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# Thure Emanuel Sandgren – engineer, painter, and globetrotter

## The story of an unusual early traveller

BY TED ROSVALL

On 21 March 1876, the *Motala Tidning* (the local newspaper) published the following detailed obituary for the engineer and painter Thure Emanuel Sandgren (1817-1876). The text deserves to be reproduced in full:

### Thure Emanuel Sandgren

*“To those more unusual personalities whose restless energy and spirit is an enigma to most of us, one has to count the former engineer Thure Emanuel Sandgren, who recently passed away.*

*“He was born in 1817 in Ransberg parish, Västergötland, and belonged to a family of limited means. From his early youth he showed a talent for drawing, which is why he was in 1830 hired as an apprentice painter at Motala factory, where he was able to learn other skills, especially in mechanical drawing. An uncle of his took him out hunting and thus he eventually became a passionate hunter. Painting, however, initially became his main focus and in which he gained considerable skill, not the least from lengthy field trips not only within this country but also to Norway and northern Germany. He was again employed at the Motala Verkstad (Factory), but did not receive enough encouragement from the then English managers, so he resumed his first profession, became established as a master painter in the city of Hjo, painted and donated an altarpiece to the Slöta church, but saw so little prospect in this profession that he*

*soon continued to Stockholm and then on to Finland, where he became a machinist on the steamer Union and later procured employment with the Nobel mechanical workshop.*

*“In 1845 he left here to go to the United States and worked for Reaney & Neafie Ship & Engine Co. in Philadelphia for three years, after which health reasons forced him to return to Europe. Being restored to good health, he obtained employment with the firm Ericsson & Cowe in Åbo (Turku), visited St Petersburg, was offered lucrative positions in the interior of Russia, but returned to Sweden and from thence immigrated a second time to North America, where he found a position as a designer with the renowned shipowner Loper in Philadelphia. On his behalf*

*he accompanied a small steamer on an adventurous and stormy journey to Brazil, lived in this country nearly a year, and then afterwards travelled directly to Europe. In 1852 he immigrated for the third time to North America, landed in Boston, and made a substantial trip via Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cairo (IL), and the Mississippi River to New Orleans and thence by sea to Havana and New York.*

*“Again employed by Loper in Philadelphia, he received an invitation on behalf of the state to build two lighthouses in California, and thus departed via Panama in 1855. He was to stay in California for nearly 3 years, during which time he took part in extensive hunting expeditions, all described in a series of short articles*



Thure Sandgren quail hunting i California. Drawing by Thure Sandgren.



Thure Emanuel Sandgren (1817-1876)  
– the globetrotter. Daguerrotype from the 1850s.

in the newspaper *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* in 1865. He also drew and colored many of the birds that he had shot, almost all California species, a precious collection which he did not want to dispose of, despite being offered a substantial price, but instead brought them back with him to Sweden.

“In March 1858, as he felt that he now had acquired enough savings, he commenced in earnest his return to Sweden. He bought himself a property, Kalvsjö near Medevi (Östergötland) and was in 1859 employed by Captain Carlsund as his closest associate and foreman with the Motala Verkstad. Although he eventually resigned before his distinguished director, he did, however, with his skill and wide experience, in no small measure help to organize and develop an establishment which rising importance is an honor for our city and our country.

After living for about 17 years in foreign countries, Sandgren eventually landed on solid ground and spent as many years in peace and respect, thriving and surrounded by his loving family, residing near the Motala he had always loved, until he eventually died of heart failure. He left his memoirs, which tell the story in surprising detail of an interesting and diverse life from a tender age.”

## Who was he?

Thure Emanuel Sandgren was a very early immigrant who, long before the great immigration period started, left Sweden several times to go not only to North America, but also to Norway, Germany, Russia, and Brazil. A true globetrotter!

The obituary mentions an altarpiece, which Thure had painted and donated to the Slöta church, the church his grandfather, the district glazier (*häradsglasmästare*) Isaac Svensson Sandgren at Enåsen, once fitted with fine glass. The painting, which is supposed to have portrayed the removing of Jesus’ body from the cross, is however not to be found in that church. The “memoirs” that this article is based on, have sadly not been found either. Perhaps they were destroyed by his surviving widow or children?

## Thure’s official family

In November 1859 Thure Emanuel married Miss Constantia Benedikta Hagelberg in Motala Köping. She was born 1824 Mar. 16 in Karlstad, and died 1922 Apr. 2 in Hedvig Eleonora, Stockholm. The couple had three children, all born in Motala:

- s. Seth Sigfrid, born 1860 Sep. 6.
- d. Sera Thurina, born 1861 Oct. 2
- s. Tyko Leo, born 1865 Dec. 12.

## Marital mysteries

In 1979, Nils William Olsson published the second volume of *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850*, a giant pioneering work listing thousands and thousands of early immigrants. To my great amazement, I found in this book a note on one Henrietta Ulrika Sjögren/Åberg (1821-1907) who, together with her son, Carl Wilhelm Hjalmar Åberg (1846-1918), arrived in Philadelphia in October 1846. She is listed as a “mantle maker” – some sort of seamstress. Upon arrival, she calls herself “Mrs. Ulrica Henrietta Atkins” later Americanized to “Oberge,” but it is a name and a title she had no right to. The father of the child was in all likelihood the tenant and bookkeeper Carl Wilhelm Åberg (1822-1863), who

in 1845 moved to Slättäng in Sandhem. In the same household is “Mamsell Henrietta Ulrica Sjögren.” In the fall, however, Åberg escapes to America, presumably to avoid responsibility for the illegitimate son, born 11 February 1846, and possibly to escape marriage ....

Ulrica, however, does not give up. Instead, she and the infant son hastily leave for America, but it is unlikely that they were ever able to chase down the runaway fiancé and father.

The note in Olsson’s book goes on to say that Ulrica, according to a family tradition, married a Swedish sea captain named (Charles) Sandgren, with whom she had a daughter.

This information naturally surprised me very much. Could it be that Thure Emanuel or his younger brother Johan (my great-grandfather) got married while both lived in Philadelphia in the 1850s? Hardly, for in that case they would have committed bigamy when they eventually got married in Motala in 1859 and in Baku in 1866 respectively. But perhaps a betrothal?

I researched further, and could eventually conclude that the daughter’s name was Francisca Sandgren and that she was born in 1854. At age 18 she married a hero from the American Civil War, Major Daniel T. Wells,



Francisca Thurena Sandgren Wells.

and the couple had three sons, two of whom died when small. In 1990, I was able to make contact with Francisca's great-grandchild, Mrs. Elise Palmer, who provided me with a few pictures, but did not know anything more about Francisca's father or the circumstances of her birth and paternity.

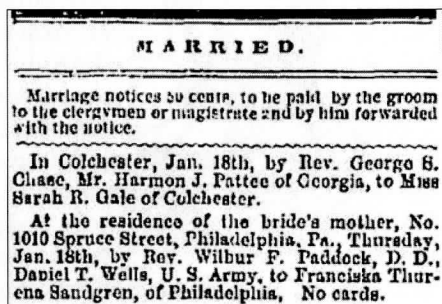
After this, the matter has rested for over 20 years. Occasionally, I would believe the theory that these Sandgrens in Philadelphia were my relatives; occasionally I would not. What complicates the research is that there is actually quite a large family in Philadelphia with a similar surname: Sandgran – and with family members named Charles....Is it in this family constellation that Ulrika and Francisca belong, rather than in my family circle?

## A notice in the paper solves the puzzle

In December last year, I was surfing among digitized and OCR-recognized American newspapers at resources like Genealogybank.com and NewspaperArchives.com. I tried a search asking for the combination of the words **Sandgren** and **Philadelphia**. The following wedding notice from 1872 made my heart stop:

**Married:** At the residence of the bride's mother, No. 1010 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, Pa, Thursday, Jan. 18th, by Rev. Wilbur F Paddock, D.D. Daniel T. Wells, U.S. Army, to Franciska Thurena Sandgren, of Philadelphia, No cards.

In this blessed announcement, for the first and only time, Francisca's

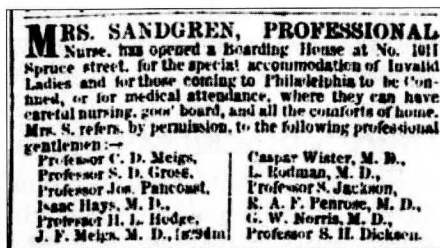


Marriage notice in *St. Albans Daily Messenger* (St. Albans, VT) 1872 Jan. 23.

middle name is mentioned; **Thurena** – and hence all doubts are gone....

Ulrica had this daughter by **Thure Emanuel Sandgren**, and as in the case with the previous relation, that with Carl Wilhelm Åberg, there was no marriage, and yet she pretended to have been married to both men by calling herself first Mrs. Oberge and then Mrs. Sandgren. Thure disappears to California, and a few years later he returns to Sweden, probably without passing through Philadelphia. Did he not feel at all responsible for his American daughter?

Well, perhaps he did. Around 1860, Mrs. Ulrica H. Sandgren starts to advertise her boarding house for elderly and disabled people on Spruce Street in Philadelphia.



"Mrs Sandgren" advertizes her boarding house in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) in 1860 Oct. 22.

Are we to believe that it is Thure who has used some of his new wealth to help his old girlfriend in Philadelphia buy and set up this boarding house as a way of supporting herself and their daughter?

## Francisca's family

What then happened to Thure's daughter Francisca and her family? In the 1880 U.S. Census, we find her and her husband the major living at Fort Dowell, Angel Island, Marin Co., California. They are then childless, having lost their two sons Ulric Burrell Wells (1873-1880) and Alfred Tyler Wells (1874-1875) at a tender age. In 1883, a third son is however born to them, Hewitt L. Wells, and he is to survive. Because of the major's military career and assignments, the family moves around a lot, first to Omaha, Nebraska, then to California, and finally to Fort Russel,

Laramie Co, Wyoming, where Francisca died in 1896. The widower retires shortly afterwards and moves back to Detroit, Michigan, where he died in 1899.

The only surviving child, Hewitt L. Wells (1883-1960) is taken care of by an aunt and uncle in Detroit, but soon settles in Washington, D.C. where he makes a career for himself as a mechanical engineer, pretty much the same profession as his grandfather, Thure Emanuel Sandgren, had and just like him he was an inventor and a constructor engineer. Hewitt was married three times, his two first wives passing away rather young. By his second wife, Elise Atterbury Campeau (1877-1934) he had two children; Hewitt C Wells (1915-1989) and Mary L Wells Kauffmann (1917-1988).

The daughter Mary was married to the editor of *Washington Post*, Rudolph Kauffmann, Jr., and had four children. Today, there are descendants in New York, Maine, and Alaska and also in Bristol, England. The son, Hewitt C. Wells becomes a successful architect and settled in California, where his children and grandchildren reside today. As he got older, Hewitt C. Wells devoted more and more time to painting, and his watercolors are today quite valuable. It would appear that my American cousins have inherited a lot of talent from their hitherto unknown ancestor, Thure Emanuel Sandgren, both in regards to engineering, drawing, and art....

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