

Buffalo Tales

MAY/JUNE 2009

AMANDA SWENSON: KEARNEY'S SWEDISH SONG BIRD

By Katherine Wielechowski

Katherine Wielechowski grew up in the eastern part of Nebraska where she attended and graduated from Shelby Public School in 2004. She continued her education at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, SD where she graduated in 2008 with a Bachelor of Science in History and English. After graduation, she moved to North Platte, NE where she put her new degree to use volunteering in the archives of the Lincoln County Museum. She moved to Kearney, NE in 2009 and is currently working at Cabela's and the Buffalo County Museum where she is a tour guide and a volunteer in the archives.

Music has always been a part of Kearney's history. From the very first instruments that were carried to the area in wagons and by train, to the concerts put on during the summer in Harman Park, the people of Kearney have always enjoyed music. During the boom years in Kearney at the end of the nineteenth century, the arts were celebrated and enjoyed by all.

The Model Opera House was originally a community center and skating rink, but was also used for musical productions. It was not the most ideal place for music because the acoustics were horrible, allowing only one activity to be going on at once. The boom years brought economic prosperity to Buffalo County and with the money came leisure time to enjoy the finer parts of life.

Music was introduced to Kearney area schools in 1888 with the arrival of H. M. Draper when he started a band for boys and his wife, Mrs. Draper, directed a band for girls. The first vocal instructor in Kearney was Amanda Swenson, who also organized the first Kearney Musical Society, which was later taken over by Charles Dean. The first true opera house in Kearney, the Kearney Opera House, was built in 1891 further encouraging music and the arts in the region. This allowed the Model Opera House to return to its intended occupation, a skating rink.



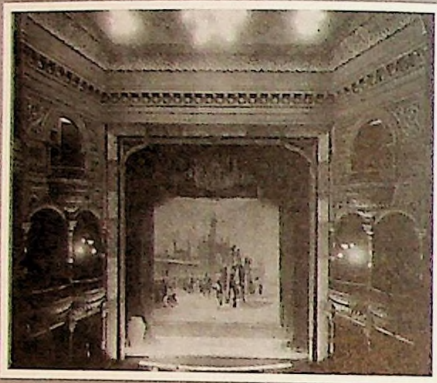
Kearney Opera House, 1891-1954
Buffalo County Historical Society Collection

Amanda Swenson, born Amanda Carlson, was a strong contributor to the "arts boom" here in Kearney. She was born in 1852 in Nykoping, a small village outside of Stockholm, Sweden. Early on, she showed great potential for singing but her parents were very poor, so the village pastor was the one to set her on the path to greatness. He recognized her gift for music and asked

his wealthy friends to become her patrons. Swenson was able to attend the Royal Conservatory of Music in Stockholm when she was sixteen years old and graduated with honors. Swenson lived one of her dreams when she sang for the king and queen of Sweden, even singing with the crown prince Oscar. After she graduated she became first soprano for the famous Swedish Ladies Quartet.

While on tour with the Swedish Ladies Quartet, Swenson was able to

perform in some of the most important cities in Eastern Europe and Asia. During one of their stops, the quartet met an American who convinced them to tour the United States. The Swedish Ladies Quartet performed in all of the major cities in the United States before their final stop in San Francisco. Upon returning to Chicago, IL, in 1876, the quartet separated and Swenson was convinced to stay in the United States. She lived in Pennsylvania where she sang in the Reading Episcopal Choir for two years.



View of the Stage from the Balcony of the Kearney Opera House
Buffalo County Historical Society Collection

She married Andrew Swenson on September 18, 1880 in Kearney, NE. He co-owned the Swenson Bros. Drug Store with his brother John Swenson. His brother, John, arrived in the United States in 1861, a few years before Andrew. Andrew Swenson was born in Sweden in 1856 and immigrated to the United States between 1861 and 1870. He had served in the Swedish Army for two years before leaving his homeland.

When Andrew Swenson first arrived in the United States, he settled first in Illinois where he dabbled in many different business ventures including a clothing store and a dry goods store. When he moved from Moline, IL to Cambridge, IL, Andrew and his brother John started a drug store business that they continued when they settled in Kearney, NE. Andrew's decision to move to Kearney was due to his deteriorating health conditions.

Amanda and Andrew were married and a year later, in 1881, their first daughter, Carrie, was born. Their second daughter, Olga, soon fol-

lowed two years later. The Swensons were married five short years before Andrew died, leaving Amanda to care for two young girls on her own. Andrew's brother, John, was named executor of Andrew's will and guardian of his daughters, but only for legal and monetary reasons. Carrie and Olga were raised by their mother, who never married again.

Andrew's passing did not slow Amanda down. She was very active in the community as a vocal teacher, founder of the musical soci-

ety and director of musical programs. She directed "H.M.S. Pinafore" at the Model Opera house in January, 1885 in addition to starring in many productions. Her performances were "always technically correct" and were greeted with enthusiasm and applause whenever she took the stage. Even the "un-musical" members of the community could enjoy her renditions of Italian opera and "hearty applause testified that the singer had succeeded in that difficult feat of pleasing a mixed audience..."

Amanda also was the star of many smaller programs put on by private members of the community. She was

welcomed into all circles and was a celebrated addition to any party. Her recitals at private homes were very well received, one was even regarded as "one of the most enjoyable affairs of the season" and she was considered "a perfect hostess and her cordiality is as lasting as it is expressive, making her soirees social successes."

In addition to her success as a singer and celebrity, Amanda was also a property owner. When her husband,

MRS. AMANDA SWENSON,

Graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music of Stockholm, also formerly a member of famous Swedish Quartet.

Inst. in Vocal Music and Quartet Singing.

Corner of 2d Ave. and 2nd St.

Amanda Swenson's advertisement as a music teacher.

Courtesy of the Kearney Hub.

June 24, 1889

Andrew, died, he left their home and the building that housed his drug store to her. She rented the building out to various businesses including a cigar shop and a tailor who occupied the upper story. Early, one Sunday morning in February, 1899, disaster struck.

At three o'clock in the morning, a fire was spotted in the cigar shop and as the temperature dropped to forty below, firefighters tried to save what they could. The fire burned the building that Amanda Swenson owned. The owner of the cigar shop lost almost all of his merchandise (but a case of ten cent cigars was saved) and the tailor lost some of his merchandise. The stock was insured, but unfortunately for Amanda, the building was not. No documentation could be found stating how many dollars in damage the fire cost, but one could imagine the loss was quite substantial for Mrs. Swenson.

Not only was Amanda Swenson a singer, teacher, landowner, and mother, she was also a philanthropist. She used her talents as a singer and the talents she gave her daughters to help the community. The two Swenson daughters, Carrie and Olga, took after their mother and were very talented musicians. They also performed in public and during at least one occasion, assisted their mother and other performers in the community to raise money for the Sunday school to buy a Christmas tree for the children. Amanda Swenson was part of a quartet which sang songs from "The Redemption" by Gounod, which was well received.

The quartet was followed by Olga Swenson who performed "Shepherd's Evening Song" by Blake on violin with her older sister, Carrie, accompanying on the piano. The pair were greeted by "a storm of applause" and they "delighted the audience" by their playing "with surprising feeling for one[s] so young."

Carrie also played a piano duet with Mand Moore, which was also well greeted. They were considered "an example of the talent which Kearney's young people are developing. They rendered Verdi's 'Il Traviata' and the audience begged another favor."

The performances by the three Swensons and other members of the community helped raise twenty-five dollars for the Sunday school children, who were most appreciative.

Mrs. Swenson found herself the beneficiary of another public performance in Kearney. The concert the community put on for the "old folks... in honor of the visiting Odd Fellows" was also to raise money to

give to Amanda Swenson "as a token of appreciation for valuable and ever cheerful and gratuitous services." The community was grateful to Amanda for organizing the concert for the Odd Fellows and for her participation in many other events such as concerts and fundraisers and her contribution to "every church choir in Kearney."

Kearney was not the only place in the United States that recognized Swenson's exceptional musical

abilities. In January, 1892, she was asked to contribute to Charles Wells Moulton's book, *A Woman of the Century*, which is a compilation of sketches about woman who were "noteworthy in church, at the bar, in literature and art, in music and the drama, in science and invention, in social and political reform, in commerce and philanthropy..."

In 1897, Amanda Swenson and her daughters, Carrie and Olga, moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, leaving Kearney. While in Salt Lake City, Amanda continued her work in musical arts as a vocal teacher. Amanda taught using the Garcia Method which was a singing method which taught singers



Amanda Carlson Swenson
Picture from *A Woman of the Century*
by Charles Wells Moulton

to exercise before performing with sharp vocalized consonants like "PA" and "MA." Carrie and Olga attended Rowland Hall, which was a private Baptist school, from 1899 to 1900.

Amanda's oldest daughter, Carrie, continued to follow her mother's path in music throughout adulthood. She moved to Salt Lake City with her family but would often stop in Kearney to visit friends on her way to Boston. While in Boston, Carrie attended classes on "vocal and instrumental music."

In 1904, Carrie married Lieutenant William E. Kneass of Salt Lake City. They were married in Amanda's house with the youngest Swenson sister, Olga, as her bridesmaid. The newlyweds moved to Ogden, Utah, which is just north of Salt Lake City, after the wedding.

Olga married Louis Ogden Dick and the couple lived in Salt Lake City until Olga's death, but not much more is known about the youngest Swenson daughter.

Amanda died in Salt Lake City on January 11, 1919 and is buried at the Mt. Olivet Cemetery. Olga died just over a year after her mother, on February 1, 1920, of influenza or pneumonia and was buried next to Amanda.

There was no indication that Amanda ever returned to Kearney, but she left a lasting impression on the community. Due to her impact on the community, music and the arts are still celebrated in Kearney.

Sources:

Buffalo Tales: *Roots of Buffalo County-The Scandinavians pt. 1, Roots of Buffalo County-The Scandinavians pt. II.* Arts in Kearney all written by Margaret Stines Nielsen
 Corene Phillips

Kearney Hub: June 24, 1889; December 10, 1891; January 4, 1892; February 27, 1892; April 25, 1893; December 22, 1894; February 13, 1899; October 13, 1900; February 22, 1904; January 21, 1919

A History of Nebraska by A.T. Andreas

A Woman of the Century, by Charles Wells Moulton

United States Census, April 29, 1910-ancestry.com

Utah State Census, June 6, 1900-ancestry.com

Did You Know...?
 ...that the 1733 Ranch was named because it sits exactly half-way between Boston and San Francisco: 1733 miles both directions.
 See your words in print!
 What is your favorite memory of... the last day of school? End of the year pranks, water fights, and graduation, we want to hear about them!
 E-mail us at:
 bchs.buffalotales@hotmail.com

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P.O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.
 Phone: 308.234.3041 Email: bchs@bchs.us

Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor
 Katherine Wielechowski, Production Manager
 2009 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------|
| Individual | \$35 00 |
| Family | \$40 00 |
| Institutional Membership | \$50 00 |
| Supporting Membership | \$75 00 |

We have replaced the word 'Basic' to 'Family'.

Directors

- Term expiring June 1, 2009: Janice Martin, Lee Sanks, Mary Kenney, Gary Straatmann
- Term expiring June 1, 2010: Jim Cudaback, Janice McGregor, Sharon Mason, Jolene Ward
- Term expiring June 1, 2011: Dr. Mark Ellis, Sharon Martin, Duane Muhlbach, Barb Riege

Officers (1 year term)

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| President | Sharon Mason |
| Vice-President | Barb Riege |
| Secretary | Janice McGregor |
| Treasurer | Jim Cudaback |

2009 Buffalo County Historical Society Calendar of Events

Friday, January 2 from 3-4 pm: Girl Scout Cookie Train exhibit

Saturday, February 21 from 2-5 pm: Cake Fundraiser

Sunday April 19 from 1-3 pm-BCHS Annual Meeting

May Date/Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. David Anderson born May 11, 1849 (2009=160th)

Saturday, May 30: 24th Annual Wagons West Celebration- Music from 10-7 pm and Exhibitors from 10-6 pm

Sunday, June 14: 2nd Annual 1/2 Marathon: Buffalo County Stampede-reg. is at 6 am- race begins at 7

June Date/Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Mrs. William Nutter born June 16th, 1835 (2009=174th)

Friday, July 3 from 9-10:30: Members Only Night (watch city's fireworks)

Saturday, July 11 from 10-6 pm: Family Farm Days

Thursday, July 23 from 6:30-9 pm: 3rd Annual Trivia Contest

AUGUST –dates and special correlating events TBD: Smithsonian Harmonies

August Date/Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Ms. Fannie Graves born August 1885 (2009=124th)

Saturday, August 15 from 10-3 pm: 5th Annual Genealogy Open House with spotlight on One-Room School w/ a picnic!

October: Date/Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Maud Marston Burrows in 1864 (2009=145th)

Friday, Dec. 4 from 6-8 pm: MEMBER'S ONLY preview of Christmas Tree Walk

Sat. Dec. 5 through Sun. Dec. 13 from 1-5 pm daily: Open to the public: 22nd Annual Christmas Tree Walk***Special Night: Friday Dec. 11 from 1-7 pm

December Date/Time TBA: Youth Chautauqua Birthday Party for Sarah Oliver born Dec. 1, 1832 (2009=177th)

Volunteers, chairpersons, and sponsors are still needed. Please contact the office for more information on supporting your Buffalo County Historical Society!

PO Box 523, 710 W. 11th St., Kearney, NE 68845
(308) 234-3041 www.bchs.us bchs@bchs.us

We hope you enjoy these stories about Buffalo County. We would love to have a stock pile of Buffalo Tales ready, so they can go out in a more timely manner. Please submit your memories and stories to us by e-mailing them to bchs.us@hotmail.com or sending them to our post office box: BCHS, PO Box 523 Kearney NE 68848.

We appreciate your support!

Director's Report

-Jim Miller donated his dad's blacksmith shop items to us and recreated his dad's shop behind the west garage door of the archive building. This will be a great addition to our educational exhibits for our guests.

-Seven Dell laptop computers will be donated to the BCHS by Bridgestone Americas Tire Operations, LLC and delivered by Dan Reese when he comes back from Nashville this summer. Dan read the wish list on our web site! The students and volunteers will be able to use these computers to work on projects all over the grounds!



Trails & Rails Museum
Buffalo County Historical Society
710 West 11th Street Box 523
Kearney, NE 68848-0523

Visit us at
www.bchs.us

Return Service Requested

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Kearney, NE
Permit No. 7