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# Swedish American By-names

Henry Hanson\*

Most of us know that our Viking ancestors used by-names in order to identify individuals with identical first names as well as patronymics. Thus Eiríkr Thorvaldsson was called Eiríkr Raudi, or “Erik the Red” and his son, Leifr Eiríksson, Leifr Heppni or “Leif the Lucky”.

The use of by-names persisted in Scandinavia until the second half of the 19th century, and still does to a certain extent in Iceland today.<sup>1</sup> Family names *per se* were uncommon in the rural population. Patronymics were used, where *-son* or *-dotter* was added to the possessive form of the father's first or Christian name. Thus, for example, my father, Henning, being the son of August Hansson, was Henning Augustsson and his older sisters, Selma and Alma, were Selma and Alma Augustsdotter respectively. It was only after arrival in the U.S. that they retained the simpler form of Hansson or Hanson. Since the names used in the rural parishes were few and mainly historical or Biblical in origin, there were any number of boys named Karl, Anders, Petter, Nils, Johan, Bengt, Erik and Gustaf. Since the patronymics were used also as last names, many people thus had the first name and the same patronymic as many others in the parish. Consequently a small community could have a number of Karl Anderssons, Erik Gustafssons and Sven Johanssons. This prolific use of a few common names often resulted in utter confusion, unless an additional term of designation was used. Officially, the Swedish State Church, which was, and still is responsible for maintaining vital statistics in each parish, added the name of the *gård* (farm) to the Christian name and patronymic. Thus, my father's exit permit reads, “Henning Augustsson i Svalås”.

The identical system prevailed in Norway, but the Norwegian clergymen frequently omitted the preposition “i” (in). Nor did they use the possessive “s”, which resulted in the double “s” in Swedish patronymics. Hence, a Norwegian named Olaf Olesen from a farm named Laingen was called Olaf Olesen Laingen. Many Norwegians, in order to cope with the identity problem, consequently dropped the patronymic and used the name of the *gaard* (farm) as a last name. Thus, Olaf Olesen Laingen became Olaf O. Laingen. This is perhaps why names ending in *-son* or *-sen* are less frequent among Norwegian Americans than among Swedish Americans.

The farm name, therefore, often was used as a by-name. Thus my grandfather was always known as “August i Svalås” in his parish in Småland, and

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my great uncle as "Enok i Östergård". However the Swedish farm population, much like its Icelandic counterpart, went beyond the use of farm names and concocted by-names based upon an individual's physical characteristics, employment, personality traits and habits.

When the Swedish immigrants began arriving in America in large numbers, shortly after the end of the Civil War, the patronymic system still prevailed to a large extent among the country folk. The widespread use of family names, largely associated with nature, such as flora and fauna, points of the compass, and soldiers' names, had just begun.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, many immigrants had identical names — John Johnson, Eric Anderson, Olof Olson, Carl Carlson, etc. (these names are here rendered in their American version). The Swedish Americans, hence, were facing an identity problem, which had to be solved by resorting to the use of by-names.

My essay does not profess to be a definitive and scholarly study of Swedish American by-names. It is based solely upon my personal recollections of the by-names still in use in a small New England industrial town in Connecticut just before World War II, when some of the original immigrants were still alive. These by-names were more or less based on the same categories used by Professor Hale in his interesting article on modern Icelandic by-names.

The by-names used in my childhood in this Swedish American community sought to identify the individual, but in the direct address his American name was usually used. Thus, John L. Johnson was always addressed as John or Mr. Johnson, but in a conversation he would be identified as "John L.". Naturally, the older generation used by-names to a much larger extent than those of us in the second and third generations, but we were all familiar with the by-name system.

Physical size, such as being unusually tall, is obviously apparent in the by-name "Store Jon" (Big John), for John Anderson. One of the intriguing by-names in this category was that used to identify a fellow by the name of Albert Johnson. Albert was a short man, so he became known as "Pojken Johnson" (The Boy Johnson), his wife was known as "Pojkens käring" (The Boy's Wife), his son was known as "Pojkens pojke" (The Boy's Boy), and his grandson in turn was given the by-name of "Pojkens pojkes pojke" (The Boy's Boy's Boy). There was another Albert Johnson in the community, who originally came from the parish of Kånna in Småland and his by-name was always "Albert Kånna" or "Albert Konna". And then there was Bo Nikolaus Anderson, who was lame and was generally known as "Halte Bonik".

One of the older and more devout members of the Swedish Church (i.e. the Augustana Lutheran Church) had the not so unique name of John Johnson. He was called (however, not in his presence) as "Kniva Jon", apparently going back to his youth, when he had more than held his own in the saloon brawls with the Roman Catholic Irish and obviously had demonstrated his skill in wielding his knife. There were two other Swedes in town

with the name of John Johnson, known as “John L.” and “John S.”, and we children referred to them as “Mr. John L.” and “Mr. John S.”.

The place of birth was also used often in the selection of a by-name. My father, Henry Hanson (Henning Hansson) was known as “Smålänningen” (The Smålander), since he was the most outstanding individual among the Swedes in Middletown, CT, who hailed from the province of Småland. An Albert Olson, born on the large island of Öland, off the east coast of Sweden, became known as “Albert Ölänningen” (Albert the Ölander), while Anna Johnson from Norway was known as “Norska Anna” (Norwegian Anna) and her countryman, John Johnson, “Norske Jack” (Norwegian Jack).

As indicated above, a middle initial often tended to be the differentiation between two individuals with the same Christian name and patronymic. Thus, John O. Carlson became “John Ooh”, pronounced with the sound of “oo” as in “ooze”. His wife, of course, was known as Mrs. John Ooh”. One of the many Mrs. Carlsons in my community had previously been married to a chap named Larson, and hence was known as “Mrs. Larson-Carlson”.

It was also quite common to use the name of an employer as a by-name. Hence, a chap by the name of John Anderson, who worked for an Irish liveryman named Lafferty was known throughout his life as “John Lafferty”. An Ida Carlson who worked as a domestic for a non-Swedish family named Spears, was known as “Ida to Spears”, and a man by the name of Arthur Carlson, born in America, was always referred to as “Arthur to Reynolds”, because he was employed by a firm in town called Reynolds Automobile Garage.

Two other well-known Swedish characters come to mind. One chap, whose surname escapes me, was known as “Charlie på stråtet” (Charlie on the Street). He drove a horse and delivery cart for the Grand Union Grocery chain, I believe. Another Swede was John Anderson, who was known as “Crazy Jack” because of his fiery temperament and unbelievable stubbornness. He later moved to Chicago, where he was killed by a streetcar, while walking home in a snow storm. He probably insisted on his right of way and lost that argument.

Some by-names reflected personal characteristics of the individual or some dramatic episode in his or her life. There was an old Swede in my home town with the very common name of Carlson. He had been a rather tyrannical husband and when his wife died, he appeared at the funeral in deep grief, weeping profusely, apparently in remorse for his callous behavior toward her in her lifetime. Henceforth he became known as “Gråtare Carlson” (Weeper Carlson). Another Carlson had a tendency to overindulge in alcoholic beverages and was called “Supare Carlson” (Carlson the Boozer).

Some by-names were mere corruptions of a Christian name. One of the many persons by the name of Oscar Carlson became known as “Ooskie” and to us kids as “Mr. Ooskie”.

There were even some slightly earthy, if not off-color by-names. One

young lady was given the rather unflattering by-name of "Röva" (the Buttocks). It seems that as a young child she attended the Sunday School in the local Lutheran Church. Her father complained that the church sexton had done such a poor job in keeping the toilet facilities in the church clean that his wife had to "tvätta Annas röva" (wash Anna's backside), when she came home from Sunday School. The name stuck and when this person, as a 60-year old, came to visit my 90-year old mother, my mother referred to a visit to her by "Röva". One Robert Johnson, regarded as a rather cunning or sly fellow was as a result known as "Räven" (the Fox), and his gentle, sweet wife, had to suffer with her by-name "Rävskan" (The She Fox).

Some by-names indicated a marital relationship. Thus Fred Anderson's wife was called "Fred's Frida" (Fred's Frida), and Anna Johnson, the wife of "John L.", mentioned earlier, was "Johns Annie" (John's Annie).

Finally, some by-names reflected the social position of the individual involved. The wife of the Lutheran pastor, the pre-eminently cultured individual in the community, was always referred to as "Prästafrun" (The Pastor's Wife) and Carl Anderson, who became a judge in the local city, from then on was known as "Judge Anderson" and his wife as "Mrs. Judge-Anderson."

The old emigrants have now gone on to their reward, as well as a good portion of those in the second generation. With the widespread adoption of American (Anglo-Saxon) Christian names such as Raymond, Lester, Arthur, Lloyd, Mabel, Esther, Alice, Ethel, and Florence, and with the on-going inter-marriage with non-Scandinavians, thus acquiring non-Scandinavian surnames, the identity problem has more or less disappeared. There are no longer three persons with the name of John Johnson, four named Oscar Carlson or three by the name of Albert Olson. Thus the Swedish American by-name has passed into history and has become a part of the folklore of Swedish America. Nowadays a new phenomenon is appearing on the scene, the binational first name, as in Jon Sebastian Berggren, where obviously Jon has a Swedish grandfather on his father's side and an Italian grandfather on his mother's side. Then there is Carl Erik Kosinski. America in a nutshell.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hale, "Modern Icelandic Personal Bynames", *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. LIII, No. 4, 1981, pp. 397-404.

<sup>2</sup> Nils William Olsson, "What's in a Swedish Surname", *Swedish American Genealogist (SAG)*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1981, pp. 26-36; Erik Wikén, "Swedish Use of Patronymics for Established Family Names", *SAG*, Vol. I, No. 4, 1981, pp. 144-146; Erik Wikén, "When Did Swedish Patronymics Become Surnames?", *SAG*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1982, pp. 31-33.

<sup>3</sup> The editor invites the readers of *SAG* to submit similar material from other sections of America, where Swedish immigrants settled in large numbers. The editor remembers from his youth in Chicago, the presence of four families Johnson in the same Swedish parish — The *långa* Johnsons, because the father was very tall; the *svarta* Johnsons, because the father had a swarthy complexion; the *Sophie* Johnsons, where Mrs. Johnson was the dominant personality and finally *mina barn, dina barn och våra barn* Johnsons, where each party had been married earlier and had children in the previous marriage as well as in their second marriage.