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# Immigrant Artifacts as Aids to Genealogical Research

Nils William Olsson

Artifacts brought over by immigrants from Sweden can sometimes be of help in genealogical research, particularly when such items carry identification marks, such as owner's names, or initials, the year the item was made, occasionally the farm, village or parish of the owner, and in the case of the immigrant chest itself, perhaps even the destination in the United States and the route the immigrant took to arrive at his final destination.

Limited as he was in what he was able to bring over from his native country, he concerned himself mostly with such artifacts which he deemed would be of most practical use in a new and different environment — the immigrant chest or trunk itself, which not only served its purpose as a trunk on the journey, but later could be used for storage purposes in the small prairie home or city dwelling, as well for sitting on and perhaps even as a table. Additionally he was likely to bring with him a spinning wheel, perhaps a loom, wool carders, small storage boxes, mostly of wood, tools, textiles and clothing, samplers, occasionally silver and pewter items, such as spoons, snuff boxes, mugs, platters, plates, salvers and beakers. Such items were often decorated with the owner's initials. Oddly enough, only a few brass and copper items examined have owners' marks, perhaps because copper and brass were in plentiful supply and were thought of as utility items, rather than mementos and keepsakes from the old world.

Items with complete names seldom give us problems. It is in the decipherment of owners' initials that problems arise. First of all one must understand the system itself. Since most of the early arrivals in America were rural immigrants, they usually had patronymic surnames. This system of names goes back to the Greek word *patrōnumikos*, meaning father's name, and has been used in Sweden as far back as there are written records. Very few people had family names and a person was known by his first or Christian name given to him or her at the time of baptism. In order to differentiate him or her from others with identical Christian names, the father's first name was added with the word *Son* or *Dotter*, depending upon the sex of the child. A lad baptized Sven, who was the son of Anders, became Sven Anders Son. A daughter named Christina became Christina Anders Dotter. It was not until the latter part of the 19th Century that the



patronymic and the words *-son* and *-dotter* were conjoined to form Andersson and Andersdotter.

Older immigrant artifacts, particularly wooden items, textiles and tools, therefore, always bore three initials, the first standing for the Christian or baptismal name, the second, the initial of the father's Christian name and finally the letter *S* or *D.*, depending on the owner's sex.

The decipherment of initials found on immigrant artifacts must, therefore, be very chancy and can easily lead to errors. The problem of decoding these initials must, therefore, proceed with a great deal of caution. On the other hand these initials can be useful in corroborating other evidence. Thus, if an immigrant chest, which we know belonged to an immigrant by the name of Anders Andersson, who emigrated in 1868 and which bears the initials *A A S*, the year of emigration and the parish name of Leksand in Dalarne, we can be fairly certain that the initials belong to this immigrant. By searching the parish records for Leksand we might find his name, his year of emigration and if these bits of information check out, we can thus determine his origin, his birth data and the names of his parents.

Some time ago a sterling silver snuff box (Fig. 1) surfaced at an antique show in Minneapolis. The box was of Swedish provenance, having been manufactured in 1840 in the city of Hudiksvall in the north central part of Sweden by a well-known silversmith named Lars Löfgren. The box bears the initials *S M D* with the additional words *I Killbo* (In Killbo) According to *Svensk*



Fig. 1. Silver snuff box made in Hudiksvall in 1840.



*ortförteckning*<sup>1</sup> there are two villages in Sweden named Kilbo (Killbo in the vernacular), both in the same general area of Sweden — one in Söderala, a parish to the south and one in Färila Parish to the west. Of these two villages we can probably eliminate the Kilbo in Söderala on the outskirts of the city of Söderhamn. Any silver object ordered or purchased for someone in Kilbo in Söderala would doubtless have come from Söderhamn, which was a prominent center of merchants and crafts people.

Färila Parish, being farther north, has its trade route with Hudiksvall, along the valley of the Ljusnan River, which empties into the Gulf of Bothnia. It would be natural for people in this valley to trade in Hudiksvall.

Among the many Swedes who emigrated to the United States in 1850 was a contingent of farmers from Färila Parish, numbering at least 36 persons, who arrived in New York aboard the bark *Maria* on September 3. Of this group, two families came from Kilbo — an army sergeant named Pehr Rehnström with his wife Carin Pehrsson and a farmer named Johan Ersson with his wife Sigrid Månsdotter. Though it is difficult to prove that the silver snuff box in question actually belonged to Sigrid Månsdotter with the initials *SMD*, it is tempting to conjecture that she was the original owner. By checking the church records of Färila Parish we find that Sigrid Månsdotter was born in the village of Svedja Dec. 19, 1813, the daughter of Måns Jonsson, a farmer, and Brita Pehrsson.<sup>2</sup>

Another immigrant artifact, (Fig. 2), much easier to identify, is also a silver snuff box, the origin of which we find in Chicago, IL. It is a beautiful item, made of coin silver and housed in a handsome velvet lined leather case, made by an early Swedish silversmith in Chicago by the name of L. F. Hussander, born in Levide Parish on the Swedish island of Gotland. He had arrived in America in 1868 and had opened a silversmithy in Chicago in 1870.<sup>3</sup> The snuff box in question was a custom made job to honor the president of the Svea Society of Chicago, J. M. Schönbeck, one of the founders of the society in 1857, who on April 25, 1873 celebrated his 57th birthday. The snuff box was suitably engraved for the occasion:

“Minne af Vänner inom Sällskapet Svea till J. M. Schönbeck (sic!) på hans 57<sup>de</sup> Födelsedag den 25<sup>te</sup> April 1873.”

In translation the engraving states that this was a memento to J. M. Schönbeck from his friends in the Svea Society on his 57th birthday April 25, 1873.

The story of John Mathias Schönbeck is the saga of an early Swedish immigrant, who arrived in Chicago in 1847 and became one of the leading figures in Swedish American circles. He was born in Riseberga Parish, Malm. län April 25, 1816, the son of Christian Schönbeck, rector and provost of the parish, and Ella Botilla Sorbon. Schönbeck was for many years vestryman in the Swedish St. Ansgarius Episcopal Church, Chicago, where he became a warm personal friend of its rector, Gustaf Unonius. He died in Chicago Oct. 2, 1873, less than six months after having been honored by his brother members of the Svea Society.<sup>4</sup>

Though books, and in particular, devotional books, do not actually belong in the category of artifacts, it is of interest to students of early Swedish immigration





Fig. 2. Silver snuff box made in Chicago in 1873 for J. M. Schönbeck.

to the U.S., that a unique literary item came to light in Chicago in the fall of 1950 with the discovery of a copy of the original edition of Erik Jansson's *Några Sånger samt Böner* (*Some Psalms and Prayers*), printed in Söderhamn in 1846 (Fig. 3). This item combines the fates of three early Swedish immigrants to the United States. Erik Jansson was the prime mover of a sect named for him, who, approximately 1,500 strong settled in Bishop Hill, IL between 1846 and the early 1850's. He was born in Biskopskulla, Väst. län Dec. 21, 1808, the son of a farmer named Jan Mattson, and died in Bishop Hill, IL May 13, 1850 at the hands of an assassin.<sup>5</sup> His hymnal was published in a second and enlarged edition in Galva,



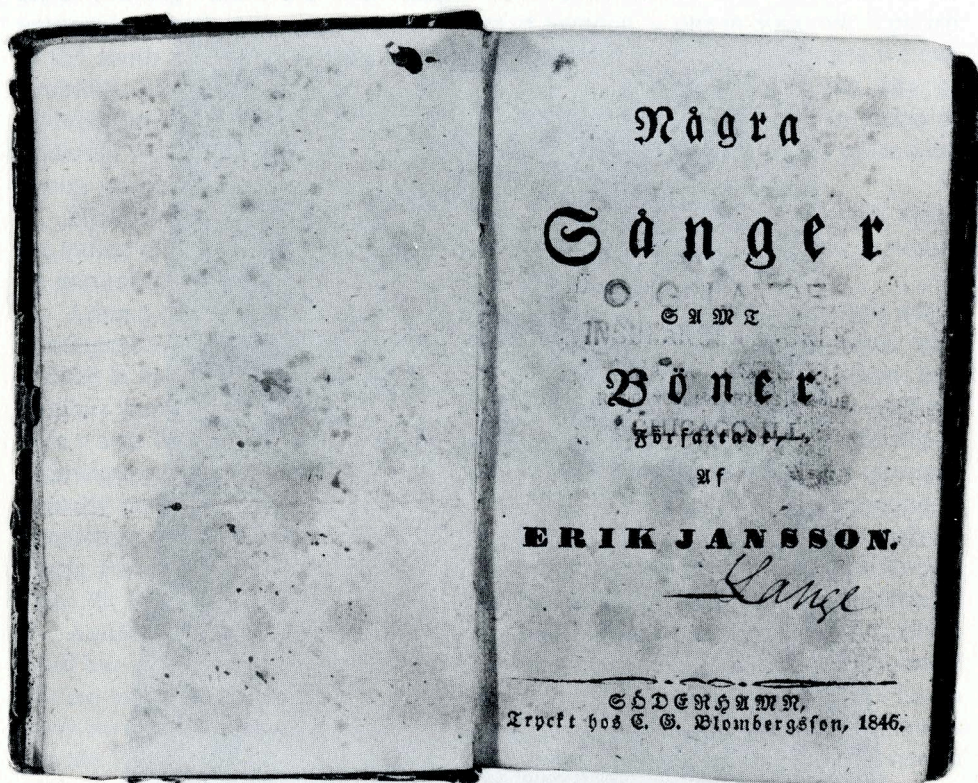


Fig. 3. Title page of Erik Jansson's *Några Sångar samt Böner* with O. G. Lange's imprint.

IL in 1857 by Svante Ulric Cronsioe, early Swedish printer in the Middle West (1817–1881).<sup>6</sup>

Carl Gustaf Blombergsson, the printer of the hymnal, was a warm friend of Erik Jansson, and had printed the book in his printing shop in Ina, Söderala Parish, outside of the city of Söderhamn. He had also emigrated to America in 1846, approximately at the same time as Jansson and was a member of the Bishop Hill colony. He died in Hanktown, CA of scurvy, probably Oct. 11, 1850 on a mining mission to the gold fields.<sup>7</sup>

The third name allied with this particular hymnal is that of O. G. Lange, whose imprint is to be found on the title page as an insurance broker in Chicago. Lange, who had arrived for the first time in Boston, MA in 1824, was the son of a furrier in Göteborg named Fredrik Lange. He was only 13 years old when he



arrived to the U.S. as a cabin boy aboard an American sailing vessel. He sailed out of Boston for fourteen years before moving on to Chicago, arriving there in 1838, most certainly as one of the earliest Swedes to settle in that city. The title page also bears the autograph of Lange.<sup>8</sup>

These examples will suffice to show that much can be learned from clues provided by artifacts brought over by the immigrants. No item is too insignificant in building up a body of evidence which ultimately may provide the solution to a thorny genealogical problem.

<sup>1</sup> *Svensk ortförteckning 1960*, Stockholm, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> *Färila Parish Records*, Härnösand landsarkiv, Härnösand.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Eric and Peterson, C.F. *Svenskarne i Illinois*, Chicago, IL 1880; p. 406.

<sup>4</sup> Olsson, Nils William, "En förgrundsgestalt i Chicagos svenska historia", *Allsvensk Samling*, No. 33, 1946, pps. 11, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Elmen, Paul, *Wheat Flour Messiah*. Erik Jansson of Bishop Hill, Carbondale, IL 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Örnberg, Victor, *Svensk släkt-kalender för år 1887*, Stockholm, 1886, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850*, Chicago, 1967, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Skarstedt, Ernst, *Vagabond och redaktör*, Seattle, 1914, p. 37.

## Swedish Genealogical Bibles

(continued from page 19)

ASI — 10. Martin Luther's *Little Catechism*, printed in Göteborg (no date) has the following notation on the inside of the front cover:

"Anna born in Hjärtum Parish (Göt. län) April 3, 1847. Mathias Andersson 1851."

On the inside of the back cover is the following:

"This book belongs to me Anna Catharina Andersson, Trollhättan December 9, 1851."

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ASI — 11. A Bible, printed in Lund in 1880 is a Type B book and has the following notation on the flyleaf:

"Ernst Adrian Olsson on his Confirmation Day in Vanstad Parish April 20, 1900."

Note: Vanstad is a parish in Malm. län.

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