

ALMA SWENSSON AND THE LINDSBORG, KANSAS MESSIAH CHORUS

by

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The first time I drove through the village of Lindsborg, Kansas, I saw a bleak little farming town much like many others scattered throughout the Great Plains. I had seen many towns like this. In fact, I grew up in one of them. Streets, dusty and flat, laid out on a grid. A single traffic light swaying above the main intersection. A drugstore, a bank, a dry goods store, a café. And, on all sides, miles and miles of broad grain fields. But this wasn't my home; and I saw it with a stranger's eyes. I saw that Lindsborg turned its ugliest side to the highway which skirted it. A few blocks from the highway, grain elevators guarded railroad tracks, stores lined a brick Main Street, children left frame houses to pitch a ball in a park with a band shell, a white church spire reached for the huge sky. The road signs told me that I was in Little Sweden, U. S. A. Homes were decked with red Swedish "dala" horses bearing the family name; Swedish restaurants and gift shops flourished. Despite this, the tiny community seemed much more Middle American than Swedish to me and I assumed that the Swedish symbols were vestiges of a dying ethnic identity.

What I could not see and did not know was that, in this unlikely and unlovely spot, an appreciation for music and art has been nurtured which is in stark contrast to the practicality of the town's farming economy. As one writer put it in 1926, "A pipe organ in the barn, Galli-Curci in a Kansas prairie town - that is Lindsborg."¹ In the months following that visit I experienced Lindsborg's cultural tradition and learned of the woman, Alma Swensson, who helped shape it. Challenged to research and tell the story of an influential woman of my area, I chanced upon the name of Alma Swensson while scanning Emory Lindquist's history of Lindsborg, Smoky Valley People.² I had heard Handel's Messiah" sung in Lindsborg the previous Palm Sunday and I was intrigued to learn that Mrs. Swensson was the first director of the magnificent Lindsborg Messiah Chorus.

Each year since 1882 the Lindsborg Messiah Chorus, more formally known as the Bethany Oratorio Society, has performed George Frederick Handel's oratorio, "The Messiah," usually during Holy Week. As the tradition has grown, many thousands of music lovers have come to Lindsborg; tickets are in such demand that seekers are advised to make their reservations soon after the first of the year. Celebrated performers are attracted to the Lindsborg Messiah festival also. A few of the greats who have appeared in Lindsborg are Lillian Nordica, soprano, (1902-04), Ernestine Schumann-Heink, contralto, (1913-16), the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (1916), Eugène Ysaÿe, violinist, (1914, 1917), Pablo Casals, cellist, (1920), and Isaac Stern, violinist, (1954).³ Because of the musical quality and religious feeling of

these yearly events, the Lindsborg Messiah festivals have gained national and international attention. Little Lindsborg has been called the "Bayreuth of America" and the "Oberammergau of the Plains." But those most deeply effected by this musical tradition are the residents of Lindsborg, descendents of Swedish Lutheran immigrants who settled the area in the late 1860's.

From its beginning, the Messiah tradition in Lindsborg has been a community effort. Being a member of the Messiah Chorus has become an honor in spite of the long hours which must be devoted to rehearsal. On occasion, three generations of one family have sung in the Chorus at the same time.⁴ Some members have sung in the Chorus for many years. When asked if she did not think Alma Swensson's record of singing in the Chorus for over fifty years remarkable, a Lindsborg resident replied, "Not in this town; it's the rule." Music touches everyone here. Lindsborg's Messiah Chorus has been called "...perhaps the best applied example of community singing in America, if not in the whole world."⁵ And so it is.

Many events and personalities have contributed to the Lindsborg Messiah tradition; but it began in the hearts of the Swedish immigrants who settled Kansas' Smoky Hill Valley more than a hundred years ago. For many of these pioneers it was painful to leave their homeland, a country of lakes and streams, mountains and green valleys, and come to the dry and windy plains of Kansas, to leave established homes and come to an open prairie. They lifted sections of prairie sod from the earth to build their crude homes. What possessions they brought with them had to be transported many miles on wagons or on their backs. Much that was precious had to be left behind. But the love of song and story which they had learned in Sweden they brought with them.

When the Swedish settlements in central Kansas were still new, those who were interested were taught singing in "singing schools." Anyone could attend, and, after paying a small fee, would be taught to sing and to read musical notes. Classes met in the evening in the schoolhouse where the music was written on the blackboard. Enough interest was shown to attract teachers for these schools.⁶ Even in those difficult pioneer days, practical concerns were softened by a yearning for the beautiful.

The man who led these immigrants from Sweden and became their pastor, Olof Olsson, was a trained organist. His love for music directly and indirectly effected the Lindsborg Messiah tradition. The first singing group in Lindsborg, a small choir directed by Olsson, first performed at Christmas morning services, 1869, in the congregation's newly constructed church building.⁷ This choir and the "singing schools" laid a foundation which was later built upon to develop the Messiah Chorus.

So we have singers, music lovers, an encouraging leader. But where did they meet Handel and his masterwork? In 1879, Olof Olsson

travelled to Europe. While in London, he read in a newspaper that Sir Michael Costa was conducting Handel's oratorio, "The Messiah," that evening in Exeter Hall. Deciding to attend the performance, he took a room near the Hall. He had little money so he purchased one of the cheapest seats in the house, but one which gave him a good view of the chorus. For almost three hours he sat enraptured by Handel's music.⁸ Dr. Olsson later wrote that he was so moved that "...I scarcely knew myself."⁹ The experience was a life-changing one for Olsson and for two Swedish-Lutheran settlements in America.

Upon his return to Augustana College, a Lutheran school in Illinois where he was now a professor, Olsson shared his excitement about "The Messiah" with friends and colleagues. Soon a chorus was formed to sing the oratorio at Augustana. The performance on April 11, 1881 was the first of many at Augustana. In the audience for that performance was Carl Aaron Swensson.¹⁰

Carl Swensson had become the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, Lindsborg, succeeding his friend Olof Olsson. It was to Lindsborg and Bethany Church that he had brought his young wife, Alma Christina Lind Swensson, immediately following their marriage in September of 1880.¹¹ The story I want to tell is hers; for it is on her shoulders that fell the responsibility for launching the Messiah tradition in Lindsborg. She devoted a great deal of her long life to its development.¹² In 1923 a member of the Lindsborg Messiah Chorus said, "Emerson tells us that every institution is but the shadow of some towering personality. 'The Messiah' (at Lindsborg) is the shadow of Mrs. Swensson."¹³ But she disagreed. The previous year she told a reporter for the Topeka Capital that she claimed no credit for the success of the Chorus. She said it was the Christian faith of the members which was responsible for its success. "Without this they would have failed..." she said.¹⁴

Sometime in the late fall of 1881, a little over a year after Alma Swensson came to Lindsborg, the young couple decided to form a local chorus to sing "The Messiah." The chorus was formed as the result of Dr. Swensson's vision and Mrs. Swensson's talent and dedication. In 1923, eighteen years after her husband's death, Mrs. Swensson was asked how the tradition began. She replied, "The reason for the annual rendition of 'The Messiah' is just this: Dr. Swensson wanted it. He was a man of ideals and vision. Once, in Moline, Ill., he had heard parts of the oratorio, and in his youthful enthusiasm for Kansas he wanted the beauty and spiritual power of that music built into this community. I knew a little about music, and I wanted more than anything else for him to have what he wanted..."¹⁵ Dr. Swensson also saw the venture as a means of support for the newly established Bethany Academy, a Lutheran school which he founded that same year.¹⁶ Without doubt, the decision to form the chorus was a mutual one made in a spirit of service to their God and to the people He had called them to lead. At the time of her death a close friend of Mrs. Swensson's said of the couple's early years of marriage:

"Together they walked the pleasant path of duty, guiding and directing the various church and college activities. They were young and full of enthusiasm and everything they undertook prospered."¹⁷

However, the couple was testing their faith by attempting to form a Messiah Chorus in Lindsborg. Of course they both knew of the performance of "The Messiah" which had been given the previous year at Augustana College in Moline. Dr. Swensson had heard that performance. However, forming a choral group capable of performing such a piece of music at Augustana, an established college in an established town, was quite different from achieving such a dream in the sparsely populated pioneer community of Lindsborg on the harsh plains of central Kansas. Describing the situation, Mrs. Swensson later said, "No, ...when we came to these unbroken prairies forty years ago there were, counting most of the families within driving distance, not more than two hundred persons. There was not much musical ability; nor was there any outstanding religious feeling out of which the singing of a great religious oratorio might grow. On the contrary, we found only a few country boys and girls, much more used to their heavy farm tasks than to the delicacy of tone discrimination...."¹⁸

Alma Swensson had been engaged as choir director and organist at Bethany Lutheran Church before she ever saw Lindsborg and was directing not only the Bethany choir, but also the choirs of outlying churches. The hope was that from these choirs enough willing singers could be recruited to form a Messiah chorus. Dr. Swensson raised fifty dollars with which he purchased musical scores of the oratorio. The songbooks had both Swedish and English texts. Each part of the oratorio was preceded by an explanation in Swedish.¹⁹ Although the work was to be sung in English, Swedish was the language familiar to the singers. English was still awkward and difficult for them.

Those interested in singing in the chorus were asked to meet at the church on Sunday afternoon, December 11, 1881. The Swenssons' enthusiasm for the project must have affected their congregation for thirty eight Lindsborg singers gathered that Sunday afternoon. They hoped to add to this number with persons from nearby Swedish Lutheran churches at Salemsborg, Freemount, and Assaria.²⁰ Rehearsals for the "Messiah" performance were soon underway.

Mrs. Swensson was a talented musician who had become church organist in her home of Moline, Illinois at the age of twelve.²¹ Before her marriage she had been employed in Moline as a music teacher.²² She was determined that the chorus would be well trained. Throughout the winter of 1882 rehearsals were held several evenings a week. Although the singers were often rehearsed by parts, it was necessary for Mrs. Swensson to be present at every rehearsal. Night after night the slender young woman stood before the assembled singers, patiently going over and over the intricate music.²³ When the time came for a break, she helped pour the coffee and serve the cake. She treated

each individual, elder or child, with respect, listening intently as they spoke to her about their concerns. Soon, though, she would raise the lead pencil she used as a baton; and the work would begin again.

Sometimes the chorus practiced in the homes of the singers in order to save the fuel needed to heat and light the church; but the lack of a piano or organ made for difficulties. A tuning fork was used to set the pitch on these occasions, but without a piano or organ to provide help in learning the long, difficult runs in the choruses, progress was slow. Handel's oratorio is difficult even for accomplished musicians and these pioneer farmers were untrained. Most could not read music.²⁴ Probably none had heard a performance of the work they were attempting. In order to help those who could not read music, Mrs. Swensson wrote numbers which corresponded with the tones of the scale above the musical notes.²⁵ Another problem facing the fledgling chorus and its director was the difficulty of travelling to rehearsals during that cold and snowy winter. Some singers came as far as twelve miles by wagon or on foot across frozen, rutted roads.²⁶

There must have been many discouraging moments in that first winter when the dream was becoming reality. How many singers, despairing of ever learning the music, quit the chorus? How many missed rehearsals because of sick or stranded livestock, family problems, simple fatigue? A confidant of the Swenssons said, "Many times Dr. Swensson despaired of his tremendous undertaking, but Mrs. Swensson's perseverance held on."²⁷ From the beginning Mrs. Swensson's confidence in the success of the chorus had been unlimited. She never rested, hurrying from rehearsal to rehearsal. Slowly, the music became more familiar. Eventually it seemed that the entire countryside was singing. A stranger, travelling through Lindsborg as spring approaches in 1882, might have been surprised to hear the strains of "All we like sheep have gone astray" emanating from the general store as he stopped to purchase supplies. Riding on past a farm outside the village, he might again have shaken his head in puzzlement to hear the mighty "Hallelujah" chorus resounding from kitchen and barn. Time was drawing near for the performance and the Lindsborg singers practiced when they could. The records of Bethany Church state that in 1887 a small child had to be removed from a service because she insisted upon humming one of the choruses from "The Messiah."²⁸ Obviously the music of Handel had become an important part of life in pioneer Lindsborg, Kansas.

As the time neared for the first performance of the Lindsborg "Messiah," the Swenssons enlisted the help of Dr. Olsson and others at Augustana College. Professor Joseph Osborn, conductor of the oratorio at Augustana, was asked to conduct and the thirteen piece Augustana orchestra was enlisted also. Olof Olsson would return as the organist for the performances. Because of the close association between the Swenssons and Augustana, it is probable that this

support had been anticipated from the beginning.²⁹ Certainly the effort was close to the hearts of all concerned. Mrs. Swenson, who had so carefully rehearsed her singers, now willingly relinquished the baton and prepared to sing the soprano solos. The fact that only two rehearsals were needed with Professor Osborn testifies to the excellent preparation she had given the chorus.³⁰

The first performance was on Tuesday evening, March 28, 1882, in the Bethany Church sanctuary. The program included eighteen of the fifty-three selections of "The Messiah." The soloists were Mrs. Alma Swensson, soprano, Miss Lydia Andreen, soprano; Miss Ana Swensson, alto; Mr. C. A. Beckman, tenor; and F. Linder, bass.³¹ We cannot know how many of those in the audience that early spring evening felt themselves stirred by the beauty of Handel's "Messiah." Undoubtedly not all; but certainly some. Life was hard in the Kansas of 1882. Hard work, drought, failing crops, and poverty were often the farmers' lot. Here was music to lift the heart, words to restore hope.

Following the Lindsborg concert, the chorus performed in Salemsborg on March 29; Salina, March 30; McPherson, March 31; and Freemount, April 3. Transportation to Salemsborg and Freemount was provided by lumber wagons. The Union Pacific Railroad took the group to Salina and McPherson. An admission charge of 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children was charged; and the proceeds of \$200 were given to Bethany Academy.³²

The performances given in 1882 were not without flaw. Luther Swensson, Carl Swensson's sixteen year old brother, played the trombone in the orchestra which came from Augustana College to play for the concerts. He reported later (1918) in the Lindsborg News-Record that "The only thing I remember of the concert in Lindsborg is that the tenors and basses did not agree as to time, where they sing in unison 'Blessing an (sic) honor, etc.' in the chorus no. 56." The conductor pointed at Luther, who was playing the organ for this number, and said, "Play loud!" Luther Swensson's memories of the other concerts in 1882 were similarly unromantic:

"The concert at Salina was more or less a failure. I know I played very poorly, and at one time lost my count, so that I had to stop playing. At McPherson we attracted attention. We came in on a special train. As there were no sidewalks, we walked in the center of the street. Jacobson's big bass was carried in the lead, next came the orchestra members, after them walked Dr. Olsson, Dr. Swensson, Mr. Osborn, and C. A. Backman and then came all the chorus members. No wonder the people of McPherson called it a funeral procession... The concert at Freemount was

remembered on account of the wind, the noise and the breaking of the church organ. . . Of the comments that I heard at the time I only remember one by Mr. Shanke, and as that was not very complimentary I will not repeat it."33

No doubt there were some who considered the Lindsborg "Messiah" presumptuous and foolhardy. Music critics, had they known what was going on on the prairies in 1882, might well have been offended at the treatment Handel's music received at the hands of the Lindsborg singers. But the ploueurs were becoming familiar with the magnificent music and words of faith in "The Messiah;" and that is what the Swenssons wanted.

Not long after the 1882 performances, rehearsals began for the next year's rendition. Alma Swensson again conducted rehearsals as she was to do for the chorus' first three years. At different performances through the years she sang both the soprano and alto solos. For many years she served as vice-president of the Bethany Oratorio Society. She was a mainstay in the soprano section of the chorus, singing with the group for over fifty years. The only year she missed singing was the year of her husband's death, 1904. At her death in 1939 she was the last surviving member of the original Lindsborg Messiah Chorus.

As the years passed and Bethany College grew and developed, its music department contributed valuable singers and leadership to the effort. The singers' familiarity with the music and with the other voices increased, improving the quality of the performance. In time the excellence of the chorus matched the vision of its founders. By 1913 music critics did know what was going on on the prairies; and the Chicago Tribune's Glenn Dillard Gunn described the Lindsborg Chorus in this way: "It attains a tone of surprising unity, and in all matters of rhythmical and intervallic precision it is unsurpassed. The quality of the tone is beautiful. . . But it is a spiritual attribute rather than of mere tone and technic that distinguishes the performance of the Lindsborg chorus, as compared with the choruses of larger cities."³⁴ In Lindsborg, "The Messiah" has never been approached as simply a musical masterpiece, but as an expression of Christian faith. The Swenssons saw that the music of "The Messiah" could focus the minds and hearts of their parishioners on things of the spirit even though their hands were occupied with earthly things. Mrs. Swensson's countless hours of labor in the face of great odds were certainly an act of faith. The chorus members undoubtedly felt that they were offering their talents to the glory of God; and this feeling was, and is, reflected in their music.

In 1979 the Lindsborg Messiah Chorus was still receiving rave reviews. A newswriter who had lived in nearby Wichita for

thirty two years before driving to Lindsborg to hear "The Messiah" reported, "That chorus is worth driving 500 miles to hear...I could not believe the sound (it) produces. It is rich as cream, clear as a mountain lake, stronger than mother love, flexible as nylon, strong as molybdenum steel. There are 120 sopranos and as many altos and tenors and basses to match. Yet they sing and pronounce with one voice. They can take the volume down to pianoissimo (sic). Then they could go to a full double F forte and rock the hall and everyone in it...I mourn for every one of the 32 performances I missed."³⁵

This writer's feelings were not unlike my own when I first experienced the Lindsborg "Messiah" after having lived in the area for fifteen years. In 1978 I bought one of the last tickets available for the Palm Sunday performance. The seat was high in the balcony; it was unpadding and uncomfortable; and the hall was crowded and hot. I could see none of the soloists or orchestra, only half of the chorus. There was a cordial, expectant buzz as we waited. People craned their necks as the soloists and conductor marched in. Applause. Silence. And then the music. The soaring, triumphant music. The magnificent words. The wonderful promises of the Christian faith. And the chorus, whose sound brought tears to my eyes and lifted the hairs on the back of my neck. I have no idea how long the performance lasted. I only know that I, like Olof Olsson, sat spellbound; like him, I "scarcely knew myself."

Today, Alma Swensson's part in founding the Messiah Chorus and its tradition in Lindsborg seems to overshadow her other accomplishments. But throughout her life she was active in many areas. On August 21, 1883 a daughter, Bertha Maria Fredrika, was born to the Swenssons; and less than two years later a second girl, Annie Hilma Theodora, was born.³⁶ Dr. Swensson was a loving and beloved influence on his children; but because he was often away from home attending to college or synodical business, the daily care and training of the girls fell to their mother. By nurture and example, she emphasized spiritual and cultural values to her daughters. The girls grew up with music and books, with religion and education.

Both Bertha and Annie graduated from Bethany College.³⁷ Like her mother, Bertha was musically gifted; and with training she became a talented soloist who sang the alto solos in "The Messiah" for several years before her marriage in 1907 to Dr. Axel E. Vestling took her away from Lindsborg.³⁸ Vestling, also a Bethany graduate, later became president of Olivet College in Michigan.³⁹

Annie Swensson left Lindsborg to do graduate work at Columbia College and Northwestern University in Chicago and to travel and study abroad.⁴⁰ She returned to become a professor in the Department of Expression at Bethany College in 1907.⁴¹ Later she became head of the Department of Speech and Dramatics. She also served as Dean of Women for a time and was founder and director of the College's dramatic group, The Bethany Players.⁴² Miss Swensson often gave dramatic recitals which were widely acclaimed and always well

attended.⁴³ She lived with her mother until Mrs. Swensson's death and was her close and devoted companion. The success of the daughters' lives is a testimony to the love and guidance given to them by their parents.

In spite of his demanding work schedule, Carl Swensson was known for making time for anyone who wanted to talk to him; and many did. This frequently led to unexpected dinner guests at the Swensson home. In addition, church and College dignitaries were often entertained at the parsonage. Mrs. Swensson was unfailingly gracious and hospitable. She expressed her warmth and pleasure at seeing her visitors by shaking hands with both of her hands.⁴⁴ In spite of the family's limited income, their home was always orderly and well-appointed. Guests, both humble and great, were warmly welcomed; and delicious food and interesting conversation were served in generous proportions. The hostess never allowed the conversation to degenerate into gossip or a discussion of trivial matters, but guided the talk to books, theology, music, or other enlightening subjects.

Alma Swensson's devotion to her husband was great. She had enormous respect for his abilities. In spite of the fact that his reach sometimes exceeded his grasp, she believed he could accomplish whatever he undertook. The support she gave him in home, church, and college efforts was in no small measure responsible for the success he attained. Because of his wide-ranging interests, Dr. Swensson was often away from Lindsborg and his responsibilities as pastor and college president for weeks at a time. During these absences Mrs. Swensson was frequently called upon to fill in for him. Distinguished visitors to the College had to be met and entertained, substitute preachers had to be accompanied to outlying churches, decisions had to be made, and things had to go on whether or not Dr. Swensson was there. Although both church and College had governing boards, Mrs. Swensson was often looked to for leadership.⁴⁵

Her service to the church as organist and choir director continued also. Music was important to the Swedish-Lutheran congregations; and leadership in church music was demanding. A description has been left us of the music at Bethany Church in those early days: "Directly over the pulpit in the center of the front gallery stood the pipe organ at which Mrs. Swensson presided. . . . On the south side of the organ sat the choir and on the north side sat several young men who led the congregational singing with their band instruments. And when Mrs. Swensson played, the choir sang, the young men played their horns and the pioneers and their families joined in the ensemble, it was inspiring to say the least."⁴⁶ Mrs. Swensson served as organist and choir director at Bethany Church for forty years.⁴⁷ In addition to her work with church music, she sang many solos for college concerts in the early years. Programs for these events invariably list a solo by Mrs. Alma Swensson.⁴⁸

In 1904 an event occurred which was to present Alma Swensson with perhaps the greatest challenge of her life. While in California to preach at the dedication of a new church structure, Carl Swensson contracted pneumonia which weakened his already strained heart. His ceaseless work on behalf of Bethany Church and College had taken its toll. He was hospitalized on February 13, 1904 and died on February 16th.⁴⁹ Mrs. Swensson learned of her husband's death in Newton, Kansas where she was preparing to board a train for California. She immediately returned to Lindsborg. Upon greeting her daughter, Annie, she said, "Our sun has gone down."⁵⁰ The entire population of Lindsborg shared her feeling. The shock registered on Lindsborg faces the day as the news spread spoke eloquently of the town's dependence on this vital man. He had led them to accomplishments undreamed of; and now he was dead at the age of forty-six.

The bereaved family struggled to adjust to their loss and resume their lives. Soon after the funeral on February 23rd, Mrs. Swensson, Bertha and Annie moved out of the parsonage and into their own home near the college. For Mrs. Swensson the adjustment to widowhood must have posed many problems. She had lost not only a companion, but a role as well; for her role as wife of pastor and college president was buried with Carl Swensson. While coping with grief and loneliness, she also had to find a new identity as a woman alone. Her whole life in Lindsborg had been in support of her husband's work; her pride in accomplishment, a reflected glory. Things now had to be different. Although she wanted above all else to see her husband's dreams fulfilled, others were in charge now. Her friend, Mrs. P. O. Johnson, was aware of Mrs. Swensson's pain at her husband's death: "These were dark days for Mrs. Swensson. She felt so crushed, so alone, the future so dismal."⁵¹ Typically, Alma Swensson turned to her Christian faith for solace. One of her favorite Bible passages, the 121st Psalm, was of great comfort to her. "The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil; he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore."⁵² Gradually her spirits lifted and she resumed her activities with the church and college in ways which did not impinge upon others' prerogatives. She continued her work with church music and the WMS and began serving as editor of Mission Tidings. She and her daughter, Annie, who lived with her in the big house on College Street, began to entertain frequently in their gracious manner. She was much beloved throughout the community, whose members referred to her with great respect throughout her life as "Mrs. Dr. Swensson."

An indication that Alma Swensson developed an important role of her own in Lindsborg following her husband's death is found in an event that took place in 1912. Suffrage for women was a vital issue in Kansas that year since a referendum vote was to be taken in the state to determine whether or not voters wanted the franchise extended to women. The matter surfaced on the Bethany campus on

April 23, 1912 when a noted proponent of votes for women, Dr. Helen Brewster Owens, a professor at Cornell University, spoke on the subject in the college chapel. The speaker was introduced to the audience by Alma Swensson "with a few appropriate remarks."⁵³ Prior to Dr. Owens' speech, demonstrations were held in support of both sides of the question. College women paraded, carrying signs saying "Votes For Women" and singing campaign songs. The men countered with a march of their own. Their placards bore the slogans "Down With Women's Suffrage" and "Politics Is A Man's Game." Reaching the chapel first, the men took up all the best seats; but when the women arrived, they gave up the three front rows.⁵⁴

Following the address a women's suffrage league was formed at Bethany. When 140 students joined, Dr. Owens declared that this was "the largest charter membership of any college association in the country."⁵⁵ The new league pledged to keep the issue alive at Bethany.⁵⁶ The group then adjourned to the Sanitar Cafe where Dr. Owens was entertained with a banquet. At this event Mrs. Ernest Pihlblad, wife of the Bethany College president, served as toastmistress; and Mrs. Swensson gave an address of welcome. Mrs. Swensson's sister, Jennie Lind, and her daughter, Annie, were among those present. Although women's suffrage passed in Kansas in the vote of 1912, the issue was narrowly defeated in McPherson County of which Lindsborg is a part.

The remaining years of Mrs. Swensson's life were spent in family, church, college, and community activities. Her interest in people was always paramount. A niece recalls that, "She was very energetic and had many projects going up to the time of her death, but she always had time to spend with me and with my three boy cousins."⁵⁷ As she grew older, her hearing failed; and in her later years, she was quite deaf. In 1938 she suffered an accident in her home which limited her activities for the rest of her life.⁵⁸

On Saturday, December 9, 1939, Annie had planned a celebration in honor of her mother's 80th birthday which would fall on December 11. The house was decorated, the food prepared, and everything was ready for guests when Mrs. Swensson became ill. The doctor was summoned immediately and the illness was diagnosed as intercapillary hemorrhage or "stroke." She was in a coma until death came a week later on December 16. She died in her home with both daughters by her side.⁵⁹

Alma Swensson's funeral on December 19, 1939 was acknowledged as the end of an era in Lindsborg and Bethany history. From 11:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. the body lay in state in Presser Hall on the Bethany College campus. Bethany seniors composed the honor guard as hundreds passed by the coffin to pay their last respects. Funeral services began at 2:30 in Presser Hall on the Bethany College campus. Bethany seniors composed the honor guard as hundreds passed by the coffin to pay their last respects. Funeral services

began at 2:30 in Presser Hall.⁶⁰ In the funeral sermon, Dr. Ernest Pihlblad praised Mrs. Swensson for her steadfastness and hope in the face of difficulty and discouragement: "She never confessed to defeat, but hope lived in her heart throughout all. The other night when I learned that the 121st Psalm - 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains, from whence shall my help come' - was one of the Scripture passages which she frequently read and recited, it seemed to me that I had found the key to her soul. Her hopefulness which throughout the years has been one of her characteristic traits, was not a superficial attitude which we are prone to adopt. It was a faith which had found its expression in the assurance of the Psalmist of old."⁶¹ In perhaps the most fitting tribute which could have been paid to the first director of the Messiah Chorus, the music of "The Messiah" was played and sung at her funeral. As the casket was brought to the front of Presser Hall, the Bethany Orchestra played the "Pastoral Symphony." A Bethany student sang the soprano solo which Alma Swensson herself had sung so often, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." And the huge Messiah Chorus assembled to bid farewell to Mrs. Swensson by singing two of her favorite choruses, "Worthy Is the Lamb that was Slain" and "Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs."⁶² She was buried that afternoon wearing her wedding gown.⁶³

The day came when I, having journeyed through the streets and the history of Lindsborg, turned east toward Elmwood Cemetery. A gentle, but cold, mist was falling as I drove through the cemetery gate. It was a melancholy pleasure to search among the stones in the rain, finding the Olsons, the Carlsons, the Malms, the Nelsons, and finally the huge obelisk which marks the grave of Carl Aaron Swensson. To the side of the monument is Alma's stone, small, close to the ground. Its inscription reads, simply, "Alma Swensson, 1859-1939." I took the red carnation I had brought and placed it on her grave.

NOTES

¹Clarice Cunningham, "Lindsborg, Kansas, The Prairie Town Whose Art and Music Have Given It Fame," Haldeman-Julius Quarterly, I (January, 1927), 20. Amelita Galli-Curci was a famous Italian soprano of the early 20th century. She appeared in concert in Bethany College Auditorium, Lindsborg, on Sunday afternoon, April 1, 1917.

²Emory K. Lindquist, Smoky Valley People: A History of Lindsborg, Kansas (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1953).

³Elmer Copley, "A Comprehensive Performance Project in Solo Vocal Literature With An Essay: Messiah on the Plains, 1882-1976; A History of the Bethany Oratorio Society" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Music, University of Iowa, 1976), pp. 49-52.

⁴The Messiah; Quarter Centennial Anniversary, Lindsborg, 1882-1907 (no publisher, no date, likely 1907), illustration following page 32.

⁵Anna Carlson, "The Messiah of the Plains," The United Telephone Voice, VII (November, 1924), 3.

⁶Lindsborg, Kansas City Schools, "The Singing Schools," Lindsborg, Kansas: Fragments of History (no publisher, 1927), unpagged.

⁷The Messiah; Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 3.

⁸Emory K. Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas: The History of a College (Lindsborg, Kansas: Bethany College (Printed by Inter-Collegiate Press, Shawnee Mission, Kansas), 1975) pp. 151-152.

⁹Olof Olsson, Helsningar fran fjerran. Minnen fran en resa genom England och Tyskland ar 1879, quoted in Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 152.

¹⁰Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 152.

¹¹"Community Mourns Loss of a Leader," Lindsborg News-Record, December 21, 1939.

¹²Sharon Hubbard, "Women of Kansas...The Heritage," The Lyons Daily News (Lyons, Kansas), October 1, 1975.

¹³"American Oberammergau on the Plains of Kansas," The New York Times, February 4, 1923.

¹⁴Oratorio Society Once Was Rural Church Choir," Topeka Capital, October 1, 1922.

¹⁵The New York Times, February 4, 1923.

¹⁶The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 4. In 1889, Bethany Academy became Bethany College.

¹⁷Mrs. F. O. Johnson, "Mrs. Carl Swensson," Mission Tidings, (no date, likely January or February, 1939), 228.

¹⁸The New York Times, February 4, 1923.

¹⁹Bliss Isely, "Let's Know Kansas History - The Messiah," The Kansas Teacher, LXV (December, 1956), 30.

²⁰Copley, p. 9.

²¹Roy F. Molander, "Alma Swensson," Mothers of Achievement in American History, 1776-1976, ed. American Mothers Committee (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1976), pp. 204-205.

²²U. S. Census, 1880. State of Illinois, County of Rock Island, City of Moline.

²³In 1882 Alma Swensson was 23 years old.

²⁴G. N. Malm, "The Bethany Oratorio Society," Lindsborg, Kansas: Fragments of History (Lindsborg, Kansas City Schools, 1927), unpagged.

²⁵John Watson, "Lindsborg's 'Messiah' in 72nd Year," Wichita Evening Eagle, April 2, 1953.

²⁶Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 153. Also Ernst F. Pihlblad, "The Messiah," Part 2 of "A Singing Settlement," Scandinavia, I (February, 1824), 38-44.

²⁷Malm, unpagged.

²⁸The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 7.

²⁹Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 154.

³⁰The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 4.

³¹Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 154. The eighteen selections were: 1. "Overture" 2. Recit. (Tenor) - "Comfort ye my people" 4. Chorus - "And the Glory of the Lord" 8. Recit. (Alto) - "Behold! A Virgin shall conceive" 9. Air (Alto) and Chorus -

"O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" 13. "Pastoral Symphony" 20. Air (Alto) - "He shall feed His flock like a shepherd" and Air (Soprano) - "Come unto Him" 22. Chorus - "Behold the Lamb of God" 23. Air (Alto) - "He was despised" 26. Chorus - "All we like sheep have gone astray" 30. Air (Tenor) - "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow" 33. Chorus - "Lift up your heads, O ye gates: 38. Air (Soprano) - "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace" 44. Chorus - "Hallelujah" 45. Air (Soprano) - "I know that my Redeemer liveth" 46. Single and Double quartette - "Since by man came death" 47. Recit. (Bass) - "Behold, I tell you a mystery" 53. Chorus - "Worthy is the Lamb," "Amen."

³²The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 3.

³³Selma Lind (Elizabeth Jaderborg), Living in Lindsborg and Other Possibilities (Lindsborg: Lindsborg News-Record, 1967), pp. 31-32.

³⁴Glenn Dillard Gunn, The Chicago Tribune, March 2, 1913. quoted in Lind, Living in Lindsborg and Other Possibilities, pp. 32-33.

³⁵Don Granger, "'Messiah' at Bethany Well Worth the Drive," The Wichita Eagle, April 9, 1979.

³⁶Annie Swensson was born on February 12, 1885.

³⁷Molander, p. 205.

³⁸The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, pp. 6-7.

³⁹Molander, p. 205.

⁴⁰Arts and Crafts of Kansas, a catalog of an exhibition held in Lawrence, Kansas, February 18-22, 1948 in the Community Building, p. 73.

⁴¹Bethany College Bulletin, III (February 5, 1910), unpagued.

⁴²Molander, p. 205.

⁴³Emory Lindquist, tape recorded interview, Wichita, Kansas, October 27, 1978.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 228.

⁴⁷"Community Mourns Loss of a Leader," Lindsborg News-Record, December 21, 1939.

⁴⁸Concert programs in Carl Swensson's scrapbook, property of Alba Malm Almquist, Lindsborg, Kansas.

⁴⁹"In Memoriam Dr. Swensson," Bethany Messenger, VII (March, 1904), 129.

⁵⁰Swensson scrapbook, property of Alba Malm Almquist, Lindsborg, Kansas.

⁵¹Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 279.

⁵²The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version. Psalm 121, Verses 7 and 8.

⁵³"And a Woman Spoke," The Bethany Messenger, April 27, 1912.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶"Bethany College News," Lindsborg News and Lindsborg Record, April 27, 1912.

⁵⁷Gahnstrom, January 6, 1979.

⁵⁸"Community Mourns Loss of a Leader," Lindsborg News-Record, December 21, 1939.

⁵⁹Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 229.

⁶⁰Mrs. Samuel E. Johnson, "Mrs. Carl A. Swensson At Rest," Mission Tidings (no date, likely January or February, 1939), 230.

⁶¹"Community Mourns Loss of a Leader," Lindsborg News-Record, December 21, 1939.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Mrs. Samuel E. Johnson, p. 230.