

Centenarian Swedish Immigrant shares her memories of a long and wonderful life!

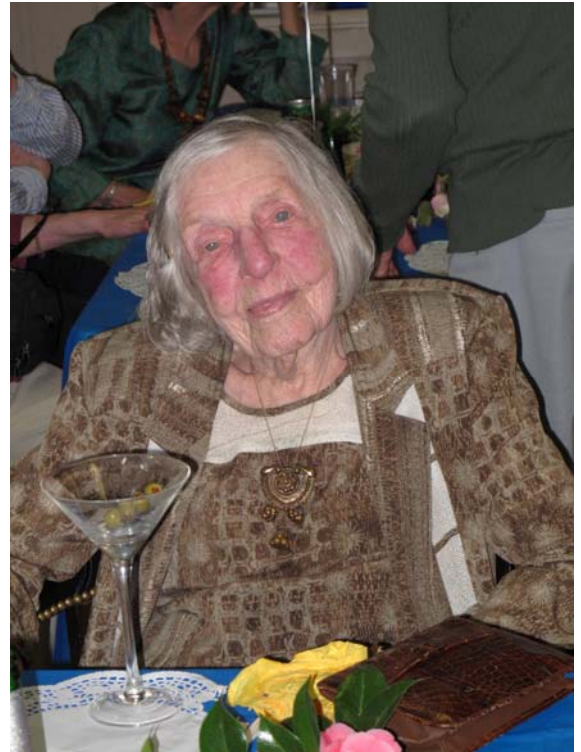
Have you ever met, looked into the eyes, or listen to a Century (100 years) old person...?

In Portland, we just celebrated such a 100-year old lady who possesses a lot of grace, wit and warmth, at the Senior center in the Hollywood district in Portland. For many of us younger people (average age about 70) it was an unique experience to sit down and meet a lady who has seen a complete century pass by, and who sees all the beauty the life could give if you just look for it. Her name is Christina Merryman of Portland, and she shared her memories from her long life with us, as documented by Ingeborg Dean of Swedish Roots in Oregon (SRIO).

I, Christina, was born in Norrköping on April 25, 1913, and, considering that I weighed less than two lbs at birth and was given an emergency christening at church, I suppose it is a miracle that I am still here. My “mormor” kept me alive, feeding me until I was almost square. My father, Valdemar Eriksson, died of TB when I was only three, so I have no memories of him. Ten years later my mother,

Edit, married my step-father, a very nice man. I was born in what was then known as “fattigsverige” (poverty Sweden) or “lortsverige” (dirty Sweden). Nevertheless, I was given a good education. After “realskolan” (high school), I attended business school for three years of very difficult work. I graduated from there just as the depression hit, and times turned extremely hard. We lived on potatoes and gravy or whatever my mother could come up with. Vegetables were a rare sight on our table, and I remember having stale bread soaked in so called “war time coffee”, made of rye and even dandelions. Getting an office job was, of course, next to impossible. Even people with doctorates were sweeping floors, just to get a foot in. After knocking on every office door we could find, my friend and I took sewing jobs and learned tailoring. This way we managed to stay alive.

After the depression, I worked for ten years as head bookkeeper at Svenska Turbinaktiebolaget Ljungström in Finspång, a large company still in existence, but under another name. In my time they made cooling systems for large ships. The company owned practically half the city. One thing I had to do was to transport salaries, all in cash at that time, across the city in a wooden box, and I was given a revolver for protection. I had no clue as to how to use it and luckily never needed to find out. I lived in a company building that also housed some engineers, to whom I became a sort of “mamma” (mother). They would come to me when they needed a button sewn on or someone to listen to their lovelorn tales. We liked to play tricks on each other. One very cold night they took my winter coat and put it on a statue in the park, and I reciprocated by nailing their galoshes to the floor. I enjoyed working at this company very much.



After my years as a bookkeeper, I began to think about seeing the world and since I had two uncles in Portland, OR. as well as my grandmother's sister, I decided to come here. One problem with leaving Sweden at that particular time was that I had just bought a fur coat and it bothered me to think that I wouldn't need it in America, because it wouldn't be cold enough for it. But I left Sweden, (the fur coat I later gave to my sister-in-law) and while in Portland I worked at Weimer's downtown as an alteration seamstress, a job I did not enjoy at all. Before returning to Sweden, when my two years were up, I applied at the post office for a re-entry permit, should I decide to come back.

After two years away, I did return to America, this time with everything I owned. My future husband, Harold, whom I had gotten to know in Portland, met me in N.Y., and with me in a complete daze, we were married soon afterwards in Buffalo, the minister almost drowning in my tears of uncertainty. However, Harold turned out to be the very best human being I have ever known, and since his death at age 80 in 1994, I have missed him constantly.

We travelled across the country in Harold's new car, a trip that, because my life had changed so suddenly and completely, and the fact that I couldn't stop crying, is a blank page in my mind. Once in Oregon, we settled in Eugene, where we bought a house and filled it with my possessions, brought to Portland on the ship's maiden trip to the north-west. It took me a long time to get used to living in Eugene, but after we fixed up the house to our liking, we enjoyed the city. During those years I was never involved with any Scandinavians, except for joining Vasa to get a cheap trip to Sweden with three other women. I have been a member ever since, paying my dues that I think initially were \$5.

In 1972 we reluctantly moved to Portland and bought the house I am still in. It turned out to have a room that would fit the blue Karastan carpet I had just bought! Our early time here was miserable. Harold didn't like our house, nor his job, but we were near retirement age at that point, and eventually we came to enjoy our life here. I began to work as a seamstress in the design department at a Pendleton Woolens branch in the city. During my two years in Sweden, I had attended the prestigious "Svenska Tillskärarakademin" (Swedish Tailoring Company) and had had plans to open a little studio of my own. When Harold and I settled in Portland, I was not at first aware of the Scandinavian community here, other than a Swedish store at Lloyd Center that later folded. Now I have been an active member of many Swedish organizations for a long time.

The national dress I like to wear to Swedish celebrations here is at least one hundred and fifty years old. I believe it belonged to my great-grandmother and is from the village of Boda in Dalarna. I found it in an attic, when I visited Sweden a long time ago and was told it had been there for decades. Wearing a national costume was completely out of fashion at the time, and mine was going to be thrown out. I took it, thinking I could use it for the occasional costume party we liked to attend here. It never entered my mind that I was ever going to wear it in public!

I am an American citizen and have been for a very long time. I did it for Harold's sake.

He was employed by the state, and I thought he should have a wife, who was an American citizen, but it was also important for me to be able to vote in this country. I have also since regained my Swedish citizenship. My husband went to Sweden with me only once, and, to tell the truth, I don't think he enjoyed it.

Keeping up my Swedish has never been a problem. I have kept writing letters to friends, among them my friend Mary from all those years ago in business school. In fact, I still find it easier to write in my native tongue, but I know that in our Swedish-speaking women's group, I am a sinner, throwing in an English word here and there without really noticing.

Written by Leif Rosqvist, editor of New Sweden Culture Heritage Society and Swedish Roots in Oregon (SRIO) newsletters, with information provided by Ingeborg Dean of SRIO.

More information:

What is a Centenarian? Go to Wikipedia for answer: wikipedia.org/Centenarian

Local Swedish organizations participating in Portland celebrating the Centenarian:

www.newsweden.org

www.swedishrootsinoregon.org

www.harmoni lodge.org

