

The Book Trade Expansion: Books and Publishers in Sweden, 1945–1970

Ann Steiner
Lund University

Abstract

The post-war years were a time of expansion in Swedish publishing. The economy was growing, people became better educated, the rise of a large middle-class meant new costumers, new publishing and sales strategies added to the increasing market, and overall there was higher sales, more titles published and more people reading. Despite the success story there has been hardly any research done on the overall publishing structures of the period and the proposed article is an attempt to map 'who did what' in publishing. Four main aspects are considered in the article: published titles (statistics, translations, genres), material aspects (publishing formats, the importance of the paperback), the publishing houses (general structures, the position and strategies of the Publisher's Association), and the market (very briefly on the relation to readers, sales, book trade etc.).

The article argues that the 25 years after the war were a golden age in Swedish publishing, a short phase, which is still regarded today as emblematic for the 'good' trade.

Key words

Post-war publishing, Swedish book trade, the Swedish Publishers' Association, nineteenth century publishing

The post-war years were expansive for most Swedish businesses, including book publishing. The economy was growing, people were better educated, and the rise of a large middle class gave the book trade new potential costumers. Overall, more books were sold, more titles were published, there were more bookshops and other places to buy literature, and more people were reading. By referring to 'the book trade expansion', the title of this article reflects the fact that between 1945 and 1970, publishing, sales, and reading rose steadily, and the period is generally seen as the golden age of the book trade.

The article maps the overall structures in publishing during the period, which was, in a longer perspective, a rather short phase of expansion. In times of prosperity it was something of a given that the book market would develop well, but it was hardly a situation that could continue into times of economic and social stagnation or decline. Ever since 1970 and the deregulation of the Swedish book trade, these years have been much idealised. In recurring debates on the pros and cons of a regulated book trade, fixed book prices, and book laws as seen in many European countries (for debates in Norway, see Rønning et al. 2012) in the post-war period are defined as the ideal. For most of the twentieth century, pre-1970 Sweden had an unusually regulated book trade in comparison to the majority of European countries. The regulations to some extent protected the market against commercial forces and have often been regarded in retrospect as the salvation of high-quality publishing. Yet this is a claim that needs to be modified, as the market for books at the time, much as now, was made up of all kinds of texts and formats.

Economic, social, and educational improvements led to more people reading and a flourishing book market. This had an effect on output, the kinds of books that were published, the attraction of book trade to investors, and consequently the number of publishing houses. In the article, I argue that the history of the book trade during the period has to be rewritten and nuanced. Three main aspects are covered here: published titles, successful formats, and the Swedish Publishers' Association. These give a general idea of the structure of the trade and can be seen as nodes from which to understand the trade as a whole.

Published Fiction and Other Books

In 1975 Per I. Gedin, a partner at the publishers Wahlström & Widstrand, wrote an influential book on the Swedish trade, *Litteraturen i verkligheten* (1975; *Literature in the Marketplace*, 1977). He had, and indeed at the time of writing still has, an important position in the industry, and his book soon came to be seen as the established version of events.¹ Despite the fact that Gedin was deeply involved in the trade, if nothing else as a stakeholder, he became one of its most important analysts. While his attempts to make sense of the world of publishing and the ongoing changes he saw in the 1970s did not have an ulterior motive, there is still indeed reason to question the position and status of his words in subsequent decades.

Table 1: Published titles, 1945–70

Year	Published books (SBF)	Published books (SOU 1972:80)	Published fiction, poetry, and drama (SOU 1972:80)
1945		4,211	1,326
1946		3,823	1,167
1947		3,453	1,126
1948		3,288	1,085
1949		3,372	791
1950		3,506	749
1951		3,013	645
1952		3,286	669
1953	2,860	3,608	707
1954	3,078	4,138	835
1955	3,508	4,446	979
1956	3,732	4,492	997
1957	4,108	5,180	1,087
1958	4,027	5,106	1,076
1959	4,151	5,311	1,078
1960	4,157	5,234	1,146
1961	4,236	5,339	1,128
1962	4,346	5,472	1,185
1963	4,550	5,704	1,217
1964	5,285	6,602	1,383
1965	5,478	6,666	1,416
1966	5,453	6,748	1,406
1967	5,809	7,218	1,330
1968	5,898	7,482	1,416
1969	5,957	7,404	1,354
1970	6,383	7,709	1,415

Gedin argued that the altogether too rapid growth in published titles in the post-war period, and in particular the 1960s, was the main cause of the financial difficulties that the larger publishers experienced in the late 1960s. Gedin in 1970 had named it 'the publishing crisis', which is a term still in use (Steiner 2006: 41). In his analysis of the causes of this crisis, Gedin wrote that 'During the period 1945–53 the number of titles issued remained the same or was reduced; after 1953 there was a rapid increase' (1977: 82). As Table 1 shows, this was true on a general level, but was not the whole story, as the number of publications still rose and fell. The real growth did not occur until the 1960s when the baby-boom generation began to come of age and the universities expanded. The rise in publishing came in order to meet new demand, and the real issue was not the number of titles published (in comparison with the figures from the 2000s, say), but rather who published them and their expected turnover. Gedin identified the main problem as market concentration: a few large companies – Bonniers, Esselte, and Almqvist & Wiksell/Geber – had 60 per cent of the total market. However, concentration per se is not an obstacle for growth; rather, I would argue, it was the large companies' expected market share and anticipated profits that were the main problems. It was the dominant publishing houses' belief that there would be a status quo, and when new, small publishing houses were successful, the only response was to publish more titles. The noticeable increase in titles was generated by small and large publishers alike; however, only the larger companies, with their wide range of genres and types of publication, suffered as salaries, production costs and rents rose in the 1960s (Steiner 2006: 50–2).

When it comes to sources of information on the published titles, the situation is far from satisfactory, as there was a great variety in the statistics, and the figures accessible were collated in different ways. Table 1 gives an overview of titles listed for sale in bookshops according to the *Svensk Bokförteckning* (SBF, 'Swedish National Bibliography') of 1953 and the findings of the Literary Commission report published in 1972 (SOU 1972:80). The latter claims to be based on the same source, yet the figures differ considerably. Further statistics can be found in *Årskatalog för svenska bokhandeln* (ÅSB, 'The Swedish booksellers'

yearbook'), in the report of the Book Commission of 1952 (SOU 1952:23), and in the official statistical yearbooks, which are based on the National Library's registers (SCB 2011). The problem is that whichever way these statistics are read, the numbers do not add up, and a definite conclusion as to the development of published books eludes us. The different ways books can be counted and accounted for in various systems pose a well-known obstacle to any attempt to map book production. There will always be books published without an ISBN, printed by small printers, or never sent to the National Library that will not be included in any statistics. In Sweden, detailed studies of poetry (Warnqvist 2007) and trade fiction (Hedman 1997) have shown that existing bibliographies are not complete. Johan Svedjedal also discusses the complexity of the area in detail in his study of the Swedish book trade in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1993: 389-91, 859).

I have used the numbers that are the most reliable, but have also specified the alternative figures given in *SBF*. The main conclusion is that publishing in Sweden expanded during the War, decreased slightly in 1946-53, and thereafter grew up until 1970. What is not given in Table 1, but can be deduced by statistics from the Swedish Publishers' Association and the National Library, is that book publishing has increased ever since. Fiction, poetry and drama follow this trend in general, but appear to have been more sensitive to market trends. The lowest point, 1951, was a reduction by 50 per cent on 1945. While fiction publishing had recuperated by 1964, there was never the same overall rise that could be seen generally in publishing. The total number of published titles during the period almost doubled, while the increase in published fiction was slight.

If one conclusion is that fiction publishing saw a modest rise during the twentieth century, the increase in all other categories of books was even larger. Books published for the general public, including children's books, biographies and non-fiction in areas such as history, the social sciences, philosophy and psychology, increased far more. Many of these publications met the demand from an expanding educational system (which saw dramatic changes across the board in the late 1950s and the 1960s). One can also assume that a larger, well-

educated public, with more time and money than previous generations, offered a potential market.

Table 2: Published books, 1945–50

Year	ÅSB (Yearly catalogue for Swedish Bookstores)	Registered titles, National Library (KB)
1945	4,211	5,509
1946	3,823	6,505
1947	3,453	6,454
1948	3,288	6,411
1949	3,372	6,549
1950	3,506	6,726

It is difficult to establish exactly how large the expansion of general book publishing was, which is where a comparison between the books registered for sale (ÅSB, pre-1953) and the books registered by the National Library is useful (Table 2). The differences are not only substantial; they also display a diverging curve. To some degree, this can be explained by variations in the registration systems. Another source of discrepancies was the selection of books registered for sale in the ÅSB catalogue, as it did not include all the general trade titles. What can be deduced from Table 2 is that the number of general trade books fell slightly, but at the same time publications for government, industry, academia and the labour movement increased. The Swedish Welfare State Model, as established in the post-war years, clearly left its mark on the book trade, as many publications can be traced to an expanding civic life.

What looks like a definite rise in National Library registration after the War should be contrasted with a fall in the sale catalogues produced for bookshops. The National Library also registered a variety of books that would not normally sell to the general public: catalogues, dissertations, and works produced for particular companies, interest groups, associations or civil-service departments. The ÅSB was compiled for bookshops, and therefore only included titles aimed at the general public. That said, there were also general trade titles that were never registered in the ÅSB as they would not be sold through the

commission-based bookshops linked to the Publishers' Association, mainly different kinds of cheap editions and mass-market paperbacks, but also books produced by small publishers. Unfortunately, neither the ÅSB (and later *SBF*) nor the National Library registrations accurately map the books published for the general market.

Table 3: Five-year average of registered books.

1935-9: 2,308 titles/year
1940-4: 3,288 titles/year
1945-9: 3,629 titles/year
1950-4: 3,149 titles/year
1955-1959: 3,905 titles/year

If one views the figures from the Publishers' Association in a longer perspective, it is clear that 1945 stands out in comparison with all other years (SOU 1972:80: 210), a discovery that should be regarded with some suspicion. The process of registration in both ÅSB and the National Library systems made it possible for titles to flow between years depending on the method used. A five-year average gives a better picture of the overall development. This method for analysing the data in this case shows a small dip in the early 1950s, but there is no reason to suggest that there was a major decline.

Successful Publishing

It is noticeable that in the post-war years, as the general economy and education expanded, inexpensive publishing was the main trend. There are two key areas where this change took place: one was the advent of quality paperbacks inspired by Allen Lane's Penguin; the other, the advent of cheap, mass-manufactured genre paperbacks printed on poor-quality paper – pulp fiction, in other words – in Sweden called mass-market paperbacks (to distinguish them from the books published for a smaller, well-educated audience) or newsstand fiction (according to the bookselling regulations, until 1970 cheap editions could be sold elsewhere than in general bookshops), terms that seem paradoxical today, when any paperback can be sold from newsstands

or bookstalls and the audience is segmented less according to quality and more in terms of genre.

Some of the high figures for published titles after 1957 can be explained by the introduction of a new kind of paperback in Sweden by the Bonniers imprint Aldus. There had been several previous publishing schemes for inexpensive, paperbound books – everyman's libraries produced by working-class publishers (*folkböcker*) or reprints in cheap editions (*25-öresböcker*) in the early twentieth century – but the paperback of the late 1950s was launched as new and modern, with a fixed format, modern cover design, and claims to quality in paratexts such as blurb and epitexts (e.g. advertising). The publishers concerned deliberately avoided any connection to previous inexpensive editions and book series, even though many of those continued to be produced. Once Bonniers had introduced paperbacks in the late 1950s, others soon followed suit. What were often termed 'quality paperbacks' were an instant success, and came to characterize the trade throughout the 1960s. The quality paperbacks became distinct brands in which the series was all, and every publishing house started their own with logos, colours and designs to set them apart: Aldus (1957) and Delfin (1960) were both Bonniers imprints, but then followed Prisma (1960), W&Wserien (1963), Tema (1964), the Norstedts imprint PAN (1967) and another six larger series. By 1969, the number of published quality paperbacks had risen from fewer than 10 to 659 (SOU 1972:80: 323).

While Aldus and the paperback series that followed were regarded as culturally important, the titles that nevertheless had the greatest impact in terms of number and sales were the popular, cheap paperbound books sold by newsstands and by subscription, pulp fiction. Today pulp fiction is defined as 'trade fiction', which separates it both from literary fiction and the other genres or categories used by bookshops and other distributors to classify titles. Pulp fiction and mass-market literature are highly evaluative terms, and hence trade fiction is a better term as used in the industry today.

The history of inexpensive trade fiction clearly shows that it was not a new form of publishing, but also that it has evoked strong negative responses in almost every century. Despite the fact that it is anything but new – inexpensive books, printed on cheap paper for amusement

can be found as early as the sixteenth century – it is equally common to claim that it has never before been seen in such quantities or in such poor quality. From the eighteenth century onwards there were repeated jeremiads about the steady decline of literature and the worsening of pulp fiction, just as more and more people seemed eager to read them. The post-war years were no exception, and there are many examples of critiques of low-quality literature and the people reading it. Take only a much reported speech at a booksellers' convention in 1945 in which the author Artur Lundkvist attacked 'the plague of bestsellers'. Books, he said, are not merchandise, and cannot be treated as such; the 'masses' do not know what they want as they have read so little ('Cirkus' 1945). His main argument was that the general public was uneducated and unqualified to judge what was best for them to read.

Lundkvist was one of many to publicly criticize bestseller culture and people who read literature of lesser quality. During the 1960s, the debate intensified as a direct response to the increasing publication and sales of trade fiction. During the 1960s, the annual figures for trade fiction ranged between 400 and 500 titles (SOU 1972:80: 286), no longer sold only by newspaper stands, but also in general bookshops. The main increase in trade fiction was seen in a large number of mass-market series with anonymous authors and cheap paper, often written in distinct genres such as crime and thrillers (35 different series), romance (19 series), Westerns (21 series), and porn (12 series). Most of these series followed a distinct pattern of high-volume sales (the popular series sold over 25,000 copies of each title) and high turnover with new titles in shops every week, produced by either Wennebergs or B. Wahlström (SOU 1972:80: 284-309). Porn was the only genre that differed, as there were other, more diverse kinds of publishers, fewer titles and a substantially higher price. During the 1950s and 1960s the different genres varied in popularity. The 1950s was the era of the Western, but there was a rather rapid fall in the following decade. Crime and thrillers remained popular, though there was a slight tailing off in the second half of the 1960s. The opposite was true of romance, which saw a small number of titles in the 1950s, but increased rapidly throughout the 1960s. Overall, trade fiction left its mark on Swedish publishing in the post-war period, changing how

the genre was perceived, and what kind of books could be sold in large quantities. During this phase, companies separated general trade from trade fiction, but this trend would change later in the century, when it became obvious just how much money could be made from the substantial interest in popular literature among the public.

The Swedish Publishers' Association

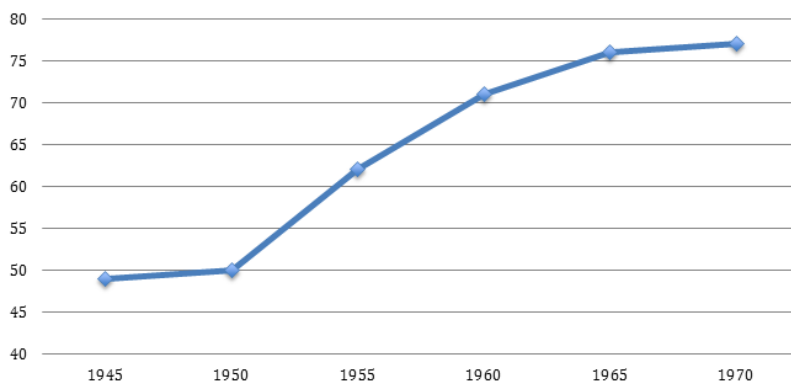
Table 4: Publishers and book production, 1948.

Size of publisher	Number of publishers	Published titles	Definition, published titles per annum
One-book publisher	288	288	1
Small publisher	83	400	2–15
Mid-sized publisher	30	837	16–50
Large publisher	14	1,478	51–
Total	415	3,003	

During the 1940s, Swedish publishing was dominated by a small number of large companies. In 1948, Bonniers published 352 titles, followed by Natur & Kultur with 135, and Norstedts with 126: these were by far the largest publishers, and their power and strong position characterised the trade during the 1930s and 1940s. Table 4 shows how diverse the publishing houses were in 1948 in terms of published titles and size. The large group of 288 one-book micro publishers should perhaps not even be defined as regular as they had little access to the bookshops and general trade. At the other end of the extreme was Bonniers with its outstanding number of published titles, and an

unassailable position that was not threatened until the 1960s.

Graph 1: Members of the Swedish Book Association



In order to analyse size, power and pull within the industry, one method is to look at the classification by Swedish Publishers' Association (Svenska Bokförläggareföreningen), which classed all members by size and, later in the period, 'importance'. Each of the eight classes was linked to a number of votes, thereby giving each publisher a different weight in discussions and voting. Membership of the association varied over the twentieth century. After a reorganization in 1912 (when the old, split association was reunited) there were as many as 75 members, but not long afterwards this number had fallen to 46 (Svedjedal 1993: 339-40).² After the Second World War, its membership increased steadily (see Graph 1). Part of the rise in numbers can be explained by the fact that it became more advantageous to be a member. Yet this does not account for the whole rise, and it is clear that in the period 1945-70 the book trade enjoyed such a degree of success that it attracted new entrepreneurs.

The membership of the Publishers' Association rose throughout the period, and the power balance within the group was negotiated yearly, and, of the more important members (classes 4-8), the larger firms gradually had to give way to middle-sized ones, as Table 5 shows. What is not visible is that there was also a growing number of publishers in Class 1 (with a single vote), which gave them individually little weight

Table 5: Members of the Swedish Publishers' Association, 1945–70, voting classes 4–8.

SBF	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970
Class 4	Fritzes Gebers Gleerup Ljus Medéns	Forum Fritzes Gleerup Hökerberg Lindblads Skoglunds Tiden B. Wahlströms				
Class 5	Almqvist & Wiksell W & W Ahlén & Akerlund	Generalstabens lit. anst.	Allhems Carlsons Fritzes Generalstabens lit. anst. Hökerberg LT: s förlag Ljus			
Class 6	Natur & Kultur	Almqvist & Wiksell Gebers Ljus	Gleerups Lindquist Nordisk rotogravyr Rabén & Sjögren Svenska kyrkans förlag Tiden B. Wahlströms	Allhems LT: s förlag J.A. Lindblads Lindquists Nordisk rotogravyr Skolförlaget Gävle	Akademiförlaget Gumperts Allhems Melins Nordisk rotogravyr Nordiska Bokhandeln Ahlén & Akerlund	
Class 7		Natur & Kultur Wahlström & Widstrand Ahlén & Akerlund	Almqvist & Wiksells boktryckeriförlag Forum W & W Ahlén & Akerlund	Almqvist & Wiksells boktryckeriförlag Magnus Bergvall Carlsons Folket i Bild Generalstabens lit. anst. Svenska kyrkans B. Wahlströms Ahlén & Akerlund	Aldus Carlsons Generalstabens lit. anst. ICA LT: s förlag Liber Prisma	Allhems Generalstabens lit. anst. ICA Melins Ahlén & Akerlund Svenska kyrkans
Class 8	Bonniers Norstedts	Bonniers Norstedts	Almqvist & Wiksell/Gebers Bonniers Natur & Kultur Norstedts	Almqvist & Wiksell/Gebers Bonniers Forum Gleerups Natur & Kultur Norstedts Rabén & Sjögren W & W	Almqvist & Wiksells boktryckeriförl. Almqvist & Wiksell/Gebers Magnus Bergvall Bonniers Forum Gleerups Natur & Kultur Norstedts Rabén & Sjögren Tiden/FiB B. Wahlströms W & W	Almqvist & Wiksell Biblioteks-förlaget Bonniers Forum Gleerups Liber LT: s förlag Natur & Kultur Nordiska Bokhandeln Norstedts Prisma Rabén & Sjögren Skolförlaget Gävle Tiden/FiB B. Wahlström W & W Verbum

but collectively some influence. The overall tendency was a shift in power from an oligopoly to a more diverse trade. Table 5 shows two points that were not previously known about the period: first, there

were marked changes in proportion and power among publishers; and second, the number of companies with maximum voting power within SBF rose rather quickly.

The analysis of the market by Johan Svedjedal showed that during the first part of the twentieth century the market was completely dominated by Bonniers and Norstedts. For example, in 1924 the two publishers were in Class 8 while no other publisher reached above Class 5 (Svedjedal 1993: 609–611). What Table 5 shows is that the Bonniers–Norstedts dominance was broken in the 1950s, and the voting balance changed radically. In 1945 and 1950, Bonniers and Norstedts were the only publishing houses in class 8, while in 1955 they had been joined by a further two companies; jump forward to 1965, and twelve companies had the maximum number of votes; and then by 1970 there were as many as seventeen. Apart from mirroring changes in the trade, the new voting balance was also a reflection of a genuine desire to create a more equal association. Many mid-sized companies had previously felt a lack of influence that had to be addressed if the association was to survive.

There were thirty-seven publishers that can be defined as the more important in the quarter-century between 1945 and 1970. The 1945 list consisted of only eleven publishers (classes 4–8), while in 1970 there were 22 publishers in classes 7 and 8. New publishers appeared, older ones disappeared, some were acquired by larger companies, some merged, others went bankrupt: ninety-five different publishers were members in the association at some point during the period. Of course, the relative strength of the Publishers' Association cannot be compared with actual size of an individual publisher, but it gives a hint of its importance in the market. In order to understand the book trade for fiction in particular, other issues have had to be raised, such as who were the stakeholders and agents; however, these are questions that will have to be dealt with in further research.

When going through the association's membership, two interesting facts stand out. The first is that the character of publishing had been established in the nineteenth century with the formation of the modern book trade in Sweden, and that it was still the dominant mode in the 1940s. Many of the members of the Publishers' Association in 1945

had been founded in the nineteenth century – fully thirty-three out of forty-eight – and of the more recently founded there was only the Bonniers subsidiary Forum (1943), and before that Lindfors (1932) and Natur & Kultur (1922). Evidently, the association and the trade in general had remained largely intact since the development of the modern book trade in the nineteenth century (Peterson 2003).

The second striking fact is just how rapidly this changed in the 1950s with the emergence of the new publishing houses. By 1960, twenty-four members had been added to the list of publishers, and quite apart from being new to the organization, they were mostly very recent start-ups. During the 1960s this process of change accelerated, with yet more new publishers. The conclusion to be drawn is that in 1945 publishing was a stable business, mainly made up of companies established in the previous century, but gradually and at an increasing pace this structure altered. Many new publishers were established, and these, as well as other companies, joined the Publishers' Association. Meanwhile, Bonniers and Norstedts had been the leading figures with substantial voting powers, but as the association grew their supremacy diminished. At the same time as more companies received a higher number of votes, the actual number of votes increased (through new members who each received a minimum of one vote), and jointly these circumstances greatly reduced the influence of Bonniers and Norstedts.

A Final Comment on the Market for Books

In the past decade, contemporary cultural debate has in many instances criticised the book trade for being too commercial and, as this was a new phenomenon, for focusing on a few poorly written novels by celebrity authors. Modern marketing techniques are frowned upon, particularly as it is often seen as a way of manipulating people into reading the wrong things, in other words trade fiction. There is also an assumption that the marketing of books is a new approach recently picked up by big-business publishing, reflecting its new, industrial mindset. Yet publishing has always been a commercial enterprise. After all, books were the single most advertised product in the daily press in the early 1950s. There was a far greater PR effort put in for

Vilhelm Moberg than for household products, travel or food (Helms 1952: 8).

Ever since the advent of the modern market in the nineteenth century, the Swedish book trade has been a commercial business despite every attempt to balance money and cultural ideals. As this article has shown, publishing saw a rapid expansion between 1945 and 1970 in terms of both title output and the number of active publishers in the Publishers' Association. The increase in publishing can be interpreted as a direct effect of the development of the Swedish welfare state in the post-war period, with a substantial number of nonfiction and specialised titles catering for the burgeoning civic society. Fiction publishing remained fairly constant, apart from increases in two formats: quality paperbacks and inexpensive trade fiction in paperback. The article has also shown that the expansion of the book trade attracted new kinds of businesses, and that publishing moved from a traditional, Bonniers–Norstedts-dominated structure to a market with many smaller companies of more diverse character. In fact, many of the things criticised in the 1970s and 1980s – bestseller culture and more commercially oriented publishing – had long been part of a development that started with the expansion of publishing in the post-war period.

Endnotes

¹ Evidence of the importance of the book is the English translation in 1977, and the fact that it was republished, print-on-demand, as late as 2010.

² These figures that should be compared with the record years of the publishing boom in the late nineteenth century, and particular 1881 when the number of members was as high as 104 (Rinman 1951: 438), though many were small companies and either went out of business or left the association during the split in 1887.

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