The Swedish Club of Chicago, 1882-1984

The Swedish Club of Chicago, located at 1258 North LaSalle Street in Chicago, had a long and prosperous history. That history is the focus of this exhibition. Using objects and memorabilia from the Swedish Club and several of its' members, we will show the significance the Swedish Club had on the members of the Chicago community.

The Swedish Club started as a fraternal singing society called "Föreningen Freja" in 1869. This group, though short lived, proved to be the impetuous for the Scandinavian singers in Chicago. They formed to unite the singers into one organization for the preservation and enjoyment of Scandinavian music thereby contributing to the American culture.. When two banks holding the funds of the group failed in 1881, Föreningen Freja lapsed into inactivity and disbanded in 1886.

In 1882, a small group of Föreningen Freja members joined together to form a purely social club called "Svenska Klubben." Membership was open to Americans of Swedish birth. In 1887, a call was sent out to former Föreningen Freja members and other Swedish-American singers to band together in this new organization. Such an enthusiastic response was met that a separate singing society was formed, "Svenska Sångsällskapet." Svenska Sångsällskapet used the club rooms of Svenska Klubben for their rehearsals. After the growth in membership from former Föreningen Freja to Svenska Sångsällskapet, the group decided to combine the names to become, "Svenska Sångsällskapet Freja."

Because both Svenska Klubben and Svenska Sångsällskapet Freja were founded from the same organization, Föreningen Freja, it seemed purely natural the two organizations combine. In 1889, the Svenska Glee-Klubben i Chicago was formed. This organization was to be short lived, as in 1906, the director for the singers returned to Sweden to accept a position with the Royal Opera Company. Without leadership, the singers withdrew from the organization in 1910. The club then changed its name back to Svenska Klubben. The singers did reorganize as the Chicago Swedish Glee Club.

As the organization grew, a need for their own building became necessary. Rental of larger spaces for banquets and concerts was inconvenient and unsatisfactory. A stock company was formed in 1893 as "The Swedish Club of Chicago." By the sale of stock, enough funds were procured to purchase the

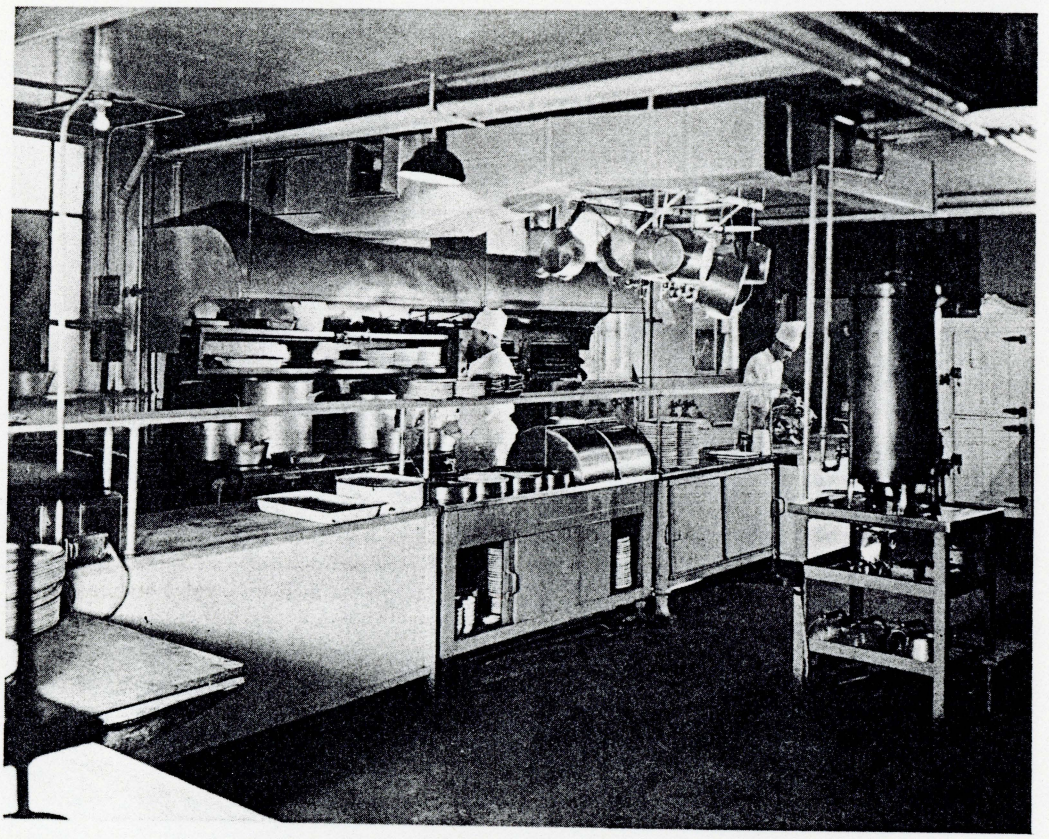
building at 1258 North LaSalle Street. Upon purchase of the building, the Svenska Glee-Klubben i Chicago leased the building from the stock company and moved into its new headquarters in 1896.

In 1923, Svenska Klubben applied for incorporation. The Secretary of State advised them that a foreign name could not be incorporated. The most logical name for the organization was the Swedish Club. however, that name was in use as the stock company owning the building the Svenska Klubben was leasing. As the directors of the two organizations were closed tied together, it was not long before a new name for the stock company was found, "The Swedish Building Club." With the reincorporating of the stock company, the name ,"The Swedish Club of Chicago," was again available. In August 1923, the Svenska Klubben officially changed its name to the Swedish Club of Chicago. It seemed natural then that the Swedish Club should buy the building it had been leasing for nearly thirty years from the Swedish Building Club, thereby dissolving that organization.

Many activities were held yearly, both for members only and also open to the public. The many parties, dinners and balls held in honor of different persons, or to commemorate a special event hold memories for the individuals who attended. Golf tournaments, concerts and lectures as well as festivals were always well attended. The art exhibitions which took place between 1911 and 1964 assisted to promote both Swedish and Swedish American artists to a wide public. The restaurant became widely known and visited by many Chicago residents as well as tourists. Whenever a member of the Swedish Royalty was visiting Chicago, an invitation to the Swedish Club was always extended with great fanfare.

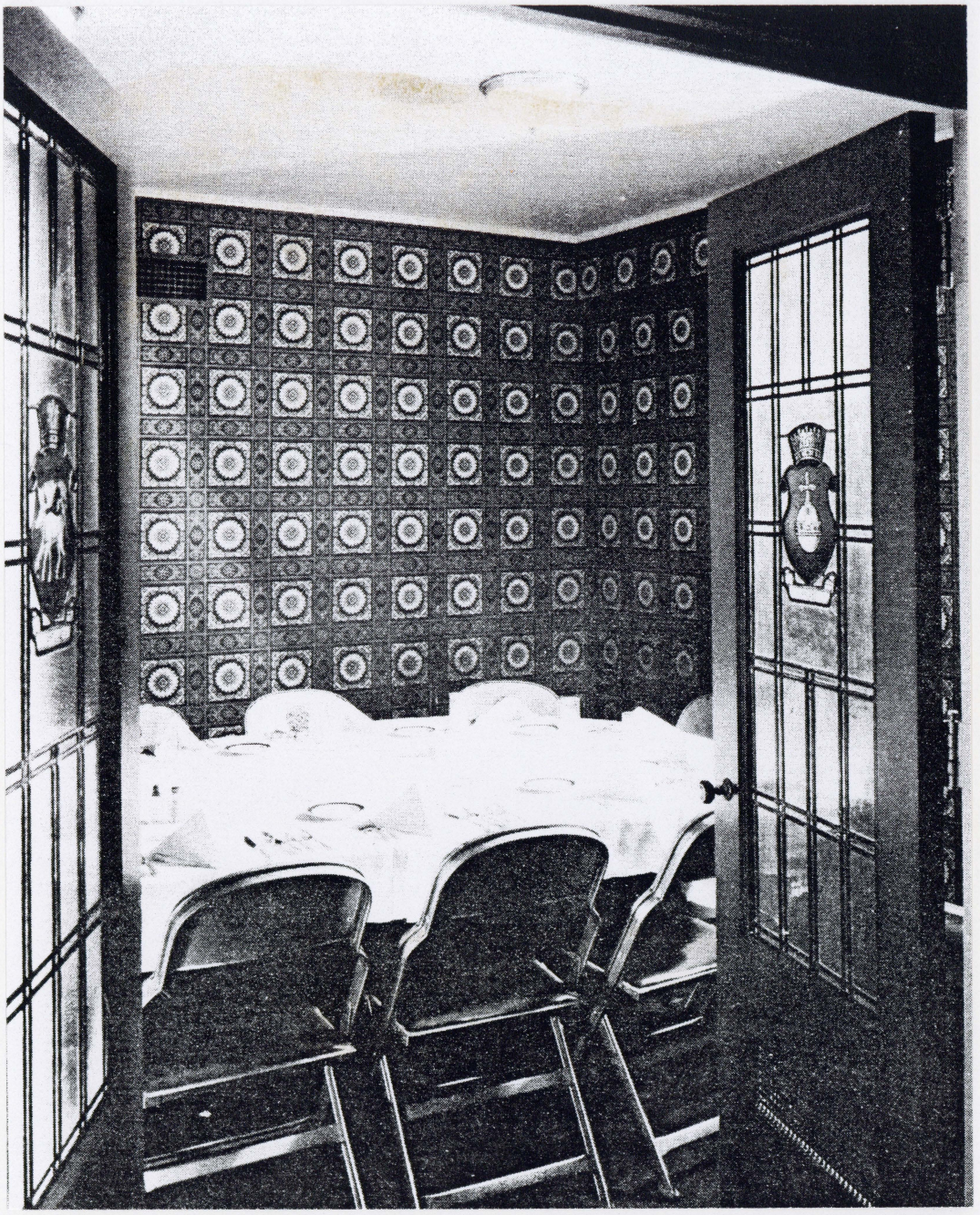
As the Chicago Swedish population aged, the membership in the Swedish Club diminished. New membership drives were carried out but without much success. Many of the younger generations were moving out into the surrounding suburbs and rarely came into the city to visit the Club. With the increasing costs and diminishing revenue, the Swedish Club was disbanded. An auction held in the spring of 1984 announced the closing of the Swedish Club.

With the closing of the Swedish Club in 1984, Chicago lost a fondly remembered organization. We hope that this exhibition will help you understand the great part in history the Swedish Club of Chicago played.



THE CLUB KITCHEN

Modern equipment in all its phases is used. The kitchen is spotless in its cleanliness.



The President's Room

The right door in this image is the one which the Museum purchased at the auction of the Swedish Club. The President's Room was a popular room for parties ranging from ten to twenty guests.

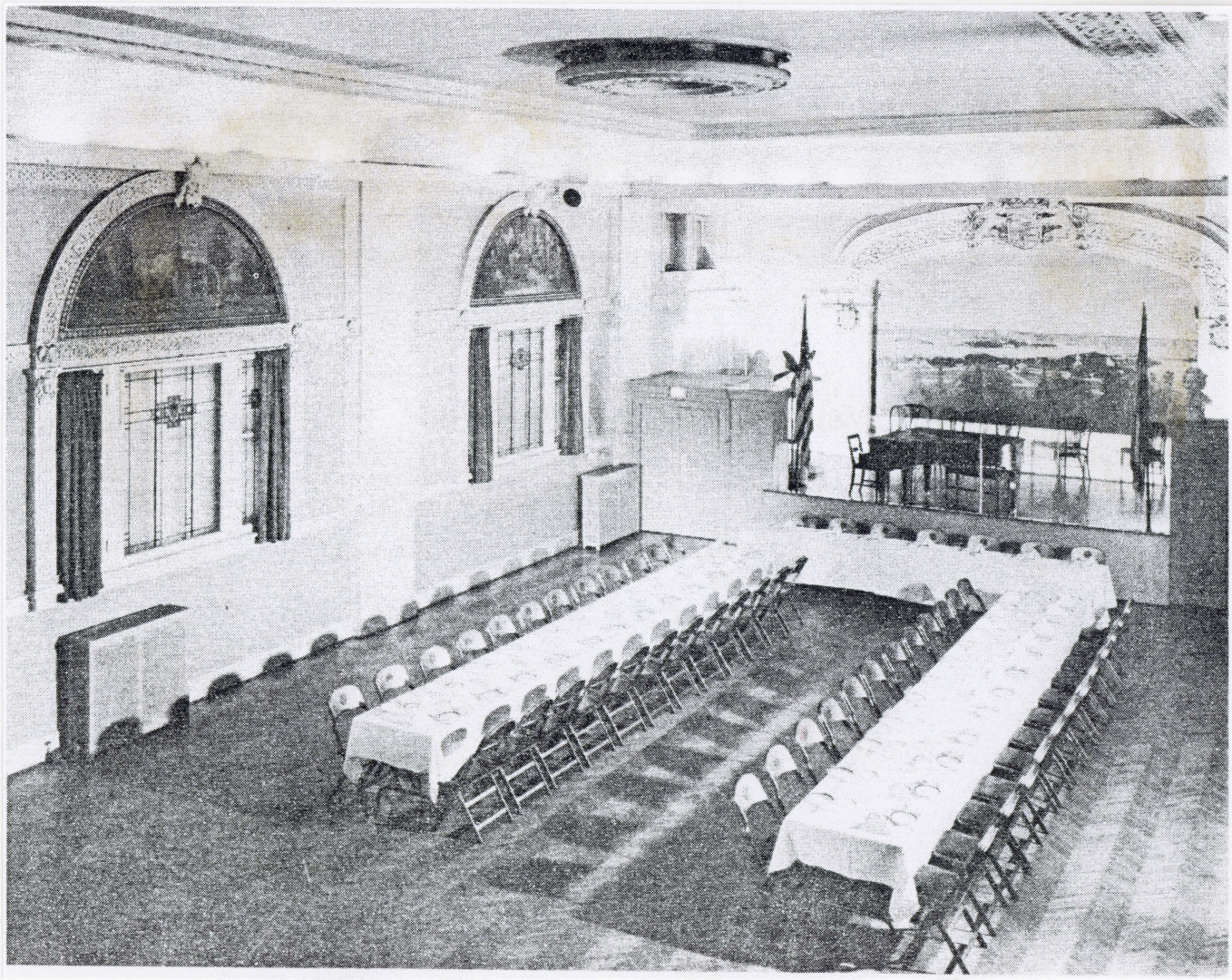
From the Museum collection.

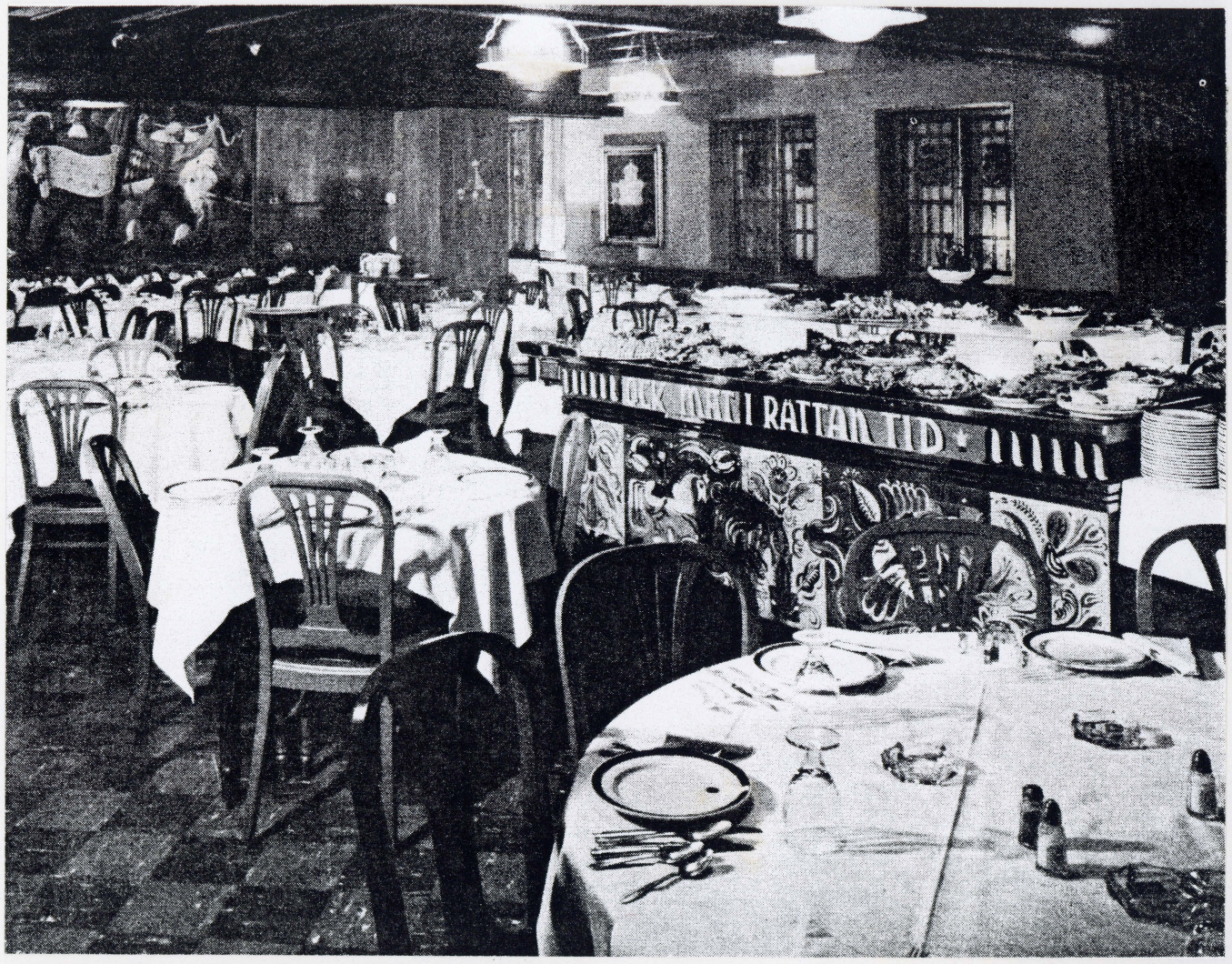
A Section of the Banquet Hall

Two of the lunette paintings can be seen at the left of this picture, above the windows. Also notice the Viking heads and trim work around each frame and window section.

Also seen in the right side of this image is the crest, above the stage area. This is the crest which the Museum has on display directly behind you, above the amoire in the Permanent Exhibition.

From the Museum collection.





The Restaurant

The back wall in this photograph depicts the windows with the provincial crests, two of which you see here. The restaurant was known as the most unique restuarant in the city of Chicago. The smörgåsbord table in the center was able to expand in size to suit any occassion. The banquets held during the Midsummer Night's Festival and at Julmiddag (Christmas dinner) could have had as many as three tables in number, with an average length of thirty-five feet!

From the Museum collection.

Art Exhibitions at The Swedish Club, 1911-1964

In 1910, the Swedish Club built an addition to the building at 1258 North LaSalle Street which provided additional banquet facilities. This new banquet hall was the home of the art exhibitions which the Swedish Club hosted from 1911 to 1964.

The first exhibitions were juried by two panels. The first, a Jury of Selection, determined which works were suitable for display and was made up of Swedish and Swedish American artists. The second was a Jury of Awards, which determined the pieces that would be awarded prizes. The second panel of jurors were non-Swedes and often connected with the Art Institute of Chicago. The Swedish Club directors made it clear that they were not involved in the selection of works, nor of which pieces received prizes.

During the exhibitions, the walls and windows were covered by wooden panels covered in burlap. The furniture was removed except for a row of benches down the center of the room for viewing. In the early exhibitions, potted palm trees were placed in the center and along the perimeter of the room. Often, paintings were hung two or more high, and sculpture was placed along the west wall and on pedestals throughout the room.

The advantages for staging an exhibition were many for the Swedish Club. First, having an exhibition of this type added prestige to the organization, a cultural event in which the Swedish community could take pride in. It also attracted new people to the Club, to come view the beautiful works by talented artists. Further, the added revenue from the bars and dining rooms was an incentive to stage such a large undertaking. The artists gained reputations through juried shows and prizes were often seen as a sign of merit. The added exposure for artists who were from outside the Chicago-land area was another benefit of exhibiting.

Artists such as Olof Grafström, Birger Sandzén, B.J.O. Nordfeldt, Charles Hallberg, Christian von Schneidau and Carl Oscar Borg were frequently invited to exhibit their works. After several exhibitions had taken place, the committees decided that if a first prize was won twice by one artist, that artist should not be able to exhibit again. This was to perhaps allow other artists the opportunity to exhibit. However, often the more favored artists would have a piece on display outside of the exhibition, as the Club purchased several pieces.

The volunteer effort of creating, judging and displaying an exhibition of this caliber finally grew too much. After Herbert Hedman, the last chairman of the Exhibitions Committee, retired in 1964 at the age of seventy-six, another chairman was not found. Mr. Hedman had chaired the committee from 1949 to 1964. Interest in the exhibitions and funding from promoters had waned to the point where the exhibitions were a disadvantage for the Club to produce. With the closing of the exhibitions, the Scandinavian immigrant painters lost an opportunity to show their works in a prestigious juried exhibition in Chicago.

The Club Bar

The three-part mural (a triptych), seen at the back wall in the photograph, is the mural which was donated to the Museum shortly after the Club auction. This mural is titled, "the Saga of Frithiof," and is faithful in execution to all historical detail. The painter is E.W. Berg, a Chicago artist and member of the Swedish Club.

Donated by Edward Ragnar Olson.

