

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Karl Arthur von Rydingsvärd (1863–1941) was born on a farm in Färgelanda, part of the sparsely populated Swedish province of Dalmland. As indicated by the particle “von” in his name, he descended from nobility, though his family lacked a formal title such as lord, count, or baron. Like thousands of other Swedish farmers, his ancestors had been elevated to the so-called untitled nobility and granted small bits of land in exchange for military service. It was a risky and often tragic tradeoff, but dozens of von Rydingsvärd men entered the military in the 1700 and 1800s, as Sweden’s nobility steadily became a class of farmers-turned-servicemen.

The von Rydingsvärd family endured all the hardships of rural Swedish life. Karl’s father, Axel Georg, also worked as a part-time cemetery caretaker and had served with the Swedish merchant marines. He and his wife, Emma Holmström, heavily relied on their nine children to maintain their farm. In Dalmland, the biggest cash crop was oats, and iron had been a key economic force for centuries. But in the 1860s, international competition in agriculture intensified just as the downturn of Sweden’s iron industry began. Increased population and a halt in trade transformed the nearby port of Uddevalla into a city of beggars. Amid the crisis, the von Rydingsvärd family opened a small store to try to make ends meet, but the impoverished family continued to battle hunger and illness. The deaths of three new babies only fueled their suffering. Beginning in 1874, each of the six boys left to pursue better lives.



Portrait of Karl von Rydingsvärd taken in Brunswick, Maine around 1900. Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts



A gently sloping landscape, oat bundles, and a church in the background are seen in this 1895 photo of Färgelanda, Sweden. Photo taken by Henry Thorburn, August 21, 1895, Courtesy of Bohusläns Museum



Karl’s noble ancestry clearly made an impression on him, as evidenced by his decision to carve the von Rydingsvärd noble coat of arms into his own dining chairs.



# A LIFE AMONG RUINS

The von Rydingsvärd family lived in poverty, but their region was a place of bounty. Known as “Sweden’s lake province” because of its abundant waterways, Dalsland boasts a varied topography, including forests, mountains, fertile plains, canals, lakes, and archipelagos. Like most rural Swedes, Karl’s parents expected their nine children to support the family. The children were taught to use local materials to make tools, farming equipment, cabinets, textiles, and other household items. Some of these handmade goods were sold at the von Rydingsvärd’s country store. In addition, the handiwork fostered young talents. Karl carved ornate furniture, his brother Gustaf was a decorative painter, his sisters Emma, Hellevig, and Rosa wove colorful textiles, and younger brother Alfred created ornamental molds.

Dalsland is also home to thousands of remains dating as far back as the Neolithic Age (4000–1701 BCE) through the Middle Ages (1050–1500 CE). With the Norwegian border to the north and the bay in Uddevalla in the southwest, the area became a natural thoroughfare for Vikings, coastal merchants, and European tradespeople. It was a place ripe for adventure and thick with folklore. In its abundant open spaces, farm-workers regularly recovered ancient artifacts while plowing fields, and children played alongside protruding ruins. Surrounded by the remnants of Sweden’s past, Karl von Rydingsvärd’s fascination with Viking art and Norse iconography flourished, along with his carving skills.



Operating a store was a family affair as you can see from this interior photo of the Ryberg family’s country store in Dalsland, ca 1895. Photo by Olof Jonsson, Courtesy of Vänersborgs Museum



Ancient grave fields such as this one in Karl von Rydingsvärd’s hometown are highly respected by the people of Dalsland. Photo taken in 1963 by Wille Ångermark, Courtesy of Vänersborgs Museum



The rock carvings at Högby, Tisselskog are the largest ancient monuments of the Dalsland landscape. Found beside Lake Råvarp, there are approximately 50 rocks with over 2500 petroglyphs from the Bronze Age (1700 BCE–500 BCE). Courtesy of Bohuslän Museum



This detail from Karl von Rydingsvärd’s armchair portrays a scene from the Viking tale of Sigurd the dragonslayer when Sigurd is roasting the dragon’s heart over a fire.



# FROM TRADITION TO ARTISANSHIP

Karl von Rydingsvärd's carving skills were the result of a lifetime of practice, and his talents were further deepened by Dalsland's rich heritage and handcraft traditions. In the 1870s, when Karl was a schoolboy, the educational theories of Otto Salomon took hold in Sweden. Salomon developed *slöjd* (handicraft), an educational system of manual training based on gaining experience with woodworking. Salomon envisioned *slöjd* as a way for children to learn to love and respect the physical work of handcrafted goods. Karl later went on to teach the principles of the Slöjd Movement to hundreds of pupils in America.

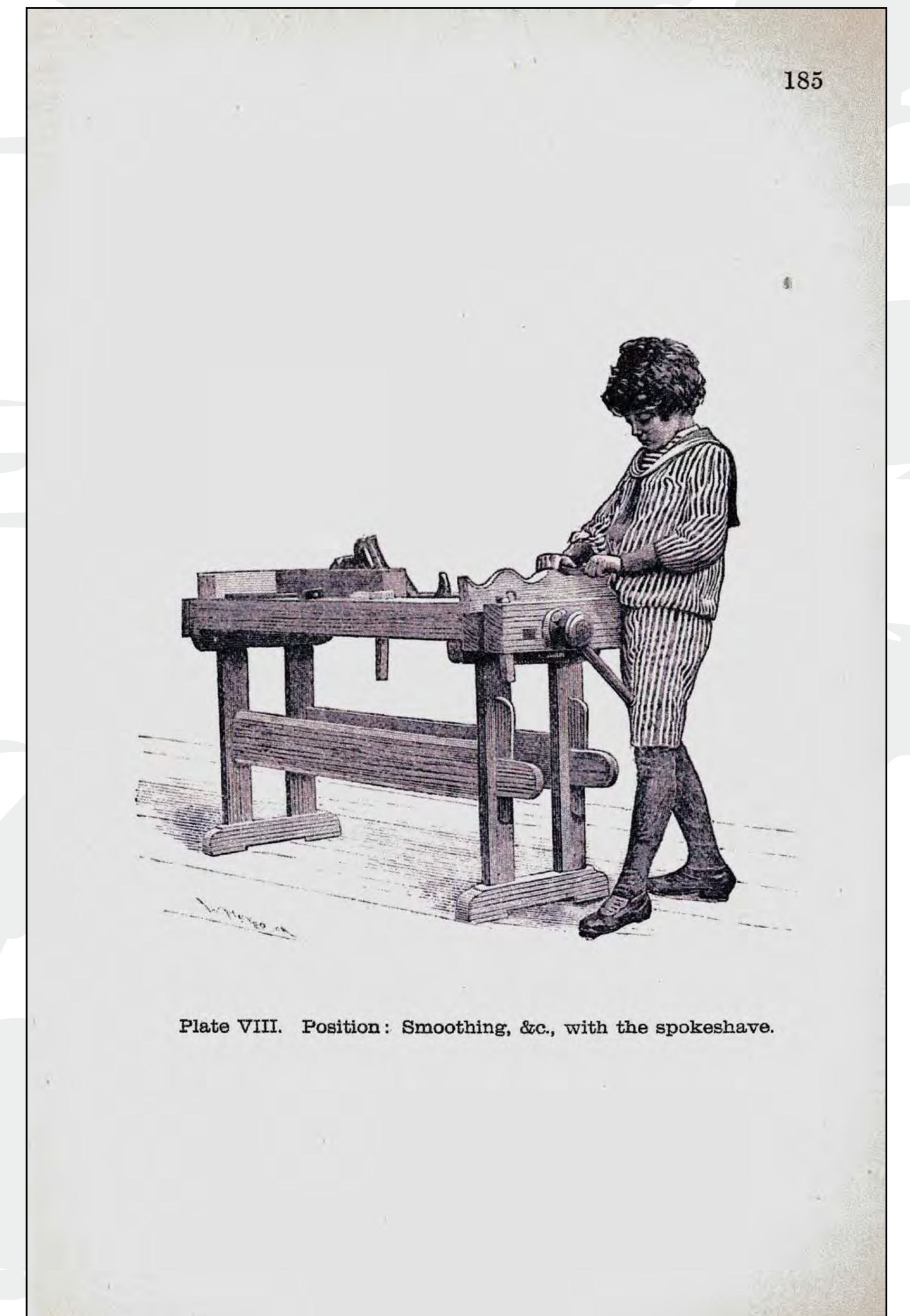


Photo of a slöjd classroom taken in 1902.  
Courtesy of Sundsvalls Museum

Karl and his siblings attended school until eighth grade, when they were expected to work full time to support the family. His oldest brother, Johan, left for Stockholm in 1874, and 15-year-old Karl joined him a few years later. Karl used this time to study the city's rich antiques scene, becoming knowledgeable about the history, tradition, and techniques of furniture making. He worked alongside local woodcarvers and received formal training as a "decorative sculptor" in Stockholm. When he left Sweden for America in 1883, Karl was immediately hired by Herter Brothers, one of New York City's leading interior design houses and furniture makers.



A view of Stockholm in 1885. Courtesy of Sjöhistoriska Museet, Stockholm



A boy using a wood shaver in the correct position, from Otto Salomon's *The Teacher's Hand-Book of Slöjd*, published by Silver, Burdett & Co., Boston, New York, Chicago, 1891.





Headline from the New York Times covering the divorce of Anna and Karl von Rydingsvärd. Published, September 30, 1897.

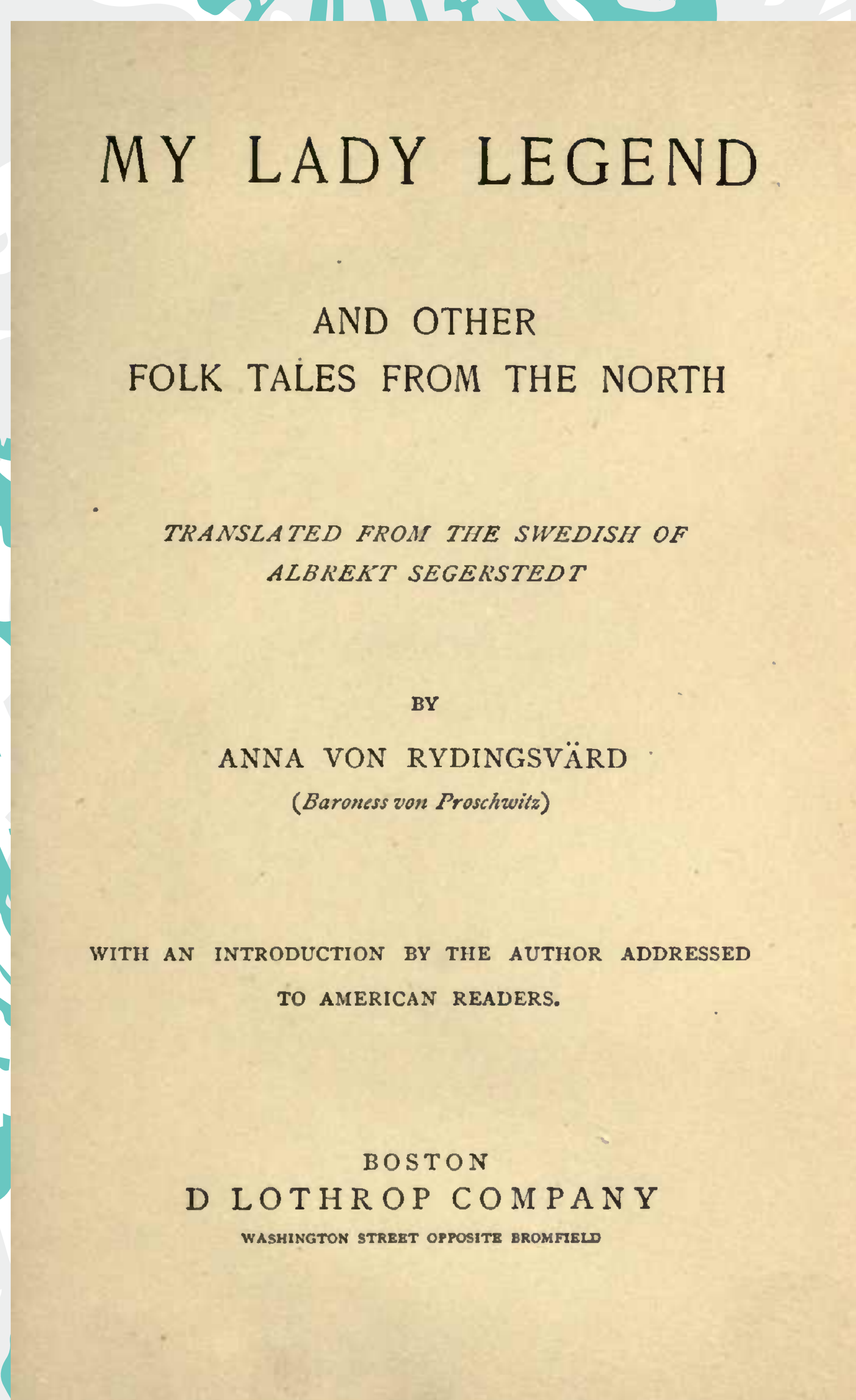
## RYDINGSVÄRD DIVORCE CASE.

Trial of the So-Called Baroness's Suit to Begin in Boston.

# A NOBLE SCANDAL

Karl soon left New York City for Boston to work for A. H. Davenport and Company, a prestigious American furniture manufacturer, cabinetmaker, and interior decoration firm. He also founded the successful Arts and Crafts School in Boston. While teaching at the Massachusetts Normal Art School, he met his first wife, the wealthy socialite Anna M. Davis. An accomplished singer and writer, Anna described Karl as a “handsome sculptor, singer, and woodcarver.” The smitten couple married in 1886. Karl established himself as a teacher and decorative carver, and over the next five years he succeeded in bringing his struggling family to the United States.

Karl and Anna quickly became Boston’s arts and culture power couple. At a reception in the 1880s, they were mistakenly introduced as Baron and Baroness von Rydingsvärd. Neither corrected the error. Anna, in particular, seems to have relished the idea, calling herself “Lady Anne von Rydingsvärd” or “Baroness von Proschwitz,” the name of Karl’s great-grandfather. She perpetuated the falsehood by using these titles when publishing books and articles in arts magazines, and publications of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The charade went on for years, until Karl’s colleague Nils Posse, who truly was a Swedish baron, began mumbling about the title’s authenticity; Swedish newspapers in Boston also questioned their claims to nobility. Karl’s alleged extramarital affairs only stoked the fires, and Anna filed for divorce in 1897. Karl slipped away to Oklahoma to escape the glare of scandal. He quietly married his former student and fellow carver Ida W. (Simpson) Jackson in December 1898.



In 1891, Anna von Rydingsvärd translated Albrekt Segerstedt's novel, *My Lady Legend*, from Swedish to English. Notice the use of “Baroness von Proschwitz” on the title page.



In 1903, Anna von Rydingsvärd wrote a series of influential art history books for high school students called *Studies in Art*.



# A SIGNATURE STYLE WITHIN THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT

The Arts and Crafts Movement (1880–1910) in Europe and the United States emphasized the importance of handcrafted domestic art and was intimately tied to home life. In Sweden, the movement also served to fortify national identity. Swedish artisans adopted the movement's moral aesthetics, adherence to regionalism, and glorification of "the simple life." Sweden's revival of traditional handicraft piqued the interests of artists and collectors worldwide. Karl von Rydingsvärd was fortunate to be living, teaching, and selling his furniture in America, where interest in Norse motifs was growing. Snakes, dragons, mythical beasts, ancient symbols, and Viking life became the trademarks of his signature style.



*Karl von Rydingsvärd, three-legged chair, ca. 1905.*

Karl von Rydingsvärd is relatively unknown compared to the pantheon of better-known American Arts and Crafts figures, such as Gustav Stickley (1858–1942) and Charles Rohlfs (1853–1936). Even so, his furniture adhered to the movement's basic principles: truth to the native quality of materials, natural motifs, and handmade construction. Yet von Rydingsvärd was not bound to the relatively simple aesthetic of Stickley's Mission Style designs, characterized by straight lines, flat panels, and general uprightness. Rather, both he and Rohlfs thought of their work as sculpture, and each blurred the line between furniture and art without compromising function. Von Rydingsvärd carved low-relief Gothic and Norse-inspired creatures, while Rohlfs sometimes mixed Asian-influenced fretwork with Art Nouveau flourishes. Karl von Rydingsvärd's impact on American Arts and Crafts is not limited to his principled approach, exceptional craftsmanship, and distinctive aesthetic. What is special is his role as an influential teacher to hundreds of students, many of whom contributed significantly to the repertoire of Arts and Crafts furniture.



*Charles Rohlfs, hall chair, ca. 1900.*



*Gustav Stickley, Sideboard ca. 1905.*





Bessie Lathrop and fellow students show off their summer school projects at Karl and Ida von Rydingsvärd's studio in Brunswick, Maine, ca. 1900. Karl is casually leaning against the door frame. The woman directly to his right is likely Ida von Rydingsvärd. Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts

# RYDINGSVÄRD THE TEACHER

Karl von Rydingsvärd's founding of the Arts and Crafts School in Boston led to dozens of teaching opportunities. One of Karl's greatest contributions was his enthusiasm for teaching woodcarving to women, who eagerly signed up for his classes. In 1890s America, painting, weaving, and ceramics were acceptable arts for women to practice, but using carpenter's tools to build and carve furniture was considered a man's domain. He used the *slöjd* educational system to train students in the creation of a series of useful items, such as boxes, bellows, and small chairs; each project introduced basic tools, built confidence, and fostered the ability to self-evaluate. Many of his students became luminaries in the art world, and Karl frequently published articles touting their achievements. For eighteen years, his classes were packed and his workshops overfilled. However, in 1901, Karl decided to stop teaching and focus on his own work. Although he maintained his Manhattan studio and Brunswick summer school for many years, he dedicated the early twentieth century to developing some of his finest work.



Karl von Rydingsvärd (shown in the center) working with a class in his Manhattan studio ca. 1905. Decorative panels and frames are visible in the background. From *American Homes and Gardens*, Volume II, January to June, 1906.

Karl von Rydingsvärd regularly highlighted his students' work in articles and "how-to" wood carving guides. This page showing a high backed chair by Melusina Varick or "Miss Varick" is from *Practical Points in Woodcarving*, printed in *The International Studio Magazine*, 1907. Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Digital Library for the Decorative Arts and Material Culture



# CARVING OUT A LEGACY

Karl von Rydingsvärd had an impressive network of friends, including fellow artists, professors, and business tycoons. These influential associates respected him greatly, and many became paying clients. His versatility and extensive repertoire also caught the attention of those outside

his circle, and a lucrative slate of private commissions kept him busy through the 1920s. In the 1910s, he carved an extraordinary desk and chair for the social reformer Dr. Felix Adler. In 1917, the textile factory mogul William Sloane and Florence Sloane, an esteemed collector, hired him to carve interior and exterior decorations for their Arts and Crafts home in Norfolk, Virginia. And in 1927, the manufacturing magnate Theodore Swann engaged him to carve a large suite of furniture for his house in Birmingham, Alabama.



Portrait of Karl von Rydingsvärd ca. 1930, Courtesy of Robert Edwards

In 1916, Karl and Ida were in a serious car accident. Struggling to recover, the couple began to downsize. They sold their summer home in Brunswick and left Manhattan after building their final home in Portland, Maine, in 1922. It was there that, on May 2, 1941, a grass fire broke out in the yard. Karl, then 77 years old, tried to contain it. His clothes caught fire and he was overcome; he died later that day from severe burns. Ida died at their home just three weeks later. The couple had no children, and Ida's niece Beda Voris inherited the estate. The furniture in this exhibition was removed directly from the von Rydingsvärd's Portland home sometime in 1941.



Dr. Felix Adler, ca. 1910, with his new desk and chair by Karl von Rydingsvärd. Courtesy of Ian Brabner, Rare Americana



This English style cabinet is one of many pieces Karl von Rydingsvärd carved for William and Florence Sloan's Arts and Crafts home in Norfolk, Virginia in 1917-18, Courtesy of The Hermitage Museum & Gardens, Norfolk, VA



The suite of furniture Karl von Rydingsvärd carved for the Swann House in Birmingham, AL, ca. 1927. Courtesy of The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Collection 117