David Gustafson’s wife, Ulrika, says that Christmas in Sweden is celebrated on December 24 and is called Jul. In her small village of Rättvik, which Ulrika describes as “the heart of Sweden,” the holiday season begins on the first Sunday of December with the lighting of the first Advent candle. One candle is then lighted on each successive Sunday until December 24.

In Sweden the St Lucia Festival of Lights is held on December 13. This celebration has its roots in the Middle Ages and coincides with the Winter Solstice. Tradition claims that St. Lucia, dressed in a long white robe with a scarlet sash, wearing a crown of lighted candles and carrying a lighted candle, came to Sweden to provide light for the dark winter months. The festival begins with a procession of young girls in similar costume, carrying lighted candles. Following the procession the girls sing “The St Lucia Song.” Girls’ choirs also sing in various venues, including senior resident communities.

During Ulrika’s childhood her grandparents lived on a nearby ranch where they raised horses and cattle and Christmas Day was always celebrated at their house. In the morning the family would eat a breakfast of rice porridge and ham. (Traditionally, if someone finds an almond in their porridge they receive an extra Christmas gift.)

A visit from Jultomten (Santa Claus) was always welcome on that day, and a time of gift-giving was thoroughly enjoyed.
Preparations for the Julbord (Christmas smorgasbord) would begin well in advance of December 24. That day, while the women were still busy putting the finishing touches on the multi-item meal, the men and children would sit around the television and watch “Kalle Anka” (Donald Duck) cartoons. This custom began in Sweden sometime in the 1960’s.

The family would then enjoy the Julbord of ham, sausages, egg dishes, meatballs, herring, salmon, whitefish, eel, boiled potatoes, cabbage and other choice dishes.

In the evening they would ride across the snow in a horse-drawn sleigh to the village church where they would eat a snack before worshipping in a Christmas candlelight service.