

The Swedish Chef
A Surprise in the Society Archives
By George Curtis



While going through a box of loose papers from the society archives, I came across a number of newspaper clippings, mostly obituaries, sent to Harlow Dunham Curtis in the 1950's. One of those obits was for a Mrs. Eric F. Curtiss, a resident of New Haven, CT who died in 1955. It was her husband, Eric F. Curtis, who was the chef and it's his connection to Sweden that is the surprise – our first Curtis/s immigrant family from Sweden. I believe this family may have changed their surname to Curtiss when immigrating, a practice not uncommon.

This was a somewhat easy research project. All I had to search for in the U.S. Census was a Curtis/s with father and mother born in Sweden. And since some of the four generations up to today stayed in New Haven County, CT, I collected quite a bit of data including that of the immigrant parents, August Curtiss and Hannah Pearson. August was not the 'Swedish Chef', his son Eric was.

August, a shoemaker, was born in Sweden on September 18, 1868 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1891. His wife Hannah and first child Alma emigrated in 1896-1897 joining August in Naugatuk, New Haven Co, CT. A query to the Naugatuk Historical Society revealed that August first appeared in the Naugatuk City Directory in 1893. The 1900 census shows August as an employee at the U.S. Rubber Co. plant in Naugatuk which later became UniRoyal. He died on April 17, 1921 and is buried in the Old Pine Grove Cemetery in Naugatuk along with Hannah who died on April 15, 1911. August became a U.S. citizen in October 1900. August and Hannah had eight children of which seven were living in 1910. Between the time of their Hannah's death in 1911 and August's death in 1921, at least four of the children left Connecticut to settle in the Midwest.

Alma M. Curtiss was born on December 11, 1891 in Sweden and married Raymond Welty in Indiana in 1916. He was born in 1884 in Oakwood, OH and died 1971 in Paducah, KY. Alma died in Stephenville, TX on July 12, 1979 and is buried alongside Raymond in KY. Alma and Ray's daughter Phyllis was living in Stephenville with her husband Robert Rudduck (1924-2002) at the time of Alma's death. There were three children in the Welty family, Elwood (b.1903 CT), Lester (b.1918 IN) and Phyllis, (b. 1925 IN).

Eric F. Curtiss, first son of August and Hannah, was born June 10, 1897 in Naugatuk; died in New Haven on July 11, 1984 and is buried at Beaverdale Memorial Park, New Haven. Eric was

a chef at a private school in New Haven. He claimed on his World War I draft registration in 1918 that he had a "lame left leg." In the 1930 census, he was a 'second cook' at St. Margaret's School in Waterbury. The CT Death Index for Eric lists his occupation as "Chef, Camp Sequassen," hence, the moniker "Swedish Chef." Men raised in Fairfield County who were Boy Scouts probably remember Camp Sequassen in northwest Connecticut but I wonder if any remember the chef, Eric Curtiss? He married three times, first to Bertha Leisring (1894-1955) in 1918 whose obituary I found in the CFS archives, second to Dorothy Sandree in 1961, and third to Ann M. Dunhan in 1970. The only child of Eric was from his first marriage: Eric F. Curtiss, Jr., born 1934 in New Haven. Eric, Jr. who married Raeann (last name unknown) and had two children – Eric F. Curtiss III (1967-1989) and Marianne B. Curtiss (b.1960).

Alvin E. Curtiss, second son of August and Hannah, was born 1899 in Naugatuk, died May 29, 1968 in South Bend, IN and is buried in St. Joseph Memorial Park, Granger, IN. Alvin, a WWI Navy veteran, married Mary E. Siltzer (1900-1989) in 1921. They had a daughter Winifred, born June 1925. Like his father, Alvin was a shoe/boot maker according to census information.

August and Hannah had four more children – Martha, born about 1902 CT; Astrid, born about 1904 CT; and lastly, twins Cora and Harry, born about 1906. I could not find any additional information on Martha or Cora but Harry moved to Mishawaka, IN and he was living with his sister Alma Welty in the 1930 and 1940 census.

That I was able to find Astrid really caused a smile. My sons gave me a new iPhone5 for Christmas 2014 which uses a different browser than my Dell laptop. For kicks I Googled Astrid Curtiss and got a couple hits, one of which was an obituary for an Astrid E. Curtiss Sousley (1903-1994) of Indiana. I checked the 1930 and 1940 Federal Census for her and husband Ben Sousley – BINGO!!! – Astrid was born in Connecticut and her parents in Sweden. That her obit was in the South Bend, IN *Tribune* as was that of other Curtiss' of this Swedish family gives me confidence this Astrid was the daughter of August and Hannah.

So, the question remains – did August change his surname to Curtiss upon immigration? I found a Charles E. Curtiss, born in Sweden in 1867 living in Hartford Co, CT, a Gustav Oliver Curtiss, born in Sweden in 1872 living in Saskatchewan, Canada in 1916, and a Gustav Curtiss, born in Sweden and living in Minnesota in 1895. Interestingly, I did not find any immigration records on Curtiss from Sweden but I did find similar surnames in Swedish birth records 1845-1875 such as Curtz, Curtelius, Curtilii/Curteli and Curforste. Whether August changed his name or not, there exists a Curtiss family line in the U.S. whose ancestor emigrated from Sweden in 1891 so we added them to our list of Curtis/s immigrant ancestors.