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Abstract for the conference Nordic Immigration in the Pacific Northwest, Then and Now

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"A Trip to Sweden for 50 cents": Screenings of Swedish Films in the Swedish-American Community in Seattle until 1950

The Swedish immigrants in the United States created a cultural community and identity by publishing newspapers and Swedish-American literature, setting up theatrical performances etc. Besides that, the Swedish-American diaspora organized film screenings with various types of films: documentaries, travel films, short films, feature films. From about 1920 until about 1950, screenings of Swedish films constituted an essential part of the Swedish-American cultural life, and that also became a widespread entertainment for the immigrants to Seattle. In this presentation, I discuss which films were shown to the Swedish immigrants, how and where these films were screened, and how the Swedish-American newspaper in Seattle Svenska Pacific Tribunen (Swedish Pacific Tribune) wrote about the films. The presentation starts with a discussion about which cinema theatres in Seattle that was used for these screenings, where they were geographically situated, and how the screenings were marketed. With the articles in the newspaper Svenska Pacific Tribunen as a departing point, I discuss what kind of memories and conceptions of the old country that was reproduced and how these conceptions was part of a new transnational Swedish-American identity. To some extent, it was the same movies that were popular in the U.S. and in Sweden, but as a cultural artifact they took on different meanings; meaning is changed by the social and cultural context, and also by how the films are "used". The Swedish-Americans' reception of Swedish films were in part different from the Swedish reception because the films were, besides being entertainment and a cultural experience, perhaps above all a channel to see Sweden, to experience the familiar and the known, and to maintain contact with the old homeland.