



Highland Park resident Janis McKay Babcock (seated in the middle) was one of 10 Americans chosen to compete in the premiere season of "Allt för Sverige" (All for Sweden), a reality show on Swedish public television.

Great Swedish Adventure

Reality show helps Highland's McKay Babcock discover a good deal about herself and her roots

BY JANET LUNDER HANAFIN

A love of genealogy and curiosity about her Swedish heritage led Highland Park resident Janis McKay Babcock on a grand adventure in 2011. She was one of 10 contestants chosen from more than 3,000 applicants nationwide to participate in the premiere season of "Allt för Sverige" (All for Sweden), a reality show on Swedish public television that concluded last month. The program, which is also known as "The Great Swedish Adventure," was watched by about 1.3 million viewers each week.

McKay Babcock, who is half Swedish, homeschools her 9-year-old son Wolfgang. Together they were exploring their ancestry when she learned of a casting call for the show through the American Swedish Institute.

Meter Television, the producer of the Swedish version of "American Idol" and "Minute to Win It," was seeking colorful American contestants who had relatives living in Sweden but had never visited that country. After a lengthy written application, video conferences and telephone interviews, she was flown to New York for an in-person screening.

"I had this gut feeling I'd be picked," she said. "I'm very sincere about wanting to know about my ancestors. Plus, I cry all the time, which makes for good TV."

Before leaving for Sweden, McKay Babcock was taped studying Norse mythology with her son at Ingebretnsen's in South Minneapolis and making Swedish pastries in her kitchen.

On May 31, the 10 finalists, who ranged in age from 28-50, flew to Copenhagen and boarded a fishing vessel. What was supposed to be a simple crossing to Torekov in southern Sweden became a five-hour, stomach-churning ordeal through 10-foot swells. As the group came ashore, the film crew caught several contestants gratefully kissing the ground of their ancestral homeland.

Once in Sweden, the Americans were divided into two teams for various competitions in Swedish culture and traditions. Members of the losing team then faced off in an individual competition to



Janis McKay Babcock

determine who would be sent home.

For the first contest, the teams dug in the sand for keys to unlock a treasure chest containing scrolls of their family trees. McKay Babcock's team lost, but she survived the individual competition in hitting tennis balls against Swedish tennis pro Björn Borg's garage door.

McKay Babcock said the competition was often physically demanding. One of her tasks was to guide a horse dragging several logs through an obstacle course. The horse understood only Swedish commands and she had no idea how to tell it to stop.

At times, the living conditions were more rustic than she had anticipated, McKay Babcock said. For one episode, the group slept at an old Swedish farmstead, filling their cloth mattresses with ferns.

Sometimes the food was also a surprise, such as fish paste in a tube that McKay Babcock had to spit out. Other times the food was wonderful. "The potatoes were like nothing you've ever had, here" she said. "The salmon was fresh. I felt I ate like a queen."

Cast members were occasionally separated from the others and taken on an excursion planned specifically for them. McKay Babcock's trip came early on when she was spirited away to Barseback, the region where her great-great-grandparents lived.

During what she described as "a

profoundly moving experience," she learned that two of her ancestors had borne a child out of wedlock and that the mother had been shamed before her church's congregation. The couple later moved, married and raised a family. Their first daughter eventually immigrated to America.

"I felt like I'd won already," McKay Babcock said after learning about her ancestors. "I really feel I did this so their story could be told."

The individual competition that proved to be McKay Babcock's downfall came after 2½ weeks of competition. After a brief visit to a Swedish home for a quick look around, the contestants were asked to identify objects they had seen. McKay Babcock was sent packing, but was given a scroll of her Swedish ancestry before she left.

That alone, she said, made her feel like a winner. She figures she has spent hundreds of hours a year tracing her genealogy, and the ancestral chart filled in many gaps for her.

But there was still more excitement to come. A Swede from Helsingborg who watched the show saw McKay Babcock's visit to Barseback and realized she was kin. He contacted her when she got back to the U.S.

"How cool is that?" she said. "We're swapping information and sharing pictures of relatives. That was like the grand prize for me."

She has made several other contacts with family members since the show aired. "I didn't do it to be on a TV show," McKay Babcock said. "I knew I was going to get access to my Swedish relatives."

Eventually, McKay Babcock plans to write a book about her family history. "There's sadness among some Americans because they're so disconnected from their homeland," she said. "It's important for us to find our roots."

McKay Babcock will speak about her Swedish adventure and show clips from the show from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Saturday, January 21, at Ingebretnsen's, 1601 E. Lake St., Minneapolis. She will also make an appearance at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 22, at the American Swedish Institute, 2600 Park Ave., Minneapolis.