

Gunnar Rahm

**Interviewed July 24, 2007
By Holli Connell
Midway Village Museum**

Gunnar Rahm

Holli Connell: Gunnar, just tell me your first and last name.

Gunnar Rahm: Gunnar Rahm.

HC: Are you married?

GR: Yes.

HC: Do you have any children?

GR: Three.

HC: And did you have any schooling here or in Sweden?

GR: Yes, I went to school for two years in Sweden and when I came to this country I didn't speak a word of English in 1925.

HC: So did you go to school here as well?

GR: Oh yes, I graduated from high school in Rockford.

HC: Where do you work now or where did you work?

GR: I worked for Bartel Engineering for 31 years I think it was and then I went into business for myself as a consultant for food packaging machinery.

HC: And are you retired now?

GR: Yes.

HC: Where are you from originally?

GR: Sweden.

HC: And the town?

GR: Jarvso Helsingland. That's 200 miles north of Stockholm.

HC: And when did you come to the United States from Sweden? What year?

GR: 1925.

HC: For deciding to come here what did you do before you came here?

GR: Went to school.

HC: And how old were you?

GR: Seven.

HC: And was that how old you were when you came here?

GR: Right.

HC: What was your life like then?

GR: Well, my father had left for this country two years before we came. Of course we missed him but I was very young.

HC: What made you want to come here? Some of these questions are geared to I know you were a child so you could just say why your parents and stuff like that.

GR: Well my father came here and he wanted the rest of us.

HC: Did he decide to come to the United States and choose a location or was he specifically coming to Rockford?

GR: He was not specifically coming to Rockford. He had an uncle in Minnesota and I think in fact he did go there but there was no work for him. My father was in construction. He worked on a lot of the buildings here in Rockford for many, many years.

HC: And then from Minnesota he made his way to Rockford?

GR: Yes.

HC: Had you ever been to this country before?

GR: No.

HC: Had your father?

GR: No.

HC: How long did it take to make the arrangements to come here and what was involved? Do you have any memories of your mother maybe telling you this?

GR: I was pretty young. I was not involved.

HC: Do you know how you came over? Like how did you travel here?

GR: Yes. We traveled by boat the name of the boat was (did not spell, check tape for name). They had four or five liners. They were all from Sweden. At that time they were the fastest way you could get across the Atlantic Ocean. It took seven days I remember.

HC: Did you come alone or did you come with family and friends?

GR: I came with family, my mother and two brothers.

HC: And did you stop or stay anywhere before coming to Rockford?

GR: The boat stopped in Canada and then we came to New York by boat and took the train from New York to Chicago and then a train to Rockford from Chicago.

HC: Did your father and your family or your mother know anyone before they came here?

GR: No.

HC: When arriving here how did you settle in? Did your father have a home ready for you or was there anyone once you got here that he was able to connect with to find living?

GR: If I remember right, the first night we stayed in a hotel on 7th St and then we rented an apartment or a house, I don't remember exactly what and later my father bought us a home.

HC: And where was that located?

GR: Seventh Avenue between Eighth and 9th St.

HC: Were there other people that you met that were from your country in your community?

GR: Well there were a lot of Swedes on 7th St and we lived close to it and of course we had to learn to speak English because the schools were not bilingual.

HC: Did you know anyone from your town once you got to Rockford?

GR: No.

HC: Did you go to school right away when you got here?

GR: We came here in the spring and in the fall we went to school.

HC: You said you spoke no English upon arrival. Did anyone in your family speak English?

GR: No.

HC: How did you learn to speak English?

GR: Well, we learned from the kids in the neighborhood and then of course we started school in the fall and I had to start over from grade 1 because I didn't speak the language and my parents, well my father of course he was working, but they would go to the talkies, that's when talking pictures started and my mother would not allow us to speak Swedish at home because that's how she learned because we spoke English.

HC: Now I have had a few stories that in the home you would speak your native language and only speak English outside so that's interesting.

GR: No, my mother she said the only way I could learn to speak English is if you would teach me.

HC: Did your family integrate themselves in the community and by that question I mean did you join clubs or community organizations or churches or anything like that?

GR: Well, I went to Sunday School at the Salvation Army. My parents were very good dancers. My dad was an excellent dancer and they belonged to some of the Swedish clubs

HC: And when you went to school do you remember the name of the school?

GR: White School.

HB: And from there do you know what high school you went to?

GR: I went to Rockford High School. There was only one high school.

HC: How did it feel to come to a foreign country?

GR: Well I don't know. I know a lot of the people when we were crossing the ocean got sick and my two brothers and I were about the only ones that went to breakfast in the mornings a lot of times. We got to know all the people on board ship. We traveled all over the boat.

HC: How do people treat you when you arrived?

GR: Well one of the favorite things the kids would say is there goes that [Buckolee] (not spelled listen to tape).

HC: So you had nickname?

GR: Yes.

HC: Were there any people you did or did not get along with your neighborhood? In terms of because you were Swedish and didn't speak English were there any conflicts you were from another country?

GR: Not really because most of the people in that part of Rockford were Swedish descent or they came from Sweden.

HC: What did you think of this country before you came? Had you been told about the United States?

GR: Well I'm sure we were told about it. One of the main reasons my father came because his uncle came to visit him and it was probably a year after that my father decided to come to the United States.

HC: Has your move here turned out like you thought it would or maybe through your parents eyes even you could answer that question?

GR: Well I think that I am probably the luckiest man alive. Here I am. I will be 91 years old next week or Friday and I'm still alive and I had a very good job where I traveled all over the world because I was an installation engineer and I've been there. In fact I even spent a month in Moscow when it was communist and they treated us wonderful.

HC: Did you become a citizen right away when you've got here or did that happen later in your life?

GR: It took us a while for my older brother and I after my father to get citizenship papers. Well he didn't get them in time so my brother and I had to take out our own citizenship papers.

HC: How old were you then?

GR: Oh, 17, 18, something like that.

HC: And at that point while you were living here did your parents have to get a visa to travel here or how did that work?

GR: There was a quota so many people from different countries. It was very much more relaxed than it is now and I don't remember that we needed anything special. We had to go through doctors so there were no diseases but that was about it.

HC: So it was about 10 years and then you went to get citizenship so you were about 17 or 18?

GR: Yes.

HC: And it at the same time your brother did as well?

GR: Yes

HC: Did your mother?

GR: My father took out citizenship papers which made my mother a citizen. It still is that way you know.

HC: Could you elaborate a little bit about the best part of moving here?

GR: Well she is sitting right over there.

HC: That would be your wife Carol?

GR: Yes. Like I said I am the luckiest man alive.

HC: What has been the hardest or most difficult part of moving here if anything?

GR: None.

HC: Do you miss anything about your former home?

GR: Well, about 30 years ago I was in Copenhagen Denmark and I contacted my aunt in Sweden and I flew up there for Midsummer Day which is a big holiday in Sweden, well in all the Scandinavian countries and I got a chance to visit my aunt and she had children the same age as I was and I remember playing with some of them when we were kids and it was very interesting.

HC: You have gone back then for a visit is that more than once?

GR: No, well I've been in Sweden several times because of business and this house is still there.

HC: Is it in the family?

GR: No.

HC: Who built that home?

GR: I don't know; my father was a stonecutter and dynamiter from the old country and he became a construction worker here like I said before. He was a labor supervisor at Lincoln General High School, the Faust Hotel, the Coronado Theater, big buildings.

[Interviewer talks about her trip to the Coronado Theater].

GR: I went to the original opening of the Coronado Theater.

HC: Wow! Did you with your family?

GR: Yes.

HC: I bet that was beautiful.

GR: It was. It still is.

Wife: Gunnar, tell her about taking lunch to your dad.

GR: Oh yeah, My dad was working long hours and it almost killed him but I went up and took my mother made us supper because he was working late and they wouldn't allow what we did because we went up the elevator when there were no walls and they were up on the top floor of the Faust Hotel and we went and did that several times. We didn't go up that far every time but it was interesting.

HC: So he was the project supervisor of these large buildings?

GR: Yes.

HC: What you like to do for fun?

GR: I like to read. I have a wood shop downstairs. I will show you some of the things I have made. I love to read. We play cribbage after lunch every day and we try to do things that make us think which I think is very important.

HC: What has been the most difficult thing to adjust to when moving from Sweden to here?

GR: Well I think the English language is one of the most difficult languages to learn. There are words that are spelled the same but don't mean the same and they don't pronounce it the same. It's like there are so many extra letters that the English language uses for instance the way I spelled enough is "enuf" which makes sense I think.

HC: Yes it does. How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration and immigrants?

GR: Well, I don't have, one thing we can't do we have been screwing it up for years and this has been going on forever and the Mexicans are not to blame because I remember talking to sailors that were in this country illegally that came from different parts of the world because they jumped ship and like I say this has been going on forever. Even though we do not have an official language I think that if you want to live here you learn to speak English just like a Mexican told me when I was in Mexico installing equipment; he says if you are going to be here you learn the language which is the way it should be.

HC: Okay, well that's it. Thank you.