

Axel's Place

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AXEL'S
LUNCH ROOM

OPEN ALL NIGHT

2217

2400

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A story, and some photos just call out to have their stories told. One of these attention-getters rests in the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis. While researching to prepare a lecture on identifying photos, I found an image called Axel's Lunch Room, a charming little vignette of life in Minneapolis that, as it turned out, contains the story of the aspirations and career of an immigrant Swede at the turn of the twentieth century.¹

Upon discovering any photo, viewers immediately take in its visual elements. Here, we see two small storefront businesses. With a little magnification, the signs in their windows are remarkably readable. The barbershop at left advertises "Lang's, nature wonder worker, cures rheumatism, stomach and kidney troubles, open wounds and skin diseases. Try a bottle, we sell it." A second sign promotes a vaudeville show on Tuesday, June 25. The front window of Axel's Lunch Room displays a small handwritten sign advertising cigars: "Brand New Little Barrett 5 cents." Near the door is another, announcing that the place is "OPEN ALL NIGHT." An address, 2217, appears above the lunchroom door, and, indeed, research in Minneapolis city directories confirms that Axel's was located at 2217 East Lake Street. In addition to the uniformed workers posed in front of the establishments, the photo shows men wearing bowler and boater hats, light fixtures inside the lunchroom, and an unpaved street. All of these rich details of

commerce, technology, and clothing are additional clues to the location and date of this photo depicting a small business sometime in the early part of the twentieth century.

Clothing is often the first detail to explore. It must have been warm the day this photo was taken, since some of the men are in shirtsleeves, and boater hats are usually reserved for spring and summer. Men's clothing is often harder to date than women's, as it changes less frequently. However, the uniforms of the three men (one is inside the lunchroom) yield clues. Those dark coats and billed caps belong to streetcar motormen, the workers who drove the cars. The style of cap-badge, with its big numbers, was used from 1906 until 1918 or so.²

The unpaved street and the com-

era when June 25 fell on a Tuesday. Since the street was paved in 1914, this photo must have been taken in 1912—the first year that Axel's Lunch Room was listed in the Minneapolis city directory. The lunchroom's proud new owner likely commissioned this photo of his enterprise.

Fortunately, the American Swedish Institute collections hold related materials that helped turn these pieces of information into a story. There are additional views of the lunchroom, portraits of the proprietor, and some papers related to the life of Axel Anderson, a Swedish immigrant to Minnesota. The photo draws us into Axel's world, while the documents provide greater detail. The story of this man and his business still resonates today.

Axel Anderson was 37 years old and had lots of restaurant experience by the time he opened his lunchroom.

bination electric-candle-gas lights seen though the lunchroom window provide additional clues. Lake Street was first paved in 1914; thus, the photo must have been taken before then.³ Gas lights were being phased out in favor of electricity at this time, so the lighting detail confirms the street detail. Finally, the Tuesday, June 25, vaudeville announcement in the barbershop window narrows the possible dates for this image to 1912 or 1918, the only two years in this

Axel Anderson established his lunchroom in 1911 to serve the railroad and streetcar workers employed at the nearby Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad yards, just a few blocks away, and at the Lake Street Station of the Twin City Rapid Transit Company, right across street. It appears from plat and insurance maps that this was a prime location for a lunchroom, drawing workers from two busy companies. Indeed, Axel accommodated them by staying open all night, since streetcar workers labored around the clock. No wonder he needed such reliable light fixtures!

The Lake Street Station opened

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Cabinet-card portrait of Axel Anderson in his 20s, about 1895, taken by the Swedish American firm of Petri and Svenson



Modest back room of Axel's, about 1912; the front room was through the doorway just left of the counter. No record survives of employee names, but this scene shows there were at least two. Axel does not appear in either of his lunchroom photos.

in 1910, and Axel was ready for customers the very next year. By 1917 the station employed about 500 men, a hefty clientele even without counting the railroad workers. Axel may have specifically requested the three motormen in the photo to pose for this commercial scene in order to attract more of the same customers. The barbershop next door, operated by Felix Dorke, no doubt served many motormen as well. Those five-cent cigars must have been popular with this clientele.⁴

Axel Anderson was 37 years old and had lots of restaurant experience by the time he opened his lunchroom. In 1888, at the age of 14, he had emigrated with his mother from Sweden to a Minnesota farm near Grove City in Meeker County. (Grove City was originally called Swede Grove.) The Andersons were part of a large group of immigrants who left their homeland during an agricultural crisis. In the 1880s, more than

60,000 Swedes moved to Minnesota, giving it “the largest Swedish-born population of any state in the nation,” according to geographer John Rice. By 1905 the Swedish immigrant population in Minnesota had reached a peak of 126,000.⁵

After working on the farm for four years, 18-year-old Axel moved to “the cities” in 1892 and began a career as a waiter in a series of restaurants in downtown Minneapolis. In

about 1900 he began working for the chic Schiek's Café at 45 South Third Street. Located directly across the alley from the Metropolitan Theater, Schiek's—and Alex—catered to the rich and famous. In a WCCO radio interview from the 1940s, Alex recalled serving Ethel Barrymore, the great tenor Caruso, and local entrepreneurs such as the department-store owner L. S. Donaldson. It must have been challenging for him, an immigrant

Saving Photographs

Axel Anderson's son-in-law, Mel Mendel, donated the Anderson family photos and documents to the American Swedish Institute in 1996, along with a one-page timeline of Axel's life, which provided the framework for this story.

Whether donating photos to public collections or saving them for future generations of your own family, this is a good model to follow. A timeline and any available supporting information will give future viewers a fuller idea of a photo's significance and its place in history. It is especially important to label photos with date, place, occasion, and personal names. The Axel Anderson collection holds some fascinating photos with no identification. They document portions of the story that we will never know.



Sumptuous interior of Schiek's Café, 1933, with its iconic 100-foot-long mahogany bar, purchased from the St. Louis World's Fair

Swede, to serve German fare to such a grand clientele. Nor was waiting tables the common occupation it is today. According to the 1900 census, only 872 males and 1,452 females were waiters in Minnesota. Minneapolis was home to 97 restaurants by 1900, but of almost 2,000 Andersons, only 24 were waiters.⁶

Alex remained at Schiek's for about a decade until he opened his lunchroom in 1911. It was a modest place, and at first he and his wife Ellen lived upstairs. The business supported them and their daughter Arlene, born in 1915, for 18 years. By 1917 he was prosperous enough to commission a small bungalow at 3050 Forty-Seventh Avenue South, but in 1924 had to sell his home and return to quarters above the lunchroom to save money.⁷

THE GREAT DEPRESSION FELL hard on Axel's railway-working customers, and in 1930 the lunchroom closed. Anderson soon went back to another job he knew well—waiting tables at Schiek's—where he regained a favored position. He was such a memorable employee that he was mentioned in owner Louis Schiek's obituary in 1941. After serving thousands of local and traveling personages, Axel retired in 1949, at the age of 75. At the time, the *Minneapolis Star* reported that he was "believed to be the oldest working waiter" in the city.⁸

His wife, Ellen, had succumbed to cancer in 1933. After living with her father in Minneapolis for several years after her mother's death, Arlene moved to California to pursue an acting career. Upon retirement,

Axel relocated to California to live with Arlene and her husband. He died there in 1954 and was returned home to Minneapolis's Lakewood Cemetery to rest beside Ellen.⁹

We can conclude from snapshots that Axel had a happy life in California; photos show him visiting various tourist sites and working in Arlene's garden. His friends at Schiek's did not forget him, either, and continued to write to him on the West Coast. However, his correspondence with the Cooks, Waiters, Waitresses, Helpers and Beverage Dispensers Union back in Minnesota indicates that his chosen profession let him down. He wrote from California to Local 458 requesting that his membership and insurance continue at no charge, since he had been disabled when he retired. "When I left Minneapolis in

October 1949, I was very sick and I had to have two operations on both my legs in a very short time. I can't work any more." Perhaps all those years on his feet had taken their toll, but the union refused his request.¹⁰

FROM THIS SINGLE PHOTO, THE related family papers, and a bit of digging in historical sources, a typi-

cal immigrant story emerges. Many newcomers dream of owning their own businesses; some do, but then later lose them to financial woes. My own grandfather from Germany owned a small contracting business, only to have his dreams dashed when the Great Depression took away the homebuyers. Many immigrants to Minnesota today open restaurants along Lake Street, as Axel Anderson

did, and they, too, will see ups and downs just as he experienced.

When we view photos of small enterprises such as Axel's lunchroom, we see the pride and progress that the owners showed to the camera. The details of a working person's life can be much harsher than the scene that appears on photo paper. Family correspondence and records provide the rest of the story. □



*Axel Anderson, early 1950s, at a famous
Hollywood intersection*

Notes

1. This photo can be viewed on the Minnesota Reflections website, <http://reflections.mndigital.org> (search on Axel's), where you can zoom in and see the great detail described in this article.

2. Sanborn Map Co., Fire Insurance Map, Minneapolis, 1912, vol. 4, sheets 411, 438; Aaron Isaacs, Minnesota Streetcar Museum. Unless otherwise noted, Isaacs provided all streetcar and Lake Street Station information used in this article.

3. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 13, 1927, clipping, Minneapolis Collection, Minneapolis Central Library, mentions that Lake Street was first paved "thirteen years ago."

4. *Davidson's Minneapolis City Directory*, 1912, p. 2067 (Barbers).

5. Harald Runblom and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press and Uppsala University, 1976), 125; John Rice, "The Swedes," in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, ed. June D. Holmquist (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 260, 262; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Place Names: A Geographical Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 365.

6. *Davidson's Minneapolis City Directory*, 1900; WCCO radio, Daragh Aldrich Show, typescript, n.d., Axel Anderson Papers, American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis; U.S., *Census*, 1900, *Population*, 2:523.

7. The building that housed Axel's Lunch Room was constructed and owned by W. W. Ehle, according to city building permits. It was torn down in 1972 by the state highway department. The Andersons' bungalow, still standing in 2010, was built by H. L. McCoig & Co. for \$3,385.20; invoice, June 19, 1917, Anderson papers. Family history relates that he sold the house to save the business; Anderson papers.

8. *Minneapolis Star Journal*, July 10, 1941, p. 1, 6; *Minneapolis Star*, Aug. 23, 1949, p. 24.

9. Anderson papers.

10. Axel Anderson to Local 458, Cooks, Waiters, Waitresses, Helpers and Beverage Dispensers Union, June 24, 1951, Anderson papers.

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