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Serving Genealogy and Local History researchers - experiences from the analogical past and a peek into the digital future

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The Analogical Period

The village of Ramsele with approximately 1000 inhabitants and situated 500 kilometers north of Stockholm has turned out to be a symbol for genealogical research in Sweden. This is due to the establishment of SVAR which is an acronym for Swedish Archives Information which has been a unit of the Swedish National Archives since 1984.

SVAR's main tasks are to preserve important materials and to make them available to researchers, libraries, archives, educational institutions and independent media. This is accomplished by lending or making available for purchase film or microfiche copies. Digital forms of distribution are increasing. SVAR has been based in Ramsele since 1978.

During the years 1982-84 microfilming and indexing facilities were developed. The National Archives took responsibility for its organization. In 1985-86, efforts were made to offer a lending service. The Swedish National Council of Cultural Affairs reported in 1987 that SVAR could provide inter-library loans of microfiche to libraries. It would ease the burden on libraries not to have to provide this service.

Libraries were seen as important channels and according to the 1987 report an agreement was made between SVAR and community libraries in Sweden. Later, similar agreements were made with libraries and institutions outside of Sweden. As a result SVAR became central lending facility.

Statistics from last year show that we have 423 agreements with libraries, 52 with archives and genealogical societies such as the Genealogical Society of Utah and the Swenson Center. The contents of these agreements include reduced loan service, increased microfiche orders, receipt of the SVAR newsletter twice a year and the availability of new archival material that is free from secrecy requirements.

Although, we are in the digital era, the use of microfiche materials has increased resulting in more archives being made available to the researcher. In Sweden the tendency has been for the researcher to visit the library because of the microfiche readers available as well bibliographies, local history collections and books on genealogy.

SVAR still has its headquarters in Ramsele, though filming and indexing facilities are now located elsewhere but still in Vasternorrland county. There are 130 people employed at the 5 workplaces of SVAR.

During the '60's and '70's parish records have been frequently consulted for public administrative purposes as well as for increasing genealogical research. The microfilming of public records which the Church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) began in 1948 comprised all parish records until 1860 and in some cases until 1895. During the '60's, copies of these parish records were sold to all 24 county libraries in Sweden. Several community libraries also purchase rolls of film that were related to their parishes. At that time public libraries in Sweden were small units of the county libraries. The county libraries still maintain certain functions such as inter-library loans, acquisition of printed materials, films and microfiche related to the area.

From 1977 onwards, the master films, which were donated to the National Archives, were transferred from 35 mm to 16 mm and subsequently to microfiche. The microfilming is still going on-about 6 million exposures a year. Every volume is registered in a database. The Register is available in catalogs available in archives and libraries in Sweden. The catalogs are in a loose-leaf format for easy updating. For the past several years the SVAR database has been incorporated in the National Archives database and is available on the Internet - www.nad.ra.se. A database system called Arkis 2 handles the archival stock, loans and invoicing. There are problems with this larger system. Our customers wait a longer time, more than a week, to get their microfiche orders. Temporarily we have focused on those who are taking genealogical courses by giving them priority. The course leaders fill special forms and we feel it is important this sector is served by getting their requests on time. We are handling around 900 incoming and outgoing packages each day.

For some years, SVAR has been lucky in having an active and enthusiastic librarian-Irma Ridback. Actually she authored the report I mentioned earlier that established the microfiche loan system. She took the first steps in our book distribution system by bringing the books published by the Swedish National Archives in Stockholm to Ramsele. Ten years ago she prepared our first book catalog and selling was begun on a modest basis. This bookstore was the beginning of our Internet bookshop emphasizing archival, genealogical and local history publications. www.svarbokhandel.ra.se. There are even antique books dating from 1877. In the coming year we will be making improvements and additions. These include getting more titles especially those published in English and specific PDF-files.

SVAR personnel are available to genealogical research. We take payment and the rate is the same as charged by the National Archives. One could also visit Ramsele and do your own research in the SVAR

research center, which was built in 1994. Here are located parish records from all over Sweden, court records, reports from district medical officers and county governors, military rosters etc. You can choose from more than 3 million microfiche.

What about the digital future?

There is no doubt that church records are the most requested archival records representing 95% of the microfiche loans. Now the time has come to start digitizing these heavily used records.

To tackle the problem, SVAR has some projects studying the digitizing of archival material. There was a preliminary study done in 1996-97 and major study in 1998-2000. The object of this latter study was to establish standards and rules for the quality and efficiency in the digitizing of archival material. In addition, we needed a suitable method of indexing. Still there are unsolved problems and as we are a unit in the National Archives, it is really important that we do things correctly from the beginning. The scanned material must be able to stand up to long-term preservation and be able to be converted to other formats. There are many pieces to this puzzle that have to fit. In any case, last year SVAR scanned around 5 million exposures. During the last several years we have concentrated on creating digital tools for archival studies in the humanities.

It is difficult to read the handwritten church records. Very often researchers ask for help in deciphering the text. There is very little literature in Sweden on how to address this problem.

SVAR has a responsibility to improve the accessibility to our written cultural heritage. The ability to read our historical documents is fundamental to this accessibility. To deal with this aim, SVAR has produced a digital instructional training program that can be used in the classroom as well as at home. Another tool for interpreting old texts is the ongoing project of developing a digital dictionary containing Latin expressions, abbreviations, measurement, monetary systems, etc.

There are plans for creating educational materials that can give explanations as to the origins of documents and relics. To highlight aspects of the history of local and central administrations could be tools for contextual understanding. As an example, a digital application that would define and visualize administrative borders and their variations over time would prove very useful not only for educational purposes but as a demarcation tool that will help the researcher in defining his areas of investigation.

Among other activities we are building up a Digital Research Center on the web. It means that on a special web address you will be able to find different types of materials such as registers and scanned documents. Our purpose will be to collect materials of good quality within the National Archives as well as from other organizations and private individuals. During this year of construction you will be free to visit but most likely there will be a fee charged next year.

SVAR is a non-profit organization under the auspices of the National Archives of Sweden. The budget is provided as follows: 1/3 from the National Archives and 2/3 generated by commercial enterprises. It is a difficult job to balance the budget. We would like to have the vision of getting archival documents from the Internet cost-free but this would require some kind of cultural-political investment.