



**The
CRAYFISH TALE
By TRAPPER ARNE**

CRAYFISH CAMPOUTS WITH THE VASA

When I left Sweden for the USA, I had no thoughts about crayfish in my mental luggage. Crayfish was part of my Swedish heritage, but I was prepared to start a new phase of my life where there were no crayfish.

How wrong I was.

True, first impressions of my adopted country had no connections with crayfish. As a matter of fact, for several years I tried hard to convert my Swedish past into an American present. I tried to become an American. Every so often, friends would tell me, 'hey, you should meet this guy in the other department, he is also a Swede!' My usual reaction was, 'so what?' I was not in the least interested in meeting Swedes. I was here to meet Americans.

After my stay at an American college, where some students made fun of my British way of speaking, I decided to do all I could to begin talking as an American.

Well, after another fifty years, some people still think I talk funny. And I have given up on trying emulating the American way of speaking – whatever that is. I recall well how, for years, I had trouble understanding Southerners. Then I realized that they actually speak more old British than in other parts of the country. To really confuse my struggle with the changed linguistics, I then moved to Arizona.

Here one of my new American friends did the totally unexpected. He introduced me to American crayfish! I saw him pull up crayfish from the Phoenix canals. At first I was sure these critters were not what I had left behind in the old country. But they were! Not only did these crayfish look like those back 'home', they even tasted the same. I was delighted.

Up till now I had avoided associating with other Swedes. As I was gung ho becoming an American, I had to associate with Americans. But then this Arizona friend of mine introduced me to crayfish. That made me realize that I did not have to disassociate myself from everything Swedish just because I wanted to become an American.

So one day I was introduced to the VASA Order of America, a fraternal group that tries to keep the Swedish heritage alive while far from 'home'. I went to some meetings and I liked the people there. One item on the monthly agenda was the 'Good of the Order', where members were encouraged to inform the lodge of anything that could be of interest to the membership. I decided that I had something to add. I rose and began talking about that there were crayfish in Arizona.

Soon several members, especially first generation Swedes, showed interest in my crayfish information. I told them about both the canal crayfish

and about that there were crayfish in most every lake up in the Arizona mountains. Soon a little group of crayfish interested gathered, and we were on our way to re-ignite the age old custom from back 'home'.

The more I talked about my favorite crayfish lake, Hawley Lake on the Apache Reservation, the closer we came to arranging a campout at the lake with the idea of combining a week's camping with catching, cooking and eating crayfish. So for several years, in August of course, following Swedish traditions, several members signed up for a week of camping and enjoying crayfish at the lake. Not surprisingly, I became the leader of the first crayfish campouts.

At the lake, we found a suitable place near the water's edge for 30 or 40 people with space enough to place picnic tables in a long row for the Saturday evening feast, and crayfish enough to make it a crayfish bash. Fortunately, this campground has plenty of wooden picnic tables which we gathered together in a row with canopies over them for rain protection. We hung lanterns under the canopies and collected the crayfish that earlier arrivals had caught and cooked the days before.

Most members arrived just for the Saturday feast. Some years it rained cats and dogs, but somehow we all managed to enjoy the camaraderie around campfires. Typically for this elevation, 8000 feet, and typically for the time of year, middle of the annual monsoon, it often rained in the afternoons and sometimes even in the evenings. The canopies came in handy.

Before all guests arrived, I and my helpers had been busy catching at least 15 crayfish per person, and if 40 members arrived, that meant we needed at least 600 crayfish. No problem at this lake. But cooking that many could become a problem at an elevation where water boils different than at sea level. But we managed.

With 10 crayfish traps that my brother had sent over, I easily managed to catch all needed crayfish, and when the rest of the entourage arrived, there were plenty of Swedes to cook all the crayfish for the bash.

Fortunately we were usually blessed with fine weather for the Saturday feast, and the colorful canopied picnic tables were decked with huge platters of red crayfish but also lots of add-ons like herring, hardtack, beer and schnapps glasses and lots of bread and butter and cheese. In spite of the crayfishy atmosphere over the whole event, I noticed one or two of the second or third generation Swedes sneaking in a couple of cheese burgers among the crustaceans.

But to each his own and with lots of camaraderie and drinking songs, we always had a great time eating Hawley Lake crayfish while singing some crazy drinking songs to the great amazement of the local Indian population and a few mooing cows.

Each time I went up to Hawley Lake, with or without VASA members in tow, I traveled through the little town of Payson, north of Phoenix. Soon this friendly town became so familiar to me that, when I finally retired from programming computers in Phoenix, I decided to retire in Payson. And that's where my wife and I are now enjoying life.

Trapper Arne