CHRISTINA NILSSON TURNBLAD,
1861-1929: FROM DOMESTIC TO WEALTHY MATRON
LAWRENCE G. HAMMERSTROM

About Christina's husband, Swan J. Turnblad, we have considerable information: a successful businessman, owner and publisher of the Minneapolis Swedish-American newspaper Svenska Amerikanska Posten; idealist; founder of the American Swedish Institute; philanthropist, donor of his mansion, newspaper, and Posten building to the Institute. But what about Christina Turnblad? What of her remarkable immigrant experience, her passage from employment as a domestic to owner of the Posten and mistress of a 33-room mansion? Unfortunately there is a scarcity of documentation pertaining to her life. I have not found a single letter or memoir from her own hand or from relatives or friends. Most of our questions about her must remain unanswered. What glimpses about her early life and that of her family I have obtained come from documents on file in the former stockholders' lawsuit against the Turnblad family in 1908-1909.¹

Christina (Kerstin) Gabrieldotter, born February 25, 1861, in Tångeråsen, Offerdal parish, Jämtland, was the seventh of nine children born to Gabriel Nilsson and Brita Göransdotter.² A previous child, also named Kerstin, lived only three days after her birth in 1859.

In a written statement on file in the stockholder suit against the Turnblad family, the Offerdal parish bailiff wrote that Gabriel Nilsson could not support himself and his family on his farm at Tångeråsen so that he and his wife had to take employment with the neighbors. He could not even keep bedclothes for his children. In 1868 the family moved to Rödö parish and in 1869 he sold his real and personal property, paid his debts, and had a surplus of 300 kronor. The purchaser of the property said the house had only two small rooms and that Gabriel Nilsson at that time had one horse, two cows, and four sheep.

Seeking to improve his fortune, Gabriel Nilsson, together with his eighteen-year-old son, Göran, left the parish on April 14, 1875, bound for North America. They came to Murray County, Minnesota, where they each obtained a homestead near Slayton. The law
suit files also contain several depositions taken in the Worthington, Minnesota, area. Banker O. G. Grundsten stated in his deposition that upon the request of their father he had, on a trip to Sweden in 1876, brought back with him Christina and her brother Simon. He said that Simon later repaid him for both fares. The parish records show that Simon and Christina left the parish on May 14, 1876, and a year later, on May 28, 1877, Gabriel’s wife Brita Göransdotter and daughter Brita left the parish to join their family in Murray County.

Peter Thompson, a storekeeper in Worthington, stated in his deposition that Christina received no pay when she worked for a banker named Smith for less than a year, but had been compensated with instruction in language, cooking, and housework. Daniel Shell, a hotelkeeper in Worthington, stated in his deposition that he had employed Christina as a dining room girl from February 1879 to February 1880 and had paid her $153.53 for the year she was employed. The United States Census, dated June 11, 1880, showed that she was living and working at home with her parents. In the stockholder trial she said she had returned to her parents’ home in Murray County to be confirmed and that she came to Minneapolis in 1882.

Several neighbors’ in their depositions said that Gabriel Nelson was poor, had a very modest house, had no animals or machinery but used his neighbors equipment and assistance to cultivate his farm. Gabriel’s son Göran died November 20, 1879, and his wife Brita died on September 2, 1881, both from tuberculosis. According to his neighbors Magnus and Helen Erickson, Gabriel Nelson borrowed $40 from them to make a visit to Sweden in 1882. They never asked for repayment since Gabriel returned a sick man and died from a hernia July 9, 1883. Repayment of the loan came from his estate. According to the neighbors, neither Christina nor Swan visited him, nor did they attend the funeral. Banker Grundsten also said that the two homesteads were sold for $500 each and after the debts had been paid, $205.90 was distributed to each of the five survivors.

Christina’s brother Simon married Mary Christianson on August 12, 1883, and to them a daughter, Anna Syverine (also spelled Sylverine, Severine) was born on April 4, 1884. Shortly thereafter Simon died from tuberculosis on May 6, 1884, and his wife Mary died from the same disease on September 16, 1894. Afterward, the daughter Syverine was under the guardianship of her mother’s uncle until Swan J. Turnblad was appointed her guardian on
In the stockholder trial, Christina said her niece had gone to a convent school and entered a convent in Montreal, Canada, circa 1906. According to another source the niece reportedly died during the influenza epidemic during World War I. Christina’s sister Bessie lived with her father until his death and afterwards with the Turnblads until she died from tuberculosis on May 21, 1885.

The 1882-1883 Minneapolis City Directory shows Christina living at 1204 South 2nd Street and working as a clerk at Carlson’s Book Store on Washington Avenue. In the stockholder trial she testified that she received $5 or $6 a week. In the same trial Hannah Anderson testified that she knew Christina quite well, that Christina had worked as a ‘‘servant girl,’’ and that she had introduced her to Swan J. Turnblad at the Good Templars hall near Bridge Square. On April 28, 1883, Christina was united in marriage to Swan J. Turnblad. The ceremony was performed by the Reverend John Ternstedt of the Augustana Lutheran Church.

The Turnblad’s only child, Lillian Zenobia, was born September 2, 1884, and was baptized at the Augustana Lutheran Church.
September 28. The Turnblad family joined the Augustana Lutheran Church on May 4, 1890, but left the church on February 4, 1898 "for the Presbyterian Church.'" Although the family is not found in the Westminster Presbyterian Church records, a Westminster church manual for 1910 shows the Turnblad family listed as members, living at 2600 Park Avenue and as having united with the church in 1898. However, they were not listed in a similar manual for 1914.

The Turnblad's first residence was at 2004 South Fourth Street. Swan, together with his sister Mary and her husband Charles Fridlund, had purchased this property on April 15, 1882. On April 7, 1886, Swan and Christina bought out the Fridlund's one-half share in this property. Mrs. Gertie M. Johnson in a affidavit filed in the lawsuit said she was well acquainted with the Turnblads and said that their small home was scantily furnished with cheap furniture and that the Turnblads lived very frugally, their clothing was of the cheapest variety, and there was every indication that they were in poor financial circumstances.

The Turnblad's first residence in the Sixth Ward in Minneapolis was not unusual as this ward was a residential area at the turn of the century and had a high concentration of Scandinavian immigrants. As the immigrants progressed upwards in social and economic status they moved out of this ward. However, no rise in fortunes was more spectacular than that of the Turnblads, for as they prospered they moved from their modest home in the Cedar Avenue area (later identified as "Snus Boulevard") to a modern three-story apartment home on Stevens Avenue, and finally to the 33-room palatial mansion on Park Avenue.

During the late 1880s the financial fortunes of the Turnblads began to improve. In 1885 the Swedish American Publishing Company was incorporated; its purpose was to publish a Swedish-language newspaper devoted to temperance. The first issue of the Svenska Amerikanska Posten appeared on March 10, 1885. Although the paper floundered and was near bankruptcy, Turnblad purchased stock in the paper in May 1886. He was elected to the Board of Directors and by October he was named manager. Although he maintained that the company was in financial difficulties, he began to acquire shares of stock from discouraged stockholders and by 1888 owned the majority of the company's stock. In October 1897, the paper was sold to Christina Turnblad for $1 and assumption of $4,309 in debts. In the trial Turnblad was questioned by the plaintiff's attorney about the sale of the paper to his wife:
Q. Why did you want to turn it over to your wife when it was such a losing proposition?
A. The stockholders refused to pay any more assessments.
Q. I am asking you why you didn’t sell it to some stranger?
A. We tried to.
Q. Why did you allow your wife to buy it?
A. Suppose she had the same privilege as anybody else.
Q. Why didn’t you buy it yourself? And not shove it off onto her?
A. Because she had the money, it was her money.

In the trial Christina said she was reluctant to buy the newspaper but consented after Mr. Turnblad said he was practically responsible for the newspaper debts anyway. Evidently Christina, after her purchase of the newspaper, began to work in its office. L. E. Olson, a former secretary of the company, said that once he commented to Mr. Turnblad, “Are you so poor that you have to have your wife working here?” And Turnblad had replied, “The paper has been sold to Mrs. Turnblad and she is taking care of the finances.” Swan testified during the trial that around July or August 1898 Christina said she could no longer manage the paper and said that he should take over. He said that the paper was transferred to him in 1901 and it was then that it was announced that he was the publisher of the paper. In the stockholder trial he said that to his way of thinking “publisher” and “owner” meant the same thing.

In March 1892 the Turnblads purchased property at 1511 Stevens Avenue and built a three-story brick residence and apartment complex called the “Cecil Flats.” The family moved into their first floor apartment in November 1892, renting out the upper flats. The exterior was of Duluth brownstone; the interior, which had oak parquet floors, was elegantly furnished. Testimony in the trial indicated that the family also had a white piano with swan-like legs and a carved lion. On one wall there was a 4’ x 10’ painting which included a parrot painted by Lillian Turnblad, then eight years old. A barn was also constructed on the lot. It later housed the first automobile in Minneapolis, an electric Waverly Turnblad had purchased in 1900. The barn was thereupon equipped with a 500-volt power line and a motor generator to be used in charging the automobile batteries.

In the spring of 1903 the Turnblads purchased six lots on the corner of 26th Street and Park Avenue. The completion of their mansion there around 1908 was probably the catalyst that caused the former stockholders to file their lawsuits against the Turnblads.
Beginning in 1895, the family made the first of many trips to Europe and undoubtedly that experience was of great value to them when they chose the stately Romanesque chateau style over two other proposed architectural plans. I do not doubt that Christina and her daughter Lillian, who was artistically inclined and had attended St. Joseph’s Academy in St. Paul, had a great deal to do with choosing patterns for the mansion’s beautiful stucco sculpture work, the oriental patterns in the original rugs, and in the selection of the remarkable collection of the eleven *kakelugnar* (tile stoves) which grace the mansion and harmonize so beautifully with each room’s ornamentation.

The cost and financing of their residences was a controversial point in the former stockholders’ suits against the Turnblads. The plaintiffs alleged that Turnblad had misrepresented to them the value of the company’s stock when they had surrendered their holdings to him. They further alleged that he had used money from the company to build his Cecil Flats and his mansion on Park Avenue.

The trial was a distressful and embarrassing experience for the Turnblads. Turnblad denied on the stand that he had used funds from the company to finance his Cecil Flats and his mansion. He said his wife had become a wealthy woman after receiving several inheritances and it was her money that had been used. Early in the trial he claimed that between 1892 and 1897, she had received around $13,000 from the estates of deceased relatives in Sweden. It was not until near the end of the trial that he recalled that most of it came from an investment his wife’s father had left in Sweden. Christina testified that her father, in his trip to Sweden in 1882, had left a sum of money for investment and that after her father’s death, the funds were to be turned over to her with the understanding that she was to take care of her invalid younger sister. The plaintiffs later introduced evidence from authorities in Sweden who stated that they could not find any evidence of those transactions.

The judge dismissed the suit, but after gathering further depositions and affidavits from Sweden and the Worthington area, the plaintiffs requested a second trial and when that was denied, appealed to the Minnesota State Supreme Court. That court, after reviewing the evidence, ordered a retrial. This trial never took place as the Turnblad family settled out of court.

Evidently in the early 1920s the family began to discuss what to do with the mansion. In a 1929 report the Swedish vice-consul,
Nils L. Jaenson, said Turnblad at one time considered giving the mansion to the city of Minneapolis, reputedly Christina's wish. He also refused a purchase offer from a Jewish group and once he had offered it to the Odin Club but that group's finances precluded such a purchase. The vice-consul also related that at a coffee party, a woman once said to Christina, "It is too bad that Mr. and Mrs. Turnblad could not keep the house any longer, but that it is expensive we can understand." This made Christina very angry, which Swan also reflected. The consul said that during the discussions and negotiations in 1929, Swan was very nervous and irritated, since Christina, to whom he was very attached, lay sick with cancer. After an illness of three months, Christina died on September 6, 1929, at St. Barnabas Hospital. Funeral services were held on September 9, 1929, at the Lakewood Chapel and interment was at the Lakewood Cemetery. She was 68 years old at the time of her death.

Apparently, when Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf agreed in July 1929 to be a patron of the "American Institute of Swedish Arts, Literature and Science," Turnblad finally decided to donate his mansion, the newspaper, and the Posten building to that Institute. In her booklet, The Story of Swan J. Turnblad, Gertrude Gump states that Christina and Lillian were against the donation and that Christina refused to sign away her interest in the property until a property division had been made giving each family member one-third. This opposition must have been prior to 1929 as an article in the December 28, 1929 issue of Svenska Amerikanska Posten, announcing the formation of the Institute and the family's donations, reproduced a document dated February 25, 1929, signed by all three members of the family, which stated that they wished to establish such an Institute and were willing to donate the mansion, newspaper, and the Posten building to it.

Miss Gump in her booklet states that Christina did not leave her share of the estate to the American Swedish Institute but disposed of it in other ways, in part to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. That Institute could not find a record of such a bequest nor could I find any probate record after her death. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts however does have a "Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund," established by Lillian Z. Turnblad's will, in which she specified that the interest from a trust created from her estate would go to that fund.
Whether the Turnblads actually lived in the mansion is debatable. In the 1908-1909 trial, Turnblad said the family lived there and when they were gone a caretaker stayed there. The United States Census of 1910 shows them living at 2600 Park Avenue, together with two servants. In a 1915 lawsuit filed against Turnblad, the Bjorkman Brothers plumbing company stated that the Turnblads had lived there the past five years. With one exception the Minneapolis City Directories also show them living there from 1908 through 1929. The exception was in 1922, when their address was shown as 500 South 7th Street. This was the address of the Posten Building which had been erected in 1915 by the Turnblads as a printing plant for the Svenska Amerikanska Posten. The third floor of this building contained an elegantly furnished apartment and it is very likely that the family used this place as their residence after its erection. A former employee of the newspaper wrote in a letter that “The Turnblad family kept pretty much to themselves. They would spend the days at Park Avenue and the evenings at the third floor apartment in the Posten Building.”

Concerning this apartment, when the Turnblads sold the Svenska Amerikanska Posten to Magnus Martinson in October 1920, the lease of the Posten building specified that the Turnblads would continue to occupy the third floor, the garage, and the room above the garage, and would have the privilege of entering it either through the garage or the main office. The lease also agreed to “not allow any liquor, gambling or other immoral practices” on the premises.

The Swedish vice-consul said that when he first came to Minneapolis it was with a combination of ridicule and contempt that people pointed out to him the Turnblad mansion, for Turnblad, because of his distinctive personality, did not have many friends and the family’s extremely retiring life did not help to change this opinion. I believe the stockholders’ suits against the Turnblad family had much to do with this. As previously mentioned, it must have been a distressful and disconcerting experience for the family to have been accused of dishonesty and deceitfulness and to have experienced in public sharp questioning by the plaintiffs’ attorney regarding the source of their income and their financial transactions of previous years. This experience and the family’s encounter with the ever-present Swedish inclination toward jealousy probably are the cause of Christina’s reported anger with the Swedish community in Minneapolis and very likely
the reason she was originally against the formation of the Institute and the donation."

Christina and her family must have been rather uncomfortable in the huge 33-room mansion. The vice-consul said that without doubt Turnblad had his special motives when he built the grand mansion, in whose numerous rooms a little family like the Turnblads could have gotten lost. There is no doubt that the family was reclusive and entertained very little. However there was one exception, when 500 persons attended the Aero Club’s first open house on July 28, 1921, at the Turnblad mansion. In later years newspapers reported that the mansion had been vacant for several years.

Today, in contrast, the mansion is bustling with activity. I am sure the family, despite their early frustrations over the disposition of their mansion, would be very pleased to see that it has become the center for Swedish activities in the Upper Midwest and that the American Swedish Institute founded by Swan J. Turnblad has continued to maintain and renew the mansion for the pleasure of thousands of visitors year after year.
NOTES

1All documentation referred to in this article in the stockholders' suit against the Turnblad family is to be found in the Minnesota State Supreme Court Cases 16844-16857, on file with Minnesota State Historical Society Research Center, St. Paul. See also Lawrence Hammerstrom, “The Swedish American Publishing Company Stockholders' Lawsuit Against Swan J. Turnblad,” Swedish-American Historical Quarterly, 35 (1984): 39-54.

2Christina's death record shows February 23, 1861, as her birth date, but microfilms of Swedish church records from Offerdal parish and Augustana Lutheran Church show February 26, 1861.

3State of Minnesota, Murray County Clerk of Court, deed and probate records.

4Ibid.

5Transcript of a taped conversation with Grace Lindquist regarding the Turnblad mansion, on file American Swedish Institute.

6State of Minnesota, Hennepin County Court marriage records.

7Microfilm of Augustana Lutheran Church records.

8Swedish vice-consul Nils L. Jaenson's report on the founding of the American Swedish Institute, December 31, 1929, on file at the Institute.


10Svenska Amerikanska Posten, December 28, 1929.

11State of Minnesota, Hennepin County Probate Court, Record No. 43596.

12Bjorkman Bros. vs. Swan J. Turnblad, Case No. 145913, October 27, 1915, on file at Minnesota State Historical Society Research Center, St. Paul.


14Hennepin County Public Records Division, Abstract Tract Index, Miscellaneous Book No. 226, pages 387-390, Document No. 1185199.

15In a taped interview from August 26, 1959, C. A. Anderson, third president of the American Swedish Institute (1942-1949), said that the Turnblad's daughter Lillian had told him that her mother was never in favor of the donation to the Institute or well disposed toward Swedes, for they had not appreciated what Turnblad had done for them and she wanted the property to go to the city of Minneapolis. A typescript of this interview is on file with American Swedish Institute.

16Minneapolis Morning Tribune, July 29, 1921.