

# Traditions

— + Swedish Ljuskröna





*Cover photograph: Mardel J. Esping and Marian  
Richardson of Lindsborg prepare tissue paper to  
cover this ljuskrona.*

*Back photograph: Mark Esping of the Folklife  
Institute of Central Kansas has conducted research  
on the Swedish tradition of ljuskrona making. He is  
shown here with several varieties of ljuskrona.*



*Mardel J. Esping wraps the Huskrona with fringed tissue.*

## SWEDES IN KANSAS

Kansas has been home to many people of Swedish ancestry. Small numbers of Swedes began to settle the central part of Kansas Territory before the Civil War. However, large groups began to emigrate to what was by then the state of Kansas in the late 1860s. This wave of emigration was partially driven by a famine in Sweden. Between 1870 and 1880 the number of Swedish-born Kansans increased significantly. By 1890 17,096 residents of Kansas had been born in Sweden.

The first significant settlement of Swedes in Kansas Territory made their home in the Blue River valley, north of present-day Manhattan. They named their community Mariadahl in honor of the mother of the first settlers. After statehood, the most concentrated area of Swedish settlement was in the Smoky Hill River valley of central Kansas. The first Swede, Anders Bengtson Carlgren, arrived in 1864. He persuaded several young Swedes to file claims for land in the area which is now Lindsborg.

Immigration companies in eastern cities placed agents in Europe to encourage settlement in the American West. Some Swedes came to Kansas because of such promotions. The railroads also encouraged Scandinavian immigration. The Santa Fe and the Kansas Pacific railroads both developed Swedish publications to promote Kansas as a good place to settle.

Many Swedes came to Kansas through the work of Swedish land companies. The First Swedish Agricultural Company of McPherson County, Kansas, was organized in Chicago in 1868. The purpose of the land company was to settle Swedes in a single community with a strong religious focus. The company purchased land in southern Saline and northern McPherson counties from the Kansas Pacific Railway. Settlement in central Kansas was then promoted among Swedish emigrants who could purchase land from the company. Other land companies similarly engaged in the promotion of Kansas among Swedes. The area around Scandia in the Republican River valley was settled through such organized activity.

Swedish immigration has also existed in other parts of the state in a less organized pattern. Marshall, Clay, Allen, Wilson, Pawnee, Morris, Osage, Wallace, Logan, Decatur, Irego, and Rawlins counties all have seen significant Swedish immigration over the years. Noticeable populations of Swedes reside in the cities of Manhattan, Hutchinson, Topeka, Kansas City, and Salina.

## SWEDISH CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS

Immigrants to Kansas have always maintained customs from the Old Country in order to hold memories close at heart. Holiday observances usually echo practices from generations back. The Christmas celebration begins with Lucia Day on December 13, which according to the Old Style calendar is the longest night of the year.

According to legend, Lucia was a young maiden who lived in Sicily around the year 300. She became aware of Christians and their charitable work. After her mother was miraculously healed of a severe illness, Lucia became engrossed in Christian charity. She became so involved that she gathered food and supplies and began handing them out to the needy. At the time she was engaged to marry a wealthy nobleman. He became jealous when she spent more and more time with charitable work and even began giving away their wedding gifts. Her greedy fiance became so angry, that he had her put in jail and condemned to death. Lucia escaped both torture and death by burning. Years later, after her death, Lucia was declared a saint. The word Lucia means light in Latin; whenever Lucia is depicted she carries a torch, and a luminous is behind her head.

It can be speculated that early missionaries from Ireland brought this legend to Sweden. These early missionaries preached in the western part of the country where the legend continued to evolve. One version tells the story of suffering and starvation on the western coast of Sweden. The story is told of how a large ship appeared with a white-robed maiden aboard. She was encircled by light and brought with her large quantities of food to distribute to the hungry. It was believed that no one but Lucia could bring such gifts.

There are recorded memories of Lucia Day customs among the Swedes in Kansas. One account from around Dwight and Morris counties recalls that it was the custom in some homes for the oldest daughter, dressed in a white robe and wearing a crown of lights, to serve breakfast to the family.

At one time in Kansas, the Christmas season meant a time when families dipped candles to be placed in the windows of Swedish American homes. The candles were lit on Christmas morning. Special foods were prepared in honor of Christmas. *Lutfisk* (codfish), *kringlor* (rolls), *rågbröd* (rye bread), *potatiskorv* (potato sausage), *sill* (herring), *bruna bönor* (brown beans), *köttbullar* (meatballs), *lingon* (berries), *ostkaka* (pudding), and *risgrönsgröt* (rice pudding) was served.

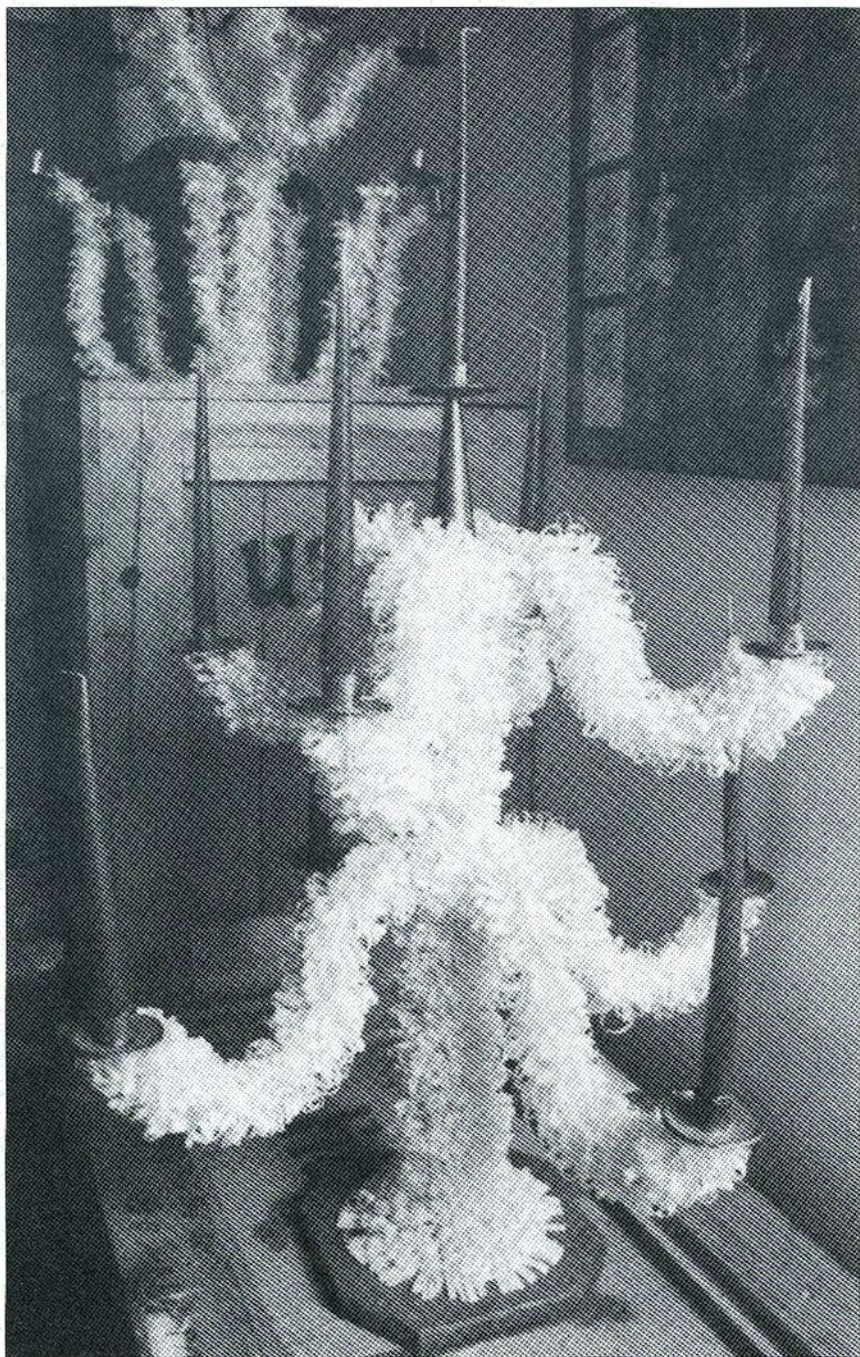
Christmas presents were opened on *julafton* (Christmas Eve). Reading the Christmas story and singing traditional Christmas songs were also part of the custom. Early on *julmorgon* (Christmas morning) the family attended church.

Swedish American families in Kansas today continue to practice portions and variations of these time-honored traditions.

## THE CUSTOM OF THE LJUSKRONA

One holiday custom retained by some Swedish Americans in Kansas is the use of a special candelabra on the dinner table during the Christmas Eve feast. This centerpiece, called a *ljuskrona* by today's Swedish Americans, is a candle holder wrapped with cut paper.

The origin of the *ljuskrona* is unknown. The custom was at one time well known in Sweden. *Ljuskronor* were actually in use before the introduction of the Christmas tradition of the evergreen tree. One story links the custom of *ljuskrona* to torches tied to the masts of ships.



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*Juskronor come in all shapes and sizes.  
This particular piece is wrapped in all  
white paper and holds nine candles.*

In recent times the *ljuskrona* has been linked to the story of Lucia. Beginning on Lucia Day, families would light candles to represent Lucia and brighter days ahead. Today some Swedish American families continue the practice of removing the *ljuskrona* from storage on December 13 to begin the Christmas season. The candle holders are repaired and rewrapped and placed in the center of the dinner table where they remain until January 12, King Knut's Day.

Many *ljuskronor* were handed down through families for generations, and perhaps this is how the first *ljuskrona* appeared in Kansas. However, most *ljuskronor* currently found in Kansas were made in the New World. Immigrants only had room to pack necessities to make the long journey from the Old World to America, so family treasures oftentimes had to be left behind. However, family and cultural memories arrived safely in America. Fortunately, most *ljuskronor* were made at home, so families could replicate them after arriving in their new homeland.

A family's *ljuskrona* often took on sentimental value and held a wealth of family stories. One Kansas family owns a *ljuskrona* that has seen more than eighty Christmases. The family believes that the ten candle arms were originally meant to represent family members. Space was made available to add arms if the family expanded.

## LJUSKRONA TECHNIQUES

Various styles and variations of *ljuskronor* have existed over the years. One design resembled a chandelier and was made to hang from the ceiling. The bottom tier of lights consisted of six arms, and the top group included four candle arms.

A more typical style of *ljuskrona* was made to stand on its own base. This style usually had an even number of candle arms on each level and could be rather large in size. Some, when wrapped, appeared more tree-like, standing five to seven feet tall.

A third type of *ljuskrona* originated in Lindsborg and became known as the Tinner John type. The creator, John Johnson, was a local tinsmith who designed his *ljuskrona* with removable cups that caught dripping wax from the candles. His design consisted of horizontal rings encircling the candle arms. Tinner John made hanging types and eventually standing types using the same ring structure.

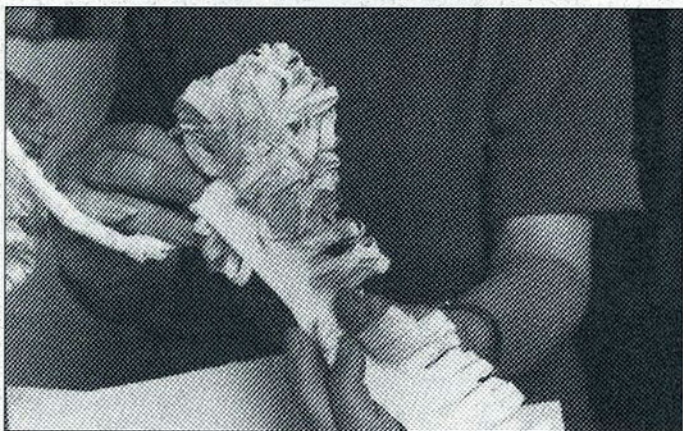
The base of the *ljuskrona* was usually made of wire, wood, and/or metal pieces wrapped and sometimes soldered to form the structure's shape. Candle cups, consisting of metal cylinders or wire hoops, were attached to each arm to hold the candles in place. The entire base was then covered with strips of newspaper, cloth, and paper that were wrapped and layered very tightly to create a sturdy structure. The final layer consisted of crepe or silk paper in festive colors or all white. This paper was cut into narrow strips, folded lengthwise, and cut on the folded edge about a half inch apart. These strips were then wrapped around the frame of the *ljuskrona* to create a delicate, lacy appearance. Because paper contains boric acid, the layers of paper would turn brown if exposed to sunlight. This made it necessary to cover and store the *ljuskrona* in a dark part of the home until it was brought out for the next Christmas season. Some families even built special air tight boxes in which to store their *ljuskrona*. Eventually the paper would darken and get worn, so the *ljuskrona* would be rewrapped to give it a fresh, clean look.

## CHANGES

Like all traditions, *ljuskronor* have changed over time. At least one family in Kansas added light bulbs shaped like candles to its *ljuskrona* in the 1930s. The family *ljuskrona* is believed to have been made in 1872 and has been displayed in the front window of the same house since 1925. The present owner had the *ljuskrona* wrapped in plastic garland in 1985 because her health prevented her from rewinding the frame on a regular basis.



*Ljuskrona bases can be made of various materials. This one shows a wooden dowel with wire armatures.*



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*Because paper turns brown over time, families rewrapped their Ljuskronor when needed.*

## CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that the tradition of *ljuskronor* is now stronger among Swedish Americans in the United States than it is in Sweden. *Ljuskronor* were well known at one time in Sweden. However, the custom has declined and has been replaced by the more familiar evergreen Christmas tree. A few families in Sweden continue to produce these special candle holders.

## FURTHER READINGS

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Lorenzen, Lily. *Of Swedish Ways*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1978.

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For more information on *ljuskrona*, contact the Folklife Institute for Central Kansas, 118 Main, Lindsborg, Kansas 67456.

## LJUSKRONA INSTRUCTIONS

Materials Needed:

Broom Handle or Wooden Dowel

Wire

Cloth Strips

Crepe or Tissue Paper

½-Inch Pipe (cut to form candle holders)

Scissors

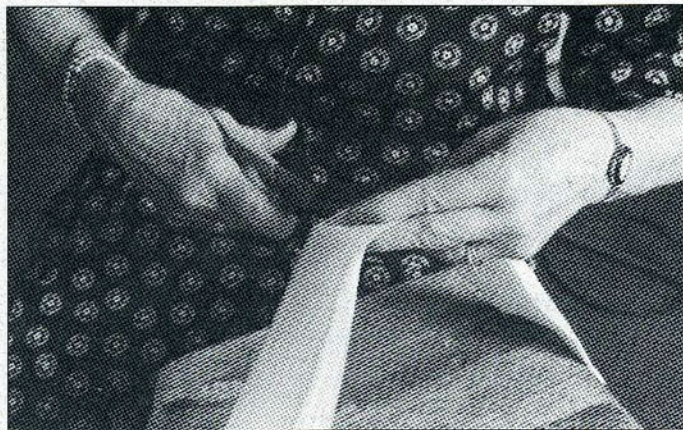
Glue

Instructions:

1. To make the structure of the *ljuskrona*, use an old broom handle or a wooden dowel for the armature. The arms can be attached in several ways. The use of stiff wire for the arms allows several different styles to be built because the wire arms can be bent different ways.
2. The wire arms must be wrapped with cloth strips to add thickness to the arms and to prevent the paper from touching the metal. This makes the paper last longer.
3. Many methods are used to attach the candles to the ends of the arms. The end of the wire arm can be bent around a ½-inch pipe to resemble a spring. On wooden arms a cylinder of thin bent metal can be attached with a screw.
4. Crepe and tissue paper can be used to decorate the structure. Decide which paper cutting method to use. Cut strips of paper 20 inches long and 4 inches wide (see *Cutting Techniques for Making a Ljuskrona*).
5. After the paper has been cut, it is time to wind or wrap the arms of the *ljuskrona*. Some people start at the outer most point (where the candle will sit). Others start wrapping at the center and work out to the candle.
6. Variegated effects are achieved by wrapping two different colors of paper at the same time. Some people use several colors on their *ljuskrona*, and others use only one. Personal preferences and individual creativity guide these decisions.
7. A small drop of glue holds the paper to itself. The glue should be used sparingly, but a drop every so often when wrapping ensures that if the paper tears, the whole arm will not unwrap.

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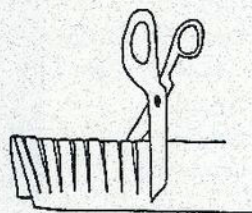
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Paper is cut into strips and fringed to create a lacy appearance.

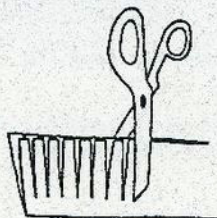
## CUTTING TECHNIQUES FOR MAKING A LJUSKRONA:

Paper loops are made by cutting along the folded edge of the paper. The closer the cuts, the finer the loops will appear on the wrapped ljuskrona.

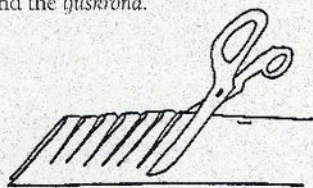


Some families cut their fringe with a single thickness of paper, others with a double thickness.

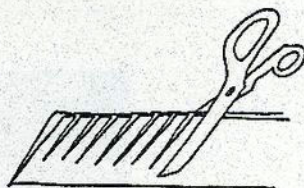
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Cutting along the folded edge at an angle will give the paper a stiffer appearance when wrapped around the *ljuskrona*.



Paper fringe cut at an angle along the loose edges of the paper will give the appearance of pointed fringe when the paper is wrapped around the *ljuskrona*.



Some families cut paper fringe then curl the individual fringe pieces with the edge of a knife or scissors.



## TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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FOR  
THE ARTS

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