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Anna Brita Östman Mohr

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# Sweden and I

The 2012 winner of *Allt för Sverige* tells about her adventures in Sweden



BY ANNA BRITA ÖSTMAN MOHR  
(TEXT AND PHOTOS)

I was privileged to grow up in an almost exclusively Scandinavian family. I would secretly pride myself on being half Swedish (and also Norwegian!) while so many others around me could only claim bits and pieces of their various ancestries, if they even knew them at all. I could claim it (though humbly of course, in keeping with the reserved nature of my heritage), and I even looked the part with the stereotypical blonde hair, blue eyes, and ruddy cheeks, but I did not have a full understanding of what that meant. My entire childhood was spent intrigued by the countries and stories of my ancestors, and my dream was to eventually go to the lands that forged the blood in my

veins and the personalities of my family members. I attended *Midsommar* celebrations in Poulsbo, Washington, and nearly pursued Scandinavian Studies as my college major. Life circumstances have a way of creeping up on us, however, and my Nordic dream eventually became unattainable. I put aside those desires as the realities of children and adulthood consumed me, but I always kept alive a feeble hope they might be revisited on some future date.

Then *Allt för Sverige* fell upon me with a force I can only describe as predestined. The actual process of being cast on the show is a story long enough to fill a novel, but it was very evidently meant to be. The timing in

my life, the experiences I had endured, the evolution of my thoughts all came together at the precise moment *Allt för Sverige* entered my life, and I was thus prepared in mind, body, and spirit for the long-awaited journey to my ancestral lands that would come to impact me in very unexpected and profound ways.

*Allt för Sverige* is a most unusual way to discover one's heritage. It is a reality TV show based on the premise of bringing ten Swedish Americans back to Sweden to discover its culture, history, and traditions. Concurrently, each participant discovers his or her personal family histories through individual "special day" trips to their ancestral homesteads com-



The 2012 group: Thure Gustafson, Walter Beck, Anna Brita Mohr, Debra Sisneros, Travis McAfee, Karen French, Kelsey Stiles, Matthew Robinson, Meghan Reilly, and Vernon Ferguson.

plete with a family history, photos, and other documents uncovered by extensive genealogical research conducted prior to filming. Along with traveling throughout the country and discovering heritages, participants compete in culturally oriented competitions in order to win the grand prize of the show: a family reunion with unknown Swedish relatives. This grand prize includes no cash reward, and the resulting atmosphere on the show is overwhelmingly positive as a result. Everyone wants everyone else to meet their family! As the winner of season 2 of *Allt för Sverige*, I can attest to the priceless value of such a meaningful prize.

I traveled to Sweden with a rudimentary understanding of parts of my Swedish heritage.

My mother's grandmother (*Emma Erika Palm*, b. 1884 Feb. 18 in Voxna, Häls., immigrated in 1902) came from the Voxna area of Hälsingland while mom's grandfather (*Carl William [Wilhelm] Anderson*) was born in Långared (VäGö) on 1875 Oct. 13, and left for America in 1896. I knew a bit about why my great-grandmother left, and the story was intriguing. Apparently, her father was an intensely strict and religious man, and she immigrated close behind her free-spirited sister, an unmarried woman with an illegitimate child, to escape the atmosphere of persecution at home. Emma soon met Carl, who by this time was a successful building contractor in the state of Washington and eventually settled in Spokane to raise a large, tight-knit Swedish family. My mother, her siblings, and many cousins speak often of their unique Swedish upbringing in Spokane's Swedish Covenant Church and their culturally Swedish family. This family history has been known to me since I was child, but my other Swedish side, my father's side, was much less clear.

My dad's grandfather (Peter Östman) has always been a mystery, although we assumed he was from the north of Sweden. [He has lately been found as *Per Olof Östman*, born 1878 Sep. 30 in Nätra, (Ånge.), who

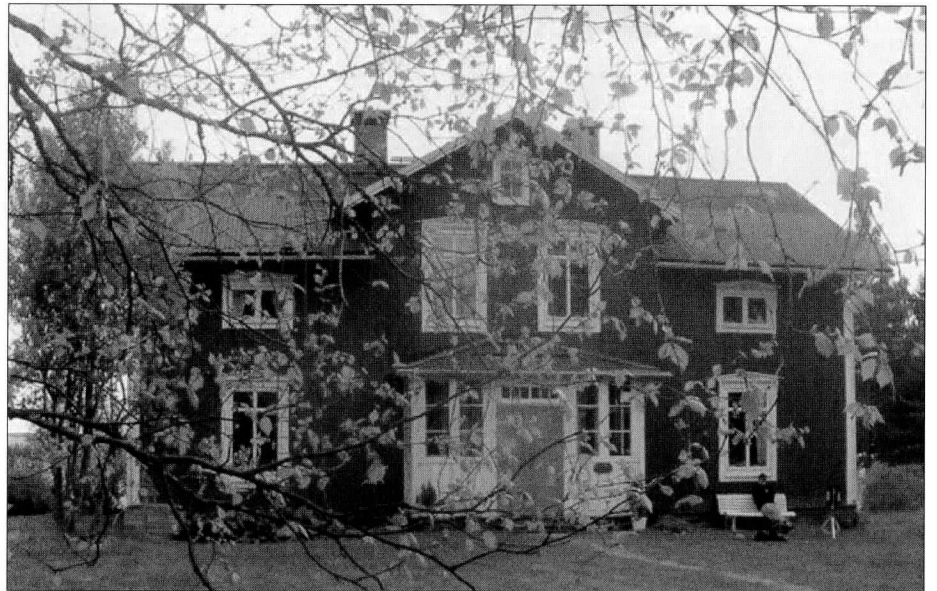
left Sweden in 1901 for Canada.]

He met and married my dad's grandmother (*Frida Nikolina Siden*, b. 1894 Oct. 14 in Nätra, (Ånge.), immigrated in 1909) after meeting her in coastal Washington State. Both were recent Swedish immigrants, and they settled in Raymond, Washington, to work hard and raise two children. Frida was the one great-grandparent I was blessed to know as a child. I can vividly recall her ancient smile as my brother and I greedily accepted her cookies and gumdrops on visits to her nursing home. We knew her, but we did not know much about her heritage or family history or why she left Sweden in the first place.

It was this line of my heritage *Allt för Sverige* chose to pursue, and it was Frida's family in Ångermanland I was eventually able to meet. Long before meeting the relatives, however, I spent my "special day" near Köpmanholmen in the Höga Kusten area exploring the large, beautiful home in which she lived as a child. I walked the same forest trails and beaches of Nässjöbäcken she most likely walked with her family. I read an extensive letter describing her life as the daughter of a hardworking *torpare* and how the rocky soil and cold climate made immigration to America almost a necessity for many poor families of that generation. Seeing the land, the gardens, and the

climate while contemplating the moving, personal story of my great-grandmother had a profound impact on my understanding of myself, my father, and my grandfather. Discovering one's roots is vastly meaningful, and finding oneself in the history of another country – a country surprisingly comfortable and familiar from the first step upon its cold ground – is unspeakably life-changing. I would discover more. I would meet actual family members themselves, but first I was in for an adventure of a lifetime.

Together with the nine other participants, I spent time at Norrfällsviken just to the south of my great-grandmother's ancestral homestead. There in an ancient church full of tiny pews and tiny doors we experienced our first "Swedish Class" taught by our host, Anders Lundin. I took copious notes, predicting the information he passed along would be important to remember at a future date. We also had our first taste of an odd Swedish food, *Surströmming* (fermented herring), and participated in our first competition. From there, we traveled to Skellefteå, threw late spring snowballs at one another, and attempted to sleep away the pink arctic nights on cabin floors at the beautiful farm Rismyrliden. It was on the farm that we ten cast members formed insoluble bonds that persist to this day.



*Frida's home near Köpmanholmen in Nätra, Ånge.*



*Kelsey, Debra, Anna Brita and Meghan shopping in Old Town, Stockholm.*

From the north, we traveled back to Stockholm to explore the capital city and then experienced our first *bilsemester* as we drove RVs down the E4 past Lake Vättern to rhododendron-laden Ronneby far to Sweden's south. We did everything from witnessing the production of *polkagrisar* (peppermint candy) in picturesque Gränna to attending The Sweden Rock Festival in Sölvesborg.

After our southern excursion, we stayed at Häringe *slott*, a castle of royal history, and then jumped into the lives of "everyday Swedes" in Södertälje who just so happened to be immigrants to Sweden much the same as our ancestors were immigrants to America. Every experience was unique and unexpected and

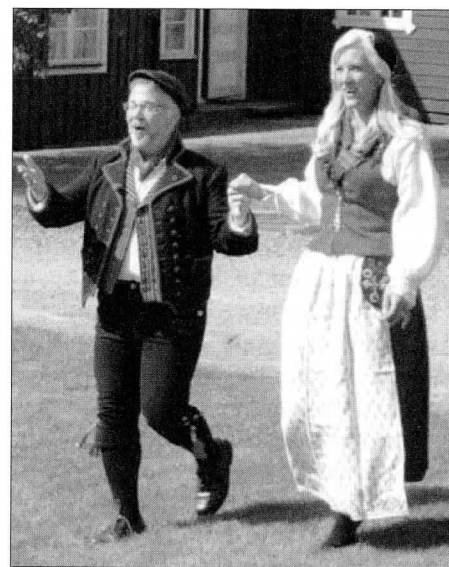


*Preparing food with modern immigrants in Södertälje.*

provided us a more in-depth understanding of our beautiful Swedish country and heritage. We never knew what was coming next, and I think that added to the excitement and pure joy we display so heartily on the show. It is all genuine, and we all fell deeply in love with the entire breadth and scope of Sweden during that first month of exploration.

Along the way, Anders continued his "Swedish classes," we participated in various competitions, and one by one a treasured friend was consequently sent home. It was always a sad day to see someone leave.

By the time *Midsommar* rolled around, only five of us remained, and we felt as if we'd been Swedish family members forever. We spent *Midsommar* in Värmland, and I had the remarkable opportunity along with Vernon Ferguson to tour Selma Lagerlöf's home and see her Nobel award, so rare and beautiful, as she was the first female in history to receive such an award.



*Vern and Anna Brita in Swedish folk costumes for Midsommar.*

setting like a picture out of a fairytale, and the people genuine and comfortable. Yes, we remaining cast members celebrated a proper *Midsommar* and stayed up until the morning hours of the following day singing songs and toasting schnapps – *skål!*, but that is another story...



*Anna Brita and Vern at Mårbacka – home of Selma Lagerlöf.*

We also spent time with the curious *raggare* subculture cruising around Torsby in classic American cars. *Midsommar* was perhaps the pinnacle of my Swedish TV show adventure. The weather was idyllic, the

Finally, we landed in Trosa, the "end of the world" and a quaint little village set upon small channels and waterways gently running in from the Baltic Sea. It was in Trosa we competed in our final three compe-

titions, and it was in Trosa my note taking and observations paid off. Surely everyone deserved to meet their family, but only one could win the prize and somehow that person was me. Shortly thereafter, I flew back up to the *Höga Kusten* and was blessed with the most moving and personal event of my entire adventure: meeting my Swedish family.

I now have another home, another place I belong. I was blessed to have had an intense immersion into many facets of Swedish culture and history, but the family connection is what ultimately sealed the bond. I saw myself reflected in the faces of strangers, and I even saw an older woman who resembled uncannily my great-grandmother Frida who I hadn't seen for nearly thirty years! It was as if I had found my long-lost home. And now I not only look and say I'm Swedish, I feel Swedish, and I know deeply what that means. I am eternally grateful to *Allt för Sverige* for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to discover so much about myself and, yes, I'll say it – my country.

I strongly encourage anyone who is moved by your heritage and



interested in your family histories to continue your efforts and pursue your own stories. You will be rewarded with a profound discovery of not only people and places, but of yourself. I hope you all get the opportunity to experience the beauty and peace that is so evident throughout Sweden. You will not be dis-

appointed, and – who knows - perhaps we may even run into one another there!

Anna Brita Östman Mohr can be contacted through her Facebook page

## The Genealogical Society of Sweden turns 80!

In 1933 some gentlemen met at an hotel in Stockholm and discussed the need for a new society, which would work with the ancestors of ordinary people, not just the noblemen's.

The result of this meeting was the start of the *Genealogiska Föreningen*, also known as *GF* (Genealogical Society of Sweden), which now celebrates its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The society started with just a handful of members, but the membership kept growing and it turned into a working society with many projects. Already in the middle 1930s it started to clip newspaper announcements from the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* about births, deaths, and marriages. They then sorted them alphabetically, and even clipped all the Anderssons, Johanssons and Petters-

sons. The project continued to about 1990, and has since then been digitized and is available online to members. It is a great help when you are tracking living relatives.

During the years the GF has collected books and manuscripts, and now has the largest genealogical library in Sweden, maybe in Scandinavia.

During the 1980s GF took the initiative to start the *Sveriges Släktforskarförbund* (Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies). This was because during the 1970s many new societies started as more people were doing genealogy as it was then easy to borrow churchbooks on microfilm. The new societies needed an umbrella organization, which today has more than 160 societies as members.



Lately GF has gained many new members, due to many new projects of digitizing new kinds of records and making them available online.

The 50th anniversary was held at the outdoors museum *Skansen* in Stockholm, where you could find genealogists in all the houses there, sometimes connected to the original inhabitants. The current anniversary will not be on this grand scale, but a pleasant event for everyone.

SAG sends its congratulations to the Octogenarian! *Link on p. 30.*