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A journey from Sweden to America

“The children have so much better chance in this new world”. Part 1.

BY MATILDA PERSDOTTER OLSON

SUBMITTED BY JOHN R. OLSON

In the spring of 1887, when she was only eight years old, my paternal great-grandmother Matilda Persdotter Olson (1878-1972) and her family immigrated from the village of Södra Vallösa in Sjörup parish, (Skån.) Sweden, to America. They traveled via Copenhagen, Glasgow, and across the Atlantic Ocean to New York's Castle Garden immigration center. They would settle in east-central Nebraska where Matilda would spend the rest of her life until her death in 1972. Based on information from the memoir she composed from 1950 to 1962, her parents' motives for leaving Sweden were largely economic: their farm in Sweden was too small and the soil too poor to support her growing family. An additional motive was the earlier immigration of Matilda's uncle (her mother's brother) from Sweden to America; his letters home to Sweden urged the family to come to America as there were much better chances in the new world.

Not surprisingly, the trip in 1887 from Sweden to America and their new home in Nebraska left a strong impression on the young Matilda. In her later years, she was foresighted enough to leave a written record of that time and the journey to America that she experienced. Beginning on New Year's Day in 1950, when Matilda was 71 years of age, she began to “write down some of my life's history” in a spiral notebook. She would continue to use that notebook over the next 12 years to periodically

record her recollections and the events in her life. Matilda died in 1972 at the age of 93. Through her writings, she has provided her descendants with a detailed description of how her family lived in Sweden: how her parents made a living, what they ate, and how, when they butchered the hog at Christmas, “everything was saved except the squeal.” She provided vivid details of the journey from Malmö, Sweden, to Copenhagen and Glasgow, and from there across the Atlantic Ocean to New York. She continues her memoir with the family's somewhat difficult journey by train west from New York to Nebraska.

There is a temptation to try to paraphrase what Matilda wrote about her journey in 1887 in order to better communicate what transpired. I do not feel, however, that I can improve on what Matilda wrote. Her childhood experiences in Sweden and

during the trip to America, as described in the first 20 pages of her 85-page handwritten memoir, were no doubt experienced by thousands of other adults and children leaving Sweden during the late 19th century. But through her writings, Matilda has provided a detailed running narrative of those experiences that can be shared. Thus, other than providing a few explanatory notes and a few selected edits, the following is Matilda Olson's story of her family leaving Sweden and starting a new life in America.

Life in Sweden 1878-1887

I have often said that I would write down some of my life's history but have never gotten around to do it, so today this first of Jan. 1950 I thought I would make a try.

I was born in Sjörup (Skån.) 19 Oct

Personernas Namn, stånd, ombete, yrke och näringslag (hockstuga-, inbyses- och fattigheten), nationalitet (om främmande), lytan (svag- sista, blöda, döftamma).	Födelse-		Ort, (Soken i Län, Stad)	Äktenskap		Flyttat från (Soken i Län, Stad eller pag- i Husförbrö- Boken).	År, månad och dag.	Inflyttning- år:- och månad:-	Bok.
	År.	Mån. och dag.		Gifv.	Enk- ling eller Enka.				
1									
2	1878	26	12	1878					
3	45	8/9	Sjörup						
4	87	2/5	Sjörup						
5	78	10	Sjörup						

The Per Olsson family in Södra Vallösa #10 in Sjörup. (Sjörup AI:16, p. 126. Picture from SVAR / Digitala forskarsalen).

so they went to America in the year of 1879.⁸ Later in the same year, my Uncle Ben (Bengt) and Aunt Hannah were married.⁹ My Aunt Tilda had worked out as a maid for some time until she married Peter Johnson on 23 Feb. 1881.¹⁰

Hannah and Ben's farming life

My uncle Ben and Aunt Hannah stayed in Iowa 2 years and rented a farm, then in 1882 they came to Nebraska and bought 160 acres of land west of Genoa, and built a small granary in the year before they came out to stay. In the spring they loaded all their property and livestock in a boxcar and came early in the spring because Uncle wanted to do some building. He got started on the stable and had the sides up and then a terrible blizzard struck the country. It blew so hard and snowed and they had no shelter for the animals; so Aunt bundled up as best she could and went out and helped my Uncle nail some boards on the roof so they had shelter for the animals. It got so cold that it was impossible to keep warm in the granary where they lived, but they were young and had no family so they cooked their meals and took care of the livestock and then they had to go to bed during part of the day to keep warm. The storm lasted two days. Later the weather changed so they could go on with their work. They started to build their house of three rooms, also had a corn crib and a windmill put up later. The first well they had had a tall bucket which they pulled up with a crank. I think the well was around 70 feet deep. They also had to fight prairie fires in the fall when they saw smoke at a distance. Uncle had to take the team and plow what they called fire lines around the home and then backfire for quite some way so they would not be burned out. Many lost their homes and all they had.

During the five years they had been living on their farm, my mother had kept up the correspondence with them. My Uncle wrote letters to them in Sweden and told them

what a wonderful country America was. He told them anyone that was willing to work would have a good chance of making a living in this country and would not have to slave and work for others all their life like they did in the old country, but could have something of their own.

The decision to go to America, spring 1887

Finally when my parents realized they never could pay for the extra land they had bought, which by the way, cost more than 7,000 [?] *kronor* an acre, they decided to sell their home and sail for America. Uncle wrote them that it is so much better when you have the children to bring them when they are young; they have so much better chance in this new world. They found a buyer.¹¹ A man who had been in America some years and earned quite a lot of money had come back to Sweden to his family. He bought father's home.

That was the first part of 1887. Then the folks had to have a sale and sell all that they had except bedding and such things as they could pack in a big chest and some wearing apparel in sacks and make preparations to go. In the spring of that year, my brother Alfred was born. So now we were five in the family and six with my grandfather who did not want to stay in Sweden with his oldest son Nils, but wanted to go with mother because he had always lived with them. That was quite a few to buy tickets for. I do not know how much each ticket cost for adults. I know they had to pay half-fare for myself and 25 *kronor* for John who was nearly 2 years old.

The voyage to America, May 1887

I will always remember the morning of 18 May. The man that bought our home got a spring wagon and drove us to the railway station. My mother's good friend that she had worked for so many times when she was a girl came running across the oat field to bid a last goodbye. Mother wrote to

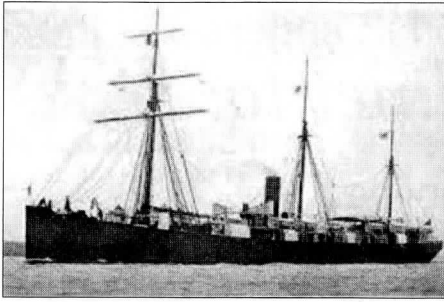
her, and I did also when I was grown up, but we never saw her again. She and her family did not want to come to America; they were quite prosperous where they were and had a good farm.

Well, we were on our way. I do not remember much about the train ride. We arrived at Malmö sometime in the evening and boarded a small ship to go across to Copenhagen in Denmark. That evening while the ship lay at anchor, the older folks went down to their bunks after supper to retire, but the young people stayed on deck and got someone to play a fiddle for them and danced until the ship went out to sea. They all seemed so happy and had a good time, but just after they were out a few miles a storm came up; then the people became seasick and that was another story. Every one nearly was just as sick as could be until morning when we arrived in Copenhagen and could leave the ship.

We stayed there for a short while before we boarded another vessel and sailed on the North Sea to Glasgow in Scotland.

I do not remember much about that trip nor how long we were on the ship, but when we got there to disembark, they just herded us like a group of cattle along the streets to a hotel; no one got a ride but had to walk and that was hard on old people. My grandfather was crippled. He had a broken hip so he limped. He had an awful time to keep up. My father had to take him by the arm, and another young fellow by the name of Nils Munson took the other arm and they helped him along. Besides that, father had to carry John that was 2 years; quite small. Mother carried Alfred and a satchel and I had to run along the best I could. I was supposed to carry the copper pail we brought with us for drinking water. I can remember I fell down many times and bumped the pail. We got to the hotel and had to stay there, I think it was three days, to wait for more passengers before we embarked on the large vessel¹² that took us across the Atlantic Ocean.

I don't remember much about go-



S/S Ethiopia.

ing aboard but I do remember how very poor the accommodations were. We were put 4 families in one room that was not very big. The bunks were in tiers, one section above the others, just made of boards, no mattress unless you brought your own. I think father bought one for grandfather made of gunny sacking and filled with hay before we started. We did not have any table when they served the meals. We had some tin basins for the food which they ladled out of big tubs the waiters carried around and had to sit on the edge of our bunk to eat. We had white bread and soup with quite nice meat for dinner; for supper we had herring and potatoes and tea every forenoon.

About 10:00 they made everyone that was able go on deck to get some air. Another girl that was about 14 years old and I used to go up together. I was just a little past 8 years old. It was cold on deck. We had to bundle up with shawls and head scarfs. And while we were up, the deck hands came down to sweep. The floors were sprinkled with sawdust that had a very strong disinfectant mixed with it; smelled like creosote; I always think of that smell on the ship. The weather was not stormy but very foggy nearly all the time. They would sound the fog horn every few minutes for fear of running into another vessel that they might meet when they could not see but a very short distance ahead.

Arrival in New York, June 1887

It took a week to cross the Atlantic and then we arrived in New York.¹² I can not recall what time of day or night when we arrived, but I remem-

ber they had us disembark when it was day. We had to go through the customs. They opened up our baggage and looked at what we had so that we did not bring anything into the country that was forbidden. Later at a place called Castle Garden¹³ we all had to go before a doctor before we were allowed to proceed. My brother John had something breaking out on his body which was caused by the heavy clothing and warm weather coming on. They almost refused to let us pass, and grandfather was old; 73 years. They would never have let him pass, only my Uncle¹⁴ had taken the precaution of having a contract drawn up and it was signed by him here in his hometown of America to the effect that he would be responsible for his keep and care upon arriving that we had to show in written English. Of course, we could not speak a single word of English to make our wants known. They passed us on, and the next thing was getting on a train and going inland. When we started, we were a whole train-load of immigrants. I don't know how many cars but as we proceeded, many came to their destination in the eastern states and got off at their address. One episode I forgot to mention while we were on the ship passing over, there was a great company of Jews in the next rooms to us. They spoke a different language than we, and they were so noisy we could hardly get any peace to sleep till midnight. I think they were performing their religious rites by sometimes mumbling and at other times very loud, prayers. After leaving the ship, we never saw them again.

(To be continued)

Endnotes:

- 1) The father Per (Peter) Olsson was born 26 Dec. 1846 in Katslösa (Skån.) and the mother Elna Mårtensdotter was born 8 Sep. 1845 in Snårestad (Skån.). The couple were married on 1 Feb. 1878 (Sjörup AI:16, p. 126, *Arkiv Digital*).
- 2) Mårten Bengtsson (1813-1891), Matilda's maternal grandfather.

- 3) Södra Vallösa, Sjörup parish, Malmöhus län, Sweden.
- 4) From a separate two-page remembrance composed by Matilda Olson on 14 Dec. 1952.
- 5) Bengt Mårtensson was born 8 July 1850 in Sjörup, and left on 7 May 1875 from Mossby in Västra Nöbbelöv (Skån.) for America (*Emibas*).
- 6) Peter Johnson (1846-1928).
- 7) Matilda's mother's sister, Matilda Mårtensdotter, born 28 Jan. 1855 in Sjörup, and had first left her home in 19 April 1877 to go to Roskilde in Denmark, and left for the U.S. in 1879 (*Emibas*). She was known as Boel in Sweden, but changed her name to Matilda in the U.S.
- 8) Matilda Mortenson and Hanna Olson both arrived in New York on July 28, 1879 on the ship *Helvetia*, (New York passenger lists [1820-1957], *Ancestry.com*). Hanna was born 30 March 1850 in Katslösa, and left 24 June 1879 from Slimminge (Skån.) for America (*Emibas*).
- 9) Ben Mortenson and Hanna Olson were married in Fremont County, Iowa, on 15 August 1879 (Fremont Co. Iowa, marriage records). Their wedding day was just over two weeks after Hanna's arrival in America.
- 10) Peter Johnson and Matilda Mortenson were also married in Fremont County, Iowa, on 23 Feb. 1881 (Fremont Co., IA, marriage records).
- 11) A buyer for their farm in Södra Vallösa.
- 12) Matilda and her family arrived in New York on 6 June 1887 on the *S/S Ethiopia* (Anchor Line) out of Glasgow (New York Passenger Lists, [1820-1957]. *Ancestry.com*).
- 13) Castle Garden, the New York immigration center on Manhattan Island, operated from 1855-1890.
- 14) Bengt (aka Ben) Mortenson (1850-1937), by this time living near Genoa, in Nance County, Nebraska.

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