

6-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Carlson, Robert M. (2015) "Swedish surnames 101," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 35 : No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol35/iss2/3>

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Swedish surnames 101

What's in a name? In Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says to Romeo, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

BY ROBERT M. CARLSON

As persons of Swedish descent, we all are familiar with those of us who are identified by common patronymic surnames such as mine. However, as I examined records of Swedish parish churches during my genealogical research, I found it was Carlsson. Even growing up with Swedes in Minnesota, I never knew a double "s" Carlsson. Probably, one "s" was dropped when my father's family, as many others did, went through immigration in 1886. However, it is interesting to note when one looks at a current phone book in Sweden, there are extremely few people named Carlsson; but there are literally thousands spelled Karlsson. What gives?

In 1906 Sweden instituted a spelling reform: "C" was changed to "K." Also a number of other letters or combinations of letters were changed for better sound/spelling correspondences. Usage of the letters "q" and "w" became rare. The letters f, fv, fw, hv, and hw as signs of the V-sound were replaced by V. For example, my grandmother Gustafva would have become Gustava.

When one does Swedish genealogical research one is confronted with the changing of the surname with each generation (patronymics). For example: my paternal great-grand father was Carl Ljungman. The surname of Carl's son Johannes, my grandfather, became Carlsson (genitive case, dropping the apostrophe and space). If that had continued, my father would have been Gustave Johannesson (son of Johannes). I would have been named Robert Gustaveson (son of Gustave) had not the prac-

tice of patronymic naming begun to be phased out in the late 1880s. Before that, a daughter born to a Björn Larsson would have been named Brita Björnsdotter rather than Brita Larsson.

Johansson is the most common patronymic surname in Sweden, followed by Andersson and Karlsson.

It is interesting that even today, Iceland still follows the practice of patronymic naming and people are listed in phone books alphabetically by first name.

Other types of names

Many other "pure" Swedes have non-patronymic surnames that may be "soldier names." These were a result of military units having too many men with the same name such as Johnsson, Petersson, Svensson, etc. Recruits with these names were given new names by the officers.

Some were based on human attributes such as *Lång* (tall), *Rask* (swift), or *Modig* (courageous) while others were something physical such as *Dahl* (valley), *Hjort* (deer), or *Strand* (shore). When discharged, the man might retain his soldier name as his new surname.

Others took "ornamental" two-syllable surnames that were combinations of short words such as: *Nordlund* (north + grove), *Granquist* (spruce [tree] + twig), *Kronholm* (crown + island). Incidentally, *Lindberg* (linden [tree] + mountain) is the most common non "son" surname in Sweden representing 0.3 percent of all surnames in Sweden.

For a more detailed discussion see: *Swedish Personal Names in America* by Folke Hedblom, Swedish American Genealogist, Vol. V, No. 1, March 1985.

The 25 most common surnames in Sweden in 2013 and 2014

Rank 2014	2013	Number of bearers	
		2013	2014
1	(1)	Andersson	245 208
2	(2)	Johansson	245 018
3	(3)	Karlsson	217 604
4	(4)	Nilsson	167 207
5	(5)	Eriksson	144 659
6	(6)	Larsson	121 966
7	(7)	Olsson	111 402
8	(8)	Persson	105 390
9	(9)	Svensson	99 023
10	(10)	Gustafsson	95 371
11	(11)	Pettersson	93 559
12	(12)	Jonsson	72 536
13	(13)	Jansson	48 996
14	(14)	Hansson	43 021
15	(15)	Bengtsson	33 525
16	(16)	Jönsson	31 376
17	(17)	Lindberg	27 605
18	(18)	Jakobsson	26 505
19	(19)	Magnusson	26 256
20	(20)	Olofsson	25 996
21	(21)	Lindström	25 009
22	(22)	Lindqvist	22 996
23	(23)	Lindgren	22 889
24	(24)	Axelsson	22 486
25	(25)	Berg	21 624

Source: Statistics Sweden. www.scb.se

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