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Postmark Hyssna: Connecting Swedish and American Cousins

A true story about the importance of a postmark

BY J. H. FONKERT, CG

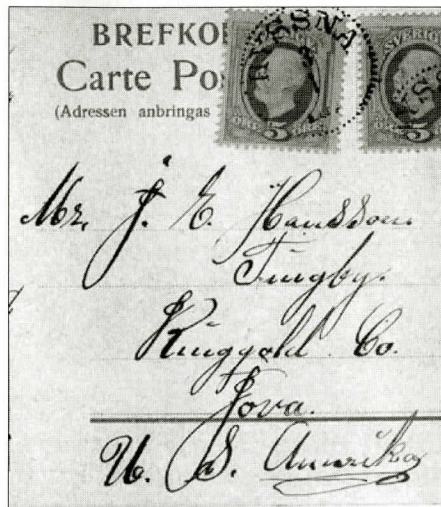
It started with a postmark. It ended with undeniable evidence that Åke and Rolf were my Swedish cousins.

My grandfather, John Hanson, died in 1964 in Iowa, when I was 14 years old. I knew he was Swedish – after all, he was hugely proud of the Swedish heavyweight boxer, Ingemar Johansson. He fit my stereotype of Swedish, with blue eyes and “light” (tending toward blond) hair, but I don’t recall him or my mother ever drawing any attention to their Swedish heritage.

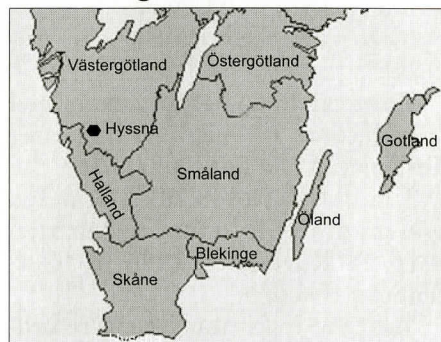
Family history was hardly on my mind as a youth, but when I was at most 13, I asked Grandpa Hanson where he came from. As I recall, he said Gothenburg (*Göteborg*), but I also remember something about Malmö. Whichever city he named was good enough for me at the time – after all, they were Swedish.

Thirty years later, a packet of some two dozen letters addressed to my grandfather in Iowa drew my attention. Written mostly between 1910 and 1912, they were stamped and postmarked in Sweden and, of course, written in Swedish – a language that was Greek to me.

But, I did understand postmarks. At some point as a child, I had actually collected postmarks – I’m not sure where I got the idea or what happened to the piles I collected from around the world. I think I especially liked postmarks because they stood for real places. The Swedish letters were boldly postmarked “Hyssna.”



Hyssna was not obvious on any small-scale maps of Sweden. In 1992-93, one couldn’t just Google “Hyssna” or type “Hyssna” into Google Maps or the Geonet Name Server. Instead, I phoned the American Swedish Institute across the river in Minneapolis and asked for help. They gave me the postal code and told me that Hyssna was a small town of about 700 people about 25 miles southwest of Göteborg.



Map of southern Sweden.

Letters give hints

While most of the letters were written to my grandfather about 1910-1913, the packet included a couple of later letters from the late 1950s addressed to my mother.

They were sent by a Hildur Edberg and postmarked Hyssna. So, armed with the postal code, I did the obvious thing: I addressed a letter to “Family Edberg” in Hyssna, 551 02 Sweden. (Wouldn’t you know, my current U.S. Zip Code is 55113?). I had no idea if any Edbergs were still in Hyssna, but figured it was a small town, so maybe someone named Edberg would get them.

This was in, perhaps, January. A few months later, about March or April, a letter postmarked Hyssna came in the mail. It was from Hildur’s son, Åke. Yes, he remembered his mother saying that she had a cousin (my mother) in America. I wrote back, “Can we visit you in Sweden this summer?” Of course, he answered.



In August we drove up to an ordinary, commonplace red frame house

on the edge of Hyssna. Åke and his brother Rolf were there to greet us. Dinner was on the table almost immediately. Our introduction to Swedish cuisine was *smörgåstårta* (sandwich cake). My journal says:

"Dinner was amazing – something called sandwich cake – seven layers of bread, cheese, cold meats, eggs, kiwi, and all kinds of bizarre things we couldn't recognize. Oh, I forgot, it also had shrimp."

It got mixed reviews from our Midwestern palates, but the best treat came after dinner. Åke went upstairs and brought down his mother's photo album. He turned to the first page and asked, "Do you know who these little boys are?" "Of course," I answered. "That's my brother and me."

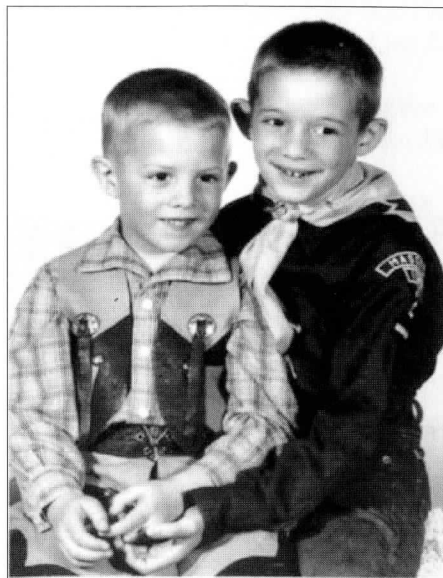
The family relationships

We had already figured out the genealogy – Hildur Edberg and my mother were first cousins. That is, Hildur's mother was my grandfather's older sister. So, Åke and Rolf were my second cousins (*sysling*). But the deal-sealing proof was in the picture. Somehow, a picture of my brother and me had found its way to Hyssna. Apparently, my mother had sent a picture of her two young boys to her Swedish cousin whom she had never met.

So much for the idea that my mother and grandfather were not in

touch with their Swedish roots! Letters carried across the ocean – first by boat and later by plane – were the threads by which the Swedish and American families maintained contact.

Grandpa Hanson never returned to Sweden after his 1908 immigration, and none of his Swedish family had been to America. Finally, in 1993, the families had reconnected.



Oh, yes... here's the photo. At least, I think this is the one that was in Åke's mother's album. This was 23 years ago, and I didn't think to take a photo of the album page. This photo is from the right time frame, and it is the picture stuck in my mind's eye when I think about that evening in Hyssna.

Postscript

When this all happened more than 20 years ago, I knew virtually nothing of the records genealogists use to trace ancestry.

Today, I wouldn't need the postmark to learn Grandpa Hanson's origins.

However, had I not first examined Iowa records, I would have had some difficulty. When he registered for the U.S. military draft in 1917, Grandpa told the draft board that he had been born 24 November 1888 in "Gottenburg, Sweden."

The 1925 Iowa state census recorded his father's name as "M. Hanson."

His 1964 death certificate – often a less reliable source for birth information – stated that John Hanson was born in "West Gothland-Hyssna" and that his father was "Mans Hanson."

The death certificate carried the best-quality information. It not only correctly name Hyssna, it correctly named John Hanson's father.

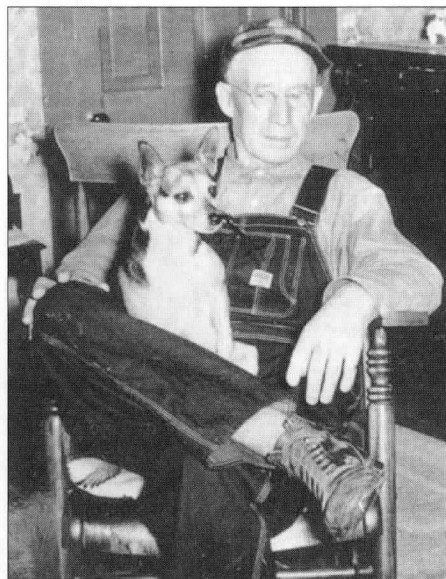
The name caused some problems. When Grandpa Hanson petitioned ("second papers") for citizenship in 1915, the court rejected the petition in part because "John Hanson" was an "assumed and fictitious name." In response to a question, Johan/John had admitted "his true name in his native country was Manson."

It now dawned on me: at some point Grandpa had chosen to use his father's patronymic name as a surname. Instead of being John, son of Mans, he was now John, son of Mans Hanson.

I had been searching for John Hanson in passenger arrival records, but had not found a good match for my grandfather. I now searched for John Manson, and in due time found Johan Emanuel Månsson arriving at Quebec in 1908. The *S.S. Kensington* manifest stated that he had been born in Hyssna and that his nearest relative at home was his sister, Anna Rosenquist, of "Locko Hyssna" (*Lockö*).

Only when I ventured into the Swedish records did I understand that my great-grandfather's given name was properly spelled Måns and that I should be looking for Johan, son of Måns. Indeed, the September 1908 Göteborg departure records included "Johan Em. Månsson" from Hyssna parish in Älvsborg. The Hyssna moving records (*utflyttningslängd*) listed the departure of Johan Emanuel Månsson on 7 Sep. 1908 from Hyssnabacka Västergård. The parish household records (*husförhörslängd*) identified Johan Emanuel as the son of Måns Hansson.

Case closed: My grandfather, Johan Emanuel Månsson, left Hyssna in 1908 for Iowa, where he used the name John E. Hanson.



John E. Hanson.

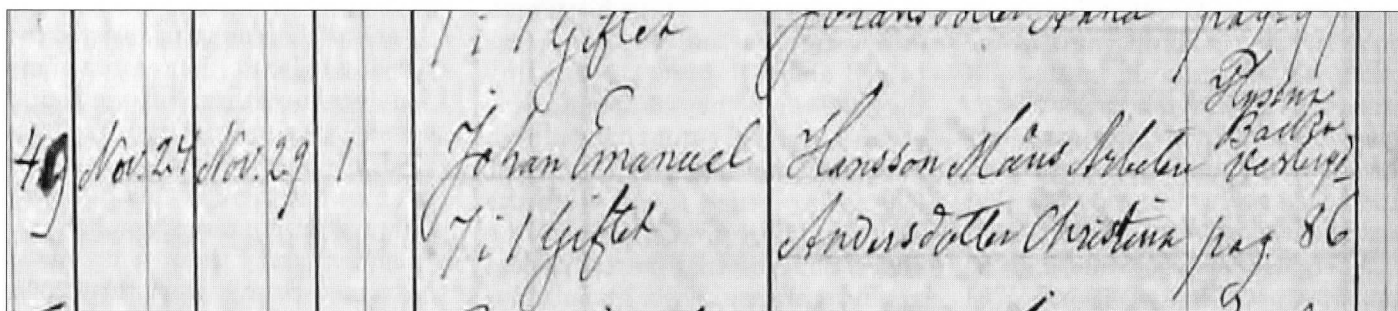


John E. Hanson and his horses on the farm in Tingley, Ringgold County, Iowa.



Hyssna old church.

The church was first built in the 1100s, but was restored and rebuilt in the 1700s. It was in use as a parish church until 1907, when a new church opened. Now it is used for weddings and other ceremonies during the summer months.



Birth record for Johan Emanuel Månsson (Hyssna C:7 [1861-1894] Image 154. Arkiv Digital.)

13.							
14.	Arb. Måns Hansson	72	5/3	16.	7/1		
	H. Christina Andersdotter	44	4/9	"	18/12	v	
	D. Emma Christina	72	14/11	"		v	
15.	" Anna Mathilda	74	11/10	"		v	
	" Josefina	79	14/12	"		v	
16.	Stjufd. Maria Emanuelsdotter	69	31/7	"		v	
	dotter Hanna Charlotta (5)	82	3/4	"		v	
17.	son Johan Emanuel (5. Nov. 1884)	85	7	7/1		v	88 12/11
	Son Johan Emanuel	88	5/4	7/1		v	
18.	dotter Sofia Mathildasdotter	79	7/2	"		v	

The Hyssna clerical survey (husförhörslängd) 1882-1890. p. 86. (Hyssna AI:18 [1882-1890] Image 97 / pag. 86. Arkiv Digital.)

This entry shows that Måns is a laborer (*arbetare*), and that he is 22 years older than his wife that he married on 28 Dec. 1871. Both he and his wife are born in Hyssna. His wife had been married before, as there is a stepdaughter (*stjufdotter*) Maria Emanuelsdotter, born 31 July 1869 in the family. This girl's patronymic

indicates that her father was named Emanuel. It was customary for a widow to name a child of the right sex after her deceased spouse. Her first son was named Johan Emanuel, but he died 17 Nov. 1888, just before the immigrant Johan Emanuel was born, so he was given the same name.

The family lived at Hyssnabacke

Västergård in Hyssna, Västergötland, Sweden.

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