

3-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Fredricks, Anna and Johnson, Ruth (2015) "Discovering your family's Neighborhood," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol35/iss1/8>

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Discovering your Family's Neighborhood

A single photograph helped connect the past to today

BY ANNA FREDRICKS WITH GUIDANCE
FROM RUTH JOHNSON

Many years ago, my husband and I were vacationing in northern Europe. To escape heavy rains, we stepped into the Swedish Emigrant Institute (*Utvandrarnas Hus*) in Växjö. Armed with basic facts, the staff supplied a document. A few pages into it, a picture of my grandparents, including my 1-year-old mother, jumped out at me. That striking photograph inspired me to learn more about my Swedish heritage and influenced my research approach.

This article illustrates the value of understanding family members through a community lens, enabled by effective use of local experts and resources. Special focus is on my grandparents in Vancouver, B. C., and the Wennersborg, Minnesota, parish in the early 20th century.

Carl Gustav Zaar, my grandfather, was the oldest child in a soldier's family in Pjätteryd parish (Kron.) that struggled with extreme poverty. By the age of 13, he had to fend for himself; in 1897, he immigrated to the U.S. and was a farm laborer until 1902.

Carl graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in 1910 and Augustana Seminary in 1913.

In 1915, he married Anna Mathilda Larson, whose parents immigrated from Grythyttan parish (Öre.) in 1880. The couple soon moved to Vancouver, B. C., Canada, where Pastor Zaar led the First Swedish Lutheran Church congregation for five years.

After returning to Minnesota in 1920, Pastor Zaar served the Wennersborg parish, Douglas County, MN, for twelve years, the Wheaton-

White Rock parish for fifteen years, and the First Lutheran Church in Port Wing, Wisconsin, for two years.

Vancouver, from boom city to hardship

1911 was one of the most prosperous years in the history of Vancouver.¹ However, a post-1912 economic downturn, fueled in part by the threat of cheap labor and competing interests in the opium trade, plus the end of World War I, saw returning soldiers, high unemployment, and fear of consequences from the revolution in Russia.

The First Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church, formed in 1903, also fared well in pre-war years. To support its growing membership, the congregation erected a modern brick building, at Pender and Princess Streets, which opened in 1910. Then circumstances stemming from the war in Europe caused job losses, declining church membership, and a vicious flu epidemic.

Pastor Carl Zaar stepped in to lead the church in June, 1915. His registration as a naturalized U.S. citizen living in Canada reveals that Pastor F. M. Eckman married the Zaars.² The Vancouver Public Library found a book citing Pastor Zaar by name: "The Swedish Lutheran Church was severe and frowned on dancing, though Pastor Zaar (c. 1916) allowed *ringlekar* (circle games) in the church basement."³

Then I visited the First Swedish Lutheran Church, whose Swedish-style sanctuary was preserved despite the building's new role as a

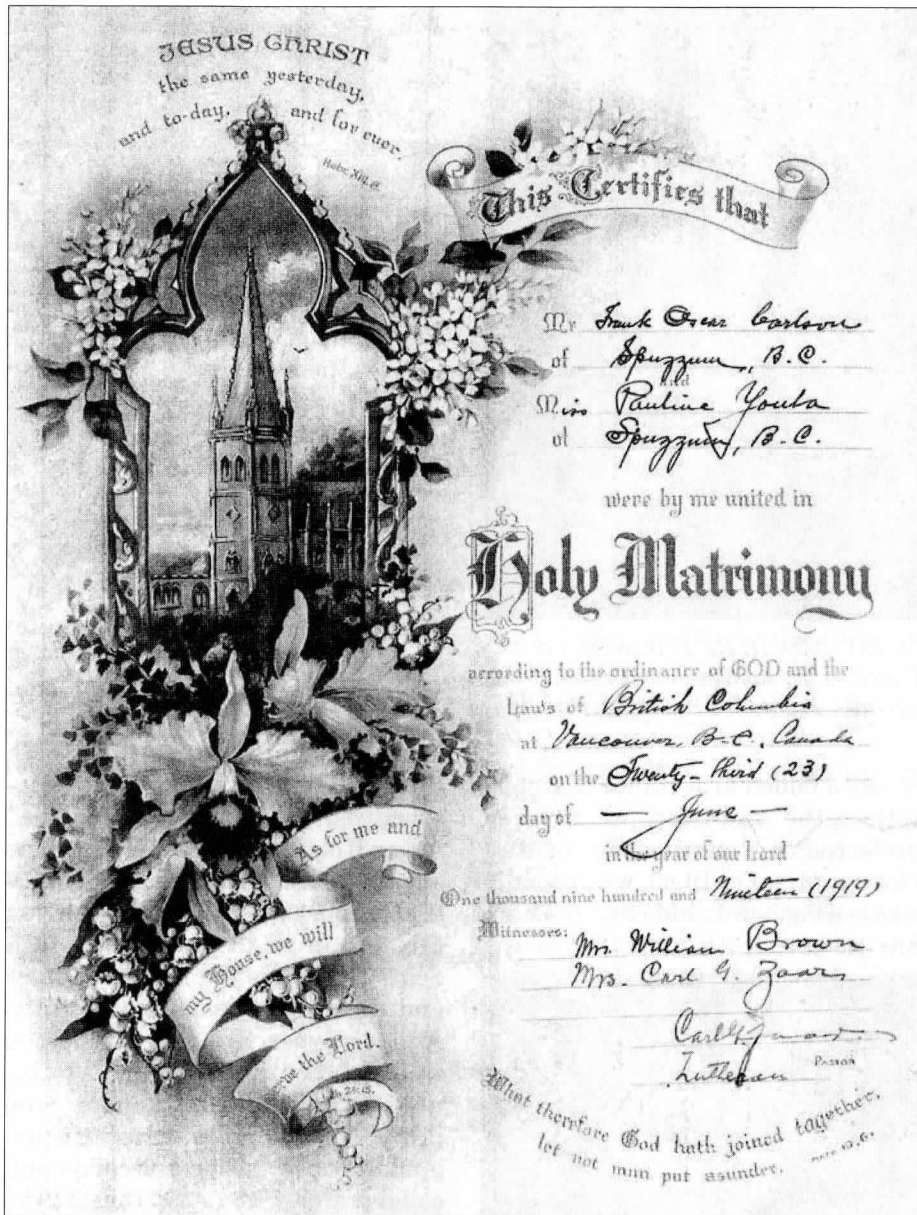
Chinese Catholic Church. The priest graciously invited me in through the former parsonage that was now his residence, explaining how the neighborhood had changed.

In 2002, I contacted the pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church (formerly First Swedish Lutheran) who shared Zaar family records, a church history, and a fascinating color photograph. The church history notes, "It can be said without exaggeration that Pastor Zaar was the right man at the right place in these times of serious need."⁴ It points to his being a strong leader who understood the value of celebrating small successes, a skill he likely learned in his own life.⁵ Anna Zaar is praised for helping to pass the Young Girls' Association Busy Bee program.⁶

A marriage certificate found

A gentleman had called the pastor to alert him that a framed marriage certificate,⁷ signed by Pastor Zaar, had been discovered behind a wall in a Vancouver house being renovated. Per church records from 1919, Pastor Zaar performed a marriage ceremony for a Swedish man and a "squaw" (which at that time was not a derogatory term), both from Spuzum, B. C. The framed certificate now hangs on a prominent wall in the Augustana Lutheran Church (see next page).

A key takeaway here is the value of visiting city archives, public libraries, local and county historical societies, and churches to better understand the community in which your family lived. Locate church his-



tories, even if your family member was not a pastor. Participate in milestone events such as reunions. In 2003, I joined Augustana Lutheran Church's centennial celebration and presented a scrapbook about our grandparents to the church. A woman was there to greet us, holding her baptismal certificate that was signed by my grandfather.

Returning to Minnesota

In 1920, the Zaar family moved to Hoffman Village, Douglas County, Minnesota, to serve the four congregations in the Wennersborg parish. The area had seen much change since the 1870's. Townships like Solem and

Land organized, expanding existing trails into roads, and building many bridges.

The Wennersborg church was built in 1880, and when railroad towns like Kensington and Hoffman were founded, church construction followed. By the early 1900's, the dugouts/log cabins built by most pioneers had been replaced by large two-story, lumber-based square houses.

As townships evolved, recording information became important. While county-level records listed births and deaths, local communities replicated the role of Swedish parishes as record-keepers of everything: birth, baptism, confirmation, mar-

riage, and death. Churches strictly adhered to customs such as confirmation instruction, memorization of Bible verses and the catechism, and services. Records begun in 1871 were destroyed in the 1908 parsonage fire in Hoffman; Pastor Peter Hedenström began a new set of record books in 1909.⁸

Rich community resources help us to understand individuals' triumphs and hardships. Farming was top priority; plowing the bare prairie grass was no easy feat. Since teams of horses were saved for field work, simple tasks such as getting mail required long walks. Yet a letter from the old country was precious to receive. Per Mrs. Erik Oslund on her 89th birthday: "I can't believe there's anything left of me – we had to walk everywhere." Erik Oslund walked 30-35 miles to the town of Benson to purchase a grain binder and carried it home on his back, saying he could walk faster than slow oxen. As late as 1942, Pastor B. G. Holmes donned a sheepskin coat and walked four and a half miles in driving snow from Hoffman to administer the last communion to the Johnson family.⁹

Pioneer's dreams

Pioneers came to America with the promise of free land; people wrote back saying the streets were paved with gold. Across the Wennersborg parish, these roads were trails at best. My grandfather routinely drove from Hoffman Village to country churches for parish duties, despite the muddy roads that were difficult to traverse in the spring. My mother often accompanied her father and especially remembered the fragrance of lilies at funerals.

This was a time when immunizations for infectious diseases were not yet available. In 1881, the Lekaner family lost four children to diphtheria between early November and Christmas Day; the Lars Rose family lost three children.¹⁰ Funerals for deaths due to influenza, smallpox, or diphtheria were restricted to the immediate family.

It was common that young moth-



The First Wenersborg Church Choir (pre-1885). Back (L-R): Erik Wiklund, Ole Lindquist, Joe Fahlin, Per Lindén, Mr. and Mrs. H. A. Komstadius. Center (L-R): Sigrid Lindén, Kristine Wiklund, Sigrid Wagenius. Front (L-R): Katrina Wiklund, Emma Wiklund, Emma Lindén, Britta Dahl.

ers to die in childbirth. When a family member passed away, neighbors or family members prepared the body, without embalming, and mounted a door over a sawhorse - covered with sheets - to hold the body until the coffin was constructed at the home. The funeral was held the next day at Wenersborg cemetery. In the early 1900s, John Norquist in Hoffman offered use of a horse-drawn hearse to move the body to the cemetery.¹¹

Recognizing area pioneers

When Pastor Zaar assumed his new role in 1920, he found the Wenersborg parish preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary the following year. A *Minnes-Album*¹² was among the plans to recognize the contributions of charter members who had settled the area. My grandfather would soon be involved in the production of this special document.

The rich set of photographs found in the *Minnes-Album* - from area pioneers and parish organizations to young men who served their country - is not surprising, as traveling photographers often stopped in towns offering to take pictures. The Wenersborg church choir picture

shows a folded arm stance that may reflect the more formal carriage preferred at that time. In another picture, Mrs. Per Blom, who proudly wears a big bow to hide her lost hair, has no teeth, an indicator of the



Mrs. Per Blom (pre 1895) - availability of good dental care.

The *Minnes-Album* and community resources provide insight into the financial health of the Wenersborg church and use of the parsonage in Hoffman Village. For serving its congregations, Pastor Zaar was paid \$1,500 a year including a place to live.¹³ The parsonage, built in 1908-09 on Carolina Street, had large rooms including a pastor's study, a front door, and a second door on the front of the house leading into the kit-

chen. Members who could not contribute much toward the pastor's salary would use this kitchen door to offer butchered chickens, fresh eggs, or produce.

Marriages and baptisms were sometimes performed in the pastor's study. A neighbor, Mrs. John Auslund, would be called to the Wenersborg parish to learn that a couple had a marriage certificate and needed witnesses. She would participate in the ceremony, bringing a floral bouquet from her garden and wearing a big beautiful hat.

The *Minnes-Album* is a real treasure. It contains that striking photograph mentioned earlier - one that is never far away as I seek to learn more about these courageous and resilient people.

Combining insights from documents like the *Minnes-Album* with local information can enrich both individual and community perspectives. What has been preserved - even if old memory books were done simply - can be a wealth of information. Never underestimate what you can find in small towns; local residents find ways to preserve history and pass on the experience of life. And discover the "keeper of the treasures" in the locale. I was fortunate to meet Ruth Johnson who provided invaluable information and guidance over several decades and collaborated with me on this article. In your journey to connect the present to the past, you never know when and where new information will emerge - enabling you to share it with future generations.

Endnotes:

- 1) Editorial, March 6, 1912 *Vancouver Sun*.
- 2) Ancestry.com. U.S. Consular Registration Applications, 1916-1925 [database on-line], Provo, Utah, Roll #: 32734_1220706418_0257.
- 3) *Vancouver's Svenskar: A History of the Swedish Community in Vancouver*, by Irene Howard, Vancouver Historical Society, 1970, page 54.
- 4) *Första Svenska Lutherska Kyrkan i Vancouver, B.C. - Dess Egen och Församlingens Historia*. (Per notes from



Pastor Carl G. Zaar, (b. 4 Feb. 1877 in Pjätteryd, Sweden, d. 4 Oct. 1959), his wife Anna Mathilda Larson, (b. 1886 in Minnesota, d. 20 Sep. 1948), sons Carl, Marcus, and daughter Arlene. Photo from 1921.¹⁴

- Adolf Lundgren, Fall 1923), page 9.
- 5) See Footnote 3, page 9.
 - 6) See Footnote 3, page 10.
 - 7) Augustana Lutheran Church, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (1919).
 - 8) Wenersborg parish church records, Douglas County Historical Society, MN.
 - 9) *Hoffman Centennial Book 1891-1991*, published by the Book Committee.
 - 10) *Hoffman Centennial Book 1891-1991*, published by the Book Committee.
 - 11) *Hoffman Centennial Book 1891-1991*, published by the Book Committee.
 - 12) *Minnes-album: Svenska Ev. Lutherska Wenersborg-församlingen, Douglas County, Minnesota, 1871-*

1921, Carl G. Zaar; Minnesota History Center; Swenson Center at Augustana College; Kensington Area Heritage Society, Kensington, MN.

13) See Footnote 8, page 19.

14) **Editors note:** dates for the Zaar family from U.S. Census 1930, Findagrave.com, and *The Augustana Ministerium*, by Conrad Bergendoff (1980).



Memorial plaque in the Wenersborg cemetery.

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McPherson County Old Mill Museum 120 Mill Street, Lindsborg, Kansas 67456

The Old Mill Museum will be hosting a Swedish Genealogy Workshop on *September 26/27*. People can attend 1 or 2 days.

There will be sessions for beginners and experienced researchers, computer stations for all. Hands-on learning every session. Assistance from experts.

The fall workshop will be a large one – open to about 200 people.

Lenora Lynam and *Lorna Nelson*, both experienced Swedish researchers, are the organizers.

The SwedGen team (*Anna-Lena Hultman*, *Anneli Andersson*, *Charlotte Börjesson*, and *Olof Cronberg*) will return, along with *Kathy Meade*.

We have also asked *Geoff Morris* from the FamilySearch team of Salt Lake City, to speak, and have also

invited *Michael Peterson* of TX, former contestant on *Allt för Sverige*, to speak about his experiences on the show and visiting Sweden for the first (and 2nd) times.

Ingrid Nilsson and *Elisabeth Thorsell*, both from Sweden, have now joined the team of instructors and helpers.

We are planning a new format of two days of lectures with the computer lab up and running both days as well. People will chose a 4 hour time frame for the computer lab.



The workshop is sponsored by
Arkiv Digital.

Schedule for the September Workshop 26 – 27

Saturday & Sunday
Includes:

- Two days of workshops and research time.
- Admittance to the Welcome Reception on Friday, September 25.
- Option for hot lunch provided or bring your own lunch.

Registration

Early bird registration ends July 18. For registration check out p. 30 or call 785-227-3595.