

Crayfish Tales
by
Trapper Arne

#11

KRÄFTSKIVAN - The Crayfish Party

A bit of Swedish nostalgia
By John P. Allinger

It was a special feeling permeating the house that August afternoon back in the early 40's. I was ten, and my brother hadn't yet arrived. That would take another year. We lived in a modest house some fifteen miles from downtown Stockholm with good bus transportation to and fro. The subway with its far-flung tracks to the suburbs wasn't on the scene yet, and it would take another dozen years to have a handful of inner city stations in full service.

Around our house, Dad was always busy in various ways. He was the next to last sibling in a flock of eleven and arrived just in time to see his father dead and the family's modest fortune in tatters. Some brothers became affluent business men, one became a doctor teaching Slavic languages and one a high school principal. Two sisters ended up school teachers, and the youngest in the bunch married rich. Dad became a house painter.

There was always, however, an artist cloaked in those painting overalls, and he could write poetry, sing, and drink. The drinking wasn't too excessive, but to his misfortune, and to ours at times, he became inebriated too quickly. But, we had it all wrong, according to Dad. He was just a happy soul who liked to entertain his guests in the best possible way when there was a party.

At crayfish time at our house, which occurred once a year, friends and selected neighbors were invited to take part in the annual merriment. The total hovered around twenty, plus children. When it was all over, most of the guests could walk home, and those who had come by bus from the city stayed over night either at our place or with some neighbor. There would be some kids accompanying their parents to the party, and they had their own table on the side.

In the afternoon of the crayfish party, there was much to do. It was 'ett knytkalas,' potluck, with my family providing the delicious crustaceans and the liquid refreshments, and the invited guests supplying whatever they felt would go well as a first course. It would be the usual: meatballs, Jansson's Frestelse, an asparagus omelet or two, and maybe a 'sylta' of some kind, plus home made bread. For dessert, there would be several tortas with whipping cream on top and made in the afternoon in our kitchen.

While mother kept busy, Dad and I were setting up long tables and decorating the crisp, white table clothes with various decorative items. There would be plenty of candles and Swedish flags (dad was a royalist) in addition to napkins, flowers, silver ware and song sheets that dad had put together. We also strung colored lanterns that would be illuminated with lighted candles in the lower tree branches. The defining emblem of the party was the unavoidable decoration at any Kraftskiva: the large, round, smiling 'man-in-the-moon' lantern that was positioned above the middle of the table.

No relatives were included since we were on the lower end of the social scale and the more affluent uncles, aunts and cousins would have their own August merriments someplace else. And that was perfectly fine. In those days, that's the way it was. Birds of a feather, they say. Some have a grayish look to them. They're small but try their best. Others have bright colored feathers and a demanding presence. To each his own. Quite happily, we nested in the former group.

When the guests had arrived and exchanged the customary niceties and brought their food to the table, Dad would hush them all to silence and, standing on a rock nearby, he would ceremoniously wish all welcome and recite a poem he had written for the occasion. Then all sat down and the feast could begin.

During the time everyone was busy eating and drinking, which often took several hours, there were "snaps visor" sung (small ditties to sing before downing the glass of vodka that was an absolute necessity on these occasions). How many 'neat' amounts of alcohol one consumed was entirely dependent on how many songs were sung.

The glorious, dark red crayfish, stacked high on maybe four large platters with their claws facing out on a bed of bright green dill crowns was a sight to behold. If it was a clear night, the moon, the real one, would gracefully peek in among the pine trees and say hello. Toward ten in the evening, well, maybe more like eleven, the kids were off to bed. Dad would put some records on the gramophone and ask everyone to join him and mother in a waltz on the small patio attached to the house. If still awake at the time it was all over, I remember it would be early in the morning before the last guests left with a reminder to come back next year for the same.

There would be a fair amount of cleaning up the next morning, which always was Sunday. But since no one ever, as I can remember, went to church other than on weddings, funerals and Christmas morning, Sunday was a swell day to sleep late and then dig in to help with the necessary chores. Dad, when awake, would always have an 'återställare' (an hefty drink designed to chase away the blues and the pounding around the temples). Mother, who seldom drank more than a few glasses of wine, supervised the work.

Kräftskivan is one of the memories that for me has a golden edge around it. As

kid, it was the time of coming of age, year by year, and getting instilled with a Swedish food tradition that began long ago and will continue, it's my hope, when other traditions have ceased to be as important as they once were. Kräftskivan, like Garbo, Bergman, von Sydow, and Absolut, is a concept the Swedes should vigorously export. I'm happy to see that my friend Trapper Arne is doing his very best in that endeavor. Happy eating!

Submitted by John P. Allinger

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