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Ann Essling

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Excerpts from Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868

Samuel Magnus, Augusta, and August Hill and their parents left Sweden for a new land

BY ANN ESSLING

I began doing genealogical research in 1976. Until the Swenson Center at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, indexed Samuel Magnus Hill's papers on their website, I knew little of my Swedish great-grandmother's life before the 1890s. Finding this archive gave me a window into the past.

Samuel Magnus was a teacher, Lutheran minister, and poet. In 2012, the *Swedish American Genealogist* published Samuel Magnus's autobiographical letter.¹ Lucky for me his daughter, Cordelia Hill Barnes, gave his collected writings and correspondence to the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center.

I never would have dreamed that I could read the words describing my ancestor's voyage to America in 1868. *Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868* or *Diary of the journey to America in 1868*² is my great-uncle Samuel Magnus Hill's daily journal of his family's emigration from Sweden to America.³

1868 May 4

In May of 1868, my great-grandmother Augusta, age four, her brother August, age nine, Samuel Magnus, age 18, her *Mamma* Maja-Stina Andersdotter, and *Pappa* Samuel Samuelsson leave Västra Ryd and travel 23 miles to the town of Eksjö.

"Monday, May 4, 1868...since we only had one horse, father and I had to walk almost the entire way....My paternal grandfather met us there, too, because he had been called as a witness in a case in the magistrate's

court. We said farewell to each other, never to see him again in this life. God bless his grey hair."

"With Mamma and the little ones on the horse and Pappa and Samuel Magnus walking, they traveled this way another 19 more miles to the Nässjö train station.

"For the first time I got to see a locomotive pulling train cars, and it was curious for me to observe its devices....There were about 100 of us from Västra Ryd alone, and quite a few from other areas, so we were about 500 individuals at the station travelling to America."

1868 May 5

"Tuesday May 5. In the morning, we got up well ahead of our departure and ... got there an hour early. I think it was the worst hour of my life, because the room was so overcrowded that we were packed like sardines in a tin and could not move. And I had my sick brother August to take care of....The noise was deafening, some cried and prayed, others swore, and very few were calm, because they feared that the train would depart before they could board it. But finally the train arrived at the scheduled time, and we all got on after some trouble and shoving. Then off we went, first to Jönköping, where a number of emigrants waited to be united with us. We were, all in all, 1600 traveling to Gothenburg, all of us emigrants to America. The train consisted of 150 cars when we arrived in Gothenburg....We saw many

remarkable things...among them was the mighty Göta River on which big ships rocked as far as the eye could see, so that the river appeared covered with masts."

Why did they leave?

What could cause 1600 people to immigrate to America from one small area in Sweden? Ireland wasn't the only country to have potato famines. Sweden had "disastrous crop failures from 1867 to 1869."⁴ In Sweden in the 1800s, all or most of the land belonged to "Nobles, clergy, burghers, landowning farmers (*bönder*).⁵ A common person could hardly hope to own any land. To earn their living, for 13 years Maja-Stina and Samuel worked separately on different farms. My great-uncle Samuel Magnus lived with his paternal grandparents for five or six years.⁵ Here in America, the Homestead Act of 1862 promised free, or almost free, land to settlers. In 1868, 21,472 Swedes left their homeland. Over a million will emigrate in the next decades.⁶

1868 May 6

"Wednesday May 6. I walked down to the canal and the harbor, where the ships were. There I had the opportunity to see, for the first time, a ship with masts and rigging, and it was exactly as I had envisioned it from reading about it...we bought tickets and...a little wine and Persian insect powder."

They used Persian insect powder to control lice.

1868 May 8

"Friday May 8. Finally, the day came for us to leave our dear homeland and meet our unknown fate...The name of the ship was *Cato*. It cast off from land at 5:45 p.m....I lost my wallet, which I had in my coat pocket.

1868 May 9

"I met with Carl Johansson of Stenabo who loaned us the money for our travel."

Samuel Magnus footnotes this last journal entry, "When I last met him [Carl Johansson], he complained to me that, of all he helped, I was the only one who paid his debt. This was in 1880 or 1881, when I was in St. Peter [Minnesota]."⁷

As the winds rose, most suffered from seasickness.

"My brother August was not seasick, but almost better now than on land."

1868 Sunday May 10

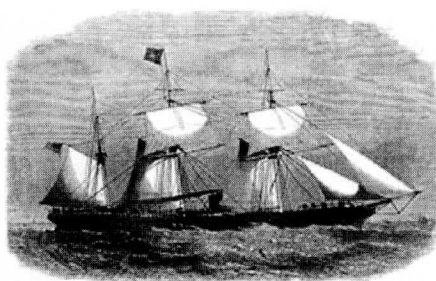
"Heavy fog lay over the water. The ship went slow for fear of encountering another vessel. Pastor Nordgren read a sermon to us. We even sang a few hymns. As the fog cleared, we saw a beacon....This was, of course, England....The ship was towed to the wharf, where it unloaded cargo, and at half-past one we go ashore. We had to walk quite a distance to the immigrant inn, and I remember how tired I was, and how I had to carry August on my back while Momma and Pappa carried the suitcases."

At the inn in Hull, Samuel Magnus ate all he could.

On seeing the sights around Hull, Samuel Magnus is impressed with the size of the horses, large, as large as elephants, he imagines, and small ones. "I had never seen so small, they are like goats with large carriages after them."

1868 May 13

"We drink our coffee and go to the railway station to go from Hull to Liverpool. There we arrived at 3 p.m. and went directly to our ship, the *City*



A ship of the same type as City of Limerick.

of Limerick. We were entertained with ship's biscuits and butter, which tasted good because we did not have dinner."

The *City of Limerick* ship was a three-masted steam ship with one smokestack constructed of iron. Its engine speed was 10 knots or 11.5 miles per hour.⁸

Samuel Magnus's journal records the next days' sufferings from seasickness and whether or not he felt well enough to eat.

1868 Sunday May 17

"Prayer on Sunday May 17. August is suffering not so much from seasickness, and we start believing that the voyage will do him good.

1868 Wednesday May 20

"Wednesday 20. A child died during the night and was buried in the waves. A funeral service was performed, but in English, which I did not understand. The corpse was wrapped in a black cloth and weighted down with stones. It lay on the board while the funeral service was performed, whereupon the board was lifted up, so that the bag slid out and fell into the sea."

1868 May 21

Thursday, Ascension Day, May 21. At 18, Samuel Magnus loves to eat, "I'll eat anything."

"August may be admitted to the hospital because he has been sore on the right side from lying on hard boards. We are afraid because a boy from Nassjö parish was there [and] had dysentery [and died].

The wind is quite cold. [There is] a good wind and the ship runs with

full sails.

1868 Friday May 22

"Fish for dinner, which was good but too salty, so that I was thirsty. We avoid the tea for supper and get oatmeal instead, morning and evening. This may be a good change because it is fresh and not salty."

In 1868, there was no source of safe drinking water on a ship.

"August got salve for his hip. He has a good appetite and eats much, but he might not have enough, so we give him our soup.

1868 May 24

"Sunday the 24. A two-year-old child was buried at 9 p.m. August's hip is slightly better but he has a sore throat, and difficulty swallowing.

1868 May 28

"August is better on his side but his tongue and throat are worse. We are near land but cannot see it because of the fog. In the afternoon, we are brought on a boat to Castle Garden. There we stay overnight for free. Here you can convert money and change tickets. I am embarrassed by diarrhea and feel pretty bad and puke all night. It has a horrible stench.

From 1855 to 1890, Castle Garden, located in the Battery of New York City, was America's first official immigration center.⁹

"We go on a ferry across to the train and are packed on like sardines in a can. A purse was taken from a man. Both his money and tickets were stolen. The same happened to one emigrant who had a wife, two children, and a maid.

1868 Saturday May 30

"The train travels all night. During the night a woman gave birth to a baby girl in the same train car we were in. All are happy and well....The train stops in Albany at 1 o'clock and then goes on.

1868 Monday June 3

"The train runs all night again, which

was quite uncomfortable so that we could not sleep in peace. I put myself under a bench, but I was still walked on. The train stopped a 10 p.m. We went by carriages to stay overnight until 7 a.m.”

1868 Tuesday June 4

“We arrived in Chicago at 10 o’clock in the evening.

“Carlsson gathered most of the immigrants up into a sort of attic, almost like a hayloft in a stable, and there was a sermon. The station manager was an old man with long hair. His name was Brown and he helped us get some food for August.

“I went out on the streets to see if there were a few pieces of bread to be found. We only had moldy bread with us and some syrup that we had bought. This was our lunch. When I was in the street, I found a fairly large piece of bread with butter right in front of me. I picked it up and wiped off dust. As soon as I picked it up, I heard a laugh from a window above. Children were there and had fun at my expense. They had thrown the bread pieces to see me pick them up. Then I noticed that it had spit on the one in my hand. I threw it away then, of course, but at the same time I experienced a feeling I have never before experienced, that they could take pleasure in seeing others suffer. It was a hard lesson.

1868 June 5

“Thursday 5. We traveled all night and arrived at Altona, Illinois, at 9 a.m. There we had food and shelter and August got to lie down on a sofa.

“Four hours after we arrived, August gave up the ghost.”

I knew when I started to translate Samuel Magnus’s diary that August did not live. But reading Samuel Magnus’s words makes me experience his death as though my little great-uncle died yesterday, not almost 150 years ago. Samuel Magnus used the phrase “gave up the ghost” that was used to describe Christ dying on the cross in a Bible version of that time period.

“He was so emaciated. The swell-

ing was completely gone. He had suffered from dropsy since the previous autumn and winter. We thought he wasn’t strong enough to come with us, but he got better. The doctor said the voyage could possibly make him well.”

Dropsy was a diagnosis for heart disease. Also, August must have suffered from edema, retaining water and swelling.

“We were received by Mr. Sandquist, the organist of the church, who received all immigrants. We were entertained with coffee, bread, and cooked pork. It was very pleasant after such a long, difficult journey.

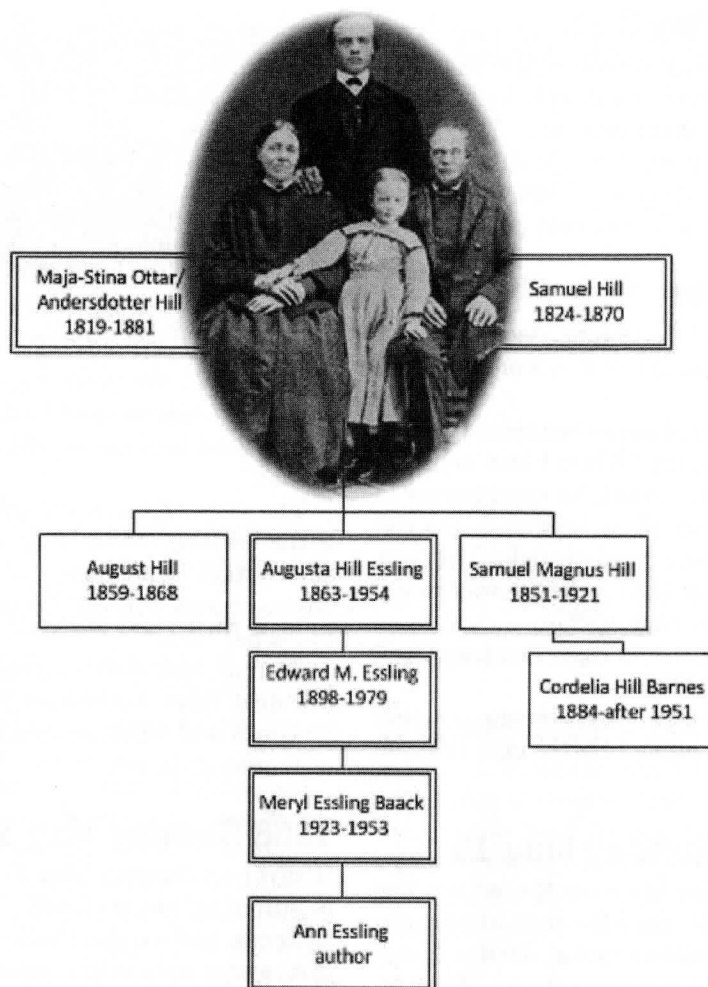
“Wouldn’t August have loved to refresh himself with a little lemonade and sweet milk?

“In the evening, I was so surprised that it gets dark so quickly. We were sitting at dinner after prayers and eating. When I went out, I found the dark night full of flying sparks of fire. They had not told me about fireflies.

Not knowing about them, I was quite taken aback. When I came in, they saw how surprised I was, and they laughed at me and said there was plenty of this kind in America.

1868 June 6

“Friday June 6. A coffin for August cost nine dollars. We went to the graveyard and Pappa and I had dug



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his grave. It was about a mile distant in a forest. The funeral was held in the afternoon. Mr. Sanden sang. Carl Wist and Johannes Starkman were there with my father and me. This was the whole procession. Mamma could not go, because the road was too long and difficult. She was also not strong enough and overcome with sorrow.”

On the last page was the following statement:

“August Samuelsson Hill died June 5, 1868, at the age of eight years, three months, and 26 days in Altona on the journey from Sweden to Berlin, Illinois, North America.”

I’ve come to the end of my great Uncle’s *Diary of the journey to America in 1868*.

Tack så mycket, uncle Samuel Magnus. Reading your journal put me on the ship, the train, the horse, and walking in my great-grandmother’s shoes beside you. To my great-uncle August Samuelson Hill, you are not forgotten.

Augusta Hill

Until I found the records at the Swenson Center, most of what I knew about my great-grandmother, Augusta Hill Essling, came from a box of her keepsakes in our attic. There was an oil painting of a white stork on red velvet and a hand-painted black glass bowl. Augusta was an artist. And there was a blackened fork, bent in half. This is the story of the fork.

Augusta Hill was 12 years her brother’s junior. After their father died in 1870 in Chariton, Iowa, Samuel Magnus supported his mother and sister. There was never enough food in their home. One day, Augusta visited the neighbors. The neighbors were kind and fed her. That evening at dinner, instead of telling her brother she was full, she said, “The food is not good.” After working all day to earn money for the food, Samuel Magnus was so angry that he took his fork and hit his sister with it. The fork bent in half. Augusta kept the fork all her life.

After graduating from Augustana in Rock Island, Illinois, Samuel Mag-

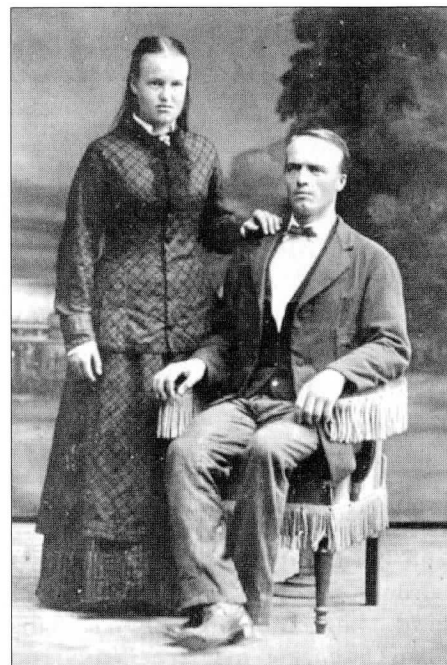
nus Hill became a teacher at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. This allowed his sister, Augusta, to be a student in Gustavus’s first year as a college. She became a teacher eventually moving to Wahoo, Nebraska, where her brother taught. In 1894, her best friend, Magdalena Schulz Essling, died of consumption in St. Peter, Minnesota. In 1897 in Wahoo, Nebraska, Augusta married Magdalena’s widower, Joel Essling, becoming stepmother to two children. Nine months later, my grandfather, Edward M. Essling, was born in St. Peter, Minnesota.

In the early 1950s, after Joel Essling tried to burn coal in their gas furnace, Joel and Augusta moved to a retirement home in St. Paul, Minnesota. Joel and Augusta did not like the modern facilities they visited. Finally, entering a rather rundown, older home, someone greeted them in Swedish. This is where they insisted on staying.

Joel and Augusta Hill Essling both passed away in 1954. Joel was 99 and Augusta 91 years old. They were married 67 years.

Endnotes:

- 1) *Swedish American Genealogist* 2012:1, “Another letter from the Emigration Survey, #173”, By Samuel Magnus Hill, From Östergötland, translated by Elisabeth Thorsell and Chris Olsson p 4-5.
- 2) Hill, Samuel Magnus *Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868* Swenson Center collection Augustana College, SSIRC MSS P:3 box 7 folder 5.
- 3) Hill, Samuel Magnus, *Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868* is written in Swedish. Through Ancestry.com, I received from Dave Magnuson a translation of the first pages. Dave Magnuson wrote “They were in my great-grandfather’s family tree files...Winfield Xenophan Magnuson, a Lutheran minister from the Orion, Illinois area....I believe his sister, Edna Viola (Magnuson) Friedstrom, did the bulk of his translations.” The rest of the diary I translated sentence by sentence using Google Translate. The following quotes in this document are all from *Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868*.



Augusta Hill, great-grandmother of the author; and great uncle, Samuel Magnus Hill. (Photo from Swenson Center Photo Collection).

- 4) Scott, Franklin D., *Sweden The Nation’s History*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1988, p 369.
- 5) *ibid.*, Hill.
- 6) *ibid.*, Scott, p 370.
- 7) *ibid.*, Hill, Samuel Magnus, *Dagbok på resan till Amerika 1868*.
- 8) www.norwayheritage.com.
- 9) CastleGarden.org.
- 10) The photo in the family tree. Photos and genealogy Swenson Center collections, Samuel Magnus Hill papers, 1870-1920, Swenson Center Augustana College SSIRC MSS P:3 box 8 folder 1.
- 11) Above photo of Augusta and Samuel Magnus. From the Swenson Center collections, Samuel Magnus Hill papers, 1870-1920, Swenson Center Augustana College SSIRC MSS P:3 box 8 folder 1.

The author Ann Essling lives in Fridley, MN, and can be reached by her e-mail:
<aessling@usa.net>

Ed:s note: The previous article on Samuel Magnus Hill was published in SAG 1/12, page 4.