

PUBLIC LIVES

He Stores City's Past (Unless You'd Care to Buy It)

By JOHN KIFNER

BRIAN G. ANDERSSON, the commissioner of the city's Department of Records, seems to be the personification of the stereotypical Irish pol: the bubbling bonhomie, the "grip your elbow and tell a story" instant familiarity, the bartender's round, merry and rosy face with a little mustache, and the office lined with pictures of himself with various famous people, even if he is kind of on the edge of some of the frames.

So it is a surprise when Mr. Andersson emphatically declares himself to be of Swedish heritage.

We had always thought of Swedes as dour and very pale, long-enduring stolid sufferers. Like the people in "Giants in the Earth," by O. E. Rolvaag, the really depressing novel we were required to read in high school about pioneers who settle in rude sod huts on the prairie and are afflicted with blizzards, locusts and all manner of aggravation until finally the main character walks out in a snowstorm and freezes to death. (Actually, they were Norwegians, but it's pretty much the same thing.) Or that Grant Wood couple with the pitchfork. Midwestern kind of people.

But Mr. Andersson is a real city guy, born and raised in the Bronx. Such a city guy that he not only revels in his job as the collector of the city's official records and memorabilia, but is also constantly coming up with schemes to display — and even sell — the documents of New York's rich, constantly changing history. The spruced-up municipal television channel, NYC TV, has a program called "Inside the Archives," which displays the department's historical photographs, many of them from a tax records project that photographed virtually every building in the city between 1939 and 1941. Viewers can call 311 or go online to buy copies of the photographs.

"Twenty-five dollars a pop," Mr. Andersson said. "We do our part to put the city on firmer financial footing. They make one-of-a-kind gifts."

His office is in the turn-of-the-century Surrogate's Court at 31 Chambers Street, an architectural treasure like the neighboring Municipal Building and the Tweed Courthouse, dating to a



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

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time when opulent city spending really meant something. It is a magnificent space, modeled on the Paris Opera House, with a vaulted marble lobby, sweeping staircases and four elaborate bronze statues featuring an eagle atop a globe that turn out to be mere radiator covers. The building has appeared in movies and episodes of "Law and Order."

"In the movie 'Romeo is Bleeding,' Gary Oldman, who is British, kills Lena Olin, who is Swedish, right under this clock," Mr. Andersson said.

The Department of Records has the archives of most New York City mayors, the City Hall library and the records and reports of every city agency. It also has a huge trove of birth, death and marriage certificates and passenger lists of ships debarking in the harbor, which are invaluable to people searching out their genealogy. For \$35, Mr. Andersson will sell you a "Full-Color Heirloom Certificate" of these documents. Among the pictures, he has Abe Stark's store, whose advertisement under the scoreboard in Ebbets Field enjoined batters to "HIT SIGN WIN SUIT." He has also created memorabilia featur-

ing documents or photographs of such New York fixtures as James Cagney, Lou Gehrig, the Three Stooges and P. J. Clarke's bar.

Genealogy is Mr. Andersson's real passion. That is where this Swedish thing comes in. When his grandmother died in the early 1970's, Mr. Andersson, now 46, found "musty old documents" that showed his great-grandfather was Swedish. Fascinated, he plunged into a new world of research, eventually writing an article for Nordstjernan-Svea, the oldest Swedish-American newspaper, showing that Jonas Bronck, for whom the Bronx is named, was Swedish. As he later wrote in Ancestry Magazine: "My Viking blood was stirring!"

Growing up in the Fordham Road section of the Bronx, then largely Irish, he went to Catholic school at St. Nicholas of Tolentine (odd, because the C.I.A.'s World Factbook says 87 percent of Swedes are Lutheran) and graduated from Lehman College in 1979 with a B.A. in history. He worked for a time for the Custom Shop shirtmaker. (He still wears French cuffs and cuff links.)

A chance encounter with a lawyer friend who learned of his genealogical skills led to a post as executive director of the Ellis Island Restoration Commission. After Rudolph W. Giuliani took office in 1994, Mr. Andersson was appointed to the City Planning Commission; he got his present job in January 2002. His wife of 22 years, Marianne, works for the Parks Department. They have three children.

FRAMED on the wall are old posters for his (unsuccessful) runs as a Republican for City Council and State Assembly, in which his name is spelled Anderson with one 's.' That is actually his legal name, he explained, but he has been using the more traditional Swedish 'ss' spelling professionally for years.

Two and a half hours into a rambling but fascinating discussion, Mr. Andersson casually mentioned plans for a family vacation in Ireland. Ireland?

"Well, actually," he said, "I'm Irish on my mother's side."