

Archives of North Park University
Swedish-American Archives of Greater Chicago
Manuscript Collection #2
Henry Bengston (1887-1974) Papers, 1905-1971

BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY BENGSTON

Henry Bengston was born into the family of Johan August Bengtsson in the parish (socken) of By in the province of Värmland, Sweden, on March 26, 1887. He studied under the noted Värmland scholar and founder of the Ingesund Folk High School and Music Conservatory, Waldemar Dahlgren. In 1907, Bengston immigrated to Port Arthur in Ontario, Canada. There he spent two years, working as a lumberjack and bricklayer's assistant, and was involved in the activities of the local lodge of the International Order of Good Templars. Bengston immigrated once again in 1909, this time from Canada to the United States, coming eventually to Chicago. After several varied and short-lived jobs, he took a position at Marshall Field and Company.

Bengston's interest in the socialist movement had begun with his politically liberal father and with his schooling in Sweden. He was able to learn more about the principles of socialism from like-minded and better-read fellow workers in Ontario. Not long after his arrival in Chicago, he joined the Lake View Scandinavian Socialist Club, which he had come into contact with through a friend from the local Good Templars lodge that he had also joined. With the formation of the Socialist Party of America's Scandinavian Socialist League (Skandinaviska Socialistförbundet), Bengston became increasingly involved in the Chicago Scandinavian socialist scene, taking over editorship of the League's Swedish-language newspaper, *Svenska Socialisten* (The Swedish Socialist) in 1914 and later management of the League's printing and publishing establishment, The Scandinavian Worker's Publishing Society, both located at 2003 N. California Avenue in Chicago. In 1916, Bengston married Hildur Carlson from Skattkärr in Värmland, Sweden, whom he had met on the boat from Sweden to Canada in 1907. They were able to afford a honeymoon trip back to Sweden that summer to see friends and relatives. In 1921, after eight years of dedicated work, Bengston left his post as editor and manager of the Scandinavian Socialist League's printing and publishing activities because of a hostile Communistic refocusing of party ideals, a change which the peaceful socialist Bengston would not tolerate.

This left Bengston with no job and a wife, small daughter, and a mother-in-law to support. Putting his newspaper experience to work, he started his own printing business, the System Press. In 1924 he took on J. A. Fenstad, a Norwegian, as his partner. The System Press was successful, taking on printing jobs for such groups as the Swedish Baptist Church of America, several churches, North Park College, Chicago city high schools, and the Swedish Good Templars in the Chicago area. Bengston worked with the System Press until his retirement in 1962, when he and Fenstad's son sold the business.

In 1923 the Bengston family was able to buy a house in Brynford Park, a neighborhood on the far north side of Chicago. From the System Press, Bengston put out a free neighborhood weekly, *The Brynford Park Bulletin*, financed by advertising from local shops and businesses. The *Bulletin* cooperated hand in hand with the Brynford Park Improvement Association, a group of concerned and well-meaning citizens of the area. On two occasions, Bengston took the leading role in resolving strong threats to the community. The first was the Brynford Park School Controversy of 1928, wherein a neighborhood faction challenged the quality of the small Brynford Park "portable" grade school. Bengston and the Improvement Association, opposed to sending the children to distant city schools by bus and elevated train, did their best to support and obtain improvements for the small school. The other large conflict was the Brynford Park

Cemetery Controversy of 1928-1936, protesting the legal right of the Montrose Cemetery Company to put graves within one foot of homes on the outer limits of Brynford Park.

From 1934 to 1937, Bengston served as president of the Swedish Educational League, a public lecture and discussion forum, which sought to help educate Chicago's Swedish-Americans, to which he had belonged for several years. The Educational League engaged speakers from a wide range of viewpoints to speak on an equally wide range of subjects, for the purpose of educating "our Swedish-American workers". Bengston's active involvement in the Swedish Educational League continued until its disbanding in 1956.

Another club in which Bengston took active part until its end in the 1960's was Värmlands Nation, the provincial society for Swedish-Americans of Värmland birth or descent on the north side of Chicago. He and his wife joined the club in 1930, and Bengston served as president of the club from 1943 to 1946. Other organizations in which Bengston remained active included Svenska Kulturförbundet (The Swedish Cultural Society), the International Order of Good Templars, and the International Order of Svithiod.

That Bengston retained his interest in Scandinavian-American socialism is evidenced most strongly by his book, *Skandinaver på Vänsterflygeln i USA* (Scandinavians on the Left Wing in the USA) (Stockholm: Kooperativ Förbundets Förlag, 1955), the history of the Swedish-American socialist movement and in particular, the Scandinavian Socialist League of the Socialist Party of America. Written in Swedish and published in Sweden due to disinterest and even hostility towards the subject here in the United States, *Skandinaver* is the only history written on the movement.

Throughout his life, Bengston sought the promotion of interest in Swedish language and culture here in America and in Swedish-Americana through his club activities, his book, and numerous articles in Swedish and Swedish-American magazines and other publications. Sigurd Gustavsson of the Immigrant Registret in Karlstad, Sweden, called Henry Bengston "a grand old man of the Swedes in America".

Bengston spent his last years living with his daughter and son-in-law in Northfield, Minnesota, and died October 8, 1974, at the age of 87.

PROVENANCE: The papers of Henry Bengston were donated to the Swedish-American Historical Society Archives by Bengston's daughter after his death in 1974.

ACCESS RESTRICTIONS: There are no access restrictions on the materials, and the collection is open to all members of the public. However, the researcher assumes full responsibility for conforming with the laws of libel, privacy, and copyright that may be involved in the use of this collection.

PROCESSOR: Daniel M. Olson, October 1983. Shadae Gatlin, October 2009 (see preservation note below).

SEPARATION RECORD: Two separate collections were removed from the Henry Bengston Papers: the Värmlands Nation Records (SAAGC MSS 27), and the Swedish Educational League Records (SAAGC MSS 3).

PRESERVATION: In the fall of 2009 preservation copies were made of the oversize contents of box two, folder three. A custom-made oversize envelope (box three) was made and houses the preservation copies as well as the entire contents of box two, folder three.

ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION OF RECORDS: This collection comprises three archives boxes (box three is a custom-made oversize envelope) and is arranged into six categories: materials pertaining to Bengston's involvement with the Scandinavian-American socialist movement, materials about Bengston's printing firm, the System Press, Bengston's

involvement with the Brynford Park Improvement Association, the original manuscript for and one copy of Bengston's book, *Skandinaver på Vänsterflygeln i USA* (1955), correspondence from Bengston during his 1963 trip to Sweden, and articles by Bengston for magazines and newspapers. These papers are written in both English and Swedish.

BOX	FOLDER	FOLDER TITLES	DATES
1	1	One example of <i>Svenska Socialisten</i> (The Swedish Socialist) (empty folder)	1920
1	2	Examples of printed material from Scandinavian Workers Publishing Society (empty folder)	1916-1918
1	3	Financial statement from Scandinavian Workers Publishing Society	1916-1918
1	4	Correspondence to Scandinavian Socialist League	1915-1917
1	5	Letters and articles from Bengston to <i>Ny Tid</i> , Swedish Communist newspaper, formerly <i>Svenska Socialiste</i>	1922-1923
1	6	Correspondence between Allen Blomkvist and Henry Bengston	1916, 1923-1925
1	7	Correspondence between Frank Hurup and Henry Bengston	1922-1924
1	8	Correspondence between Herman Hallstrom and Henry Bengston	1925-1933
1	9	Correspondence between Frithiof Werenskold and Henry Bengston	1922-1925
1	10	Correspondence from Henry Bengston to Oscar Larson	1923
1	11	Correspondence concerning Herman Hallstrom	1929, 1961
1	12	Newspaper clippings concerning Frithiof Werenskold	1933-1942
1	13	Poems, books by Frithiof Werenskold	n.d.
1	14	Speech by Henry Bengston to the memory of Frithiof Werenskold at IOGT	1942
1	15	Article by Henry Bengston about Herman Hallstrom from immigration periodical <i>Bryggan/The Bridge</i>	c.1970-71
1	16	Speech, statement by Herman Hallstrom	1930, 1933
1	17	Newspaper clippings on Herman Hallstrom	1924-1961
1	18	Brochure, newspaper clippings on Scandinavian-American socialist and labor movements	1905-1963
1	19	Newspaper clippings on labor and socialist movements	1936-1965
1	20	Alarm, Minnesota Swedish-American socialist magazine	1937-1938
1	21	Correspondence from Albert Pearson to A. Furstenberg concerning Swedish-American socialist history	1945
1	22	Correspondence to Bengston concerning Swedish-American socialism	1951, 1956
2	1	History of the System Press (author unknown)	n.d.
2	2	Examples of printed material from the System Press	1929-1962
2	3	Brynford Park Bulletin (contents moved to box three folder one, see preservation note above)	1927-1932
2	4	Materials concerning the Brynford Park School Controversy	1928
2	5	Materials concerning the Brynford Park Cemetery Controversy	1934-1936
2	6	Newspaper clippings on the Brynford Park Cemetery Controversy	1933
2	7	Petitions and statements from the Brynford Park Cemetery Controversy	1933

2	8	Brynford Park Improvement Association membership list and announcements to members	1931-1959
2	9	Brynford Park Improvement Association letterheads	n.d.
2	10	Original manuscript for Skandinaver på Vänsterflygeln i USA by Henry Bengston	1955
2	11	Original manuscript for Skandinaver på Vänsterflygeln i USA by Henry Bengston	1955
2	12	One copy of Skandinaver på Vänsterflygeln i USA by Henry Bengston	1955
2	13	Correspondence from Bengston during his 1963 Sweden trip	1963
2	14	Articles by Bengston in Svenska Amerikanska Tribunen about his trip to Sweden	1963
2	15	Series of articles by Bengston in immigration periodical Bryggan/The Bridge	1971
3	1	Brynford Park Bulletin	1927-1932
3	2	Preservation copies of Brynford Park Bulletin	1927-1932