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Gustaf Mellberg— From Swedish Academician to American Farmer

Stieg-Erland Dagman*

On a farm named Gullskog in Habo Parish in the Swedish county of Skaraborg, a boy was born Feb. 23, 1812, who at his baptism received the name of Gustaf. His father was a farmer, later an innkeeper, named Sven Gustafsson, who was married to Maria Andersdotter.

Maria had inherited the Gullskog farm from her father, Anders Andersson in Långhult, about whom the parish records had this to say after his death — “A wealthy and successful man from Långhult”. His widow had a by-name in the parish — “Rikamora i Långhult” (“Wealthy Mom in Långhult”).

The paternal grandparents were Gustaf Svensson in Bränninge in the same parish, an innkeeper and a respected member of the assizes, and his wife, Catharina Larsdotter. This latter farm was the place where Gustaf was to grow up. When he was two years old, his parents sold Gullskog and moved to a much bigger farm, named Eskhult, which was owned by his paternal grandfather, Gustaf Svensson.

The family remained in Eskhult for seven years, during which time there were three additions to the family. Gustaf now had three brothers — Anders Petter, Sven and Carl Johan. During this time his paternal grandparents also died.

In 1821 the family moved to the inn in Bränninge, which had been leased out for three years after the grandfather's death in 1818. Bränninge Inn really consisted of three farms, Mellomgården, Östergården and Molekullen, altogether comprising a unit for tax purposes of almost 1½ Swedish *mantal*. For Swedish conditions this was indeed a large farm complex. The village of Bränninge consisted not only of the inn complex, but also several other farms, with a combined population of about 70 persons. The inn itself was the place of residence of no less than 19 persons. In addition to the innkeeper

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and his family, there were also a number of servants, maids and hired men. Another ten persons also worked on the farm and in the inn, but lived elsewhere in surrounding cottages and crofts.

This was the milieu in which Gustaf spent the years of his youth and later, during his long academic career, also his vacations.

In 1826 when Gustaf was fourteen years old, he began attending public school in the city of Jönköping, a city located at the southern tip of the large body of water known as Lake Vättern, approximately ten miles from Bränninge. The name of the school was *Jönköpings Högre Lärdomsskola* (Jönköping's Higher Institute of Education). The school was an outgrowth of the old Brahe School, founded by Pehr Brahe on the island of Visingsö in Lake Vättern during the 17th century.

It is not clear why Gustaf was allowed to study. None of his siblings were given the opportunity to acquire advanced schooling. Perhaps his being the eldest son may have had something to do with it. As he entered the Jönköping School he also changed his name from the patronymic of Svensson to the family name of Mellberg. Gustaf's studies in Jönköping took five years, during which time he had courses in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, but he was only a fair student.

When Gustaf came home for his summer vacation, after his second year in Jönköping, his family was dealt a severe blow when his father died, only 37 years old. Now Gustaf's mother had to shoulder the entire responsibility for running the vast farm, the innkeeping business and the rearing of many children, which now amounted to a half dozen — five boys and a girl named Gustava. Gustaf was the oldest and Johannes, now four years old, the youngest. Later during the year Gustaf's only sister, little Gustava, died. Gustaf, himself, was laid low by a case of measles. All of these unfortunate events affected his studies, and during the next two semesters his grades suffered as a consequence.

Finally on June 1, 1831, it was time for Gustaf's graduation from the school in Jönköping. It was a solemn occasion and the chairman of the school board, the eminent Swedish bishop as well as Sweden's poet laureate, Esaias Tegnér, gave the valedictory speech. In poetic form Tegnér told the boys:

“Farewell, young larks during life's short spring,
You two-legged flowers on the distant heaths,
May Heaven foster you through its dew,
And the Sun through its life-giving rays”.

After a summer's vacation at Bränninge, Gustaf continued his studies in the fall at *Skara Gymnasium*, the high school in the neighboring city of Skara. Here he was to spend four more years in an institution filled with much history and many traditions.

At the end of September of 1835, it was time for Gustaf to move again, this time a little farther away from home. He sought and gained permission

to enter the Royal Academy in Lund, a preparatory school for entrance into the University of Lund. Here he began the study of theology, for he had in mind to become a clergyman. He took his university entrance examinations in 1838. During the last term he also added philosophical lectures to his curriculum.

During his time in Lund he roomed at three different locations. At first he was housed in the home of a shoemaker, named Rönberg, located aptly enough on *Skomakaregatan* (Shoemaker Street). The second place was the home of an innkeeper named Wahlgren on *Stora Kungsgatan* (Grand King Street) and finally he boarded with a merchant named Isberg on *Paradisgatan* (Paradise Street).

Life for a student in Lund in those days was a very trying experience, which is vividly brought out in a letter, which Gustaf wrote home to Bränninge in March of 1836, where he says that it was so cold in his room, that he could not continue writing, since his fingers were stiff from the cold. He added that no firewood had arrived in the city, so that it had been impossible to use the fireplace ever since his return to Lund from the Christmas holidays at home.

After finishing four years of university studies at Lund, Gustaf took a job as a teacher in a school operated by the Weapons Factory in Huskvarna, a neighboring city of Jönköping. Here he stayed a year, but in the spring of 1840 he decided to continue his education at the University of Uppsala.

In order to finance his studies there, he decided to sell off some of his paternal inheritance, shares in the inn and in Östergården to his stepfather Johannes and his mother Maria. She had remarried in 1832. The sale of his inheritance brought in the sum of almost 900 *Riksdaler*, the equivalent of \$225.00, which was enough to finance his studies for two years.

In Uppsala Gustaf became acquainted with Gustaf Unonius and Thure Kumlien, both of whom were to figure prominently in his life later in America. One of his fellow students was Gunnar Wennerberg, later to become Governor of Kronoberg County, a well-known composer of church music, as well as the father of the very popular and famous student song cycle, *Gluntarna*.

Gustaf Mellberg passed his examinations for his degree of *filosofie kandidat*, the equivalent of an A.B. degree, and then decided to go for a master's degree, but soon gave up the plan, probably because of the costs involved.

In the fall of 1842 we find Gustaf in Stockholm, where he resided at Bollhusgränd 1, a neighbor of the Royal Palace in the Old City. In Stockholm he continued his career as a teacher until the spring of 1843. He still thought about becoming a clergyman. In the household examination roll for the parish of St. Nikolai, where he was domiciled, he has entered that he was a *Sacri Ministrii Candidatus*, i.e. a candidate for the Holy Orders. But Sweden had an overabundance of clergymen at this time, and he knew that it would be difficult to find employment, once he had taken the necessary

examinations. In addition Gustaf had found during his advanced studies in Uppsala, that he had questioned the dogmas of the Church of Sweden, which bothered his conscience.

It is also probable that Gustaf was disappointed with the economic results of his many years of study and that this disappointment may well have triggered his idea to emigrate.

Gustaf Unonius had left for America a few years earlier and his optimistic letters home to Sweden, printed in several Swedish newspapers, may also have sharpened Gustaf's resolve to pursue his fortunes in the new land in the West.

He contacted his fellow student, Thure Kumlien and the latter's intended wife, Christina Wallberg, as well as Christina's oldest sister, Sophia, and together they decided to emigrate.

Space was booked on Captain Johannes Nissen's brig *Svea*, which now for the first time was to carry a large number of passengers to the New World. *Svea* was in reality a freighter and had been used for transporting bar iron to the U.S. Now it was remodeled to accommodate passengers. The price for the passage was 180 *Riksdaler* or about \$45.00 per person.

The four friends, Gustaf, Thure, Christina and Sophia, now formed plans to leave Sweden. Thure succeeded in borrowing some money for the journey from a relative and Gustaf, in turn, borrowed from Thure. This information we learn from notations made on the inside covers of a diary, which Thure later kept during his first years in America.

After having received their passports for the journey during the last days of May of 1843, the party left for Göteborg via stage coach, arriving at Blom's Hotel on *Södra Hamngatan* (South Harbor Street) in Göteborg on June 10. The trip from Stockholm to Göteborg had cost them the equivalent of \$8.00.

On June 14 the *Svea* was ready for departure with its 62 passengers and 1,000 leeches (?). After two days of waiting, because of unfavorable winds, the vessel finally was ready to depart and at 9 o'clock in the morning of June 16 the *Svea* left the Masthugg quay for a journey which was to take two months. Gustaf now viewed his native land for the last time.

From the letters and diary notes, written by several of the passengers, it is apparent that the journey went fairly well, except for one major storm, which hampered the progress of the brig. A greater problem was the calm that betook them from time to time and caused them to be delayed so long, that the supplies of fresh water ran out. Passengers had to hang linen cloths out on deck in the very humid weather, and then wring them out to procure water to quench their thirst.

Time hung heavily on their hands and in order not to become bored they organized dances and games on deck. When the captain celebrated his *name* day — his name was Johannes, which is celebrated in Sweden on June 24, a dedicatory poem was written and read in his honor.

On Aug. 16 the *Svea* arrived in New York and after the necessary

formalities the passengers were allowed to go ashore and take possession of their new land.

Already on board the *Svea*, a group had been organized, which decided to stay together on the way westward. In addition to Gustaf, Thure, Christina and Sophia, the party consisted of Abraham Reuterskiöld from Hössna Parish in Älvsborg County and his family (eight persons) Johan Olof Liedberg from Jönköping, James Benneworth and his wife Alice, Carl Gustaf Hammarquist and Sven Björkander.

The group had decided that the goal of their journey was to be the area around Lake Koshkonong in southern Wisconsin. It is probable that Gustaf Unonius, who had settled at Pine Lake, a day's journey from Koshkonong, had furnished them with a map of that area.

After spending a day or so in New York, the party continued via steamboat up the Hudson River to the city of Albany. From Albany the group took the train to Buffalo and while waiting there for a ship to take them across the Great Lakes, they availed themselves of the opportunity of viewing Niagara Falls. In Buffalo they also beheld Indians for the first time.

The ship took them through Lakes Erie, Huron and Michigan and on to the city of Milwaukee, which at that time consisted of barely a dozen buildings or so.

When the party arrived in Milwaukee on Aug. 28, the women and children were lodged with an English family, while the men began their three day trek westward in order to look for suitable land.

Gustaf chose his first piece of land, consisting of 40 acres, near the old Winnebago Indian village called White Crow, east of what is today Busseyville, located in Sumner Township of Jefferson County. Here he built himself a small cabin. Later he bought an additional 80 acres, on which land he had a house built, which was ready by 1846, a house which is still standing, now part of a larger house, owned by a family named Kruckenberg.

Thanks to a diary which Gustaf kept from the month of May in 1846 until June, 1849, and which is on deposit in The State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison, one can follow Gustaf's daily toil in clearing and working his land.

Also in Thure Kumlien's diary one can read of the difficult life which the pioneers in Wisconsin had in breaking the virgin sod.

Of the group which had kept company from New York to Wisconsin, Björkander and Hammarquist stayed on in Pine Lake, but later moved and were reunited with the group at Lake Koshkonong. From the beginning one lived mostly on fishing and hunting, since the forest and the lake teemed with game and fish. The colony expanded quickly and soon there was a sawmill as well as a couple of general stores to serve the settlers.

On June 7, 1846 Gustaf, now 34 years old, married Juliette Devoe, 27 years old, whose family had arrived in Wisconsin from the neighboring state of Michigan in 1841 and had settled directly across from Gustaf's newly

constructed house, on the other side of the Old Indian and Army Trail, today known as Wisconsin State Route 106. The wedding was performed by Gustaf Unonius in the home of the Reuterskiöld family.

The following year their first child was born, a daughter named Amelia. Three other children followed — Gustavia, born 1850, a son Edward in 1855 and finally a daughter Henrietta, who died very young.

Once in a while Gustaf found use for his theological training. He conducted funerals and baptisms, when no other minister was available. In October of 1845 he buried Augusta Kumlien, the daughter of his good friends Thure and Christina Kumlien. Thure writes in his diary: "Mellberg conducted the funeral according to the ritual of the Church of Sweden". Gustaf had also baptized Augusta eighteen months earlier. In 1847 he buried one of his travelling companions on the journey from Sweden, Abraham Reuterskiöld, who was interred in the Busseyville Cemetery.

Gustaf's contacts with the family in Sweden were largely sporadic. He wrote a letter to his mother in 1847, but then the connections were broken until a quarter of a century later, when suddenly in 1872 he wrote a letter to his brother Sven, in which he asked: "When did our poor mother die"? The mother had died already in Bränninge in 1851.

A nephew, Axel Mellberg, who emigrated to America in 1867, also was in contact with Gustaf. A number of letters, written to a brother, a nephew and a cousin in Sweden between the years of 1872 and 1877 are still extant.

Gradually the farm began to pay off. Gustaf grew a lot of tobacco and he began to become involved in community politics. Thus, when Sumner Township was organized in 1858, he became the first town clerk. He held this position for eight years until 1867. In 1875 he was again elected to the same position and kept the job until 1891 — for a total of 25 years.

He was also secretary of the school district for 18 years, town supervisor for one year and assessor for one year. He was also enrolling officer during the Civil War and in 1875 as well as in 1880 he served as census enumerator for the State of Wisconsin and the Federal Government.

Thanks to the two diaries he kept we have a pretty good idea of how pioneer life was conducted in Wisconsin. It was marked by hard work, mutual assistance, borrowing of necessities when needed, help in time of illness, but also relaxed social occasions in each other's homes, where among other things intellectual discussions and declamations of literary works were greatly appreciated — as a counterweight to the drudgery in the fields.

How did it go for the academician, who skipped from Sweden, in order to become a farmer in America? Did he amass a fortune? A quote in a letter to his brother Sven in 1872 gives us the answer: "Here I have worked and sweated for thirty years. Thanks be to God, my health has been good, and courage and hope have never failed me. I am not wealthy, since I have never striven to acquire riches, but I am well provided for and I am hopeful that until the end of my days I shall not be in want for my daily bread".

Gustaf's and Juliette's three children grew up on the farm, and as time went on and after a few years of study, Edward married Sarah Jane Andrews, and then took over the family farm. Gustavia became a seamstress and was married in 1899, at the age of 49 to John Whittet, 68 years old, who a year earlier had become a widower. Amelia married in 1872, at the age of 25, Casimir Reuterskiöld, who was 39 years old, and became the latter's second wife. Casimir was ten years old, when the family had arrived in New York aboard the *Svea*.

In his old age, after Gustaf had handed over the farm to his son, he spent much of his declining years performing services for the community as well as devoting much time to intellectual pursuits. He helped the neighbors with clerical work, drafted legal documents for them, wrote letters, settled estates and kept accounts. His ability to converse and to read seven languages never failed to astound his neighbors.

In 1891, Gustaf, Juliette and their daughter Gustavia moved into the neighboring city of Ft. Atkinson, where they purchased a home on Adams Street. Here Gustaf ended his days on Dec. 19, 1892, at the age of 80. A long life, filled with academic studies, adventures, hard work and disappointments, but also moments of happiness and contentment had ended. The obituary in the *Jefferson County Union* ends with these words: "Too much cannot be said in his favor as a friend and neighbor".

His wife Juliette survived him by twelve years and she died in Ft. Atkinson Jan. 12, 1905. Both are buried in the Busseyville Cemetery. The closing words in Gustaf Mellberg's diary for June 1, 1849 might well serve as the necrology for him and Juliette: "At rest after a long period of hard toil".

The descendants of Gustaf and Juliette Mellberg are the following:

1. Edward and Sarah Jane Mellberg sold their family farm after a few years and moved to Montana. Both of them died in Bozeman in that state, Edward in 1911 and Sarah Jane in 1940. They had no children.
2. Gustavia Whittet died in Ft. Atkinson in 1925. Her husband, John Whittet, had died already in 1912. They had no children.
3. Amelia Reuterskiöld died in Busseyville in 1888. Her husband, Casimir (Charles) Reuterskiöld died in Janesville, WI in 1923 as the result of an automobile accident. They had six children, of whom three reached maturity:
 - a. Jennie Reuterskiöld married Adolph Lund. It is not known if they had any children.
 - b. Marion Reuterskiöld was married to Frances Ashworth. They had a son, Francis Ashworth, born in Milwaukee in 1912.
 - c. Maud Reuterskiöld was married to Herman Stark. They had at least one child, Marion Stark, who married a person named Battle.

<p>Gustaf SVENSSON Innkeeper and Farmer Born June 8 1756 in Gölan Died June 15 1818 in Brånninge Married Dec.26,1775</p>	<p>Sven GUSTAFSSON Farmer B. Jan.18 1731 in Lilla Gölhult D. July 31 1780 in Gölan M. Dec.26 1755</p>	<p>Gustaf NILSSON Farmer B. Oct.19 1684 D. April 30 1735</p>	<p>Kerstin LARSDOTTER B. D.</p>	
		<p>Lars JONSSON Farmer B. April 30 1682</p>	<p>Elsa LARSDOTTER B. Jan.14 1683 D.</p>	
	<p>Annika LARSDOTTER B. Aug.11 1723 in Abbarp, Habo Parish D. July 4 1782 in Gölan</p>	<p>Lars NILSSON Farmer B. Sept.23 1704 in Lilla Gölhult D. Aug.10 1780 in Lilla Gölhult M. June 13 1725</p>	<p>Nils SVENSSON Farmer B. D. Feb.2 1723</p>	<p>Ramborg ERICSDOTTER B. D. April 26 1719</p>
		<p>Kerstin BJÖRNSDOTTER B. March 24 1705 in Sjogarp, Habo Parish D. Sept.29 1773 in Lilla Gölhult</p>	<p>Björn HANSSON Farmer B. D.</p>	<p>Gunilla TORKELSDOTTER B. April 6 1679 D. Nov.7 1705</p>
	<p>Catharina LARSDOTTER Born May 3 1749 in Lilla Gölhult Died July 20 1817 in Brånninge</p>	<p>Anders PEHRSSON Farmer Born in Oct. 1694 in Eket, Habo Parish Died Jan.7 1756 in Eket</p>	<p>Pehr JOHANSSON Farmer</p>	<p>Anna ANDERSDOTTER</p>
			<p>Anders</p>	<p>Kerstin ANDERSDOTTER</p>
<p>Anders PEHRSSON Farmer Born in 1734 in Gubbhulan Died Feb. 3 1774 in Gubbhulan Married Feb.3 1762</p>		<p>Pehr MÅNSSON Farmer B. Apr.14 1689 D. Jan.4 1772</p>	<p>Ingeborg SVENSDOTTER B. March 25 1695 D. Feb.16 1776</p>	<p>Bengt ANDERSSON Farmer B. July 23 1707 D. June 9 1780</p>
		<p>Maria BENGTSDOTTER Born Oct.24 1736 in Svenshult, Habo Parish Died April 21 1799 in Gubbhulan</p>	<p>Maria ERICSDOTTER B. 1699 D. March 15 1775</p>	
<p>Anders ANDERSSON Farmer Born Oct. 18 1724 in Eket Died Oct.20 1793 in Långhult Married Nov. 21 1783</p>	<p>Kerstin ANDERSDOTTER Born April 20,1763 in Gubbhulan, Habo Parish Died Oct.13 1829 in Lilla Flittered, Habo Parish</p>	<p>Maria ANDERSDOTTER Born May 2 1793 in Långhult, Habo Parish Died April 16 1851 in Brånninge</p>	<p>Maria ANDERSDOTTER Born May 2 1793 in Långhult, Habo Parish Died April 16 1851 in Brånninge</p>	
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Gustaf MELLBERG
 Born in Gullskog, Habo Parish (Skar.), Sweden Feb. 23 1812
 Married June 7 1846
 Juliette DEVOE
 Died in Fort Atkinson, WI Dec. 19 1892
 Died in Fort Atkinson, WI Jan. 12 1905
 Born in Allegany County, NY May 7 1819

Amelia MELLBERG
 Born April 9 1847 in Busseyville
 Died Dec. 12 1888 in Busseyville
 Married in 1872 to
 Casimir REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born Oct. 13 1833 in Hössna,
 (Skar.), Sweden
 Died March 11 1923 in Janes-
 ville, WI

Emma Gustavia MELLBERG
 Born in 1850 in Busseyville
 Died July 24 1925 in Ft. Atkin-
 son, WI
 Married Sept. 22 1899
 John WHITTET
 Born Nov. 24 1831
 Died Nov. 4 1912 in Ft. Atkinson

Edward MELLBERG
 Born in 1855 in Busseyville
 Died Oct. 30 1931 in Bozeman, MT
 Married
 Sarah Jane ANDREWS
 Born in 1854
 Died July 11 1940 in Bozeman, MT

Henrietta MELLBERG
 Born in Busseyville
 Died Jan. 23 1857 in Busseyville

Frances, A. REUTER-
 SKIÖLD
 Born 1873
 Died 1893

Jennie REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born 1875
 Died 1952
 Married
 Adolph LUND
 Born 1867
 Died 1953

Marion REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born May 17 1876
 Died Oct. 13 1914
 Married
 Francis ASHWORTH
 Born
 Died

Mabel REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born in 1879
 Died in 1880

Carl REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born in Feb. 1883
 Died March 20 1883

Maud REUTERSKIÖLD
 Born in 1883
 Died in 1957
 Married
 Herman STARK
 Born
 Died

Francis ASHWORTH
 Born in 1912 in
 Milwaukee, WI

Marion J. STARK
 Born in 1913
 Died May 7 1949
 Married
 _____ BATTLE
 Born
 Died