

A Village Sending Greetings from the Past

Kerstin Hopstadius

Sweden

The Municipality of Leksand (in the county of Dalarna, or Dalecarlia as it sometimes is translated) has 15,000 people and more than 90 villages. Returning to the place where my father was born, I now live in one of these villages, called Heden, consisting of 104 households, half of which are villagers, the rest holiday houses. You might think that this is a small, isolated place; however, four of the villagers play ice hockey on a national level, and of those four, two are playing in the National Hockey League. That might be an indication that people in Heden have not been afraid to take on challenging tasks.

Three years ago, I took on a local documentary project together with two other villagers aiming to portray the life and history of the village of Heden. Apart from the “village book” that is about to be in print, the study has given me unexpected glimpses of how people in this area have organized themselves over the centuries. Whether the troubles came from the meager soil or repressive authorities, the villagers responded by means that formed a culture of sharing resources and dealing with rulers. Throughout its history, this region has been a stage for countless initiatives of managing difficult situations. Some of the events that I have been told or found in writing are very different from the official written history.

Through my professional work I have used tales and stories from the village, but what I see and hear in this work goes beyond analogy and metaphor. I think that I am touching on things that keep us going as individuals and as a society.

My father as a child in this village would hear old women talking about “gussordspapper” – ‘Godswordspaper’; the expression was used for any piece of paper with printed letters. Those days, when Bible and hymnal were the only printed items many people were familiar with, are not very long ago. There must be a lot of things, both within us and around us, that are not yet touched by the modern project with all its abstractions and gadgets. John Shotter talks about “words in their speaking”; today, I try to listen to those words from a time long gone in a way that lets them speak to me now. An owner’s mark on the back of a wooden plate, or a spade, or a signed contract indicates a way of keeping order of belongings without a lot of formal arrangements.

Archeological enterprises in the region have revealed that the villages as we see them today were largely formed in the course of the 17th century. Before this, the farms were scattered in the woods. This change is not to be found in any written documents, from government or church. Most likely the farmers themselves decided to gather for cooperation and protection, and this was done without any big trouble that was seen and heard by the authorities. By the end of that century we see a lot of common enterprises, including a message from the county to the king that he could have a certain number of soldiers from the region, while the villages took responsibility for organizing the soldiers’ salary. The king accepted the offer, and a local economy evolved that served a lot of other common needs, such as building and repairing roads and feeding the poor. The region for centuries to come would be known for its skilled carpenters and various arts and crafts.

At the start of the documentary, I expected to learn more about certain legendary individuals. To have found intricate patterns of collaboration enabling basic survival as well as skills and creativity has left me in a sense of deep respect for the people involved.