3-1-1981

What's in a Swedish Surname?

Nils William Olsson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag
Part of the Genealogy Commons, and the Scandinavian Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol1/iss1/15
What's in a Swedish Surname?

Nils William Olsson

The use of surnames in Sweden is of comparatively late date. Prior to the 15th and 16th Centuries, all Swedes used patronymics, i.e. the father’s name in conjunction with the word -son (son) or -dotter (daughter). This practice was not unique in Sweden, but existed in practically all European cultures. Whereas in Sweden the patronymic was a suffix, coming at the end of the father’s baptismal name, it was a prefix in the British Isles, where the word Fitz (from the French fils meaning son) was prefixed to the father’s Christian name, thus giving rise to such forms as Fitzgerald, Fitzpatrick and Fitzsimmons. In Ireland the prefix was O’ as in O’Connell, O’Grady and O’Neill. In Scotland where the word for son was Mac, patronymics became MacAdams, MacCarthry and MacDonald.

It should be emphasized that the patronymic is not identical with a family name. It was not until the latter part of the 19th Century that the patronymic in Sweden congealed to become a family name. Before that time it had changed with each generation. Thus persons named Sven and Anna, the children of Anders, were known as Sven Andersson and Anna Andersdotter. If Sven in turn had a son, he became Svensson and his daughter became Svensdotter. Iceland is the only Scandinavian country today, which retains the system of patronymics. Even the telephone directories follow this custom by listing Icelandic telephone subscribers by their Christian names. The patronymic follows in second place.

Aristocratic Names

By the 15th and 16th Centuries family names begin appearing in Sweden, at first confined almost exclusively to the aristocracy, somewhat later but in a parallel development to what was happening in the British Isles and on the Continent. At first the family name was simply an identifier added to the patronymic. This identifier was usually the symbol emblazoned on the field of the escutcheon, thus Ture Jönsson Tre Rosor, a Swedish political leader, who died in 1532 was named thus because of the three roses inscribed on his coat of arms. Gustaf I (1521–1560), the first of the modern kings of Sweden was known as Gustaf Eriksson Vasa or Vase because of the fact that his escutcheon was inscribed with a vase (fasces in English). One of the oldest Swedish families of
nobility used an escutcheon on which the chief or upper half was emblazoned in gold, the lower half or base was inscribed in blue. In the popular jargon of the day the family which carried this heraldic emblem was first known as Dag och Natt, later changed to Natt och Dag (Night and Day), a name carried by the family to the present time.

Sweden's House of Nobles (Riddarhuset) in Stockholm contains the records of many thousands of families, who across the years have been ennobled by Swedish royalty for services rendered the monarch or in the service of Sweden. While many of them retained their original names, it was customary that when dubbed a knight, the individual so honored was given, not only a coat of arms, but also a new name "more fitting" to his new social station in life. Some of these names were derived from his earlier name, as for instance the name of af Klercker, derived from Klerck, but often a new name was created for the peer. This is no place to go into the flora of aristocratic names, which have come to the fore across more than 350 years of history since Riddarhuset was founded, suffice it to say that we have here a vast collection of Swedish surnames allied with the Swedish nobility.

Clerical Names

By the 17th Century the clergy had begun to adopt family names. In the pre-Reformation era young men who entered the church automatically latinized their baptismal names as well as their patronymics. This custom continued in the 16th Century and into the beginning of the 17th. Thus patronymics like Andersson became Andrae, Eriksson — Eri, Håkansson — Haqvini, Hermansson — Hermanni and Petersson — Petri, etc. Though they were latinized forms, they were still the patronymics they had inherited at birth. By the beginning of the 17th Century, young clerics went one step farther. They actually adopted new family names, using their knowledge of Latin and Greek. The young student pursued various methods to concoct a new surname. One method was to take a name of the farm, village or parish in which he was born and simply translate it into Latin. Thus Berg, meaning mountain, became Montanus. This was the route taken by the hero in Ludvig Holberg's delightful comedy, Jeppe på Bjerget (Jeppe on the Hill), in which the rustic student, possessing a smattering of Latin attempts to impress his home village neighbors with his learning, by having taken the name of Montanus. There are legions of such names. Another name, which has become internationally known is that of Anders Celsius, inventor of the centigrade thermometer, whose ancestors came from the manse of Hög en in Ovanåker Parish in the province of Hälsingland. Another interesting transformation is the name Cavallius taken by a student from Håldala in Småland, who simply translated the name of his home village into Latin — cava vallis. A Danish counterpart is the name of Pontoppidan, taken by a young student from Broby, who likewise translated the Danish into Latin — ponto (bridge) and oppidanus (town).
Still another method was to add the Latin -ius to a Swedish name, usually derived from a place name, as for example Bergius from Berg. A few other -ius forms which come to mind are names like Abelius, Acrelius, Agrelius, Arrhenius, Barchaelius, Boethius, Craelius, Darelius, Dryselius, Fornelius, Forselius, Gumaelius, Hallenius, Hagelius, Hagrelius, Hazelius, Hesselius, Lothigius, Moselius, Netzelius, Nobelius, Normelius, Nyselius, Topelius and Unonius. Most of these surnames are also formed after the principle of using a first syllable anchored in a Swedish place name. There are exceptions as with Unonius, which originally was the latinized form of the Christian man’s name Uno. With succeeding generations, the bearers of these typically clerical names, entering into secular professions, often would lop off the -ius ending, calling themselves Abel, Acrel, Agrell, Darell, Drysell, Hagrell, Mosell, Netzell, Nobel, Normell, etc.

Another favorite Latin ending was -aeus as in such surnames as Barchaeus, Bosaeus, Tranaeus and the modern 20th Century form Lonaeus.

Some scholars preferred to use the suffix -ander, derived from the Greek word for man, andro(s). This suffix became so popular, that it is used even today to create new Swedish surnames, despite its clerical past. Surnames ending in -ander are as numerous as there are persons with fertile minds to fashion a new variant. The following are only a few samples from this sea of names, most of them arising from using the first syllable with some allusion to a native place name: Ahlander, Akiander, Alander, Allander, Arenander, Bellander, Bjorkander, Bolander, Bonander, Brolander, Chrysander, Dahlander, Duvander, Dylander, Elander, Enander, Erlander, Fjellander, Fornander, Forsander, Froeder, Gallander, Gasslander, Gullander, Gravander, Haliander, Hussander, Isander, Jarlander, Kilander, Kylander, Kyllander, Lekander, Levander, Lithander, Lotsander, Mellander, Mosander, Nylander, Olander, Osander, Palander, Pelander, Petander, Rosander, Sarnander, Sallander, Selander, Solander, Spolander, Svalander, Tellander, Tholander, Ullander, Wallander, Welander, Wikander, Ylander, etc.

These are but a few of the clerical names in vogue in Sweden, but they give a good indication as to the endless variety which exists.

The next social group to drop the patronymics in favor of surnames were the citizens of the towns and villages, as well as the itinerant craftsmen, who coming from rural parishes, sought improved economic conditions within the cities and towns. These name changes begin occurring toward the middle of the 17th Century. At first the artisans and craftsmen were content with a nickname which had allusion to their trade and craft, such as Thomas smed (Thomas the smith), Sven skrädare (Sven the tailor) or David bagare (David the baker). But David bagare’s son was not necessarily a baker, and there was therefore a need to differentiate people with identical names as the population increased. Hence the gradual emergence of fixed family names.
Nature Names

It is not certain why and how Swedish nature names were formed. Sweden and Finland alone in Scandinavia use this unique form. Since Finland was an integral part of Sweden for hundreds of year, it is not peculiar that the Swedish Finns as well as the Finns themselves have followed Swedish name usage. In Norway and Denmark, where these forms are unusual it was customary to take the name of the farm or the dwelling and adopt this as a surname. This method has of late been introduced in Sweden also. The taking of nature names may have been inspired by an unconscious effort to borrow from the nobility, not their names, which was illegal, but to use the same techniques, except where the nobility used the vocabulary of heraldry with copious allusions to martial exploits, the burghers were content to use names which incorporated the vocabulary of the peaceful Swedish countryside.

Swedish nature names are based upon the topographical features of the Swedish landscape, almost all types of Swedish flora and fauna, as well as parts of the mineral kingdom, the four points of the compass and innumerable references to Swedish place names, ranging from the smallest croft, hummock and rivulet to the larger cities, counties and towns.

The nature names generally consist of one or two syllables, very rarely three, as in Bergendahl, Levenhagen and Björkegren. As a result of an ongoing campaign in Sweden for persons to change their patronymic surnames for new names, the trend has been to take three syllable names, which for many years was frowned upon as being too foreign-sounding. Since we are dealing with names brought over by emigrants, antedating the modern name-changing process, we shall confine this study to the two syllable names. Here follows a partial list of the common topographic elements which go into the structure of a nature name. The Swedish word is to the left, followed by an English translation of the element to the right:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swedish Word</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Åker</td>
<td>creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alv</td>
<td>field, arable land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Äng</td>
<td>large river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Äng (old form was Eng)</td>
<td>meadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backe</td>
<td>rivulet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back</td>
<td>small hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berg</td>
<td>mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brant, Bratt</td>
<td>steep incline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dal (old form was Dahl)</td>
<td>valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>a clearing in the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fjäll (old form was Fjell)</td>
<td>a large mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fält (old form was Felt, Feldt)</td>
<td>field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flod</td>
<td>river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fors</td>
<td>rapids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Häll (old form was Hell)</td>
<td>a flat rock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hage — paddock  
Hall — a rock formation  
Hammar — a rock formation 
Hav (old form was Haf) — the sea, ocean  
Hed — heath  
Hög — hummock, hillock  
Holme — island  
Hult — wooded area  
Källa (old form was Kella, often in surnames written Kjell) — well, spring  
Kil (old form was Kihl) — a small inlet of the ocean  
Klev (old form was Klef) — a rock formation  
Kulle — a small hill  
Land — land  
Lid — a gradual incline  
Lund — a grove  
Mark — land, ground  
Mo — heath  
Mosse — low lying pasture  
Myr — swamp  
Ö — island  
Ryd (from the Swedish verb rödja, to clear ground) — clearing  
Säter (old form was Seter, also written Setter, Zäter, Zäther, Zätter in surnames) — farm in the mountains  
Sand — sand  
Sjö — lake  
Skär — skerry  
Skog — forest  
Sten — stone  
Strand — shore  
Ström — stream  
Sund — narrows  
Tun (old form was Thun) — open place in front of farmstead  
Vad (old form was Wad) — wading place, ford  
Vall (old form was Wall) — pasture  
Vik (old form was Wik, sometimes written Wiik, Wijk in surnames) — bay

Most of these monosyllables can function alone as surnames. Words ending in e, however, drop the e in combination with another element — thus the compound form would have Back-, Hag-, Holm-, Kull- and Moss-. In some instances both Back and Holm are also used as surnames. It is questionable if Å and Ö can stand alone. At least the writer has never seen references to such surnames.

By far the most common practice is to combine two of these elements to form a family name. There are myriads of combinations. If we take the form
Berg, as an example, we come up with surnames like: Åberg, Elfberg, Engberg, Brantberg, Brattberg, Bergdahl, Dahlberg, Fallberg, Ejellberg, Flodberg, Forsberg, Hellberg, Hagberg, Hallberg, Hammarberg, Högberg, Holmberg, Hultberg, Kihlberg, Klefberg, Kjellberg, Kellberg, Landberg, Lundberg, Mossberg, Myrberg, Öberg, Rydberg, Skogsberg(h), Strömberg, Bergström, Sundberg, Tunberg, Thunberg, Wadberg, Wikberg, Wijkberg, Wallberg, Sandberg, Strandberg, Sjöberg, Bergstrand, Bergsjo, Bergstedt, Berglund and Bergwall, to name a few.

If we go to the Swedish flora and begin with tree nomenclature, we find the following common Swedish trees, which all can stand alone as surnames or can be combined with other elements:

- **Ahl** — alder
- **Alm** — elm
- **Asp** — aspen
- **Björk** — birch
- **Bok** — beech
- **Ek** — oak
- **En** — juniper
- **Fur** — pine
- **Gran** — fir
- **Hägg** — chokecherry
- **Hassel** — hazel
- **Lind** — linden
- **Lönn** — maple
- **Rönn** — mountain ash

Add to these native trees and bushes the very popular exotic trees, **Ceder** (cedar) **Lager** (laurel) and **Palm** (palm), and we have thus covered the more common elements from the area of trees.

Some Swedish flowers and plants which have been used to fashion surnames are the following:

- **Blom** — flower, bloom
- **Lilja** — lily
- **Ljung** — heather
- **Myrten** — myrtle
- **Ört** — herb
- **Ros** — rose
- **Säv** (old form was Säf) — rush

Parts of Swedish trees and plants are also incorporated into the names:

- **Bark** — bark
- **Blad** — leaf
- **Gren** — bough or branch
- **Kvist** (old form was Qvist) — twig
- **Löv** (old form was Löf) — leaf
- **Rot** — root
- **Stam** — stem or trunk

Certain fruits and berries also lend themselves to the formation of family names, but not all. The older Swedish word for apple was **Apel**. This occurs in surnames but not the modern word **Apple**. Neither is **Päron**, the word for pear, in the surname vocabulary. On the one side we have several family names in which the word **Hallon** occurs, the word for raspberry, but no strawberry (**Jordgubbe**). The word for plum is **Plommon** in Swedish and is found in the surname **Plomgren**, but the writer has never seen a name based on **Körsbär** (cherry).
Except for the fruit names, all of the above forms can stand alone as surnames. Combined with other elements in the floral kingdom, we find such names as Blomgren, Blomqvist, Hallongren, Hallonqvist, Liljeblom, Liljeblad, Liljegren, Liljefors, Liljeros, Liljestam, Ros(en)qvist and Ros(en)gren.

Again it is perfectly proper to combine any of the Swedish topographic elements with those in the botanical library and names like Blomberg, Dahlgren, Dahlenqvist, Dahllof, Hellqvist, Hallgren, Hammarqvist, Hedblom, Holmqvist and Rydqvist are quite numerous.

In the animal kingdom we find the following birds:

- Fågel (old form was Fogel) — bird
- Duva — dove
- Häger — heron
- Hök — hawk
- Svala — swallow
- Svan — swan
- Sparv (old form was Sparf) — sparrow
- Uggla — owl

But not Höna (hen), Tupp (rooster), Anka (duck) nor Gås (goose).

The quadrupeds are represented by:

- Alg (old form was Elg) — moose, elk
- Djur (old form for deer)
- Hjort — hart
- Lejon — lion
- Ren (old form was Rehn) — reindeer
- Varg (old form was Warg) — wolf

But not Ko (cow) nor Hund (dog).

Examples of names derived from the animal kingdom are Hjort, Hjortsberg, Elgqvist, Elgström, Djurberg, Lejonberg, Varg and Warg.

Fishes are represented by:

- Gääda (old forms were Gedda or Giedda) — pike
- Gös — walleyed pike
- Haj — shark
- Lax — salmon
- Sik — whitefish
- Val (old form was Wahl) — whale

Several Swedish families are named Gedda and the words Haj and Lax have also been used in combinations with other elements. The most popular fish is the whale, and it may be the first part of such names as Wahlberg, Wahllund, Wahlqvist and Wahlström.

If we turn to the mineral kingdom we find a few elements which are used in family names. Malm, the word for ore is found in Malmberg, Malmqvist and Malmström. Guld(Gull) for gold and Silver for silver are found in such names as
Gullberg, Guldström, Gullstrand and Silverberg.

Names of precious stones have apparently not caught the fancy of the Swedes wishing to change their names. We find no native Diamant, Rubin nor Safir names.

Points of the compass are popular in the formation of Swedish family names, either standing alone or in combination with nature elements or names of flowers and trees.

Väst(ER) (old form was West or Wester) — west
Öst(ER) — east
Nord, Norr — north
Söder — south

The points of the compass are popular in themselves as family names but in combination with other elements they form a large proportion of the Swedish name flora: Westberg, Westerberg, Westerdahl, Westerstrand, Östberg, Nordström, Norström, Nordgren, Norgren, Norqvist, Nordqvist, Söderberg and Söderqvist.

The adjective Ny, meaning new, has been very popular in forming names, thus we find countless families named Nyland, Nylund, Nyberg, Nyström, Nygren, Nyqvist, Nystedt and Nystrand.

If we, for a moment, look at surnames formed from Swedish place names, we shall discover that the list is endless. Particularly in recent years, when the campaign has been going on to induce Swedes to take new names, thousands of new names have been selected, most of them based on a Swedish place names. Only two examples will be given here, in order to show how many names have their origin in the Swedish countryside. Two of Sweden’s largest lakes are Vänern (old form was Wenern) and Vättern (old form was Wettern) which have given birth to many such names as Wennerberg, Wennerström, Wennerstrand, Wetterberg, Wetterdahl and Wetterström.

Walloon Names

In the late 16th Century and early 17th, Swedish kings, wishing to revitalize and modernize the Swedish iron and steel industry, brought in from what is today Belgium, several hundred French-speaking Walloon families. Walloon smiths were well-known for their excellent craftsmanship in the working of steel, iron, copper and brass. They were hard workers and their knowledge and skills had been handed down from father to son for many generations. The infusion into Sweden of this foreign "knowhow" brought about a veritable revolution in the Swedish metal industry and laid the foundation for the fact that the Swedish metallurgical industry today enjoys world-wide reputation. The Walloons were not only gifted smiths, but they brought into the life stream of Sweden new blood and new ideas.

The Walloons and their descendants have remained a small but highly influential segment of Swedish life, numbering at the present time about 30,000,
and residing for the most part in those areas of Sweden, where the iron manufac-
turing industry has had its center of activity, in the län of Kopparberg, Uppsala, 
Västmanland, Örebro and Östergötland.

The physical characteristics of the Walloons have somehow persisted and 
and have often been dominant across the centuries despite intermarriage with Swed-
ish women. Their brown eyes, dark complexion and high foreheads constitute a 
type which one can spot quite easily in Bergslagen, the part of Sweden where 
they first settled.

Though many of the old Walloon names are gone, having been dropped by 
latter-day descendants in favor of patronyms and Swedish surnames, there are 
still a number of them in use today, names like Anjou, Bedoire, Boivie, Bouveng, 
de Besche, De Geer, Galon, Gauffin, Gefvert or Gäfvert, Gille, Gilljam, 
Hybinette, Laurin, Lemon, Pousette and Sporrong.

Military Names

A very characteristic part of Swedish nomenclature is the existence of a 
number of military names. They are to be found in every segment of Swedish life 
and have been transported, as well, across the ocean to America, where they can 
be found in great numbers, even if in a slightly altered form or perhaps totally 
anglicized.

The story goes back a long time, to the time when Sweden had to fill its 
cadres of army and navy personnel with recruits from the rural areas in the land. 
The standing army was small and Sweden had to rely on the mustering of a great 
many men, who during peace time were occupied mostly with the tilling of the 
land. They were thus assigned small cottages with a small piece of land, which 
they could work, but be ready at a moment's notice to leave home and join the 
army and the navy, should a military emergency arise. These cottages, provided 
by the government, were called soldattorp or båtsmanstorp, depending upon 
whether the inhabitant was a member of the army or the navy.

Usually the recruit, as he arrived for the first time to be mustered into the 
military service, had a patronymic which was all too common and easily led to 
confusion. The military scribe therefore assigned a new name to the soldier or 
sailor, a name which was usually short and pithy and in some way alluded to his 
new profession. The name could be an object from the arsenal of the weaponry 
he used or a martial characteristic he was supposed to possess, or simply a name 
fashioned from the place name of his torp.

Some of the names in the first category that come to mind are:

*Dolk* — a small knife, a stiletto
*Granat* — grenade
*Kanon* (old form was *Canon*) — cannon
*Hagel* — shot, lead pellet
*Kula* — cannon ball or bullet
*Pamp* — a large heavy sword
Pil (old form was Pihl) — arrow
Pistol — pistol
Sabel — sabre
Sköld — shield
Skott — shot, volley
Skytt — marksman
Spjut — spear
Stål — steel
Strid — battle, skirmish
Svärd (old form was Swärd) — words

Names based on a characteristic which a soldier was supposed to possess were:

Ärlig — honest
Frimodig — brave
Glad — happy
Hurtig — bold
Modig — courageous
Munter — jolly
Säll — blessed, ecstatic
Stadig — steady or sturdy
Stark — strong
Stolt — proud
Tapper — brave
Trofast — trustworthy
Trotsig or Trotzig — stubborn

It is not unusual to find some of these characteristic names partly or wholly anglicized among Americans of Swedish descent in America. Names like Sell, Shield, Shields, Shold, Streed and Sturdy are only a small part of the flora of Swedish American names with a martial past.

Before we leave the military names it should be mentioned that certain recruits who were assigned to soldattorp in the Swedish countryside, would often also inherit the name of the predecessor in that billet, even though no blood relationship existed. An example from the province of Västergötland comes to mind, where three generations of soldiers, none related, were billeted in the same cottage, one after the other, all bearing the name of Ådahl. Research showed that the name given to the first resident of this soldattorp was Ådahl, and subsequently all occupants came to be known by the same name. Caution should therefore be used in searching the military rolls and check how the soldiers inhabiting the identical torp with the same name could be related.

Foreign Names

In addition to the Walloon names, other foreign names have also gained admittance to the catalog of Swedish surnames. Many of these names are linked
to the movement into Sweden of other nationalities at certain time periods of Swedish history. In the 16th and 17th Centuries, a number of Scottish and English mercenaries sought service in Sweden's armies, particularly in the service of Gustavus Adolphus during the Thirty Years War. Many of these young men won fame and fortune in this bloody conflict and elected to settle in Sweden, where some of them founded families, which exist to the present day. Some of these mercenaries were scions of British and Scottish noble families, who in Sweden sought entry and were admitted to the Swedish House of Nobles (Riddarhuset). Typical of these families were names like Fleetwood, Hamilton and Montgomery. Others who became a part of Swedish society were names like Lejon (Lyon), Klerck (Clark), Forbus (Forbes). Later in the 18th Century we find English families in the city of Göteborg with names like Gibson, Dickson, Chalmers and in Karlskrona the Sheldons.

The Germans have always had strong ties to Sweden, going back to the Middle Ages, when German kings occupied the Swedish throne and the city government of Stockholm was dominated by German merchants and craftsmen. Many of the members of the St. Gertrude's Church in Stockholm (Tyska kyrkan), were immigrants from Germany, who had settled in Stockholm to ply their trade as printers, brewers, smiths, and tradesmen. In the 18th and 19th Centuries new waves of German tailors, shoemakers and other craftsmen came to Sweden to settle down and marry Swedish women.

Polish and Russian prisoners of war, captured in Sweden's many wars to the east, released from captivity, elected to settle in Sweden, where some of them still have descendants. Immigrants from southern Europe and France have entered Sweden from time to time, have settled down and have produced progeny represented by French names like Giron and Richert and Italian names like Ambrosiani and Dominique.

In the northern part of Sweden Finnish settlers have brought in Finnish names and throughout Sweden may be found families of Norwegian and Danish origin.

The influx of these disparate peoples have brought into Sweden a number of distinct and different surnames, which still live on to speak their language of foreign origin.

Swedish family names constitute a part of Swedish history and speak eloquently of the part that both natives and immigrant peoples have played in the making of modern Sweden.

It is the plan of SAG to bring to its readers in the future more complete essays on the various classes of Swedish names, particularly the military and Walloon names, which form such a distinct pattern in the formulation of Swedish surnames.