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, gallons of beer in a Kansas prairie town – that is Lindsborg.” 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. 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 1982 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 Lilian Nordica, soprano, (1962-84), Ernestine Schumann-Heink, contralto, (1913-16), the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (1916), Eugène Ysaye, violinist, (1914, 1917), Pablo Casals, cellist, (1922), and Isaac Stern, violinist, (1954). 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 affected by this musical tradition are the residents of Lindsborg, descendants 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. 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 example of community singing in America, if not in the whole world.” 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. 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 affected 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. 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
Little Lindsborg has been called the "Oberammergau of the Midwest" by this musical tradition of the Swedish-Lutheran settlers of late 1860's.

The tradition in Lindsborg has been that of the Messiah Chorus; a local church choir which must be devoted to the singing of one family have sung in the choruses for over fifty years recently.

In central Kansas were still new, "singing schools." A small fee, would be taught for these schools. Even in concerns were softened by a

But the love of song and tradition from Sweden and became an encouraging leader. But

On the blackboard. Enough

Dr. Olsson later wrote that he was so moved that "...I scarcely knew myself." 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.

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.

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.

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 the blackboard. Enough

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 cutlying 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 Salemberg, Fremont, 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
ath of duty, guiding and directing. They were young and undertook prospered. 17

Of course they both knew of each other. They had been given the previous Dr. Swensson had heard that small group capable of performing an established college in an from achieving such a dream. With the situation, Mrs. Swensson these unbroken prairies forty of the families within driving distance. There was not much standing religious feeling out us oratorio might grow. On the boys and girls, much more used familiarity of tone discrimina-

ried as choir director and organist I ever saw Lindsborg and was but also the choir of the cutting-edge choir enough willing singers chorus. Dr. Swensson raised musical scores of the oratorio. English texts. Each part of the on in Swedish. 19 Although the and difficult for them. the chorus were asked to meet December 11, 1881. The Swenssons affected their congregation for that Sunday afternoon. They were from nearby Swedish Lutheran and Assarita. 20 Rehearsals for underway.

musician who had become church at the age of twelve. 21 Before Moline as a music teacher, 22 could be well trained. Throughout several evenings a week. ed by parts, it was necessary any rehearsal. Night after night the assembled singers, patiently 23 When the time came for a 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 relinqu­
ished 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
solists were Mrs. Alma Swensson, soprano, Miss Lydia Andreen,
soprano; Miss Ada Swensson, alto; Mr. C. A. Backman, tenor; and
Mr. Linder, bass. 31 We cannot know how many of those in the audi­
ence 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, fai­
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
Salina on March 30; Salina, on March 31; Salina, March 31;
and Freeport, April 3. Transportation to Salina and Freeport
was provided by lumber wagons. The Union Pacific Railroad took
the group to Salina and Freeport. 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 concerts 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 Augusta College
to play for the concerts. He reported later (1918) in the Linds­
borg News-Record that "The only thing I remember of the concert in Linds­
borg 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.
36." 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 pro­
cession... The concert at Freeport was
he beginning. Certainly the concerned. Mrs. Swenson, singers, now willingly relinquishing the soprano solos. She had given the chorus. 29

Tuesday evening, March 28. The program included arias of "The Messiah." The soprano, Miss Lydia Andreen, Mr. C. A. Beckman, tenor; and how many of those in the audience stirred by the beauty of not all; but certainly some. Hard work, drought, falling

remembered on account of the wind, the noise and the breaking of the church organ...

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 pioneers 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 Swenson 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. Swenson'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 pianissimo (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."

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 1974, I bought one of the last tickets available for the Palm Sunday performance. The seat was high in the balcony: It was unpadded 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 central, 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 "sorely knew myself."

Today, Alma Swenson'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 Swensons; and less than two years later a second girl, Annie Hilma Theodore, was born. Dr. Swenson 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. 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. She took him away from Lindsborg. Vestling, also a Bethany graduate, later became president of Olivet College in Michigan. Miss Swenson often gave dramatic recitals which were widely acclaimed and always well received.
Lindsborg to hear "The Messiah" in 1906, a distance of 500 miles to hear.... I could only rock the hall and everyone 32 performances I missed. 33

In spite of my own when I first experienced lived in the area for fifteen set tickets available for the Palm Sunday service in the balcony; it was unprecedently crowded and hot. I could see only half of the chorus. There was no opportunity to stand and rock the hall and everyone agreed that performances I missed. 35

He was active in many areas. On April 12, 1907, a second girl, Annie Hilma was born to the family. Annie was a loving and beloved in-law and was given the name Hilma in memory of her maternal grandmother. The girls grew up with the support and example of their parents. The girls received a good education.

From Bethany College, 37... gifted and with training she was able to serve in the choir. In 1907 to Dr. Axel E. Vestling, also a Bethany graduate, 38 in Michigan. 39

To do graduate work at Columbia in Chicago and to travel and be a professor in the Department of Music, 40 later she became head of the Department and director of the College. 41 Miss Swensson often gave challenges 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 hospitalable. 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, butGuided 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. Music was important to the Swedish-Lutheran congregations; and leadership in church music was demanding. A description has been left 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. 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." 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 accomplish untold 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. F. 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 dim." 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." Gradually her spirits lifted and she resumed her activities with the church and college in ways which did not impose 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
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ed 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 Phiblad, 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 cele­
bration 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 acknow­
ledged 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 Col­
lege 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. In the funeral sermon, Dr. Ernest Pilchard praised Mrs. Swenson 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. 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 Swenson herself had sung so often, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." And the huge Messiah Chorus assembled to bid farewell to Mrs. Swenson by singing two of her favorite choruses, "Worthy Is the Lamb that was Slain" and "Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs." She was buried that afternoon wearing her wedding gown.

The day came when I, having journeyed through the streets and the history of Lindberg, 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 Clones, the Carlsons, the Malms, the Nelsons, and finally the huge obelisk which marks the grave of Carl Aaron Swenson. To the side of the monument is Alma's stone, small, close to the ground. Its inscription reads, simply, "Alma Swenson, 1859-1919." I took the red carnation I had brought and placed in on her grave.
The funeral sermon, Dr. Ernest er steadfastness and hope in ent: "She never confessed to toughot all. The other night ight lift up mine eyes unto help come" - was one of the lly read and recited, it seemed soul. Her hopefulness which her characteristic traits, was n prone to adopt. It was a in the assurance of the Psalmist it tribute which could have been sh Chorus, the music of "The funeral. As the casket was Bethany Orchestra played tudent sang the soprano solo, I know That My sh Chorus assembled to bid two of her favorite choruses, n "Surely He Hath borne Our oon wearing her wedding gown. 63ourneyed through the streets and oward Elmwood Cemetery. A drive through the cemetery gate, among the stones in the rain, Malm, the Nelsons, and he grave of Carl Aaron Swenson, stone, small, close to the ground, Swenson, 1859-1939." I took the in on her grave.

NOTES

1 Clarice Cunningham, "Lindsborg, Kansas, The Prairie Town Whose Art and Music Have Given It Fame," Haldeman-Julius Quarterly. I (January, 1927), 20. Amelia 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.


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


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


9 Olof Olsson, Helsingvär från fjärjan, Minnen från en resa genom England och Tyskland år 1879, quoted in Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 152.

10 Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 152.


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

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


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

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


20 Copley, p. 9.


23 In 1882 Alma Swensson was 23 years old.


27 Main, unpaged.


29 Lindquist, Bethany in Kansas, p. 154.

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

31 Lindquist, 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. Alt (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." 32 The Messiah: Quarter Centennial Anniversary, p. 3.

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


Annie Swensson was born on February 12, 1885.

Molander, p. 205.

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

Molander, p. 205.

Arts and Crafts of Kansas, a catalog of an exhibition held in Lawrence, Kansas, February 16-22, 1948 in the Community Building, p. 73.

Bethany College Bulletin, III (February 5, 1910), unpaged.

Ibid.

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

Ibid.

Ibid.

Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 228.

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

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

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

51 Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 279.

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

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

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.


57 Cahnstrom, January 6, 1979.


59 Mrs. F. O. Johnson, p. 229.

60 Mrs. Samuel E. Johnson, "Mrs. Carl A. Swensson At Rest," Mission Tidings (no date, likely January or February, 1919), 230.


62 Ibid.

63 Mrs. Samuel E. Johnson, p. 230.