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Jennifer Eastman Attebery. *Pole Raising and Speech Making: Modalities of Swedish American Summer Celebration*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Christopher Oscarson

In a conversation with a colleague several years ago, I was surprised to find out that we were both exactly one quarter Swedish—I through my paternal grandfather and he through his maternal grandfather. This was unexpected because based on his appearance, family traditions, and last name, I had never anticipated that we might share this common ancestral heritage. Whereas my family has tended to emphasize its connections to Swedish culture, his has focused on links to Japan. There are good reasons that account for the differences in our families' respective cultural identification, but the variability of how we each see our own ethnicity underscores what ethnographers and folklorists have known for a very long time: there is nothing automatic or straightforward about the expression of ethnic identities. Being Swedish American, Japanese American, or anything else is far more than what can be measured in a DNA test or observed in hair or eye color. As such, the study of ethnicity is not the search for essences or origins, rather the performance of identity within the bounds of given cultural contexts. This might make it sound as if ethnic or cultural identity is completely arbitrary, but this is not the case. Political, economic, social, religious, and environmental factors are tremendously influential, although it is the complex interplay of all these factors that can make ethnicity very difficult to trace.

One of the ways to try to evaluate a group's investment in a given cultural identity is to look at markers such as holidays and holiday celebrations. Holidays are vital for establishing and maintaining relationships, emphasizing important cultural values, and making note of the passing of time. Holiday celebrations are always loaded with significance and meaning for the group celebrating. Thus, a productive road to understanding how a culture sees itself is to start with a focus on which holidays are observed (and when) and how holidays are celebrated. This then provides valuable information about the values, affiliations, beliefs, and allegiances of the involved communities.

In her book, *Pole Raising and Speech Making: Modalities of Swedish American Summer Celebrations*, Jennifer Eastman Attebery very skillfully looks at a wide range of sources in Swedish and English in-

cluding journals, letters, newspaper advertisements and articles, and photographs to gather the necessary information to begin to understand how Swedish Americans in the Intermountain West celebrated Midsummer in order to better understand how they saw themselves and their own relationship to both America and Sweden. The choice to focus on Midsummer is not arbitrary as it stands at the nexus of competing social realities for these immigrants and their descendants. This particular holiday has come to be seen within the contemporary Swedish American community as a kind of litmus test, "an index of Swedish Americanness" (6). Attebery is quick to point out, however, that it is never a straightforward question of cultural purity that determines how, where, and why a particular holiday is observed, but looking at these questions one comes to a far better understanding of the complex relationship forming cultural identities.

One of the important insights to emerge from the variety of celebratory practices has to do with the fundamental differences in the self-perception of the Swedish American population on the Colorado Front (in and around the greater Denver, Colorado area) compared to the Swedish Americans on the Wasatch Front (valleys extending north and south from Salt Lake City, Utah). The reasons the individual members of these two groups came were very different and the things tying the individuals to each other were likewise different. Whereas in Colorado, Swedes had immigrated mainly individually and often moved first through the Upper Midwest, Swedish immigrants in Utah came together with other Scandinavians and mainly because of conversion to the LDS (Mormon) Church and were thus part of a larger process of cultural consolidation from Northern Europe that had a distinct and at times strained relationship with Americanness, especially before statehood and the official end of the persecution for practice of polygamy.

In both Denver and Salt Lake City, public celebrations of Midsummer were often organized as outings or picnic excursions to a park or resort, sometimes even requiring short travels by rail. In Denver, the outings were usually more secular in character and were held on Sundays to accommodate work schedules. In Utah, the celebrations tended to be held on days other than Sunday to avoid conflicting with Sunday worship practices and it was not uncommon for them to incorporate speeches by ecclesiastical leaders or public prayer.

In both communities, Midsummer competed with an already crowded holiday calendar in the transition from spring to summer, including, at the time: various May Day celebrations, Decoration Day (now Memorial Day), Flag Day, Independence Day, and, in Utah and Idaho, Pioneer Day on July 24. But, as Attebery points out, “spring-to-summer passage was celebrated by Swedish Americans with abundance and redundancy, evident in the way the seasonal passage was celebrated in multiple events in which traditional practices were freely intermingled and conflated” (24). One holiday could meld together with the next suggesting the formation of hybrid identities. Midsummer celebrations changed (and were changed by) these other celebrations as part of the greater assimilation process.

As a folklorist and ethnographer tracking these changes, Attebery does an excellent job of documenting and evaluating the cultural practices of Swedish Americans throughout the region and their transformation from Swedes to Swedish Americans during this period. She is effective because she is thorough and always careful in her attempt to understand not only what these groups did, but also—to the degree it can be reconstructed—why they observed their specific practices. She works to understand--both from the inside and out--sources on their own terms, without projecting contemporary values and perceptions on the past.

This volume is a valuable resource for anyone trying to understand the unique dynamic of cultural assimilation and the preservation of Scandinavian ethnic identity in the West. It is meticulously documented and full of the descriptions of interesting and illuminating situations of how these communities understood their relationship to dominant cultures and to native Swedish culture. Midsummer celebrations involved undeniable nostalgia for a past life and a country beyond the sea, but the celebrations looked forward as well to assimilating that past within the context of a new and promising future as Americans in the West.