

# Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center

**John and Lilly Werner papers, 1906-1995**

**MSS P:338**

**.2 linear feet (1 box)**

- Creator(s):** Werner, John Oscar, 1888-1994  
Werner, Lilly Maria Holm, 1897-1985
- Language:** English
- Access:** The collection is open for research. A limited amount of photocopies may be requested via mail.
- Subject headings:** Werner, John Oscar, 1888-1994  
Werner, Lilly Maria Holm, 1897-1985  
Werner Automotive Supply Company (Providence, R.I.)  
American Union of Swedish Singers  
American Union of Swedish Singers--History.  
AUSS Cultural Heritage Foundation  
Merchant Marine  
Merchant Mariners
- Processed by/  
Finding aid prepared by:** Rebecca Knapper, 2015
- Related Collections:** SSIRC I/O:61 American Union of Swedish Singers records, 1896-2005;  
Series VII: AUSS Cultural Heritage Financial Reviews, Treasurer's Report and Correspondence
- Repository:** Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center  
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Rock Island, IL 61201  
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## **Custodial History/Provenance**

Donated by Donald Ahlm in 2015.

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## **Biographical Sketch**

John Oscar Werner was born in Kristineberg Västergötland Sweden on October 21, 1888. He came to the United States with his mother and older brother in October of 1900. The same year, in April, his father came to Cranston, Rhode Island where the whole family settled.

In 1910, Werner joined the United States Navy, serving a four-year period. He then enrolled at the Technical Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Having received a license as Marine Engineer from the Pratt Institute, he joined the Merchant Marine and was assigned to Standard Oil of New York with its large fleet of tankers.

At the end of World War I, with borrowed money, Werner opened his first automobile supplies company in New York—in a basement rented from a friend. He later bought a formula that solved the problem of grinding soft metal without embedding. He began an extensive advertising campaign, touring the country to promote this product. By 1922, Werner had returned to Providence from his advertising campaign and began to manufacture the compound from the formula he had purchased. In October of 1929, just after the stock market crash, the owner of the compound patent sued him for \$60,000. He settled by ceasing production of the formula. He recovered and worked through the Great Depression with success and, in 1930, hired a fellow Swede, Einar Nilsson, who later became a business partner. In 1947, Werner turned over a large portion of company shares to Einar Nilsson and George Sullivan. In 1969, Werner and Nilsson incorporated the Tri-State Auto Warehouse, with Werner as president.

On April 18, 1940, Werner married Lilly Maria Holm. She was born near Linköping, Sweden on September 28, 1897. Through the urging of two of her sisters who lived in Providence, Rhode Island, she came to the United States in November of 1922. She and John Werner meet through one of her sisters and kept in contact from 1923-1939 until they married in 1940. Mrs. Werner died on June 11, 1985.

As a non-singing member of the Verdandi Male Chorus, Werner had taken interest in AUSS for many years. In the early 1970s, he brought forth a proposal to establish an archive where records and artifacts could be kept and displayed. After some investigation, the newly formed Rockford Museum Center and Village was chosen as the location for this endeavor and, due in large part to donations by Werner, the AUSS Cultural Heritage Association was founded. The Singer's gallery room in the Midway Village Museum in Rockford, Illinois was acquired to house these materials.

The AUSS Cultural Heritage Foundation, formed and funded by Werner, has publishing the complete one hundred year history of the American Union of Swedish Singers. The book, *A Century of Song*, contains Werner's biography and a photograph of John and Lilly Werner together with King Carl Gustaf of Sweden. This book became the only expression of gratitude that this very modest man would accept. When Mr. Werner died on August 4, 1994—at age 105—he willed one final very generous gift to the Foundation. Interest on that money continues to support the museum and archives, as well as providing contributions to choruses and conventions.

*Excerpts for this bibliography were taken from a more complete biography of John Oscar Werner found in A Century of Song by Lilly Setterdahl.*

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### **Content/Description**

This collection contains the personal papers of John and Lilly Werner who helped to found and financially support the AUSS Cultural Foundation.

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## **Arrangement**

This collection is arranged by the following subjects: Legal Documents, Merchant Marine Service Paperwork, Photographs, Awards, the American Union of Swedish Singers and the AUSS Cultural Foundation.

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## **Inventory list**

### **Box 1**

Folder 1: Legal Documents of John and Lilly Werner 1906-1994

Folder 2: Merchant Marine Service Paperwork for John Werner 1913-1919

Folder 3: Photographs of John Werner and Werner Automotive Supply Co.

Folder 4: Awards Presented to John Werner 1976 & 1992

Folder 5: John Werner, the American Union of Swedish Singers, and the AUSS Cultural Foundation

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## **Publication Note**

When citing this collection, use the following credit line: John and Lilly Werner papers, 1906-1995 (MSS P:338), Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois