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# Lewis Ransome Freeman — a Swedish American Author

Axel Friman<sup>1</sup>

*Who's Who in America* for 1922–1923, as well as the edition of 1948–1949, contain biographies of an outstanding American writer and journalist, Lewis Ransome Freeman. During this rather long span of time, during which Freeman held a certain prominence in American letters, there is no reference either by himself nor by any other person to the fact that he was of Swedish origin. Yet, his father, Otto Freeman (Friman in Sweden), had been an immigrant from this northern part of Europe, the youngest of five brothers (he was born Nov. 10, 1831), who left Varnhem Parish in Skaraborg *län* in the fall of 1838 in order to accompany their father, Carl Friman, to America. During that year Carl Friman and his five sons became the first Swedes to settle in what was then known as Wisconsin Territory.

About 1850 these Frimans were in part responsible for the founding and organizing of the small town of Genoa Junction (later to be known as Genoa City) in Wisconsin. The main street of the city, which runs in a northerly-southerly direction, is known to this day as Freeman Street.

Otto Freeman married Maria Clary (born in 1835) in 1872 and Lewis was born in Genoa Junction Oct. 4, 1878. Soon after Lewis' birth the family left Wisconsin to move westward and by stages arrived in Pasadena, CA during the years 1882–1885.

Lewis Freeman was graduated from Pasadena High School in 1897, whereupon he continued his studies at Stanford University during the last years of the last century, more specifically 1896–1898. While at Stanford, Lewis became an athletic star, making a great reputation in college sports, winning letters in football, baseball, track and tennis. He was the only student in the annals of Stanford, so far as is known, who represented his university successfully in all four major sports.

After graduation from the university Freeman continued to be active as well as successful in the game of tennis, gradually becoming one of the best players on the West Coast, during several years winning both the Pacific Coast as well as the Southern California Championships.

It was during this time that his intensive travel schedule began, which in time was to have him girdling the globe as well as visiting many of the world's hidden corners. He became a foreign correspondent, who, as he was better known, gradually began to write for an increasing number of newspapers and journals. He also developed an active interest in photography, becoming proficient not only in the field of still photography, but also branching off into the new and emerging field of moving pictures.

His first major assignment was as a war correspondent during the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. His penchant for facts and his nimble mind, which could absorb myriads of details in a background story, gave him a following which not only learned from his presentations but was also keenly interested in broadening the scope of human learning. Freeman sensed this and now increasingly turned his attention to lecturing. Here he was helped by scientific progress in the form of illustrative aids, using both slides as well as motion picture film.

New extensive travels and more stimulating ideas of far-away places gave him a well grounded reason for stepping up his intensive travel schedule. He would fulfill his reporting assignments and then return for his appointed rounds on the lecture circuit. One of his lecture managers characterized Freeman in these words: "In Lewis R. Freeman we have the author and the traveller seeking always the unknown. His lectures are bound to prove successful, for he not only has the gift of speech, but the most fascinatingly beautiful moving pictures we have ever seen."

Somehow Lewis Freeman had the seventh sense of being at the right place at the right time. Thus he happened to be present during the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 and was able to give an exhaustive account of the tragedy soon thereafter in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

In 1910 he was appointed a member of a delegation dispatched by the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the Pacific Coast to China. During the years of 1915-1917 he served as a war correspondent with the British, French and Italian armies in World War I. A commentator has said about Freeman: "As a war correspondent he rubbed shoulders with kings and other royalty in Europe and Asia. He owned a book collection, of which many volumes bore the autographs of Rudyard Kipling, a friend of many years' standing. Freeman was also a personal friend of Gen. John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, who at one time considered him for a high post in the public relations office of the U.S. Army." Instead Freeman accepted a commission as an honorary lieutenant in the British Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, being attached to the Grand Fleet in 1917-1918 as a war correspondent.

It was in 1918 that Freeman published his first book, *Many Fronts*, in London, which contained eleven articles, earlier published in various journals and magazines. The following year he published no less than three volumes, *Stories of the Ships, Seahounds*, and *To Kiel in the Hercules*. During the years between the two great wars he was to publish an additional fifteen or so books.

At the end of World War I Freeman was sent to Germany as a staff member of the Allied Naval Armistice Commission. After this stint he served as a corres-

pendent with the U.S. Navy, accompanying the fleet to many parts of the world as well as on major fleet maneuvers.

Once more back in civilian life, his love and devotion to travel brought him in contact with several expeditions to various parts of North, Central and South America. He participated in hazardous journeys following rivers from their source until they emptied into the sea, notably such large rivers as the Columbia, the Yellowstone, the Missouri, the Colorado, the Mississippi and the Amazon. These journeys were often made in small craft, some as small as an eighteen foot open rowboat. These craft were furnished simply but were well-planned and highly organized. He once made a dangerous 2,000 mile cruise from Milwaukee to New York in his little boat, powered by his trusty three h.p. Elto motor. Already in the fledgling years of radio, Freeman made use of the wireless in his contacts with civilization, with varying degrees of success.

In addition to the more than twenty books Freeman wrote during as many years, he also had time and energy for numerous articles, written for a host of American journals and magazines. For many years he was a leading writer for *The Atlantic*, *World's Work*, *Review of Reviews*, *Outlook*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The National Geographic*, *Sunset*, *Motor Boating*, *Motor Boat*, *Field and Stream*, *Travel*, *Asia* as well as many foreign magazines.

Despite this enormous production or perhaps because of it, Lewis Freeman had a need to escape from his highly mobile life once in a while. He found this escape in the stability of his parental home at 287 East California Street in Pasadena, where his mother lived until her death at the age of 91 in 1926. After her demise he used the Explorers Club in New York as his address until the middle of the 1950s, when he returned to Pasadena, where he died in the fall of 1960.

He left behind an enormous scrapbook, containing more than 1,000 clippings from newspapers and magazines, probably put together by his mother. This book covers the first quarter of this century, which also embraces the most productive period of Lewis Freeman's life, his many odysseys and adventures.

It is therefore quite obvious that a man of his general character of writing, travel and exploration, did not have the opportunity to establish a family in the general sense. He remained unmarried his entire life.

Finally, one cannot help but to make a reflexion concerning this very active life, filled with adventure in faraway places combined with an unusual ability to write successfully. Why did this so naturally gifted author not turn his attention to material, which lay so much closer at hand, material which he must have received from his father as well as his uncle, William Freeman, — first hand observations of the famed Gold Rush into California in the 1850's, which both of these Sweden-born immigrants had made with considerable financial success?

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<sup>1</sup> Col. Axel Friman of Göteborg, Sweden, is the descendant of the sixth son of Carl Friman. He did not immigrate with his father and brothers, but stayed in Sweden, being too young at the time. Col. Friman is a knowledgeable writer on early Swedish immigration to the United States. Presently he is at work on a study of the early Swedes in the gold fields of California.