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Paul D. Sward

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Chasing John Nordholm

A missing grandfather's uncle

TEXT AND PHOTOS: PAUL D. SWARD

I was raised with a strong sense of my Swedish heritage. The town that I was born in, Kewanee, Illinois, had a large population of ethnic Swedes due in large part to the nearby community of Bishop Hill, which had been settled by Swedish immigrants in the mid 19th century.

Although both my paternal grandparents had been born in the United States, both of them spoke Swedish. My grandfather was the son of Swedish immigrants from Skåne. My grandmother was born to a mother who had emigrated from Småland and an American-born father that was the son of "Bishop Hill" Swedes who had emigrated from Hälsingland. As a child I was exposed to a kaleidoscope of Swedish culture. My grandfather would regale me with stories about Gustavus Adolphus and the Thirty Years' War. My grandmother would take me to visit Bishop Hill where she and her friends would converse in a mixture of English and Swedish.

Unfortunately, over the years I have retained very little of this and my renewed interest has been a rediscovery of my heritage.

One of the many pieces in this puzzle of rediscovery relates to my paternal grandfather's uncle, *John Nordholm*. I have a vague memory of my grandparents discussing him. They referred to him as the family member who settled in the woods of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

What became of John Nordholm? Why did he settle in a remote part of Michigan when his siblings settled in Illinois? Why did he take the sur-

name of Nordholm, when my great-grandmother went by an anglicized version of her patronymic surname (Nelson)? He was an intriguing figure to me.

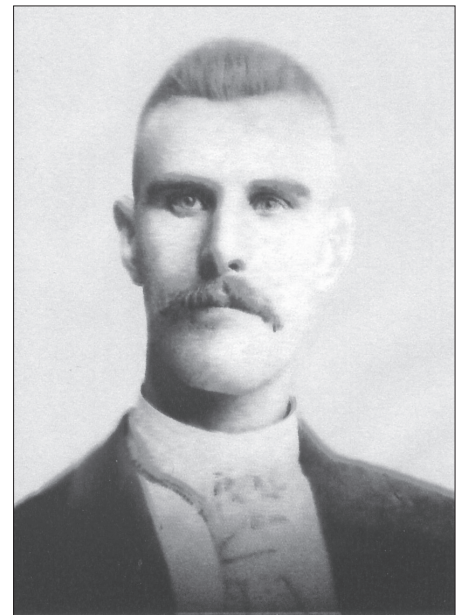
The two previous generations that had knowledge of John Nordholm are now gone. Consequently, my starting point began with an old family photograph; a family story that John Nordholm was buried in Wallace, Michigan; and that there was an image of him permanently affixed to his headstone.

The chase begins

Since John Nordholm was allegedly my paternal great-grandmother's brother, I began my research in the parish records.¹ An examination of records revealed only one sibling that seemed likely to be John Nordholm, Jöns Nilsson.

Jöns Nilsson was born at Ugerup Torp #12, Köpinge parish, Kristianstad län to Nils Pehrsson and Elna Jönsdotter on July 8, 1869. Jöns remained with his family until the parish records indicated that he immigrated to "Amerika" on June 15, 1888.² Parenthetically, all of Nils and Elna's seven children immigrated to the United States prior to 1900.³ A record dated July 19, 1888, in the *EmiHamn* database indicates that Jöns Nilsson departed from Malmö destined for New York,⁴ eleven days past his nineteenth birthday.

I was unable to specifically identify a record of Jöns Nilsson's arrival in the U.S., although I did uncover a few possibilities. However, none of these



Jöns (John) Nilsson Nordholm.

possibilities helped further the research.

The next logical step was to examine the census records, but I faced a problem which many genealogists face, the lack of a complete 1890 U.S. Census. Since almost all of my relatives that emigrated from Skåne and Småland arrived in the 1880s, I had found other ways to conduct research during this time frame, either through local records or family documents. Three of Jöns Nilsson's siblings settled in Kewanee, Illinois, and appear in the 1890's records of a local church.⁵ From family documentation I was able to identify that two other siblings relocated to the Chicago, Illinois, area, but I was unable to determine where Jöns and his brother Pehr settled. However, in



Map of Upper Michigan and some parts of Lower Michigan, from the "Handy Book for Genealogists" published by George B. Everton Sr. (1977).

The star shows approximate location of Wallace.

researching Jöns's sister, who died in 1923, I discovered that her obituary references a brother named John Nordholm residing in Wallace, Michigan.

The chase leads to Wallace, Michigan

At this point, the only avenue that I had for further research was Wallace, Michigan. I began with the 1900 U.S. federal census for Menominee County, Michigan, where Wallace is located. I was unable to find an appropriate match under Nilsson/Nordholm, but I did find a Johan Noertholme residing in Ingallston township who is a perfect match for country of origin, date of birth, and date of immigration. I am fairly confident that this is Jöns Nilsson/Nordholm. He is shown as a day laborer boarding with a family of German origin. I suspect that the name was corrupted either by the census taker or by a member of the German family providing the census information.

Found him in the census

An examination of the 1910 U.S. census for Menominee County revealed a John N. Nordholm residing in Mellen Township. Again this individual is a perfect match for Jöns. It further identified John Nordholm as a single farmer who owned his own

farm. This same John Nordholm also appeared in the 1920 and 1930 U.S. census for Menominee County. It became clear that I needed to conduct some field research in Menominee County. Although I also live in Michigan, this is a geographically large state. I live in the far southeastern corner of the lower peninsula of Michigan and Menominee County is located in the far western part of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, separated by five hundred miles. Consequently, I put my quest for John Nordholm on the shelf and moved on to other things.

Encountering Sheldon Anderson – a good man

Many years later I planned a fishing trip to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with a friend of mine. Realizing that our fishing camp was within sixty miles of Wallace, Michigan, I convinced my fishing partner that we needed to make a side trip to Wallace. Prior to our departure, I made a telephone call to the Wallace, Michigan, post office inquiring about the local cemeteries. This call resulted in Sheldon Anderson contacting me. Sheldon is a native of Menominee County who had recently retired from the U.S. Department of Interior where he had served as a forester. His career had taken him away from the

county, but he had returned after retiring. Sheldon is also of Swedish ancestry and was now serving as the sexton for the Mellen Township Cemetery. I explained to Sheldon my search for John Nordholm. Sheldon advised that there was a John N. Nordholm buried in the cemetery and he offered to meet us at the cemetery when we arrived.

On the appointed day, my friend and I arrived early at the Mellen Township Cemetery. The cemetery is relatively small and well marked. I easily found John Nordholm's grave based on the information that Sheldon had provided. The headstone was marked "John N. Nordholm" and had an indentation where an image could have been attached at one time.

Sheldon arrived shortly thereafter. Sheldon is the type of person that you immediately like when you first meet him. He is intelligent, friendly, and to the point. Sheldon related that he had been making some local inquiries on John Nordholm. First he advised that he had spoken to another resident of the area, Les Newlin, who had knowledge of John Nordholm. Mr. Newlin had advised Sheldon that there had indeed been an image of John Nordholm attached to the headstone and that he, Mr. Newlin, had a photograph of the image. Additionally, Mr. Newlin was in



The former Nordholm farmhouse.

possession of a table made by John Nordholm. Sheldon explained that Mr. Newlin had a distant relative, Charles Nelson, who had been a friend and neighbor of John Nordholm. Sheldon asked me if I wished to visit Mr. Newlin that day, which of course I did. Sheldon then asked me if I wanted to see John Nordholm's farm. It was a lucky day when I made contact with Sheldon Anderson.

After a short drive we parked on the side of a lonely county road. Sheldon led us into the partially wooded undergrowth by the road. As we were walking it became apparent that this land had been cleared and farmed at one time. Shortly we came upon an abandoned farmstead that once belonged to John Nordholm. There were four buildings on the farmstead in various states of disrepair. However, the barn was in quite good condition. Clearly it had been a prosperous farm at one time. After having some fun exploring the various buildings we departed to visit Mr. Newlin. Unfortunately he was not at home.

Sheldon graciously brought us to his home where he made the cemetery sexton records available. A review of the record relating to the burial of John Nordholm quickly validated my search. My grandfather and all his siblings were on the deed

for the burial plot. This was clearly my grandfather's uncle. After thanking Sheldon for all his time and trouble, we bid him goodbye and returned to our fishing camp.

Sheldon continues the chase

After I returned home Sheldon contacted me and advised that he had spoken with an older gentleman in the area named Al Pearson. Mr. Pearson's family had lived near John Nordholm and he remembered him. Subsequently, I spoke with Mr. Pearson. He told that his father and John Nordholm had been friends. John Nordholm had obtained the first radio in the area and Mr. Pearson's family would come to John's home to listen to the new invention. Mr. Pearson related that John was a carpenter and he had helped Mr. Pearson with woodworking projects. Mr. Pearson described him as nice man.

Sheldon had also located John Nordholm's death certificate and sent a copy.⁶ Of particular interest was the cause of death of John Nordholm: "Found dead in garage, exhaustion from trying to start car."

A couple of years had passed when

PLACE OF DEATH		STATE OF MICHIGAN	
County <u>Macomb</u>		Department of State--Division of Vital Statistics.	
Township <u>Mellen</u>		TRANSCRIPT OF CERTIFICATE OF DEATH--LOCAL REGISTER.	
City _____		Registered No. <u>5</u>	
No. _____ St. _____		Ward _____ (If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)	
1 FULL NAME <u>John N. Nordholm</u>			
PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS		MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
2 SEX <u>Male</u>	4 COLOR OR RACE <u>white</u>	3 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED (Write the word) <u>Single</u>	14 DATE OF DEATH <u>Nov 28, 1931</u>
6 DATE OF BIRTH <u>About 1867</u>		17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from _____, 191____, to _____, 191____, and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at _____ m.	
7 AGE <u>About 64</u> yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds. <u>OR</u> _____ min.?		The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: <u>Found dead in garage. Exhaustion from trying to start car.</u>	
8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession or particular kind of work. <u>Farmer</u>		Contributory (SECONDARY) _____ (Duration) _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds.	
(b) General nature of industry, business or establishment in which employed (or employer) _____		(Signed) <u>Brookland A. Pearson</u> M.D.	
9 BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <u>Sweden</u>		*State the DISEASE CAUSE OF DEATH, or in deaths from VIOLENT CAUSES, state (1) MEANS OF INJURY; and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL.	
PARENTS	10 NAME OF FATHER <u>Nils Pearson</u>	11 LENGTH OF RESIDENCE (FOR HOSPITALS, INSTITUTIONS, TRANSIENTS OR RECENT RESIDENTS) At place of death _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds. In the State _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds.	
	11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country) <u>Sweden</u>	Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death? _____ Former or usual residence _____	
	12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER <u>Edna Johnson</u>	13 PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>Walled</u> DATE OF BURIAL <u>12/14 1931</u>	
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country) <u>Sweden</u>		14 UNDERTAKER <u>Alb. M. Larson</u> ADDRESS _____	
14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE (Informant) <u>Edna Pearson</u> (Address) <u>Macomb, Ills</u>		15 Filled _____ 1931. <u>Guid A. Johnson</u> REGISTRAR	



The tombstone and the picture.

Sheldon contacted me again. Sheldon related that the image of John Nordholm that had been on his headstone had been found. It was a ceramic piece that had been adhered to the headstone and apparently had fallen off. One of the cemetery caretakers had thrown it in a desk drawer where it remained until Sheldon discovered it. Additionally, Les Newlin had discovered a postcard that John Nordholm had sent to Charles Nelson. Sheldon sent copies of the headstone image and the postcard.

The postcard had a photograph on one side of two men in a horse and buggy. I compared the photograph that I had of Jöns Nilsson as a young man to the cemetery image, as well as to the younger man in the postcard photograph. They all appear to be the same man from different times in his life.

Silverhill, Alabama

The postcard had been sent from Silverhill, Alabama, and was dated December 3, 1908. It struck me as

odd that John Nordholm, an immigrant Swedish farmer from northern Michigan would be visiting Alabama at this time.

John Nordholm's visit no longer seemed odd after I found Lilly Setterdahl's *Memories Preserved, Vol. 2*.⁷ Ms. Setterdahl's work covers in depth the Silverhill Colony that had been settled by Swedes coming primarily from the Midwest beginning in 1896. Oscar Johnson, a resident of Chicago and an immigrant from the Swedish province of Dalarna, had founded the colony. Along with others, Johnson formed the Svea Land Company and offered land for sale in Silverhill which attracted ethnic Swedes from all parts of the U.S. I had been completely unaware of this interesting piece of Swedish-American history.

However, Silverhill, Alabama, raised some new questions about John Nordholm. Was he just visiting or had he considered relocating there? Did he have friends or relatives in Silverhill?

Les Newlin was aware of other people from the Mellen Township area that had travelled to visit the Silverhill colony. So perhaps John Nordholm was just there to visit. Regardless it appears that he did not relocate to Silverhill and remained a resident of Michigan until his death.

The aftermath of the chase

My search for John Nordholm has been a partial success. I know his origin and a little of his life in Michigan. What attracted him to Michigan is still unknown. The obvious attraction was the Swedish community in the area.

In the 1900 U.S. Census there were 1,832 people living in Mellen township and adjacent Ingallston township. Of this number, 271 individuals were identified as being born in Sweden. These numbers do not include the U.S. born children of the native Swedes.⁸ Consequently, the ethnic Swedish population of this area exceeded 20%. Sheldon's cousin, Ron Newlin, who has conducted re-

search on Swedish settlers of this area, advised that most of the settlers originated from Värmland. However, local church records did reveal a few Swedes of Skåne origin including John Nordholm.

Why Nordholm?

Why did Jöns/John choose the Nordholm surname? I have subsequently discovered that Jöns/John's brother, Pehr, changed his name to Peter Nordholm. Furthermore, another brother, Simon, retained his soldier's surname, Lilja.⁹ The answer to the surname question seems to be that each of the siblings chose their American surname without consideration of the other siblings' choices.

Clearly there is more research that could be conducted, but at this point I have satisfied my curiosity concerning John Nordholm. It appears that he was well liked and had prospered in life. He was a Swedish immigrant who made a successful new life in his adopted country. Unfortunately, John had no children of his own, but I take pride in that I am related to him and his photograph will always hang on my den wall.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Köpings parish, Kristianstad län, *Husförhörlängd*.
- ² Köpings parish, Kristianstad län, *Utflyttningslängd*.
- ³ *Ibid*.
- ⁴ *Emigranten Populär* (database).
- ⁵ Records of Zion Lutheran Church, Kewanee, Illinois (Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center).
- ⁶ State of Michigan Death Certificate, Menominee County, Mellen Township.
- ⁷ Setterdahl, Lilly, *Memories Preserved, Vol. 2*, (Scandinavians in Alabama), East Moline, Illinois. 1992.
- ⁸ 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Menominee County, Michigan.
- ⁹ Simon after residing in the U.S. returned to Sweden. I have corresponded with one of his descendants, Gunnar Lilja, who currently resides in Stoby, Sweden.

The author is
Paul D. Sward
E-mail: <wikblom@yahoo.com>