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## CREATING NARRATIVES OF PLACE AND IDENTITY IN “LITTLE SWEDEN, U.S.A.”\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In Lindsborg, Kansas—“Little Sweden, U.S.A.”—the streets are lined with shops offering “An Adventure in Swedish Tradition,” and residents put on numerous festivals throughout the year highlighting Swedish folk customs. Such ethnic tourist towns have become increasingly widespread in the United States over the past thirty years. Tourists tend to perceive these places as towns where folk culture has been passed down unchanged for generations, while academics tend to dismiss residents’ ethnicity as crass commercialism. Neither view is correct. Ethnicity and tradition are not static but constantly invented and reinvented. Modern folk ethnicity, among European Americans in particular, is simply the most recent incarnation of this process, one that attempts to recover ties to a specific, small-scale landscape and history. This article explores the changing nature of the narratives of ethnicity and place-based identity that the residents of Lindsborg have used to create a place for themselves in American society. *Keywords:* ethnicity, Kansas, place identity, tourism, tradition, Swedish Americans.

In Lindsborg, Kansas, self-described as “Little Sweden, U.S.A.,” the still-brick Main Street is lined with shops and galleries, many with vaguely European-looking features adorning late-nineteenth-century American Victorian-style buildings (Figures 1 and 2). Many of the shops in this central Kansas town on the banks of the Smoky Hill River boast Swedish crafts, books, and music, together with a number of items that almost certainly are never found in Sweden: buttons pleading “Kiss me, I’m Swedish”; bumper stickers reading “Honk if you love lutfisk.” Driving through residential streets, one sees nameplates made from little red Dala horses—the town symbol—adorning housefronts. In fact, Dala horses are omnipresent; they can be found in the decor of local businesses, on the city seal, on bumper stickers, and on billboards (Figure 3). A number of restaurants offer ethnic foods or, sometimes, complete Swedish smorgasbords.

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