



swedish
american
museum

Summer 2026

Flaggan

To preserve, teach and
celebrate Swedish heritage



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Dear members and friends,

It is sometimes hard to know where to begin when writing this article. There is always so much happening at the Museum, and thanks to social media, email, and our newsletter, we are able to share many of our events and activities with a broader audience.

This year is especially meaningful as the Swedish American Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary. While the Museum has grown tremendously since it first opened its doors, our mission remains the same - to celebrate, preserve, and share Swedish traditions and Swedish-American heritage and culture.

It has been 50 years since Kurt Mathiasson opened the Museum in 1976, and ten years later in 1986 Kerstin Lane was hired as the first Executive Director. In 2006, I was honored to be chosen as Executive Director when Kerstin retired.

Some of you know my background, while others may not. Sometimes we don't know what our future holds, and this is one of those stories. I was born in Los Angeles after my parents moved to the United States for my father's engineering career. We

returned to Sweden when I was four years old. After growing up in Gothenburg, I moved to St. Paul in 1980 at the age of 22. From there, my career took several unexpected turns - from preschool teacher to accountant and controller to turnaround manager - all of which helped prepare me for my role at the Museum.

My involvement with the local Swedish community began in 1982 when I moved to Chicago from St. Paul, Minnesota. The first organization I joined was SVEA (now SWEA), where I enjoyed meeting other Swedes, speaking Swedish, and celebrating our traditions together. I later became a teacher at Svenska Skolan, which first met at the Swedish Club and later at North Park College (now North Park University).

In the late 1990s, my involvement expanded to include the Swedish American Museum. As a member of the Exhibit Committee, I had the privilege of helping develop the Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration. In 2003, I joined the Museum's Board of Directors, and for the past 20 years, I have had the honor of serving as Executive Director.

One of the greatest joys of working at the Museum is meeting people from all walks of life and hearing their

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personal stories. When I moved to St. Paul in 1980, I planned to stay for just one year before returning to Sweden. Life, however, had different plans. Looking back, I am grateful I didn't know what the future held because I would have missed the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people who have shaped my life and helped build this wonderful Museum.

In this issue, you'll read several stories from Swedish Odyssey 2026, the Museum's recent tour of Sweden. Participants came from across the United States and included both Museum members and first-time travelers. Julie Benson and Jill Pearson Reider led the group together with Lasse Heimlander in Sweden. One of the most meaningful parts of the journey was watching participants meet relatives and discover family connections, strengthening the bonds between Sweden and America.

I was fortunate to join the group in Gothenburg and again in Stockholm. The itinerary included many historic sites, as well as a visit to Nusnäs, where the famous Dala horses are handcrafted. One memorable fika stop in Gothenburg featured a traditional Haga bulle - a giant cinnamon roll that certainly lived up to its reputation! The hotel breakfast buffets were another highlight, offering delicious pastries, fresh breads, and healthy ginger shots that quickly became favorites among the group. We all probably ate larger breakfasts than we do at home, but it was fun to sample so many Swedish specialties. One surprise for many travelers was learning that Swedes often enjoy their pancakes with strawberry jam or queen's jam (a raspberry-blueberry blend) rather than lingonberry jam.



Haga bulle

The trip concluded with Sweden's National Day celebration on June 6 in Stockholm. We watched the Royal Family travel by horse-drawn carriage on their way to Skansen, where we spent the day enjoying the festivities. Plans are already underway for Swedish Odyssey 2028, and we look forward to sharing more details in the future.

Before returning to Andersonville's three-day Midsommarfest, some of us had the opportunity to enjoy dinner with Museum members who now live in Stockholm. It was a wonderful way to end the trip by strengthening the connections between Chicago and Sweden.



Our anniversary celebration continues this fall with the opening of our new exhibit, 50 Years at the Swedish American Museum: Honoring Our Roots, Cultivating Tomorrow, opening on Friday, Aug. 14. The festivities will continue with our Retro Party on Saturday, Aug. 15, and conclude with the Golden Gala on Saturday, Nov. 7, 2026, at the Driehaus Museum.

As we celebrate this milestone year, I am reminded that the Museum has always been about people and their stories. Thank you for being part of ours. Whether you have been with us since the beginning or have only recently discovered the Museum, your support and participation help ensure that our next 50 years will be just as meaningful as the first.

Greetings

Karin M. Abercrombie

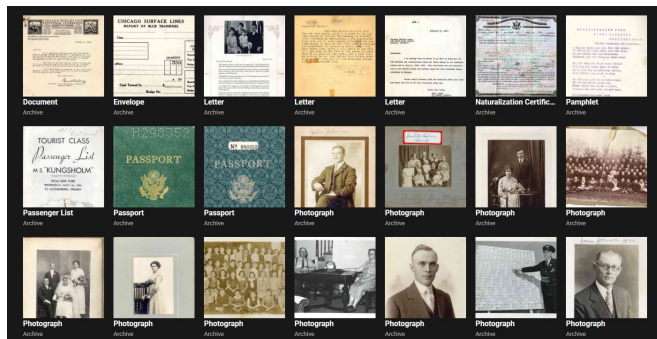
Karin Moen Abercrombie

Curators Corner

By Sarah Hawkinson

The Swedish American Museum's artifact collection and vibrant exhibition history provide a strong foundation for continued growth and expansion in the future. Together, the collection and rotating displays in both the Main Gallery and Wallenberg Gallery, along with the core exhibition, We Are America, will continue to share traditions and stories from Swedish and Swedish-American communities with guests both physically and digitally.

This summer, the Museum will be finishing a year-long digitization project supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Collection staff members Bea Sider and Shelby Walker have worked with Curator Sarah Hawkinson to digitize and publish over 2,000 of the Museum's archival records on the CatalogIt HUB, a resource available on the Museum website to guests and researchers both near and far. While this particular grant-funded project will end at the end of the summer, it has also included setting up some pieces of infrastructure for the Museum to sustainably continue refining and digitizing its collection. Portions of the Museum's digitized collections have been uploaded to the Illinois Digital Archives and Chicago Collections Consortium, two digital repositories that house growing numbers of digital records from museums and cultural institutions across Illinois and the Chicagoland area. Going forward, the Museum will also invite guests who have more information about particular people, places, organizations, and events that are featured in our digitized collections to share that knowledge through a digital form on the Collection page of the Museum website, in an effort to contextually enrich the Museum collection wherever possible.



CatalogIt



The Museum's movable shelves

The Museum will also explore future possibilities of acquiring more storage infrastructure for its collection space, in order to create more space and thereby accommodate more donations to the collection. Pursuing a mechanical systems assessment to explore ways in which the Museum can control the collection's physical environment through factors such as relative humidity and temperature is another concrete step that can be taken. Many forthcoming collection-based projects have also been informed by suggestions made through a Collections Assessment for Preservation (CAP) that was conducted in 2024, supported by the Foundation of the American Institution for Conservation of Historic Artistic Works (FAIC) and The Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The Museum's decisions in regards to collection growth, preservation, and management will continue to be informed by best practices and professional standards.

On Friday, Aug. 14, a new Main Gallery exhibition about the history, expansion, and future hopes for the Swedish American Museum will open for the public to enjoy through Sunday, Nov. 29. Entitled 50 Years at the Swedish American Museum: Honoring our Roots, Cultivating Tomorrow, this display will invite guests to reflect on the Museum's rich history and

immense growth since 1976 as a warm and inviting backdrop for other anniversary-related programming that is retrospective, but, importantly, also looking forward to an exciting future of continued service for the Museum to its constituents and community members. On Oct. 9, a new exhibit will open in the second-floor Wallenberg Gallery entitled Unsettled Clay, featuring ceramic work by Swedish-American artist Carl Mankert that reflects on themes of immigration and the duality of Swedish and Swedish-American identities. During the holiday season, a selection of the Museum's traditional bonader will make a return to the Main Gallery walls to charm and educate guests about a unique style of Swedish folk painting. An exciting 2027 exhibition calendar is right around the corner, and we can hardly wait to share more engaging displays with you in the coming year. Keep an eye out for more details!

Looking further ahead, the Museum will continue to build out its robust special exhibits calendar, fostering more connections with artists and museums both locally and internationally. We hope to tell more stories and shine a spotlight on Swedish and Swedish-American narratives that provide unique perspectives that may not have been shared before on a larger scale. We will also continue to explore ways in which to feature artwork in Mormors Café, with the help of a newly-installed display system. We hope that you will join us on this journey of continued exploration and reflection at the Swedish American Museum through its collection and exhibits.



Regional archives in Vadstena



Swedish Odyssey 2026

Early summer 2026 the Swedish American Museum organized a trip to Sweden together with the Genealogical Society. The participants got some help researching their own family history before the trip and were encouraged to contact their Swedish relatives in preparation for the trip. The trip was a tour of the southern half Sweden with the option of a trip to Denmark and/or Norway. 43 people signed up for the trip. Here are some of their stories. In this issue, you will also be able to read some additional stories in the magazine "Nordstjernen" in the near future.



Sweden's Regional Archives and the 'Genealogy Brothers' in Vadstena

By Julie Anne Benson

Vadstena is a charming town in Östergötland on the east coast of Lake Vättern - the second largest lake in Sweden. The town is noted for at least two facts of Swedish history. It was in Vadstena in the late 14th century that St Bridget of Sweden founded the first monastery of the Bridgettine Order, and Vadstena Castle is one of Gustav Vasa's castles from the 16th century. Also the town hall there is the oldest surviving town hall in Sweden.

In addition to all the history, Vadstena is the home of the Riksarkivet (Swedish Regional Archives) housed in the castle. Our group was thrilled to have a private tour of the archives led by two long-time archivists there – Anna and Claus. We also received a very informative genealogy presentation by Släktforskarbröderna (the "Genealogy Brothers") Mathias and Tomas Karlsson from Oskarshamn. Here we learned more about our ancestors by reviewing the Swedish court records for Southern Sweden.

The Future of Volunteering

By Layne Borden

The Museum's volunteers have been amazing from the very beginning of our inception. For fifty years, we have had people coming in from the neighborhood, the city, the suburbs, and all around the world to help us run our programs, events, and day-to-day operations. What was once a community expectation for Swedish folks in Andersonville became something people seek out when looking for places to volunteer in Chicago or the Museum community. We continue to seek advice to strengthen and improve our volunteer base, but through the years we have become a guiding voice amongst some of the Chicago Cultural Alliance institutions, assisting organizations like the National Hellenic Museum with their own volunteer coordination.

That being said, volunteering is an area that by its very nature is constantly shifting and changing. We will never be completely stagnant in our approach to volunteers, nor should we be. This variance is what keeps us an active and thriving part of the community. There are many things that contribute to the way volunteering exists at the Swedish American Museum: from the people who make up our volunteers, to the types of events we host, or the programs we run on a day-to-day basis.

It may be the most obvious statement one can make, but it really is the volunteers who make up the community. The people who most often answer the phone when you call the Museum, who welcome you into our exhibits and events, who check you out in our store or give you a tour of the neighborhood and core exhibit. There are over ten times the number of volunteers as there are core staff members at the Museum, and without their help, our day-to-day functioning would look incredibly different. Not only do the fantastic people who donate their time to the Museum help us run our programs and events, but the energy they bring to each shift at the Museum sets the tone for our members and guests. When a volunteer moves on from the Museum or a new one starts, the dynamic amongst our volunteer base shifts.



Food volunteer at Midsommarfest



Volunteers doing flower crowns at Midsommarfest

The events the Museum hosts and our normal programming also changes how much time different volunteers spend at the Museum, and will draw in a different crowd of people. We mostly have calm, laidback events that are focused on art and culture. When it comes to our higher stress events like Midsommarfest and Julmarknad, we do our best to ensure the stressful problems are dealt with by staff members so the only issue is the high volume of people. These trends with our events, alongside our increase in low-intensity day-to-day volunteering as a 2nd floor attendant or showing off items from our collection during Late Night and our Free Tuesday, have created a calm volunteer culture where people know that anything that arises will be handled swiftly and with ease. In recent years we have also created more events for volunteers to just come in and get to know each other, building community amongst them to ensure we know we're all in this together. As time goes on, we hope to continue to support our volunteers through the slow changes that will continue to come.

Cousin Meet-Ups

By Risë Samuelson-Rasch

When I learned where this Swedish Odyssey tour was going to visit, I was thrilled! I'd never been to Sweden, but especially wanted to see Östergötland, where my father's mother (farmor) was born (in Vaderstad, near Vadstena). She was the first of the 5 youngest in her family of 10 children who emigrated to the US, and eventually to Chicago, in the early 1900's. This branch of my family had extensive genealogy information already compiled by a cousin in Lockport, Illinois. We were also in contact with some Swedish relatives through Facebook. I had emailed a few in advance, but was disappointed when they said they weren't going to be available while I was in the area. Fortunately, they "referred" me to other cousins instead!



Risë with her Swedish cousins

I eventually connected with descendants of my grandmother's brother Axel, who was 12 years older than she, but had stayed in Sweden. As a little girl, I remember the stories told to me about him. We were on our pre-trip tour in Denmark when I received an unexpected email from Axel's granddaughter (my second cousin) who has made her home for years in suburban Copenhagen - she had just learned I was in town and invited me over for dinner! We shared photos and stories about our grandparents and all their siblings, as well as our own lives (since we'd never met) and current events on both sides of the pond. It seems she and her sister are my only living second cousins left in Sweden (while there are still quite a few in the US). It felt like traveling back in time to meet someone in person who actually knew these interesting people I'd only heard about all my life.

A few days later, I met up with Axel's great-granddaughter, who lives in Jönköping. She was very kind to drive up to meet me in Gränna when our tour made a quick stop for lunch and "polkagris" shopping! This "second cousin, once removed" was thrilled to learn that she even had relatives in the US – she said she had no idea! We even looked quite a bit alike!! She said she always felt there was something "missing" when it came to knowing about her relatives, but now she felt more "complete"! I was able to provide her with genealogy documents that showed her just how many dozens and dozens of cousins she has here! She and her family are now very interested in coming to visit the US, and I am hoping to return and explore more family history in Östergötland!



Mormors Café

By Jeanette Norlock

Mormors Café is now taking part in Late Nights at the Museum on the last Friday of the month. The Café will be open while other programs happen around the building. Make sure to pop in to enjoy Swedish or other treats in the Café or on the patio in back. Perhaps even pick up our delicious bread pudding or other treats to enjoy at home for breakfast or bring to your next gathering. Summer means we are baking many things with fresh berries and rhubarb grown locally. Going forward we will continue to stay open late on the last Friday of the month with community dinners that can be pre-booked online. The idea is to gather and meet people from the community whether you come alone or as a group; everyone is welcome and should feel at home at Mormors. In addition, we will expand our hours on the weekends and close at 4 p.m. with the rest of the Museum, starting in August.

All the Café events and programs can be found on the website and that is also where you will find our online order form, it is always best to order ahead of time if you want bigger quantities of any item, and checking in often will make sure you don't miss what is new as the menu is always expanding. If you can't see what you are looking for, it doesn't mean we can't make it. Just check in with us about your ideas and questions and we will always do our best to make it happen. Whether it is for a small private event, birthday party, office meetings or an onsite event, we can provide the refreshments.

With time we will eventually be offering some of our most popular items from our food menu online as well as To Go options. Always made in house in small batches, like your mom or grandma use to make it, the best of two worlds, foods you know, family recipes, that you can serve at home.

We have had the pleasure of putting together a few private events before and after hours in the Café and hope you will consider us for your next event. You get all the things you love about the Café catered to your specific needs and wants in a private setting. Baby shower, birthday or simply gathering your favorite people to show them love with a kafferep, the Swedish version of afternoon tea, comes to mind. Or why

not a private Tea Tasting or Mocktail event, we carry a large assortment of teas that can be served hot or iced. The current customer favorite is Black tea with Strawberry and Rhubarb over ice. I am sure it will not be hard to come up with a reason to host your next gathering here, big or small.

If you don't already follow Mormors Café on Instagram, @mormorscafesam, make sure to hit that Follow button for a way to stay in touch and find out about specials and what we are up to in an interactive way. Often our specials are ideas and creations happening due to ingredients we don't want to go to waste, or a nice harvest or Farmers Market find that you don't want to miss out on.



Private party in Mormors Café



Special Exhibits



50 Years at the Swedish American Museum: Honoring our Roots, Cultivating Tomorrow

Aug. 14, 2026 – Nov. 29, 2026

This special display will highlight and honor the past 50 years of community at the Swedish American Museum. Since 1976, the Museum has been a cultural anchor for generations of Swedish Americans and a welcoming space for all to explore and reflect on the immigrant experience. This exhibit reflects on the journey: the visionary founders who brought the Museum to fruition, the milestones that shaped our growth against the backdrop of Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood, and the staff, volunteers, artists, scholars, and visitors who breathed life into it. As we celebrate the Swedish American Museum's golden anniversary, we invite you to look both backwards and forwards with us; to reflect on the legacy that the Museum has built over the past 50 years and look ahead to the future.



Unsettled Clay Artwork by Carl Mankert

Oct. 9, 2026 – Feb. 7, 2027

Exhibit Opening: Oct. 9, 6 p.m. - 8 p.m.

This exhibition brings together a dynamic and rich collection of works by ceramicist Carl Mankert, exploring the expressive potential of clay – one of humanity's oldest creative materials – through a contemporary lens.

The artist's work is a reflection of his own experiences with the duality of Swedish-American identity. Never settled, always here and there. He draws inspiration from a deep cultural well, incorporating both classic Scandinavian design and the din of urban America; the solid rock of homeland and the unsettled experiences of an immigrant. Through his work, he draws on repetition, perfection and reflection.



The Hellstroms of Melrose Street c. 1915 Installation Art by Thomas Hellstrom

Ongoing – Oct. 4, 2026

"The Hellstroms of Melrose Street c. 1915," is an immersive installation by fourth-generation Swedish-American artist Thomas Hellstrom that brings his family's Swedish-American story on Chicago's North Side to life. Drawing from his Great Aunt Delores Olsen's meticulously annotated photo albums, the exhibition features candid, often humorous photographs - including early "selfies" - of Delores, her brother Harlow Hellstrom, and their father Victor, who emigrated from Stockholm in the 1890s.

Delores's handwritten, annotated photographs are the installations starting point, which pairs a video presentation - an homage to the early movie-houses in Andersonville that Delores and Harlow frequented - with original Victorian furnishings and family heirlooms depicted in the photographs. The installation invites visitors into the everyday world of a young Swedish American family in the early 20th century, enriching the Museum's mission by connecting historic Swedish experiences with the neighborhood as it exists today.

My Swedish Cousins

By Annika Jaspers

In the past, whenever anyone asked me if I had relatives in Sweden, my answer was always no. My great-grandparents emigrated from Sweden in the 1860s, and I never heard my grandparents mention any relatives still living in Sweden.

I did, however, know that my great-grandfather, Johan Olson, was from the province of Dalarna. So when genealogist Jill Pearson Reider offered to do research for Swedish Odyssey participants who might have relatives in Sweden, I took her up on it. I sent her an Olson Family History that a relative had written in 1971 along with a feature article on Johan Olson that appeared in a local Minnesota newspaper in 1926.

Less than a week later, I received an email from Jill with the subject line “Swedish Cousins Found!” In the email was a “Cousins Contact Sheet” with the names and addresses of TEN fourth cousins or third cousins once removed.

At this point Jill put me in touch with Barbara Walls in Sweden, who was also assisting the Swedish Odyssey participants in tracking down Swedish relatives. Barbara sent a hand-written note to Elisabeth Pellmyr, one of the 10 cousins, who lives in Mölnlycke, a town just east of Göteborg where Barbara and her brother had attended school. In her note, Barbara explained who she was, who I was, and why she was making contact.

Imagine my absolute delight when, two days before my departure to Sweden, I received an email from Elisabeth. She invited me to join her and her husband Anders, along with her cousin Kjell and his wife Christina, for lunch in Göteborg three days after my arrival in Sweden.

Over lunch near our hotel, the five of us spent 2-1/2 hours talking about our children, grandchildren, careers, hobbies and interests, travel, politics, immigration, and numerous other topics. Kjell and Christina have a married daughter living in Virginia, so I’ve encouraged them to include Chicago in their itinerary the next time they come to visit her.

And I have, of course, extended an invitation to all of them to visit Chicago because I’d love to show them our world-class city. And what fun it is to be able to answer the question “Do you have any relatives in Sweden?” with a resounding “Yes!”



Annika and her Swedish cousins

In Sweden with Family and Friends

By Carol Rigmark

I partly chose to participate in the Swedish Odyssey 2026 Tour because the itinerary brought us to places where I could easily meet up with family members and friends. Although each town we stayed in was special in its own right, the overriding appeal for me was that I could see so many people I cared about. Lasse, our tour director, was extremely accommodating and made it easy to coordinate the group activities with my personal ones.

In Malmö I had dinner with my long-time friend Yoshiko. We met in Stockholm in 1971 when we were in the same Swedish language class, and became good friends. She had moved there from Japan (where I also grew up) and I was doing my junior year in Stockholm. Since then we met a few times in Chicago and in Sweden but had lost touch some years ago when she moved back to Japan for a few years. I sent a letter to her old address in Malmö; happily her daughter is living there now so my letter reached Yoshiko. It was wonderful to reconnect!

My cousin Anna joined me for dinner at our hotel in Tallberg. Anna's father was my mother's much younger cousin and an important influence in my life during the times I spent in Sweden. My grandfather had immigrated alone from Forsberg in Västergötland to Chicago as a 16-year-old; Anna's grandmother was a toddler at the time. It was my mother who initiated contact with the family. Whenever I was in Sweden I visited Anna's family in Karlsborg and I have stayed in touch with others from my mother's family through the years. Happily Anna and her husband Tobbe now live in Dalarna. Tobbe was unable to join us as he had knee replacement surgery that same day but I did go see him at their home another day while the tour was at Sundborn. We stay in close contact and it was great to see them again.

In Mora, Dalarna, I met up with another long-time friend Kerstin and her sambo Lars. Kerstin and I met as teenagers in Japan. My father was the headmaster of a seminary in Tokyo and her father was the headmaster of the Swedish School so our families connected. My friendship with Kerstin and her brother Gunnar continued when I went to Stockholm for my junior year and visits after. Later Kerstin visited me in Chicago several times, sometimes bringing her young families, but we had not seen each other in a number of years. It was wonderful to spend the day with her in Mora, Rattvik, and later for dinner with our group.

Anna's sister Ulrica lives in Stockholm with her sambo Eva. I was able to spend much of our two days there with them. Because I know Stockholm well I focused more on having personal experiences with them. We went to Waldemarsudde, one of my favorite spots, before ending up at Skansen on Saturday. On Sunday I had lunch at their apartment in Södermalm and then went to the premier of a Var (Spring) Messe as Eva was performing with her choir. I first met Ulrica when she was around six years old, and I was a teenager. Great to refresh the friendship. I last saw them in Stockholm 3 years ago.

During the Swedish Odyssey Tour I was able to meet cousins on my mother's side; after the tour ended I spent time with my cousins on my father's side. My father grew up in Kvillsfors, a tiny village in Småland. All my Rigmärk cousins are in Sweden and we gathered in Vetlanda, Småland where three

of them live. This was such a special time. Although I don't see them often we have a strong bond and many shared memories. Even the grandkids wanted to see "the American cousin" again. While in Vetlanda I met up with cousins Solveig, Hans Erik, Karin, Yvonne and Marie together with their spouses, Solveig's children and grandchildren. One day I was with 22 family members. My Swedish is rusty but rose to the occasion. Another day we visited our grandparents' home in Kvillsfors, went to the cemetery in a neighboring village, drove through the village where my father was born, and shared our memories. We went through folders our grandmother had saved and pieced together some of the family history. I came home with a folder of articles my father had written for the papers and articles about him and our family. Each time we can get together is a special occasion and we hope there will be another time.



Carol with family and friends



Kerstin Andersson Museum Store

By Andie Nash



If you have been in the Museum Store in the last few months, you may have noticed a little bit of rearranging. Offering the large variety of Scandinavian goods our community has come to expect, this allows us to further feature new items and treats, keeping inventory stocked and refreshed.



Midnight Sun, the chart-topping hit by Swedish artist Zara Larsson, celebrates the never-setting sun in Northern Sweden during the summer months. To capture the beautiful scene of the sun just over the Horizon is the Midnight Sun Necklace. Made from brass with gold or silver plating and reflective glass crystals. Made in Norway, this item is a new addition to our Nordic-inspired jewelry collection.



From Chicago Embroidery Artist Haley at H.H. Embroidery, are some new popular hat designs. In honor of our Mormors Cafe's popular treat: the "How I Roll Hat" cinnamon roll hat. And the "Swedish Fish" hat, to celebrate your Swedish heritage or love of candy fish.



Swedish American Museum



Commemorating the Museum's 50th Anniversary is the Chicago Skyline Dala Horse. This item is a beautiful piece of decor featuring traditional Dala design, the Chicago Skyline, and our famous Museum water tower. Manufactured by Eco Outfittings, an environmentally responsible company using recycled wood.



Flowers are forever in bloom as we increase our offerings of felted flowers from Gry and Sif with our new display. Designed in Demark, Gry & Sif are certified Fair Trade; supporting the woman artist of Nepal with fair wages, good working conditions and the opportunity to build a better future



With so much chaos in the world right now, it's often the little moments of joy that make the biggest difference. That's why we've expanded our collection of stickers and magnets—making it easier to bring a little Scandi joy into your day at an approachable price.

Children's Museum

By Jack Rogalla

As the Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration celebrates its 25th anniversary, we see many adult visitors return to the space where they used to play as children. Some arrive as college students visiting the Museum on a class trip, some return to join the Museum team as a docent supervising the space, and some return as new parents introducing a new generation of children to imaginative play. A comment we hear often is how much the space looks just as people remember it, allowing them to revel in nostalgia. While it is true, a lot of the space looks very similar to the way it has in the past, it is not easy maintaining everything just the way that it was. Over time things break, items and furnishing get worn down, and things go missing, but with the help of volunteers and staff, the community keeps the space together.

Perhaps what requires the most frequent repair is the fish and fishing pole. As the fish are caught daily, the washers that connect them to the magnet fishing poles get ripped off and are re-sewn. The fishing poles can stick to unintended metal surfaces and the magnets get pulled off. Guests sometimes even take it upon themselves and want to help retie a magnet to a pole. Nails get loose on the apple basket and get hammered tight and screws get loose on oven knobs and get screwed tighter. One time I found something strange, a blue oval board painted in kurbits style leaning against a wall. It took me a minute to recognize it as the façade to grandfather clock in the Swedish stuga! Perhaps a curious child thought they could open the door and wind the clock. After a couple nails, it was good as new.

Sometimes new items are introduced to the space. For a long time, there was just the one set of white dishes in the American stuga, but after noticing children constantly carrying them back and forth between the two houses, we decided the Swedish side would get its own set of blue dishes. All of the beautiful, sturdy, woven mats on all the tables were made and donated by a volunteer. The babies' clothes were also hand knitted by a docent. Sometimes new additions are waiting right under our noses. One day while cleaning a back closet I found four plastic buns that

fit perfectly into the round pan that now lives in the Swedish stuga.

We are lucky to have a lot of skilled volunteers involved with the Museum. If the space chair stops vibrating or the sound stops working, there is a volunteer electrician who knows just what to do. When we needed a stand for the doll house displayed in the hallway, there is a volunteer carpenter who was happy to install one. For big picture maintenance projects there is a volunteer architect who is happy to advise.

Usually during the first full week of January, the Museum will close for the week so that we can give the Museum a good deep clean and work on maintenance projects. One project I was excited to tackle was repairing the base to the oven in the Swedish stuga. Over time the corners got worn down, so much to the point you could see the wooden frame underneath. We plastered them, sanded them down, and painted them and are really pleased with the result.



Before and after



Swedish American Museum

Another maintenance project we were pleased to accomplish this year was the replacement of the green carpeting. The green carpeting was getting quite worn, and was peeling up, especially around the ticket booth where it had been stapled back down as a temporary solution. So, we worked with a local flooring company to replace it with a nice new softer carpet that is perfect, especially for our youngest visitors who crawl around the space.



Before and after



Looking forward, we are always thinking of new ways to update the space while retaining the charm of its original design. While some items retire, new ones take new life in the imagination of guests and next generation of children who may one day bring their own children to play. The Brunk Children's Museum of Immigration is always evolving, while at the same time, staying the same as it is remembered.

Summer 2026



ASPIRE! GALA 2026

As the Swedish American Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, we invite you to celebrate with us. We have preserved, celebrated, and shared Swedish-American heritage while enriching the cultural life of Chicago for five decades.

Our Golden Gala to be held on Saturday, Nov. 7, 2026 at the Driehaus Museum. This special evening will celebrate the Museum's remarkable history, honor the individuals and organizations that have helped shape our success, and raise critical funds to support our future.



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Mission Statement

Through its arts and educational programs and its permanent collection, the Swedish American Museum interprets the immigrant experience for children and adults and promotes an appreciation of contemporary Swedish-American culture.

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