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Who Was Otto Wilhelm Åkerman?

Erik Wiken*

In the descriptions of the Peter Cassel group's journey across the Atlantic and then onward from New York to the interior of the United States there are frequent references to Otto Wilhelm Åkerman.¹ Even so, commentators have neglected to make use of an important source, namely a letter from the journey which Åkerman himself wrote. The letter is dated Burlington, IA Sept. 25, 1845 and was published in *Wenersborgs Weckoblad* March 26, 1846.² Here follows an English translation of the letter in question:

“Now I must describe my travels from New York to this place, which in truth has been coupled with great difficulties. The Swedish emigrants decided, that instead of proceeding to Wisconsin, to go to Iowa, where they planned to settle, and I promised to accompany them. Early one morning I went down to the pier, where the steamer lay, with all of my wards, but here the passage was blocked by a great many other loads, who were ahead of us, and we were therefore forced to wait until the coast was clear. Finally we began to carry on board our things, which were altogether too many, and just as the last chest was carried on board, the bell sounded and we were on our way to Philadelphia. The farmers swore that they never before in their lives had labored as much as that morning, which I fully believe. In Philadelphia all of the baggage was weighed, whereupon they were loaded on the canal boats, which were to proceed by land to Columbia,³ about 80 miles, before they were placed in the water. Each boat consists of four parts, each of them then placed on an iron wagon, and when about twenty of these had been linked together, a steam engine comes along and takes the whole aggregation across forest and plain, in a manner which is very amusing. I almost laughed myself to death at the farmers as we rode down from the railroad into the water at Columbia. A mile above the water, the steam engine was disengaged, and since the roadbed to the canal is on an incline, the whole set of cars proceeded on its momentum. The speed accelerated more and more, until they scarcely dared to look up. Finally we, the cars and everything splashed into the canal so that the water cascaded far into the sky. ‘This was the devil of a ride!’ and ‘God save us in Jesus’ Name!’ were the expressions I heard from them. They were both frightened and surprised.

Now we went by canal to Hollidaysburg,⁴ where the boats again

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were taken apart, placed on wheels in order to be transported over the Allegheny Mountains. One entire day was spent making this very peculiar journey. There were five different stops, before one reaches the top of the mountain. At each stop a steam engine hauls the cars upward by means of a heavy cable. Going down the mountain there are just as many stops, and now the process is reversed. We were lowered instead of being hauled. We were on the brim of the deepest chasms, which gave us peculiar feelings, particularly me. One farmer said: 'Well, now I believe anything, when we travel by boat through such areas'. In Johnstown⁵ we were back on the canal and continued in that manner until we arrived in Pittsburgh. Here I sold quite a few items I had taken along for speculation, thereby filling my pocketbook and giving me ease of mind. From here we went to Cincinnati by steamboat. Nothing remarkable happened during this three-day journey, except that a man drowned (not a Swede, however), but such things are routine and happen almost daily on the western American steamers. In Cincinnati we rested for two days. All of the old men and old women were invited by Mr. Frank⁶ to view his museum.

All of the passengers had enjoyed good health up to this time, but now three persons in the group took ill, namely Zetterström,⁷ a surveyor from Skåne, and a farmer's two children. The day before we reached St. Louis one of the children died, whom we ourselves interred the following day. The health of the other child deteriorated and as soon as we arrived here I convinced them (the parents) to rest and at the same time consult a doctor.

A few days later five of us travelled toward the interior in order to select land. No Congress land was available in these parts, which seemed strange to me, since large areas lay fallow, but such is the case when the land is 'in market'. Capitalists buy up the land thereby hoping to sell to newcomers. Our men received 400 acres of very good land on good conditions, \$2.00 per acre and as much time as was desired to pay for it, however, at an annual interest of 10%. Some of the neighbors said that this was a lucky break, since the price per acre in these parts is usually \$4.00 to \$6.00 per acre. After having settled the real estate deal, a messenger was sent to fetch the others. In the meantime I was supposed to look for land for Zetterström, who wanted his land by himself. This was, however, unnecessary, since they were in the process of burying him when I returned. The widow was all alone among strangers and since she did not understand the language, her condition was not an enviable one. My own arrangements I had to put aside in order to secure a place for her. There are a few Norwegian families in Galena, where she certainly can stay over the winter, and for this reason I shall go with her there at the earliest convenience. Then I hope that I shall be freed of all responsibility and problems, which I voluntarily have assumed, but which I shall never regret, since they gave me the opportunity to serve my troubled countrymen.

On my wandering through the countryside I saw a type of threshing machine, which was truly ingenious — a cylinder about 2½ feet long and 14 inches in diameter with a number of spikes, sticking out as on a music box, which threshes the grain. With four horses one is able to thresh as much as 200–300 bushels per day, depending on the nature of the machine. The whole affair can then be taken apart and put on a wagon and transported with the help of two horses. Some

persons do this type of threshing as an occupation, and receiving every tenth bushel for themselves in payment, they can earn quite a bit of money. Wheat in Iowa now sells for 40 cents per bushel. Don't you⁸ think that it would be worthwhile to construct such machines in Sweden? The construction is quite simple and not very costly. Perhaps a patent could be bought, since the invention is by an American, and has not been in use too long. The grain is also cleaned as it goes through the thrasher. If you think it worthwhile, I would be willing to send one to Sweden, in case someone there is willing to introduce it there with me. I fully believe that one would find it worthwhile, since the owner of several estates or farms would only need one threshing machine, which could be moved from place to place, instead of having several. The price for the machine in America is \$130.00, which considering the high labor rates here, is rather cheap. Please let me know what you think of this idea.

The freight cost for our baggage from New York to Philadelphia was 50 cents per 100 lbs. For the same weight from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh it was \$1.50; from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati 50 cents; from Cincinnati to St. Louis 50 cents and from St. Louis to Burlington, IA 25 cents. Every person was allowed 50 lbs. free from New York to Pittsburgh and 100 lbs. from Pittsburgh to Burlington. I therefore believe, that it is crazy to bring over anything beyond clothing and bed clothes. Tools of the best quality can be bought anywhere in the country. The only exception to this is if one travels to New Orleans, where the freight rates are not as high.

Land in Iowa is the best in all of the United States. Nevertheless they are amateurs in working the land. Despite this they harvest 25-fold and as high as 50-fold. A few days ago I saw a farmer sowing wheat in a field where he had grown potatoes, without removing the leaves or cleansing the field at all.

One ought not to rush ahead with plans to emigrate, since most of them whom I accompanied on the journey here, were almost besides themselves from unhappiness.

The climate is not as healthy as it ought to be, particularly along the rivers, but even so it is much healthier than in any other state. I therefore advice all Swedes, who plan to come to America and farm, to come to Iowa."

Åkerman had arrived in America for the first time Oct. 1, 1840⁹ and had during the time from Nov. 21, 1840 to July 3, 1844 served in the United States Army as a bugler.¹⁰ After his term of service he returned to Sweden via Hamburg. Here he received a passport to Sweden Sept. 17, 1844.¹¹ According to one source it had been his intention of fetching some relatives.¹² According to the same source it was in the city of Vänersborg that the Cassel party on its journey to Göteborg was to meet Åkerman.¹³

After Åkerman had arrived in Iowa with the Cassel party, he seems to have had plans of constructing a blacksmith shop together with his school mate and later colleague in the United States Army service, Gustaf Ferdinand Jochnick.¹⁴ Nothing came of this idea, however, for Åkerman re-enlisted in the U.S. Army Jan. 19, 1846.¹⁵ Jochnick followed suit, re-

enlisting the following year.¹⁶ While with the U.S. Army in New Mexico Åkerman was killed in a skirmish with the Indians March 13, 1849.

Who was this man Åkerman? So far there has been no identification of him in the literature. There is a source, however, contained in the roster of students enrolled in *Skara läroverk* (The Secondary School of Skara), which leads us to a solution of this question. From the fall term of 1833 to the spring term of 1837 the student directory lists a student by the name of Otto Wilhelm Olson, born in Herrestad Parish (Göteborg and Bohus län) Jan. 12, 1822, the son of Lars Olson, a bank director and speaker of the farmers' party in the Swedish *Riksdag*, and his second wife Otiliana Wilhelmina Kunckel. The student biographical dictionary has the following information concerning Otto Wilhelm Olson:

"He is supposed to have been a very gifted person. He emigrated to the United States, enlisted as a volunteer in the United States Army and is said to have been killed in one of America's wars, unknown when".¹⁷

There is no doubt that we here are dealing with Otto Wilhelm Åkerman. A perusal of the church records in the Provincial Archives in Göteborg shows that his birth data can be further documented in that he was born on his father's farm, Övre Åker in Herrestad Parish. From this farm the young man has obviously taken the name of Åkerman. The mother died 1830 and his father in 1832. Otto Wilhelm then came to the manse in Källby Parish (Skar.), where a maternal aunt of his was married to the local clergyman. From Källby to Skara it is not far, at the most thirteen or fourteen miles, and it would be natural for the clergyman's family to place the lad in this school. Checking the household examination records for Källby Parish we find that Otto Wilhelm moved to Värmland in 1838, where he doubtlessly was employed at some mill, which one we don't know, since he used the title of mill bookkeeper when he received a passport to America in Göteborg July 15, 1840.

¹ Most recently see Lilly Setterdahl, "Peter Cassel's America" in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, pp. 109-110 and 127.

² The letter was published anonymously, but it was cited in *Åmåls Weckoblad* April 2, 1846, and where it expressly states that its author was Åkerman.

³ Columbia, PA is situated in Lancaster Co. on the Susquehanna River.

⁴ Hollidaysburg, PA is situated in Blair Co., six miles south of Altoona. It became a railroad and canal terminus in the 1830s.

⁵ Johnstown, PA is situated in Cambria Co., 60 miles east of Pittsburgh.

⁶ Frederick Franks, alias Jacob Otto Natt och Dag (1794-1865), a former Swedish army officer, who lived in Cincinnati, more or less as an exile, after having incurred the wrath of Swedish officialdom for having published a pamphlet critical of the monarch, Charles XIV John. In Cincinnati he operated the Western Museum, which he had purchased from Joseph Dorfeuille, its founder. This museum contained a realistic presentation of Hell and all its horrors, the creation from 1829 to 1834 by the budding American sculptor Hiram Powers (1805-1873). — V. Söderberg, "Otto Natt och Dag. En patriotisk högförrådare" in *Historisk Tidskrift*, 1910, pp. 235-275; *American Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. XV, pp. 158-160.

- ⁷ Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820–1850* (Stockholm and Chicago, 1967) (*SPANY*), p. 63, n. 76. Lars Olof Zetterström and his wife Anna Maria Beck, had arrived in New York three weeks earlier than the Cassel party, and had apparently joined the group for the journey to the interior.
- ⁸ It is not known to whom Åkerman originally addressed the letter, presumably some millowner, whom Åkerman had met during his time as bookkeeper.
- ⁹ *SPANY*, p. 35, n. 93.
- ¹⁰ Nils William Olsson, “Swedish Enlistments in the U.S. Army Before 1851” in *The Swedish Pioneer* (later *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*), Vol. I, No. 3, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Göteborgs och Bohus landskansli passjournal (The Passport Journals of the Göteborg and Bohus County Office) in Göteborg *Landsarkiv*, dated June 6, 1845.
- ¹² Letter to the editor in *Östgötha-Correspondenten* dated Oct. 29, 1845.
- ¹³ The Cassel party and Åkerman arrived in New York Aug. 11, 1845. — *SPANY*, pp. 62–67.
- ¹⁴ An undated letter from Otto Tertius Bengtsson published in *Åmåls Weckoblad* March 5, 1846.
- ¹⁵ Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Enlistments*, p. 5.
- ¹⁶ Jochnick re-enlisted in St. Louis, MO July 3, 1847. On Dec. 4, 1847 Jochnick was stationed in Jalapa, Mexico, where he wrote a letter to the Swedish Norwegian Minister in Washington, DC. A series of five letters written by Jochnick during his first tour of duty in the U.S. Army 1841–1845 from various encampments have been published in *Wenersborgs Weckoblad*. — *The Swedish Pioneer*, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 20; *Beskickningen i Förenta Staternas arkiv, Riksarkivet* (The National Archives), Stockholm.
- ¹⁷ E. Erlandsson, *Skara högre allmänna läroverks lärjungar åren 1826–1869* (Skövde, 1925), p. 86.