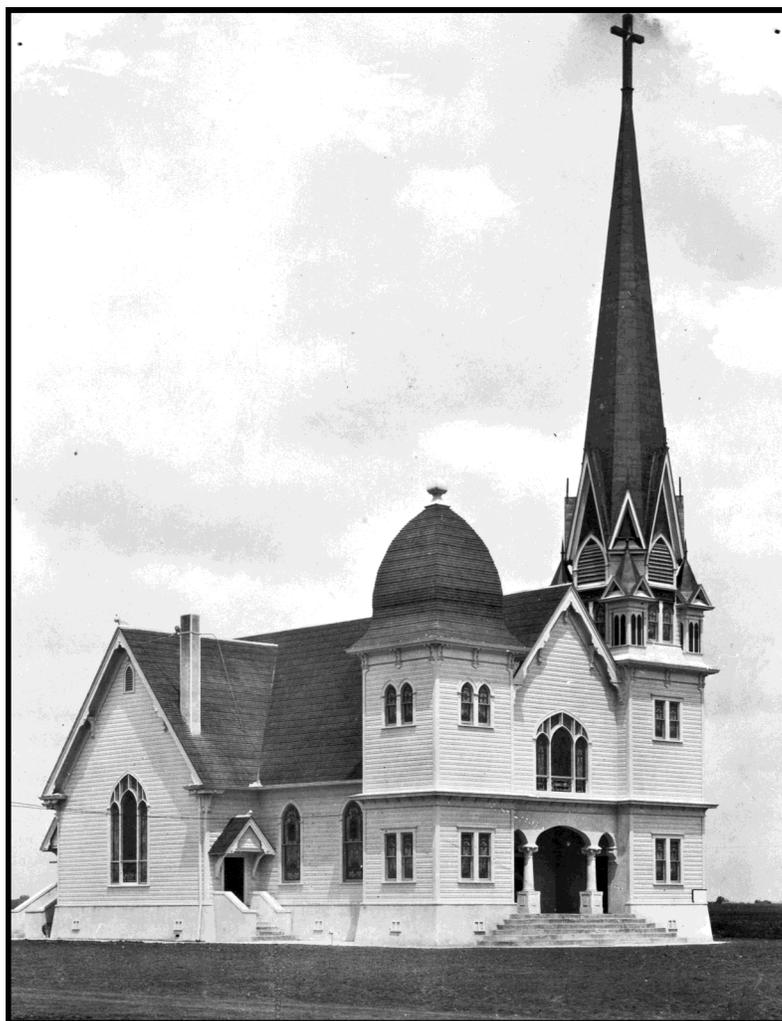
"I wish that I could describe Texas for you, but it would be too difficult, for much is still strange to me... When it begins to rain, it can last for long periods of time and the same is true for periods of no precipitation...

"The soil here is of such a consistency, that when it rains, we can neither ride nor walk, it becomes so muddy, so then we have to stay inside long hours. Or, if we do go out, we have to ride horses. Winter is variable, sometimes warm, sometimes cold. We have no winter before Christmas... Fred and I have slept outside on the porch for over a week... it is so warm in our room that we can't sleep there.

"I don't think you'd recognize us; we have become brown and lean..."

But Fred, writing years later in 1908, had become used to the climate, claiming "I would freeze to death in an instant if I were at home." And, married by then to Olga Nygren, he noted his lack of attraction for Texas women. "Here in Texas, women are in general small and thin, the climate is the reason."

Fred summed up the Swedish Texan experience: "Texas is a place for the poor to work their way up by means of work and thrift. Poor Swedes come here practically all the time, and in a few years they are independent. This place is not for a lazy bones but for the diligent."



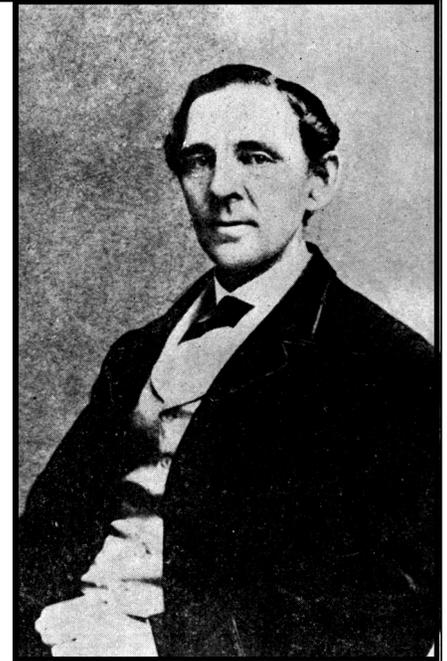
New Sweden Lutheran Church, 1920s

Swenson and Palm

Two men were directly responsible for the bulk of Swedish immigration to Texas: Swen Magnus Swenson and Swante Palm.

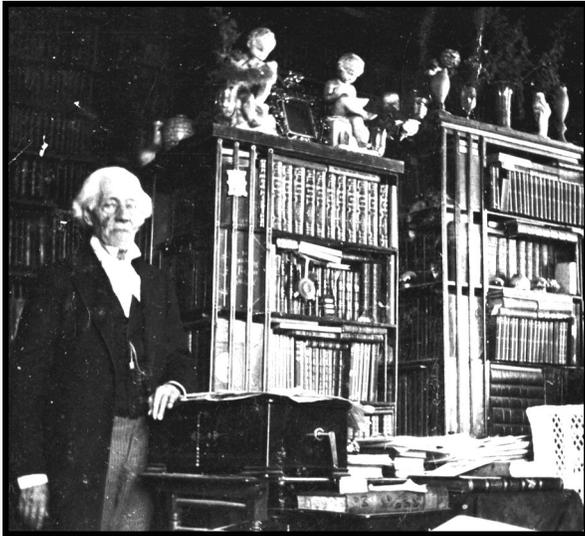
Swenson was the first to arrive in Texas, in 1838. Working his way up from peddler of mercantile goods to plantation owner, he was joined in 1844 by his uncle Swante Palm, a newspaper editor, court clerk, and secretary. The two men were overwhelmingly successful business partners as well as independent operators.

Swenson, establishing a mercantile business in Austin with Palm, became a land dealer. Buying land certificates and investing in the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway, he became one of the top landowners in the state. Swenson established the SMS Ranch and maintained a fleet of freight wagons to sell goods in West Texas. In Swenson's words, his wagons carried "boots and shoes, Hats, hardware, Holloware, Earthenware, Woodware, Blacksmith's tools, Iron, Steel and Nails; a General Assortment of Groceries, Flour, Tobacco, Rice, etc.; whisky, brandies, Holland gin, Rum, Sherry, Madeira, Port and Claret wine by the box or the barrel, oils, Paints, Window-Glass and Putty, Bagging and Bale Rope, Powder Shot and Lead; cooking stoves and office stoves, ploughs, hoes..." Anything anyone would need.



Swen Magnus Swenson

Swenson remained neutral as the Civil War approached, an unusual accomplishment due to his ability to export cotton as an agent for the Swedish government, his investments, and friendships with Governors Sam Houston and Francis Lubbock. Even so, he joined Houston in an effort to counter Texas secession. Houston, whose ideas were rarely low-profile, planned an independent Texas army. Swenson, to be made a colonel for his efforts, was to provide troop supplies. Although plans failed, the activity was hardly considered neutral.



Swante Palm in his library c. 1894

By 1863, Swenson had left Texas in fear for his life. He lived thereafter in Mexico, Sweden, and New York without dissolving his Texas ties or investments. He regularly visited the state.

Swante Palm, in addition to joining his nephew in various business ventures, became a La Grange postmaster and diplomatic secretary to Thomas William Ward, United States consul in Panama.

Writing in favor of slavery, but not participating, Palm maintained careful neutrality during the Civil War and was in an excellent political position during Reconstruction. He became a Travis County justice of the peace, a member of the Austin City Council, and an amateur scientist turned professional. He served as meteorologist for the first Texas Geological and Agricultural Survey.

Appointed vice consul for Norway and Sweden in 1866, Palm worked continuously for Swedish immigration to Texas.

Palm built a private library during his life totaling over 12,000 volumes. Many he had read carefully, as shown by his marginalia in English, French, Swedish, Norwegian, German, and Latin. He donated his library to the University of Texas in 1897, a gift which increased university holdings by sixty percent. As late as 1970, some of his volumes remained in use on the regular shelves of the library. His books are now in special collections.

"The chief characteristic of weather in Texas is not variety, but surprise."

---Swante Palm

SWEDISH TEXANS & ASSIMILATION

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ PERIOD: _____

What is Assimilation?

The many immigrants to Texas brought their unique cultures with them. The people of Poland spoke Polish, the Germans knew how to make sauerkraut, the Norwegians built log homes like those they had built in Norway, the Japanese planted rice as they did in Japan, and the people of India built Hindu temples in Texas.

As immigrants from different cultures made Texas home, many changed or lost some of the cultural traditions they brought with them. This process known as *assimilation* happens when people living together merge, or combine, their cultural traits. Through assimilation, some cultural traits are lost and others are adopted. People may change the way that they dress, the language that they speak and even the food that they eat based on the cultures of others they live near.

Assimilation is not always an easy or welcomed process. Sometimes it happens by force because immigrants and their cultures are not accepted by the majority. Through political and social pressure, some groups have been forced to give up their language and other cultural traditions.

The population of Texas today is one of great cultural diversity with more than 400 different cultural groups represented. Although many groups have assimilated and adopted other cultural traditions, the ongoing arrival of new citizens continues to create Texas anew, enriching us all.

List five cultural traits that new immigrants bring with them to a new place.

How does *assimilation* affect culture?

Describe one example of how a person or group has been forced to assimilate to be accepted.

Directions: In the frames below, draw a cartoon to describe the process of assimilation.

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Swedish Texans

Using **Texans One and All: The Swedish Texans**, answer the following questions about why Swedes moved to Texas and how they assimilated.

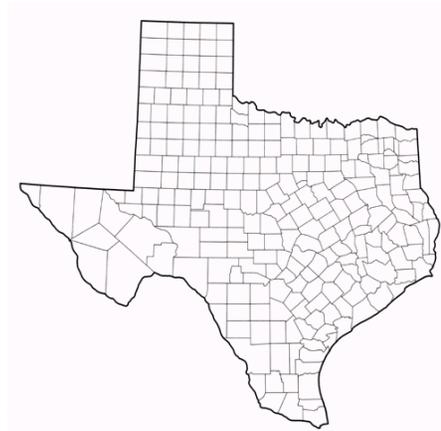
When did most Swedish settlers come to Texas?

Describe one way that Swedish settlers maintained their cultural traditions in Texas, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

How many Texans claim to be of Swedish descent today?

How do Swedish Texans maintain their cultural traditions today?

Geography Skills



Use your textbook to find the locations mentioned as significant to the Swedish experience in Texas, and label them on the map below.

- Austin
- Dallas/Ft. Worth
- Waco
- Lund
- New Sweden
- Swedonia
- West Sweden
- Palm Valley
- Swensondale
- Stockholm
- Ericksdahl (Ericdale)
- Govalle

Globalization

The world is more connected than ever before! Changes in technology and political policies in the last several decades have led to greater increases in international trade, made migration easier, and put information from around the world at the tips of our fingers. This process called *globalization* has created an increasingly connected world culture and economy. Some fear that globalization may erase traditions and customs of smaller cultural groups. While we have more access to information, products and movement, globalization may also decrease the diversity that makes cultures unique and interesting.

What examples of globalization do you see in your home or community?

How do you feel about globalization? Explain your answer.

Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about Swedish Texans and assimilation.
