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A Swedish Cowboy in the Rockies?¹

BY BRITA BUTLER-WALL, PH.D.

What was it like for the 'last of the Old West cowboys' transitioning into trail guides and caddies? Why was a Swede from the Illinois prairie ranching in the Colorado Rockies a hundred years ago?

In the early 1900s, young Will Johnson left his parents' home in the Swedish village of Bishop Hill, Ill., and struck out for the Wild West. The village had been founded as a Swedish colony in 1846 and many still spoke Swedish. The men drank coffee from saucers and the women often wore headscarves. Within a few years, Will was working on a large cattle ranch near Allenspark, CO, in what would soon become the Rocky Mountain National Park.

I knew almost nothing about my grandmother's uncle, Will Johnson. As a young woman, my grandmother Berenice Johnson and her sister Bertha, had visited him in Colorado with their cousin Ruby Lindquist. This trip was the highpoint of her life, both figuratively and literally. Inheriting her photo album piqued my curiosity. What brought this Swedish Uncle Will out west? Where did he live? What was his life like?

I was determined to find out more. After wading through old letters and obituaries, searching through immigrant records and a database of immigrants and descendants of Bishop Hill, visiting the archives of the Bishop Hill Heritage Association, and reading local Colorado histories, I hit the road. In July 2010 my three sisters, three of our cousins, and I (all descendants of the Swedish colonists in Bishop Hill) spent a week together in Estes Park, CO. In the Estes Park Museum we acquired local histories of the area. With our grandmother's

photo album as guide, we tracked Grandma (Johnson) Florine, searching for our great-great Uncle Will. In searching for this Uncle Will, we discovered a new side of the Wild West.

Son of Swedish immigrants

William (Will) Johnson was born 20 Jan. 1867 in Bishop Hill, IL, one of six children born to Magnus and Christine Johnson.



Will Johnson (1867–1933).

Bishop Hill colonist Magnus Johnson, born 5 Aug. 1836 in Sunnanå, Söderala parish (Häls.), had arrived in the colony in the fall of 1850 with his parents at the age of 14. After the colony dissolved in 1861–62, Magnus Johnson opened a harness shop with a dwelling above it on E. Main Street, just behind the Steeple Building.

In Bishop Hill, Magnus Johnson held various offices including township assessor and township collector,

police magistrate, justice of the peace, and notary public. According to his obituary, "He was a man of strong convictions, always taking a stand for that which he thought was right."²

Will's mother was colonist Christina Wahlström, born at Sälja in Nora parish, (Väsm.) on 30 Jan. 1838. She arrived in America at the age of 12 with her parents, eight sisters, and two brothers.³ She married Magnus Johnson in Bishop Hill in 1862, just as the colony was dissolving.

The move west

Will grew up in the Bishop Hill area but in his early twenties left for the west. I could not discover when he left, but he returned for a visit at age 26 from Stromsburg, Nebr., over 450 miles away.⁴ Stromsburg had been founded by Swedes from Ockelbo (Gäst.) who had arrived on the ship *Carolina* in 1856 and after a few years in Illinois, moved west to Nebraska. Stromsburg, 100 miles west of Omaha, still calls itself the 'Swede Capital of Nebraska.'⁵

To Colorado

In August 1910, at the age of 43, Will took a train from Stromsburg further west to Colorado, another 500 miles. He wrote to a brother back in Bishop Hill that he had found a new job, doing construction:

"Came up the Hills two weeks ago. Struck a job by Longs Peak house building cottages at a summer resort. Will stay here all winter on my way down after my [unintelligible]. How is Mother and all of you[?] built 3 houses on the valley since I heard from you. Write more latter. [sic] Address my mail is Longs Peak In [sic]."⁶

Long's Peak Inn was near Allenspark, south of Estes Park, on the edge of what in 1915 would become the Rocky Mt. National Park—a dry area of pines, aspen, and sandstone ridges called the “Lyons Formation,” created by ancient sand dune deposits. The railroad brochures waxed poetic about the area:

*“Rocky Mountain National Park is a marvelous grouping of gentleness and grandeur; an eloquent, wordless hymn, sung in silent, poetic pictures; a wilderness mountain world of many groves and grass plots, crags and canyons, rounded lakes with shadow-matted shores that rest in peace within the purple forest. There are wild flowers of every color, and many a silken meadow edged with ferns. Brokenness and beauty, terrace upon terrace, a magnificent hanging wild garden. Over these terraces waters rush and pour. From ice-sculptured, snow-piled peaks, young and eager streams leap in white cascades between crowding cliffs and pines.”*⁷

The Allenspark region had been homesteaded in the 1860's by miners headed into the Colorado mountains prospecting miners headed into the Colorado mountains prospecting.⁸ By the 1880s, there were large herds of cattle in Estes Park, as well as sawmills, stage lines, and hotels.

A “thriving summer tourist industry” was well underway.⁸

Colorado booming

In the years immediately after Will's arrival, tourism boomed in Colorado. Lodges, cabins, and resorts sprang up around Allenspark, with an elevation of 8,521 feet. Americans became fascinated with a ‘Western experience’ and started taking vacations. Trails were constructed to open up the mountains to hikers.⁹

Getting to Allenspark was not a problem. In 1914 the Estes Park Transportation Company offered trips via Stanley Steamer “along the banks of the beautiful St. Vrain River.” Visitors could take the C&S RR from Denver at 8:20 am and arrive at Estes Park by 1:00 pm. In 1920 the Fall River Road from Estes Park to Grand Lake opened up the wilderness, and thousands of visitors entered the Rocky Mountain National Park.¹⁰

Will Johnson went to work for a man named Burns Will (1869-1950), an early settler in Allenspark and commissioner from Boulder County who built Copeland Lake Lodge in 1914,¹¹ on land homesteaded by John Copeland. This ranch was south of Estes Park, in an area known as Wild Basin, near the southeast entrance

to today's Rocky Mountain National Park. The lodge was expanded and renamed Wild Basin Lodge.¹² By 1921 a visitor described it as: “an attractive place with accommodations for ninety people. It has hot and cold running water, electric light, baths, a large office, comfortable lounge, and well-appointed dining room. The meal was excellent.” He noted that the Copeland Lake Lodge offered “riding, hiking, tennis, and indoor amusements.”

Burns Will later operated another resort called ‘Will's Resort’ in Allenspark. That resort was later named Point-O-Pines.¹³ In the late 1920s it was managed along with the nearby Highlands cabins by a former concert violinist named Augusta ‘Gussie’ Mengedoht.¹⁴

The ranch in 1924

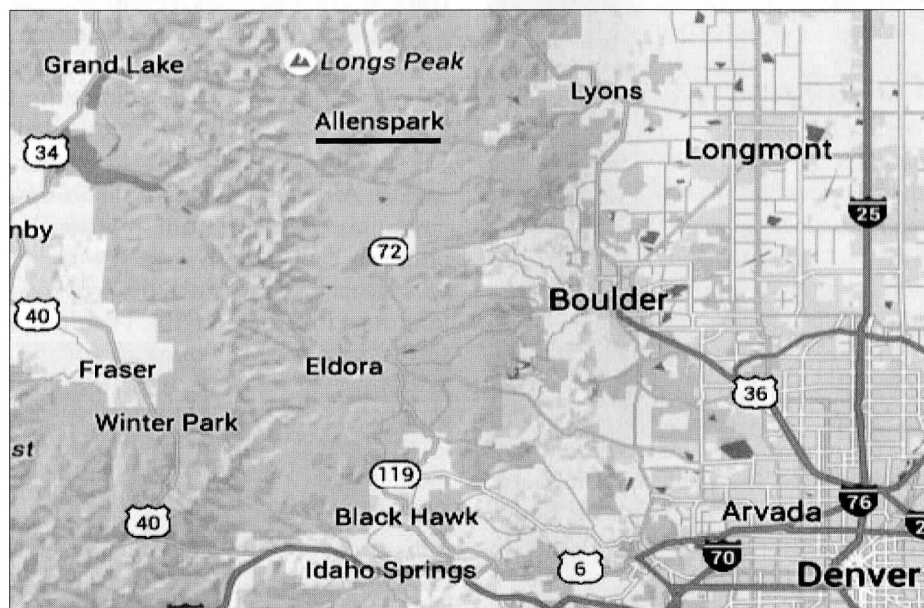
When my grandmother Berenice, her sister Bertha, and their cousin Ruby Lindquist visited in the summer of 1924,¹ Burns Will's ranch had 900 cattle, a cook, and young cowboys, including Charles Wolf and ‘Slim’ Parish with his horse, Dynamite.

The cook was an African-American woman with a husband and several daughters. The youngest was called “Idela Chocolate-Drop Stick-in-the-Mud,” presumably meant to be an affectionate nickname in those days.

Berenice Johnson's photo album showed her girls climbing Long's Peak, 14,259 feet high. At the Wild Basin ranger station, U.S. forest rangers at Long's Peak compared the photos to their model of the mountain and helped us trace their route up Long's Peak in 1924.

Burns Will's ranch may have been a working ranch, with its 900 head of cattle, but in the summer it was also a resort. Tourists ‘motored to the valley,’ ‘enjoyed a good swim in Copeland Lake,’ and held ‘Rook parties,’ a card-game similar to Bridge.¹⁶ By 1924, this resort had a 9-hole golf course with a clubhouse run by a golf pro who offered instruction. The clubhouse had a shower and electric lights. There was no greens fee.¹⁷

The resort also offered fishing,



Estes Park is about 16 miles straight north of Allenspark.



Cowhand Fred with some of the 900 head of cattle on Burns Will's ranch. Photo by Berenice Johnson, 1924.

saddle horses, and club dances on Saturday nights. The hotel was a log building with electricity, hot and cold running water, and a bath. The resort served meals of chicken and mountain trout. In addition, they rented out furnished log cabins with rock fireplaces – this area was called ‘the Highlands.’

Entertaining guests was serious business on these Colorado guest ranches. Other ranches offered similar amenities. By 1921 Long's Peak Inn featured a showroom for nature study, the “Gallery of Nature.” Long's Peak Inn had two dining rooms, one for regular guests and reserved seats; the other where transients could get a chicken dinner for \$1.75.¹⁸ Elkhorn Lodge dug a swimming pool, though the water was icy.¹⁹



Berenice and Ruby 1924.

After their summer at Will's ranch, Berenice and Bertha returned to Illinois. Berenice started teaching at Wauconda high school in Illinois, 165 miles north of Bishop Hill, and Bertha taught in the two-room schoolhouse in the village of Bishop Hill. Their cousin Ruby Lindquist, however, moved to Stockton, CA, that year and married a man from Boulder, CO. He may well have been a guest or even a cowhand at Will's ranch.

Cowboying days end

Will returned to Bishop Hill for an extended visit during 1920-21, the last years of his parents' lives. After their deaths, he returned to Colorado and worked another ten years. In 1931, his own failing health forced him to seek a lower altitude and he moved nearly 400 miles east, to Holdrege, Nebraska, where other families with ties to Bishop Hill had moved.²⁰

He lived for the last two years of his life with his first cousin, Victor Carl Carlson and Victor's wife, Laura Amelia Anderson, a Swedish-American from Andover, IL.²¹

Will died, following a stroke, on June 23, 1933, at Holdrege, NE, at age 66. The funeral was held at his

widowed sister-in-law Emma's home in Bishop Hill. His cousin Victor came from Holdrege for the funeral, and helped bury Will Johnson, the Swedish cowboy, in the Bishop Hill Cemetery.

Conclusion

Will Johnson left his Swedish community of Bishop Hill on the Illinois prairie and made a life for himself in the Colorado Rockies. His life on the guest ranch may have involved learning new dances more than lassoing calves, caddying golfers more than corralling broncos, and guiding hikers more than gunning down varmints. Although I was able to discover much about him – when he came to Colorado, where the ranch was located, what ranch life was like, whom he interacted with, I could not find answers to the question of why this young Swede from Bishop Hill chose a life in the Colorado Rockies.

In my search for Uncle Will, I became fond of him, imagining what those 20 years on a ranch were like. But unless more family letters surface, I will never know his reasons for heading west, nor his reasons for staying.

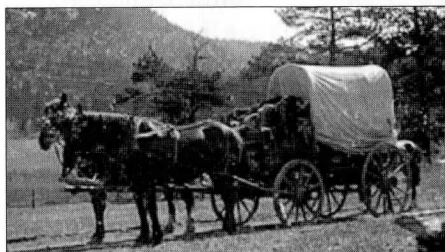
Perhaps he left just for adventure,

finding the village of Bishop Hill too stifling or rigid. Perhaps he needed a job. Perhaps he needed some distance from the father of strong convictions. Why did he stay? Maybe some combination of the beauty of Wild Basin, the outdoor life among mountains and streams, being part of the booming times in Colorado. Or maybe it was a personal connection. Will never married. Maybe he liked the bachelor life. Maybe there was a broken heart or impossible romance in his past. Family research can take us only so far.

Will Johnson escaped the sleepy Swedish-American village of Bishop Hill, Illinois and provided his nieces with the adventures of their lives. And 86 years after their summer in Allenspark, nearly a hundred years after Will moved to the ranch in Colorado, his great-grandnieces rediscovered him.

Endnotes

- 1) Thanks to those on the ancestral journey: Kristin Butler Astle, Sonya Greven Butler, Marta Butler-Bearzi, Benita J. Gonzales, Andrea Gonzales-Johnson, Melissa A. Gonzales, and Risa Puzas Thanks for comments: Gary Bloxham, Peter Curtis, Lynn Knight, David O. Wall, and Scott Wyatt.
- 2) "Pioneer Called," Obituary of Magnus Johnson. Bishop Hill, IL: Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives, April 1921.
- 3) Obituary, Bishop Hill Heritage Association archives, n.d.
- 4) *Galva News*, (12 Oct. 1893). Bishop Hill State Site files.
- 5) Stromsburg, NE.
- 6) Will Johnson to Fred M. Johnson,



Camp wagon on Burn's Will's ranch. (Photo by Berenice 1924).

29 August 29, 1910. Author's collection.

- 7) Enos A. Mills. *An Appreciation of Rocky Mountain National Park*. Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park, Colorado. Burlington Route Streamliner Memories. n.d.
- 8) Patricia A. Welker, *The Highlands Vision: A History of Highlands Presbyterian Camp and Retreat Center, Allenspark, Colorado* (Allenspark, CO: Highlands Presbyterian Camp and Retreat Center, 2001), p. 2.
- 9) John Willy, *A Vacation in the Colorado Mountains 1921*. In *Early Estes Park Narratives*. Vol. II. James H. Pickering, ed. (Estes Park: Alpenaire Publishing, 2004), p. 132.
- 10) Estes Park Trail, 20 June 1914. Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection.
- 11) Willy, "Vacation in Colorado Mountains," p. 134.
- 12) Suzanne Silverthorne. *Around Rocky Mountain National Park*. Postcard History series. 2015. Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC, p. 95.
- 13) "Days and Hours of Estes Park

(1912-1944): The Journal of Charles Edwin Hewes" ed. James H. Pickering, *Early Estes Park Narratives, Vol. III* (Estes Park: Alpenaire, 2004), p. 167 n. 8.

- 14) Sylvia Pettem. 'Gun woman' a jack-of-all-trades in Allenspark. Boulder Daily Camera. Retrieved on 30. Nov. 2015. Jan. 18, 2013.
- 15) "Mrs. Karl J. Hunt, 80, of Bishop Hill, dies," *Galvaland (June 1924)*.
- 16) *Longmont Ledger*, July 27, 1923. Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection. Retrieved Nov. 19, 2015.
- 17) 29 June 1923 *Estes Park Trail* Vol. II.
- 18) Willy, "Vacation in Colorado Mountains," p. 148
- 19) *Memoirs of Eleanor E. Hondius of Elkhorn Lodge*. (Estes Park: Estes Park Museum Friends and Foundation, Inc. 2010, p. 57-58.
- 20) Bob Nelson. *Genealogy of the members of the Bishop Hill Colony and related families*. Database.
- 21) William J. Johnson to Berenice Johnson, 11 February 1931. Author's collection.



Will Johnson's great-great nieces Andrea Gonzales-Johnson, Marta Butler-Bearzi, Risa Puzas, Highlands Retreat Center at Allenspark. (Photo by author, 2010).

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