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Ben Benson's Story of the Swede Bottom Settlement, as told to His Grandson, Oliver Wendell Holmes

A Baptist family from Halland goes to America in 1853

SUBMITTED BY PAM BERWEN

[Introductory note: – This material was taken down on visits to my grandfather in the summers of 1926 and 1927 when he was 81 and 82 years old respectively. It was already too late to get a wholly satisfactory story, because it tired him to talk and to try to recall details of those early days when he was 7 to 12 years old. He was remembering over a span of 75 years. The details he remembered, it will be seen, were those which would impress a small boy. We were never able to work longer than a half hour at a time. Then Grandfather would say, "I think it's time for a game of checkers."

I never urged him when he did not feel like talking even though I was most anxious to get on with the narrative. I had hoped to get through the period of the Minnesota Indian War and the Civil War, and down to the period of his marrying and establishing himself on his farm in Stockholm Valley. He enjoyed reminiscing about his services in the wars, and frequently would jump ahead of his story, but by asking questions, I would take his thoughts back again to the earlier days.

I held him there, knowing that narratives of the Civil War exist by the thousand, but that there will be no other autobiographical story of the settlement of Swede Bottom in 1853. Every detail seemed precious, and there was so much more about which I wished to know. I wanted to ask more about the crops, the building of houses, and the schools of the pre-Civil War years, but these details were never secured. When I returned

in 1928 for but a day's visit, it was apparent that Grandfather was not as well as in previous years. When I suggested continuing the story of the earlier days, he suggested playing checkers instead, and it was reward enough to see his grin when he could say, "I can still beat Oliver at checkers." So passed the last chance, for Grandfather died in January of 1929, less than forty-eight hours after the death of his wife Christine Nilsson Benson, a comrade and helpmate of over 50 years standing.

The narrative here even is not quite in Grandfather's own words for I found it possible to take down only short sentences in the manner of one who takes very full notes. The content of the sentences is his in all cases and also all descriptive words and phrases. I have in a number of instances changed the order of some remark or episode in order to place it in its chronological position. This is but a fragment of what I hoped the completed narrative would be, but it is all we now have of Grandfather's story. - O. W. H.]¹

Ben's story begins

"My father, Olaf Berntson, was born in 1812 in Halland province, Sweden. His father's name was Bernt Berntsson and his mother's name, I think, was Christine, but I cannot remember her family name before her marriage. We lived on a big farm on the coast about thirty-five English miles south of Gothenburg. My grandfather Bernt, I think, was born on this farm. We had a big boat with which we took the farm produce,

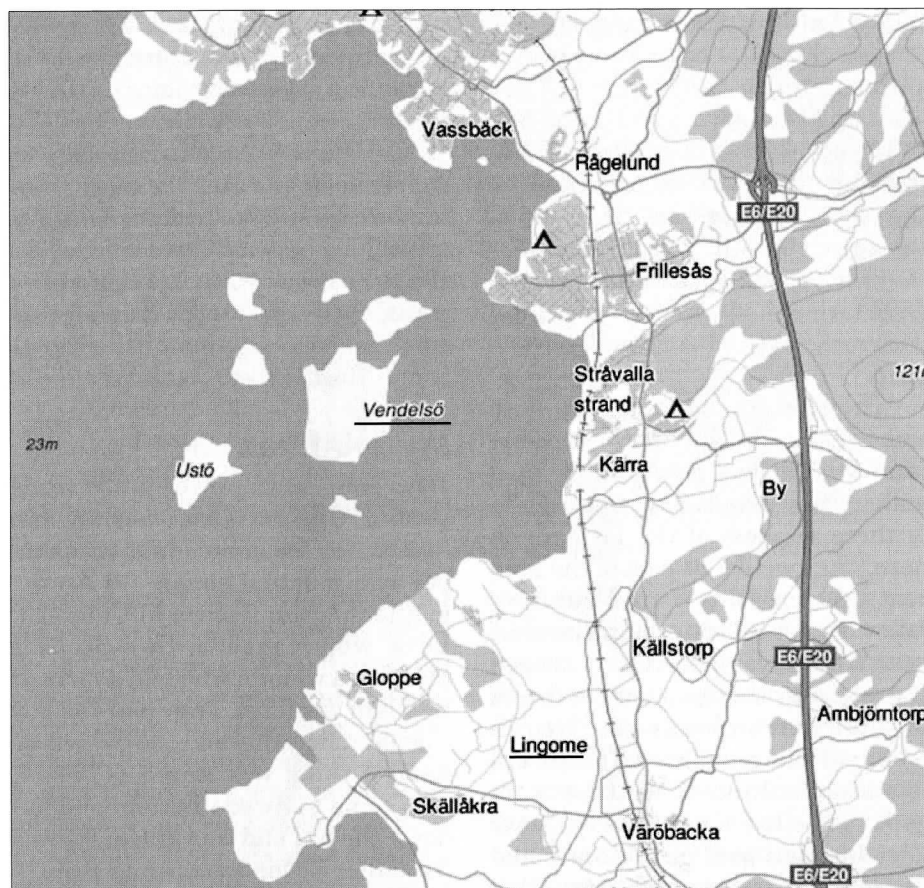
potatoes, oats, and other things by water to Gothenburg where Englishmen would be with their vessels to buy it. Now the roads are good and there are railroads on which they can ship their grain.

"In the years before I was born almost every farmer had a small mill of his own which was run by a water-wheel on one of the creeks running to the ocean. There were some of these left when I was young. There was a stone quarry nearby from which they secured the stone for their own millstones. But when I was born there were already big mills where they made fine flour. On market days the farmers took their stock to town to sell in the market place. Warberg (Varberg) was our closest good market, but there were markets also in some of the smaller towns. I remember stagecoaches went between the towns. The farmers that lived along the route furnished horses to take the coaches over a certain distance, but we didn't live close enough for that.

"We lived on the shore of a bay named Vendelsö that opened out into the North Sea. Our pasture went down to the bay, but our house, where I was born, was about a half mile east of the water. Father had a big farm for there – about 160 acres. We raised oats, wheat, rye, and barley, and beans for the horses and cattle. These beans grew tall with a big yield, the pods being in close to the stalk. We had a frame house with a kind of brick tile roof. Some houses had slate roofs. Our house was a story and a half, and there were about eight rooms. Two families lived there the

last years we were there. We had an enclosed barn, with a carpenter shop on one end, a wood-shed on the other, and a driveway between the woodshed and the stables. The driveway doors were big enough so they could drive in with big loads of grain. The granary was in there too. It had tight floors. The wheat was mowed away in the barn, and they gradually threshed it, getting through about Christmas. They threshed with a flail, the handle about the size of a hoe handle, but the pounding end big and round. The grain was not put in until it was dry, and it then threshed out easy. Generally four men were threshing together, keeping time with each other. After the grain was threshed out they shoved it in a pile. Then with scoops they threw it from one end to the other and the chaff fell first.

"There was a man on our farm who had three or four acres, and for rent kept the family in fish. We had salt water herring and mackerel and they were good, I can tell you. The regular farmers in Sweden lived better than they do here. They raised their own butter and cheese. They made a barrel full of beer from malt and hops and it lasted two or three weeks. We ground the barley and rye together after it was soaked and that made the malt. The beer was not made of drugs like beer in this country which tastes like swill in comparison. We baked bread once a month in big ovens carrying twenty-five or thirty



Parts of Värö parish in Halland, south of the city of Kungälv.

loaves at a time. The loaves each had a hole in the middle and they were hung on nice round smooth sticks in the attic to keep dry. We still had bread made at home in Sweden when we came to La Crosse, after our long time on the water. Our everyday shoes were made of wood, but we had leather shoes for Sunday, made by a shoemaker who came to the house to

make them. The wooden shoes we washed and scoured with white sand to keep them clean. We sowed by hand and cut with a cradle. The smaller farms only had grass hooks.

"We had in that part of Sweden whole farms – about 160 acres – half farms and quarter farms. Lots of houses had a few acres around them, and were deeded so many years to the people who lived in them in exchange for so many days work each year. The houses were close together like small villages with the land out around. Most of the land on our farm was east of the house. There was a small field to the west, and pasture north and west to the bay. The house was on high ground so that the bay was visible. We could see ships way out where the bay emptied into the Kattegatt.

"On an island out in that bay, which we could also easily see, my mother was born. The island, too, was called Vendelsö. There were only two farms on the island, but they were nice farms with big windmills and



Vendelsö island, Värö parish, Halland.

fine orchards with large apples. Each farmer along the coast ran his own sailboat up to Gothenburg. They went up in the spring and in the fall. In the spring they went up really to buy, but they took up any produce they had left over from their trip of the previous fall. I can remember they took sheep up alive on the boat. Each farmer had his own wharf, built with rock out to where the water was deep.

"The pastures on the hills were somewhat rocky, but not the farming land which was more down in a valley. They didn't farm as carelessly there as most of the farmers do here. They would let part of the land rest and manure it and summer fallow to get a better crop the next year. There was a kind of seaweed thrown up by the waves on the shores of the bay which was gathered in piles and left for manure. There were lots of gravel pits, and there were good gravelled roads. Each farmer kept his own part of the road, and there was an overseer who inspected their work. He had a small ring which the stones must go through.

"We raised hogs only for our own use. We had small tough, fleet-footed horses. Father had three horses and a yoke of cattle. We had two-wheeled carts which were used for nice driving. Some of them had a top. For loads, we had regular wagons. In general the mountains came almost down to the sea, though where we were they were a few miles back. On them grew pine and hemlock and we went there to buy wood for building and hemlock for the fire, though generally we used peat which the farmers went together and dug out of a peat bog nearby and let dry. It made a very hot fire. There were a few trees on the place.

"There were many kinds of berries growing on the stony pastures and along the stone fences. There were blueberries and blackberries as big as plums, and a sort of red berry like a cranberry, only sweeter. There was another kind of berry which grew in the peat bogs. The orchards which each farm had planted were always very nice to see. The apple trees and

pear trees had trunks as big as walnuts or maples here. The pears were large and sweet like our southern pears.

"The farm was called Barcka, or the word for 'tanner.' The place went to the oldest son. Brother Charley could have got it if he'd wanted it. When he didn't want it, I could have got it, but I didn't want it and it was sold. A man who was afterwards called 'Barckasben' bought it.

My relatives

"My uncles and aunts on father's side were (1) Christine, who married and lived in Gothenburg. I do not remember her married name. (2) Annie, mother of John Benson in Union. (3) Lars, who stayed in Sweden. He married a woman who had a farm or he'd had our farm. They had one boy – Johann Berndt – and one girl whose name I think was Annie. (4) Peter, who came to Swede Bottom and fell down the hill and was killed. He was the father of Onabreta (Anna-Brita?).

"On mother's side there were (1) Catherina, who got the farm on the island. (2) Christine, and (3) Anasteena (or Annie Christine). My grandfather on mother's side was Claus Lotberg, a sea captain who sailed with his vessel to New Orleans with iron. The other family on the island were the Nilssons, and Peter Nilsson, father of F. O. Nilsson and Bernt Nilsson, was first mate on Lotberg's ship. They both dreamt on one of their trips that they would meet their wives by the seaside cleaning fish. And they did, finding two sisters and marrying them, so that Lotberg and Nilsson were brothers-in-law. My mother and your Grandma's father were first cousins. Grandfather Claus was a great swimmer, but he drowned falling out of a boat between the mainland and Vendelsö.

"My mother, Christine, was baptized about 1851, and this was the reason we were a part of the company that came over here in 1853, although father was not baptized until we reached this country. Father sold the farm in order to come. It cost a

lot then to come to this country – about \$1,000. We were five children. Only brother Charley had to pay full fare. Jane (Nellie?) and I went for half-fare. Olivia came for nothing and Jane also. We took lots of tools along in chests to have to put up buildings with. In the old country these tool chests, of which nearly every family had one, had round covers, but we were warned to have flat-topped ones on board the ship. They were made of oak. Families took pride in their tool chests and many of them were much decorated. I have a chest given to my half-sister by a newcomer with the date 1800 painted on it, and a wreath of lilies painted round the date. I remember the doors of houses in Sweden were decorated by the owners. One man, Nils Anderson, had a verse painted on his doorpost and underneath it in Roman numerals was the date of the building.

To America

"We took a big sailboat and a yacht up to Gothenburg where we boarded the big ships. There were five families who came all the way here to Swede Bottom. Several other families remained in Rock Island. The five families who came here were Lars Johnson's, David Johnson's, Abraham and John Anderson's, my father's family, and Lars Redding's. There were lots of children in the Redding family – Nick, Lewis, Emanuel, Oscar, and two sisters. We had to board ourselves, and had bunks three tiers high. We had our own bedclothes.

"The cooking place was up on deck, and each family cooked its own food there over a long fireplace. There were others on the boat, besides the families I named and since there was not room for all at once, we had to take turns. We had cheeses, hams, and breads mostly, and then cooked coffee. The men not married were partitioned off by themselves. The married people had a room to themselves. We came on a freighter, heavily loaded with iron.

"It was queer it didn't go to the bottom for we got into a storm so bad that it lost nearly all its masts. It was

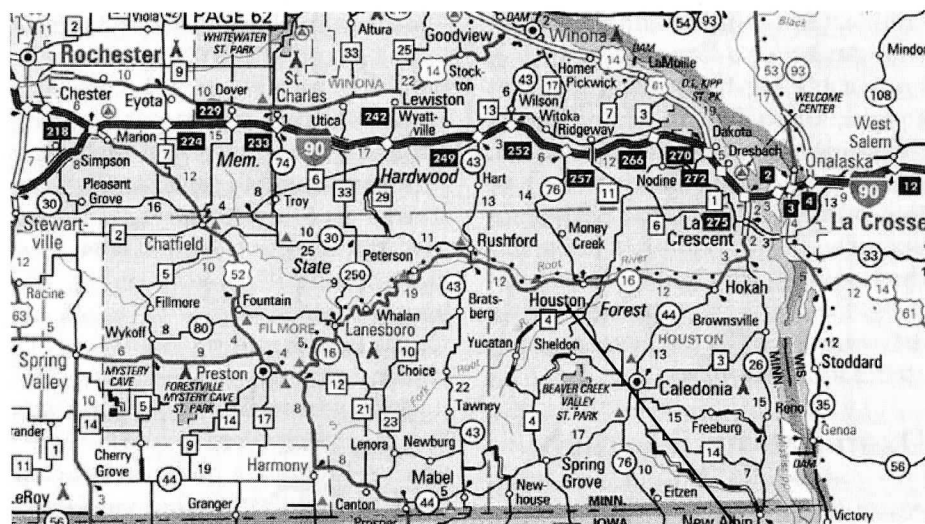
a new vessel and the ropes stretched so that the masts did not hold. Its name was the *Jennie Page*. Its railing was so low that the water ran over the rails when the ship was tacking. The hatches were down during the storm and no passengers were on deck. – The ship almost stood on end in the big troughs. We were six weeks on the ocean. We lay still a long time while they were repairing the masts.

“We landed at Castle Garden in New York, went by train to Dunkirk, New York, crossed the lake by steamer, and went by cars again to Chicago. We received tea from the lake boat deckhands – our first tea – with sugar in it. They were good to us. I can remember running on the board sidewalks in Chicago, the like of which I had never seen, and laughing to hear them rattle.

The journey continues

“We took the train to the end of the Rock Island road a ways out of Chicago, and then hired teams to take us across Illinois to Rock Island. The women and children rode, and the men walked. I walked too. Our wagons were canvas covered. We stopped at places with big barns along the road to sleep in the hay because there was not enough room in the wagons. We stayed in Rock Island about a week. There I remember we lived in a tent, and I think we had a tent along with us too.

“La Crosse had two small stores when we arrived there by steamboat, one kept by Merrick and the other by Levy. Merrick later moved over to La Crescent. I remember two blind horses, a bay and a black, propelled the ferry owned by McSpadden which took us across to the Minnesota side. There wagons were hired which were to take us to the fork of Root River, but in the morning the oxen could not be found so the women and children started to walk ahead over the only trail which then led up across the ridge and down into Looney Valley. We didn’t know it was such a wilderness. There were no houses along the road until you came to Looney’s in Looney Valley, and



Southeast Minnesota (from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas).

there was no water on the ridge, and nothing to eat for the wagons didn’t catch up with us as we had expected them to. There was nothing to eat until we came to Looney’s on the present Bert Lilly place, except that at a spring that we found as we came down into Looney Valley. I found a sandwich that a claimer had left which I gave to my mother. It was a godsend or my mother, who had carried the baby Olivia all the way, would have given out, I am sure. At Looney’s we got some sour milk to drink and some johnnycake [**Ed’s note:** a common cornmeal flatbread]. Looney’s place was only a small shanty. He later built a log house upon the hill.

“The trail we had come from La Crosse, leading over the ridge, was known as the Territorial Road. It was the first trail into Houston and it was not much of a trail. The only work which had been done was some spading down of banks of creeks and ditches. A road was built from Houston down to Hokah on the south side of the river in 1854, but it did not go all the way to La Crosse. The valley bottom lands were full of timber and marsh lands and it would have been more work to build a road in the valley.

“Some men had been up in the valley here the previous year, and one of them, a Swede named Lundblad, wrote home to Sweden about the valley, and the letter was published in the Swedish papers. His widow

lived in Red Wing later, where she had a restaurant where I used to get ice cream. She never married again. She had a daughter. We passed through lots of good government land in Illinois but nothing would satisfy the people but they should come to the Root River valley of which they had heard. We stayed at Looney’s that first night from La Crosse, sleeping outside his shanty. Knutson sent down two yoke of oxen for us the next day. Knutson was the first storekeeper in Lower Town, and he named Houston after Houston, Texas, where he came from. He was a rebel in the Civil War.

“We waded the Root River about where the old mill race came in. The water was clear then. We could see the bottom clear across. In Lower Town there was a Wing loghouse in which Knutson lived, and another where Stafford lived. Knutson traded with the Indians a good deal. Stafford was a boot and shoemaker, and had his sign out. He pre-empted land, too, of course. Both were married. Stafford’s wife had been an actress in England, and Stafford also came from there. Stafford was a smart man but a heavy drinker.

“A fellow named Moore had a loghouse over under the hill where Frank Abraham lives. Irish Hogarth bought Moore out later the same year we came. We stayed in Lower Town only a short time and then moved over on Swede Bottom and pitched our tents about where the church

stands. On the tableland where Arthur Anderson's house is now, they built a big log house eighteen feet square, all one room, where four of the families lived during the winter. This was the first house on the bottom. A little south of Little Roy's place upon the hill they built a house for the Reddings who had too big a family to live with the others. Across a driveway from the big house was the stable for the cows.

Oxen has no Swedish

"My father and Abraham went to Decorah, Iowa, and purchased a yoke of oxen for each family that fall. Father bought a yoke of cattle and a cow and they got an old wagon to ride in. They did not know how to drive the oxen, for in Sweden they were always driven with a line. The oxen didn't understand Swedish either. They didn't know how to put the yoke on, so they put it on wrong and the oxen didn't understand and they danced around a long time. I had a pair of oxen once, and when you put the yoke on one, the other would come for quite a distance and put his head under the other side of the yoke.

Life in Swede Bottom

"We staked out our claims the first year. The land had just been surveyed before we came. The surveyors had marked trees where there were trees. Other places they had built up a little mound and put in a stick. If the men had pre-empted they would have had ten or fifteen years before the government called for the money and they'd have got it for \$1.25 an acre. But sharpers got a hold of them and lent gold to people so they could buy right away and charged 50% interest. We had to buy provisions the first year. Flour was \$15.00 a barrel. Pork was \$25.00 a barrel and we were cheated because there was side pork only on top. The rest was split heads. These had been shipped up the river and bought at Levy's in La Crosse. We bought venison from the Indians and shot prairie chicken and partridges. We had some flint rifles and cap shotguns.

"The men worked all the first winter cutting and hauling logs for the houses to be built next spring. They helped each other put up the houses. Abraham's house was put up first. It was up to the road closer at first, but it was swampy there so that he moved it back to the knoll where the same house still stands now. The next house was on J. F.'s farm where Curtis is now and was built for F. O. Nilson, but F. O. went to Carver, Minnesota, where there were already Swedes to stay there for the following winter. Redding's built their house near the old schoolhouse. David Johnson built here where Houston is now on the north side of the railroad track, about where Ed Peterson lives, a little west of Sanderson's. Lars Johnson built his house in a low place up in John Ver Vatt's pasture, and the first flood nearly drowned them all. The water was four feet up in the house before they woke up. The houses of the Johnson families were built in the fall with the help of the Swede Bottom folks.

"The men used butternut or walnut that split straight for a roof. Later we made shingles with a draw shave knife.

"In 1854 Albert Olson came and located up in the little cooley where Rasmussen has his house now, this side of Tennis Tennison's. The house is gone now but plum trees are still standing where it was. An American family named Johnson also came that year and built upon the Sliter farm west of Houston. The Badger Norwegians came in 1854 too. Ole Findring and many others had settled first in Wisconsin in '52. There were no houses along the ridge road to La Crosse until '55. Then there were two houses built. A man named Van Sickle had a house between Storer Valley and Day Valley in the fall of '53, near Vick's old place, or between Vick's and Bertscelf's house.

"In breaking we had two or three yoke of cattle for each plow. The plows were so clumsy that just one team couldn't do a thing. They were made by a blacksmith in Lower Town, Pete Ericsson, I think. In the low places the sod was tough, a kind of muck.

On the higher places there was a sandy loam which broke easily. My, I was tired driving oxen. I had to do it when I was too small and I got hoarse yelling at them. I stayed with David Johnson after my mother died, and in 1855 broke with oxen across the lot where our house here in Houston is now. I was barely ten years old then. We built little log barns for the oxen and covered the roofs with slough grass. We cut wild grass with old time scythes. We had no tame grass for many years.

My father's farm

"My father had an acre of fine wheat that first year. We threshed the wheat with a flail on a split log floor in a lean-to on the house. We also had planted potatoes. We had only our tool chests and clothes chest from the old country. We made all our furniture. We didn't use fireplaces. We had bought stoves in Rock Island and the pipes went up through the roof. I think the three families had one stove the first year, a kind of poor concern for the stove too. There were eleven of us in that one house. Sister Nellie didn't come up till '55.

Cholera hits

"Four of the women and a small boy died in the first part of that summer (1854) of cholera. They were Abraham's wife, John Anderson's wife, Lars Johnson's wife, and my mother, and Abraham's son (Frank Abrahamson's half-brother). There were only two women left. There were no doctors. It went so fast we couldn't get any. My mother died in the night, though she was well the evening before. Afterwards, they all got the ague. It came the next summer again. On Swede Bottom, only my father and I didn't have it. We went around giving the sick ones water. They got cold and shivered first, and then the fever took them, and they sweated and got so weak they were unable to move from their beds. The ague came for many years until the ground got broken up and drier. The women who died from cholera were buried in the little plot on Arthur Anderson's place,

near the big house. My father was later buried there too. There are nine altogether buried there.

Life goes on

"My father married again in '55 or '56 to a woman who had come with us from Sweden as far as Rock Island. Her husband had died on the way over. Lars Johnson married an old "Miss" who came up from Rock Island, too. John Anderson never married again. Abraham went to La Crosse and met his second wife while working there, a "Miss" too. She is Frank's and John's and Aaron's and Lena's mother. A sister of David Johnson's came here in '55 and lived with him. My father and older brother Charlie went down to work on the mill dam in Hokah for awhile. I lived with David Johnson's when they moved the Sioux Indians up the Territorial Road and west to their reservation. Stray Chippewa Indians stayed around here and begged a

good deal. After we got so we could live off the farm, I lived at home with father.

"Then in 1859 I went up to Red Wing and lived with David Johnson's who had moved up there two years before. He moved because of the floods which used to take the plowed ground too. They had big floods then too. The river was dammed often by brush and logs and could only run off on the flat bottom lands. I guess if they had known of the floods they wouldn't have been so anxious to settle here. But it looked pretty nice when they came. There were no trees to grub on the bottom lands a little away from the river banks; there was only tall grass, so tall you could only see a man when he was on horseback. There was very little timber then on the sidehills either. The Indians had always set fire to the grass in the fall so as to get new grass for the deer and their ponies. The Indians had their certain districts that they were

responsible for burning. There were lots of deer here then, but few buffalo. They were further west, up on the prairies.

"The Indians did not live around Houston here but further down toward the Mississippi. They came up the river often in their canoes to hunt here. The second summer we were here, one of their chiefs died and they buried him up on the tableland now owned by Dr. Onsgard west of the village. They buried him sitting up with the dirt only up to his waist. Then they built a little log house around him. Father and Abraham and I went up there to see it after it was built. The old Chief had a red blanket around his shoulders.

"My, I wish there were fish in the rivers now like there was then. We used to catch three and four pound black bass, and I tell you they were good."

Submitted by Pam Berwen.

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What the church records tell about the Benson family

As the above interviews were done when Ben was very old, it might be of some interest to see what the Swedish church records from Värö tell about the family.

First, Ben's name in the Värö church records is *Berndt*, son of Olof Berndtsson and his wife Inger Christina Lyckberg of Lingome 12 (Värö CI:6 [1839-1860] image 34 / p. 61), and he was born 12 June 1845.

According to the Värö cl. survey his family consisted of Olof Berndtsson (b. 3 Feb. 1812); wife Inger Christina Lyckberg (b. 23 Mar. 1818); s. Carl August (b. 21 Apr. 1840); d. Petronella (b. 31 Aug. 1842); s. Berndt (see above); d. Johanna (b. 25 Jun. 1848, died 2 Aug. 1848); d. Britta Johanna (b. 25 Oct. 1849); d. Olena Christina (b. 24 Feb. 1852, died 31 Mar. 1852) and Olivia (b. 8 Feb. 1853). (Värö AI:19 [1844-1857] image 332 / p. 322).

In this cl. survey there is also a note about the wife Inger Christina "has deserted the Christian faith, has refused to be churchd after giving birth in 1849."

In the Värö moving-out record the Olof Berndtsson family is #4, which means they left early in the year 1853, but no date is given. It is a miracle that little Olivia survived the trip, as she was born in February 1853. (Värö B:1 (1844-1860) image 18). The Berndtsson family are called "Anabaptists."

In the book *Halländska emigrant-öden* (1996), p. 179, it is stated that they left from Värö on 5 May 1853 in the company of a couple of other families, and they arrived in New York on 24 June. The leader of the group was Fredrik Olaus Nilsson, a cousin of Inger Christina Lyckberg, but more famous for having converted a number of people to the Baptist faith. Doing this was still forbidden in Sweden, and F.O. Nilsson had been expelled from the country for this, and was probably in Helsingör in Denmark at the time the Berndtssons left Sweden.

The ban on "free churches" (*konventikelplakatet*) was abolished in 1858, and F. O. Nilsson's expulsion

was retracted in 1860. He returned to Sweden in 1860, but again settled in the U.S. in 1868. He died in Houston, MN, in 1881.

Olof Berndtsson was born 3 Feb. 1812 in Lingome (Värö CI:5 [1797-1838] image 61 / p. 109). His parents were Berent Persson and his wife Anna Larsdotter. The farm was at that time called Nils Nilsgård. Berent was born in 1770, and wife Anna in 1774, d. Petronella in 1799, s. Lars in 1800, d. Brita in 1806, d. Christina in 1808, and son Olof in 1812 (Värö AI:14 [1812-1818] image 25 / p. 45).

Inger Christina Lyckberg was born 24 Mar. 1818 at Clagård on Vendelsö (Värö CI:5 [1797-1838] image 87 / p. 161). Her parents were the chief mate Claes Lyckberg, and his wife Brita Werdelin. Claes was born in 1780, and his wife Brita in 1777. They had children: d. Johanna Catharina, b. 1815, d. Inger Christina, b. 1818, d. Anna Stina, b. 1821 (Värö AI:15 [1819-1825] image 56 / p. 105).

Elisabeth Thorsell