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Careless driving in the the 1850s

A young man was killed, but who was responsible?

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

A SAG reader, Ingrid Johnson, sent in a newspaper clipping from 14 March 1856 which told the sad story of the death of a young man.

The newspaper was named *Hwad Nytt?* and was published in Eksjö for some years in the middle of the 1850s.

The persons involved were:

1) the victim, *drängen* Samuel Johansson, b. 14 Oct. 1827 in Edshult (Smål.), who died 8 Feb. 1856 in Eksjö, but his death was recorded in Hult (Smål.) where he worked.

2) *Nämndeman* (permanent jurymen) Johan Pettersson, b. 24 Nov. 1802 in Flisby, owner of a farm in Sjöarp, Eksjö *landsförsamling*.

3) *Brukare* (tenant farmer) Carl Jonas Jaensson, b. 27 Sep. 1816 in Askeryd (Smål.), now living at Redegård Östergård in Askeryd.

What happened?

In early February there was a market going on in Eksjö town. Many people from the rural areas around the town went there to do business, buy some extra food, go to the inn and have some beer or just to meet friends and hear the news.

On 8 February at the end of the afternoon, when it was getting dark, Samuel Johansson, who had gone to the market in the company of his father Johannes Pettersson and brother Jonas Johansson, started to walk back home with Jonas, leaving their father in town. They walked for a while, and then decided to return to Eksjö and meet with some friends that had promised that they could ride in their sleigh, as there was enough snow on the ground for that. Samuel and his brother walked on the side of the road, but then they

saw three sleighs coming towards them with high speed, all driving side by side, coming down a hill called "Dunderbacken."

Samuel and Jonas went down in the ditch. But Samuel was not quick enough, so he got hit by one of the sleighs, the one on the right, and fell down unconscious. Jonas shouted at the drivers that they should stop, but they just continued at the same speed as before.

Jonas and some of the others took Samuel to town, where he died within the hour, before the doctor arrived.

In the magistrates court

This accident was reported to the authorities in Eksjö, and was soon discussed in the magistrates court (*Rådhusrätten*), on 11 Feb. Two of the drivers had been identified, Johan Pettersson and Carl Jaensson, but for some reason they were not heard until the next meetings on 23 February and 10 March.

Johan told the court that he had come behind the other drivers, and when he came down the hill he had seen a man lying besides the road, but had not stopped by the man, as he thought that the man was drunk. He also denied that he had been driving recklessly.

The prosecutor answered him that this kind of driving was not appropriate for a man of his position, a former *nämndeman* and church warden. Johan also denied hearing anyone shouting for him to stop.

The witness Johan Svensson Malm told that he had recognized Johan Pettersson, and that Carl Jaensson had been in front of him. Another witness, Anders Berggren, said that he had seen those two men driving

side by side and then a third sleigh had driven in between them, all coming down the hill at high speed.

A third witness was dismissed, as it was found out that Johan had coached him as to what he should say, and he was also in service at Johan's farm.

Next Carl Jaensson was heard, and he told that he had had problems with his unruly horse, and was very remorseful that this had happened. It would not have happened if the other had not dared him to a race, and he had also been a little drunk.

Samuel's father Johannes Pettersson now showed an agreement with Carl Jaensson in which Carl promised to pay Johannes and his wife 1 barrel of grain every year as long as they lived, as they had been dependent on Samuel for their food.

The prosecutor now wondered if Johan Pettersson, who was a rich man, could not also promise the same, which he did.

Carl admitted that he had hit Samuel with his right shaft (*skakel*) on the sleigh, but insisted that it had been an accident.

Johan denied all complicity in this, and was let go. Carl was sentenced to pay for this accident $\frac{1}{2}$ wergild (*mansbot*), which was 50 *Riksdaler*, 6 *Riksdaler* 32 *skilling* for being drunk, and pay 6 *Riksdaler* 8 *skilling* for the autopsy, and finally 33 *Riksdaler* 16 *skilling* for witnesses' travel cost, all in *Riksdaler Banco*, which was a huge sum. It was somewhere around 7,400 SEK in today's money.

Source: Eksjö *Rådhusrätt*, vol: A1a:7. Dates: 11, 23 Feb., 10, 31 March, 1856. Original records kept in Vadstena Regional archives, Sweden.