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Who Was Ernst Wilhelm Holmstedt?

Erik Wikén*

The three groupings on the opposite page demonstrate with a great deal of certainty that we are here dealing with same identical person.

Who was he? It has not been possible to locate Ernst Wilhelm Holmstedt in Stockholm prior to June 19 1843, when he procured a passport for travel to Rostock in Germany.

Until November of 1842 there resided in the city of Stockholm a boy, Ernst Wilhelm, born illegitimately in Katarina Parish of that city on Oct. 31 1828 to a servant girl named Märta Kihlberg, 44 years old. The boy was placed in *Allmänna Barnhuset* (The General Orphanage of Stockholm), after which he was placed in homes of foster parents. From 1829 until 1836 he lived with a widow named Brita Maria Hjertsell, whose family name he assumed, when he was placed in the school of *Frimurarbarnhuset* (Orphanage of the Freemasons) on July 11 1836. He stayed there until May 18 1842, when he became apprenticed to Frans Beck, a Stockholm manufacturer of briefcases. In the census of Klara Parish, dated November 1842, the name of Ernst Wilhelm Hjertsell appears for the last time.¹

Thus Ernst Wilhelm Hjertsell disappears without leaving a trace, while Ernst Wilhelm Holmstedt steps upon the scene, without any previous history, the day he received his passport. It is probable that the youth sometime between November 1842 and June 19 1843 had been placed with another foster family, unknown whom or where, and from them probably appropriated the name of Holmstedt.

Elgenstierna's register of the Swedish peerage does not list anyone by the name of Ernst Wilhelm Nordenskiöld.² If Kullgren is correct in his statement that an admiral Nordenskiöld was the father of Ernst Wilhelm, he must be the son of Otto Gustaf Nordenskiöld (1780–1861), who became an admiral in the Royal Swedish Navy in 1826. It is true that he was absent from Sweden during 1828–1829, when he led a Swedish naval squadron to the Mediterranean, but proof exists that he visited Stockholm, before departing from Karlskrona, at the beginning of 1828, when the actual conception must have taken place. It is interesting that Kullgren mentions that Ernest Wilhelm had visited relatives in Rostock in Germany in his youth. An uncle

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Ernest Wilhelmi

Born in Stockholm ca. 1826. Clerk.

Enlisted Dec. 10 1847 in the U.S. Army for the War with Mexico; discharged Aug. 15 1848; re-enlisted Nov. 22 1848; deserted Feb. 9 1850; apprehended March 29 1850. Resided in the Columbia Barracks, Clerk County, Oregon Territory Nov. 15 1850. Deserted May 24 1851.

SOURCES:

Nils William Olsson, "Swedish Enlistments in the U.S. Army Before 1851" in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, Vol. I, No. 3, pp. 3-13; Vol. I, No. 4, pp. 17-38; *7th U.S. Census, Oregon*, Vol. I, p. 86.

Ernst Wilhelm Holmstedt

Born in Stockholm.

At age 14 he received passport June 19 1843 in Stockholm for travel to Rosstock, Germany to attend commercial school.

At age 18 he received passport in Stockholm Sept. 11 1846 for travel to New York. He arrived in New York Dec. 9 1846. Participated in the War with Mexico. Regimental clerk with U.S. Light Infantry Regiment to Oregon Territory.

SOURCES:

Överståthållareämbetets passjournaler (Passport Journals for Stockholm), 1843, 1846, *Stadsarkivet*, Stockholm; Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850*, p. 127, n. 83; Nels Hokanson, *Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time*, p. 109; *Post och Inrikes Tidningar* (Stockholm), Sept. 29, 1862.

Ernest Wilhelm Nordenskiöld

Born in Stockholm ca. 1826, son of a Swedish admiral named Nordenskiöld. In his youth he resided in Germany with relatives. Participated in the War with Mexico; company clerk and later military policeman during nine months the U.S. Army was stationed in Mexico; deserted but was apprehended. Ordered to Oregon Territory with his company; deserted in 1851.

SOURCES:

Alvar Kullgren, *Dagbok, m.m. 1850-1855* (Diary for 1850-1855), *Landsarkivet*, Göteborg.

of Otto Gustaf Nordenskiöld, Carl Fredrik Nordenskiöld (1766–1828) had resided in Rostock, and a son of his, i.e. cousin of Otto Gustaf, Emanuel Edvard Nordenskiöld (1808–1880) was a merchant there.³ And it was to Rostock that Ernest Wilhelm Holmstedt was destined when he received his passport June 19 1843.

Kullgren, who met Ernest Wilhelm Nordenskiöld in California in October 1855, describes at length how Ernest Wilhelm after deserting from the army, under great difficulties had made his way to California, where he tried his luck at a great many jobs — as waiter, musician, store clerk, knife sharpener, actor, etc. Kullgren also mentions the interesting fact that Ernest Wilhelm kept a diary.

The next time we meet Ernest Wilhelm Holmstedt is Aug. 25, 1856, when he sent a letter from Brooklyn to the Swedish Norwegian Consulate in New York, asking if any letters for “Ernest Wilhelmi” or himself had been received at the consulate.⁴

Concerning Holmstedt’s later adventures in America, we know that he participated in the Civil War, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the 41st New York Regiment, later to become colonel of the 74th U.S. Colored Infantry.⁵

He died in New Orleans Oct. 10, 1867. An obituary signed *Bgn* (perhaps Carl Leonard Berggren, the well-known New York Swede) relates the following:

“Last winter he, i.e. Holmstedt, moved from New York to New Orleans, in order to join a manufacturing firm there. He had just ‘gotten started’ as he termed it in a letter recently, when death intervened and unexpectedly ended his career. Last winter he lost his wife, with whom he had a two year-old daughter, who is now being cared for by relatives. H(olmstedt) had recently announced his engagement to a young lady of French extraction, and would have celebrated his nuptials this month. It is said that she arrived in New Orleans the same day he died, ready to move into the home he had prepared for her”.⁶

¹ *Mantalsuppgift för Klara församling* (Census returns for Klara Parish), 1843, *Stadsarkivet*, Stockholm.

² Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor*, I–IX (Stockholm 1925–1936), V, pp. 473–491.

³ Agathon Hammarskjöld, *Ätterna Nordenskiöld* (Stockholm 1902), pp. 26–27.

⁴ *Beskickningens i Förenta Staterna arkiv, 1850-talet* (The Archives of the Swedish Norwegian Mission in Washington, DC for the 1850s); *Generalkonsulatets diarium 1855–1858* (The Journals of the Swedish Norwegian Consulate General in New York 1855–1858), pp. 420, 424, 436, 488, *Riksarkivet*, Stockholm.

⁵ Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (Baton Rouge, LA 1951), pp. 241–242. *Post- och inrikes tidningar* for Sept. 29, 1862 contains a condensed account of a letter from Holmstedt, dated Washington, DC July 19, 1862. *Upsala-Posten* for Jan. 7, 1865 contains a news item concerning Holmstedt and the 74th Regiment on Ship Island, MS in the Gulf of Mexico, taken from an American newspaper.

⁶ *Skandinavisk Post* (New York), Oct. 31, 1867.