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Father Unknown - What to Do?

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

A not uncommon problem in working backwards in one's family pedigree is to discover that a child is born to an unwed mother, and one wonders then if it is possible to find the missing father.

This is a problem for which it is impossible to lay down general rules or solutions, but perhaps a few experiences in my research can give hints as to possible ways of solving the mystery.

In olden days when there was a strong social consciousness and strong ecclesiastical control, the problem with illegitimate children was not as prevalent as it became in the 19th century, as documented by the parish registers. Unfortunately we do not know too much about this problem before 1871, but in that year a publication appeared in Sweden titled *Historisk statistik för Sverige* (Historical Statistics for Sweden), which according to the year of publication (1871) gave the number of unwed mothers as 10% of all women giving birth. Thus it is probable that every genealogist sooner or later will find the word illegitimate (*oä=öäkta*) in the birth registers in some generation.

An easily solved problem

If one is lucky one may not have to

hunt for the child's father very long as in the case of the following child - "Anders Petter, born 28 Jan. 1846, the son of Inga Carin Persdotter, servant (*piga*) from Humlebäcken on the estate of Eksjöhult in Ulrika parish (Ög.). It was legally determined that the child's father was Anders Fredrik Nilsson, a servant (*dräng*) in Kärr."¹⁷

More difficult cases

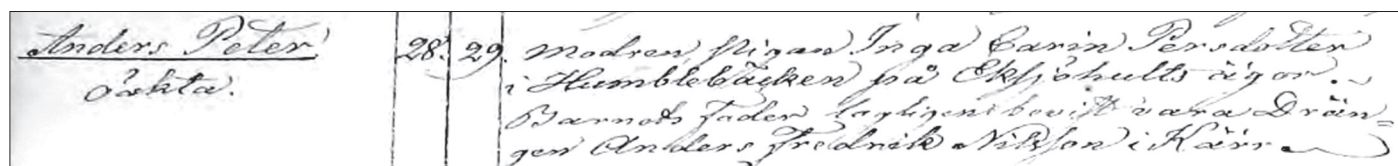
If the parish records are not that helpful, one will have to attempt other avenues. The first thing to determine is to see if the child, as it grows to adulthood, uses the same patronymic (a father's name like Larsson) as his mother or maternal grandfather. If this is not the case but it carries the name Jonsdotter, the mother is named Larsdotter, and the grandfather Svensson, one may suspect that someone named Jon or Jonas was the child's father, and then see if the mother had been a maid servant (*piga*) in the same household as a person named Jon of the approximately the same age. If one finds a Jon who seems to fit the case, one may follow him in the parish records in order to see if the clergyman has added a note which may solve the mystery.

Gustaf Pettersson, a servant (*dräng*) in Malma, Västra Ryd parish

(Ög.) wished to move from his parish to Norra Vi, another parish in Östergötland, in 1858. The clergyman noted in the household examination roll that "Anna Lotta Andersdotter in Malma expressly forbids that Gustaf Pettersson be given a certificate of freedom to marry." This Anna Lotta was found on the following page to have given birth 20 Sept. 1858 to an illegitimate son named Johan Alfred, and she seems to have had reasons for naming Gustaf Pettersson as the father of the child and therefore wished to block him from having the certificate, since he was not free to marry, according to her statement. In this specific case the man stated that he was not the father of the child and in 1861 swore an oath that such was the case. The notation in the household examination followed him, nevertheless, until he departed for America in 1866.

If one finds a plausible candidate as the father but has found nothing in the parish records to prove this point, one should follow his career until he dies. A notation may show up much later, for example the child may have been domiciled with the supposed father. It has even occurred that the child finally is mentioned in the estate inventory of the deceased.

The secretary in the Department of the Army (*Krigskollegium*), Fred-



Ulrika (Ög.) birth records, volume C:3 (1846).

This is the 1st
issue of the
30th
volume, and this is
one of the
old gems

rik Wilhelm Westée, died in Stockholm 27 Dec. 1882. His estate inventory (*bouppteckning*) was probated 22 Feb. 1883 and according to this document he died without leaving any known heirs. But in examining the volume of estate inventories more closely one found, after the document itself, a will drawn up by Fredrik Wilhelm, dated 1876, which specified that his estate should be divided in two equal parts, one of these to go to his son, Ludvig Wilhelm Alfons Westée, a manufacturer in North America, and the other to his daughter Edla Lovisa Adelaide, married to a Gustavi.

This proved that Ludvig Wilhelm Alfons really was the son of Fredrik Wilhelm, which his descendants had claimed right along. However, he was born in Hedvig Eleonora parish in Stockholm; of “unknown parents”, his mother was 25 years old and lived in the Repslagaren quarter.

The sister, Edla Lovisa Adelaide, was married to a battalion adjutant named Gustaf Wilhelm Gustavi, who later lived in Rappestad Parish (Ög.). The parish records of Rappestad state that Edla was born in Jacob-Johannes Parish in Stockholm in 1840, but she is not to be found in the birth register. In a special volume for the births of illegitimate children there is a note, however, which has been pasted in, dated 1853, in which Fredrik Wilhelm admits that he and his then deceased betrothed, Lovisa Ulrica Nyman, were Edla's parents.

The fact that Edla is not listed as born in Jacob Parish may be due to the fact that she was born in one of the city's birthing centers and that the parents used their prerogative of being registered as “unknown.”

Child Murder Manifesto

The Swedish King Gustaf III was often confronted with cases having to do with mothers who had taken the life of an infant, and whether he should have them executed or pardoned. He finally became quite concerned by the number of infants killed, and issued a manifesto known as “child murder manifesto” (*barnmordsplakatet*), signed into law 17 Oct. 1778. This order said among other things that “a woman who wished to give birth at an unspecified location, could do so without being molested and without being queried as to her name or other personal details.”

This functioned quite well in the cities, where one often sees the statement “unknown parents” (*okända föräldrar*) in the birth registers, but scarcely in rural areas, where people usually knew quite a bit about their neighbors.

In the cities, however, despite the notation concerning unknown parents sometimes the mother's age is given as well as an address. If one checks the latter for the time period in question one will often find the residence of a midwife who took care of the wayward girls (*obemärkta flickor*), a term used even into modern times. In such cases it is almost hopeless to continue the search.

It is somewhat different if the child was born at a birthing center (*barnbördshus*) or if the child had been admitted to an orphanage soon after its birth. One should then search the journals and registers, since sometimes the mother deposited with the institution a sealed envelope which might contain the key to solving the puzzle by naming the parents of the child.

The child of the unwed mother in rural areas

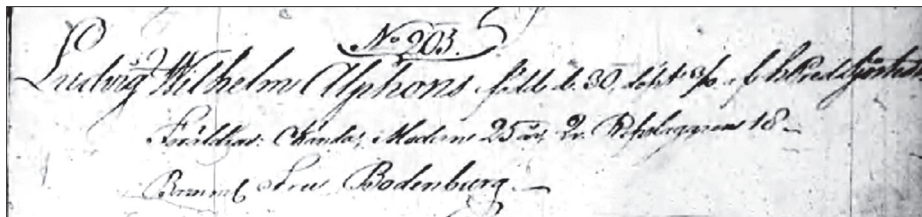
Let us now return to the illegitimate child in rural Sweden. One should not forget that despite everything else it was considered a crime up until 1864 for persons to indulge in premarital intercourse or adultery. There were specified punishments to be meted out according to Sweden's legal Code of 1734, which stated that the first time these crimes were perpetrated the man was to pay a fine of ten *daler* and the woman five, or for the man 14 days' prison or workhouse and for the woman half that amount. The nature of these crimes was such that it was difficult to prove unless it resulted in the birth of a child.

Of the fines collected half was to go to the parish treasury, and it may pay to search the parish accounts or those of the special account set up for the poor, shortly after the birth of the child to see if the mother paid a fine to the church. If one is fortunate, one might find that a man paid the double amount at about the same time, pretty good evidence for looking a little closer as to who the father might be.

If the mother paid her fine to the parish and to the poor, the next step is to look at the court records of the hundred (*härad*). Here the simplest way is to look at the fines paid (*saköreslängd*), which is generally found bound at the end of the court records themselves at each assizes. In this register one can search for those who were fined, often with a reference to the court case itself, so that one may go directly to the court record without having to go through the entire large volume.

Most of the time it was the county sheriff (*länsman*) who brought charges against the man and the woman, but occasionally it was also the father of the woman who charged his daughter, or the woman who brought suit against the child's father for child support.

On 6 Jan. 1836 Maria Larsdotter, a servant (*piga*) in Löt parish on the island of Öland paid a fine of 32 shillings (*skilling*) to her parish church



The birth of Ludvig Wilhelm Alfons, as child #205, born on the 20th, and baptized on 3 October by the H[of] Pred[ikant] (= clergyman to the Court) Sjöstedt. Parents: unknown, mother's age 25 years, living in Repslagaren Qu[arter]. Midwife (barnm[orska] Mrs. Bodenbergs. [Hedvig Eleonora. Volume CI:18 {Births 1825–1830}].

for having indulged in fornication (*lönskaläge*). On 6 Nov. 1835 she had given birth to her daughter Stina Cajsa, and she now was to be brought into the church after the purification process and she wished to have her debt to the church paid before this event. Stina Cajsa, the daughter, used the patronymic Olsdotter as an adult, the mother was Maria Larsdotter, and the maternal grandfather's name was Lars Andersson, so the child's patronymic should give us a clue as to who the father was.

In the court records for the northern district of Öland (Ölands Norra Mot) for the assizes held during the winter term of 1836 this case came up for consideration under § 285. A. Thiman, the sheriff, had sued Olof Johnson, a farmer in Stora Hage-lunda in Alböke parish (Kalm.) and Maria Larsdotter, a servant in Lundby, Löt parish "to assume responsibility for having indulged in fornication, urging the court to sentence Olof Johnson, the defendant, to pay child support."

Both parties were present and admitted their guilt. Maria demanded that Olof should pay her annually one barrel of rye as well as 100 *daler* for the child's subsistence, which he refused to do.

The court then announced its decision that Olof should be fined three *daler* and 16 *skilling* or be incarcerated for 14 days in the county jail and in addition pay one *daler* and 16 *skilling* to the parish church in Löt. In addition he was to pay Maria annually a barrel of good rye and six *daler* and 32 *skilling*; should he refuse, the court would order the foreclosure of his farm. Maria was to pay 32 *skilling* to Löt church which she already had done.

In this case the man admitted his guilt, but there are many cases where the man denied the charge and despite the fact that there had been witnesses who had seen the couple in the same bed, continued to deny the charge, finally swearing an oath to free himself. In such cases the woman had to accept that there was no official father for her child, which could pose quite a problem.

The inheritance rights of the illegitimate child

According to the Law of 1734 a child born out of wedlock did not inherit anything from either of the parents or their families. This was changed in 1866, so the child could inherit from the mother, provided that she

had had the child recorded in the church records as her child. In 1905 an illegitimate child got the full inheritance rights after the mother and her family, but not until 1970 after the father and his family.

Other sources

Among other sources that should be tried, should they exist in the parish examined, are the series known as the G Series, [rarely filmed] consisting of registers of pardons issued for offenders as well as journals of punishment meted out to those guilty, where persons are named who were absolved by the clergyman either secretly or openly before the public. This was one of the methods used by the church to uphold public morality as well as punish the guilty.

In older times, when an illegitimate child was an unusual occurrence, one may find the event reported to the diocesan chapter (*Domkapitlet*), where such cases can be found in the records submitted by each parish.

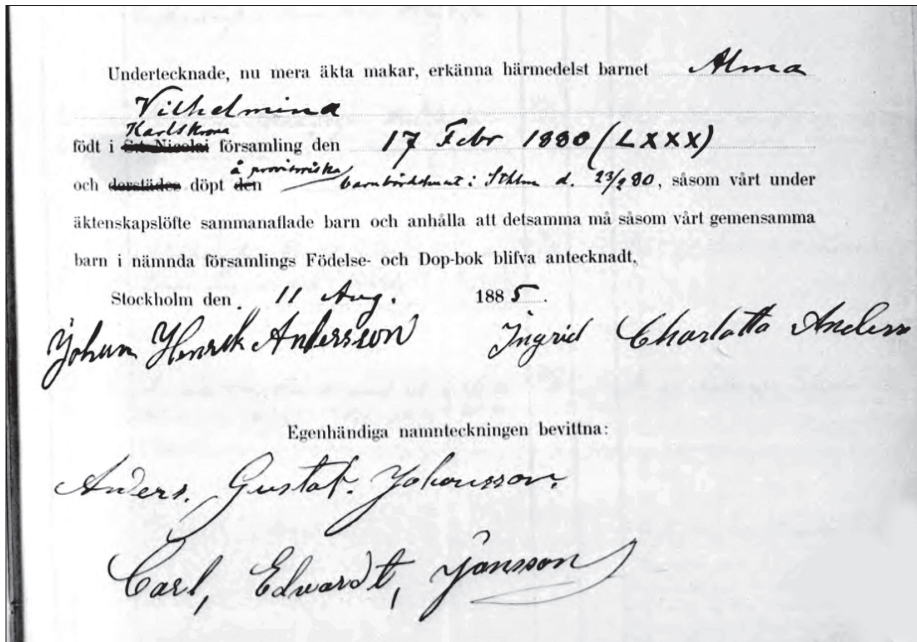
As is usual when it comes to difficult problems in genealogical research, one must try all possible avenues in order to solve the problem. I have here sought to discuss some of the most important ones. My chief advice is to leave no path untried until success has been reached.

Literature on the subject

There is very little literature on the subject of finding the unknown father, whereas the illegitimate child and its mother have been studied in many works. Among these I should mention Jonas Frykman's *Horan i bondesamhället* (The Whore in Rural Society) (1977), which gives too dark a picture of the unwed mother and her prospects for the future. Svante and Sten W. Jakobsson have given in *Orons och förtvivlans gerningar* (The Results of Anxiety and Despair) (1987) a shocking picture of the anxiety the unwed mother experienced in the face of her pregnancy and birth of the child. This study touches on the situation in Stockholm. Beata Losman in *Kvinnor, män och barn på*

Offender	Offense	Fine (Daler)	Fine (Skilling)
Anders Olsson of Bjurbäcken	First time illegal intercourse (lönskaläger)	14	0
Reserve soldier Bengt Olsson from Bjurbäcken	Same offense	14	0
Elin Persdotter (Qwinfolket)	Having had intercourse with two men	12	0

This is a Saköreslängd (list of fines) from Färnebo härad (legal district), where the first offender is Anders Olsson of Bjurbäcken, who was sentenced for first time illegal intercourse (*lönskaläger*), and had to pay a fine of 14 *daler*, of which 4 *daler* was for the church, and 10 for not having to go to jail. The next one is the reserve soldier Bengt Olsson from Bjurbäcken, who paid the same for the same offense. The third is the "female person" (Qwinfolket) Elin Persdotter, for having had intercourse with two men.



This document is from the birth records of Karlskrona Stadsförsamling, volume CI:6. The child Vilhelmina was born 17 Feb. 1880 of unmarried parents, and they were only listed as “unknown,” but they were really Johan Henrik Andersson and Ingrid Charlotta Abrahamsson.

On 31 July 1881 they married in Stockholm (Storkyrkoförsamlingen) and had by then also another child, Signe Emilia. Later they had nine more children, making a total of 11. But why they did not legitimize Vilhelmina until 1885, when the above form was filled out and attached to her birth record, is not known.

On this form they have also acknowledged that Vilhelmina was born in Karlskrona, but baptized at the temporary maternity hospital (Provisoriska Barnbördshuset) in Stockholm just a week later. They also tell that the child was conceived under promise of marriage (äktenskapslöfte), so she should have had the same rights as a child in marriage, but how to prove that without the parents’ names in the birth record?

1800-talets svenska landsbygd (Women, Men and Children in Rural Sweden During the 19th Century) (1986) gives a good picture of the role of the family in Värmland. Anne-Sofie Ohlander in her book *Kärlek, död och frihet* (Love, Death and Freedom) (1986) illustrates other aspects of the life of women in older times. Marie Lindstedt Cronberg published in 1997 her thesis *Synd och skam. Ogifta mödrar på svensk landsbygd 1680–1880* (Sin and Shame. Unmarried Mothers in Rural Sweden 1680–1880), as this is a thesis it does have a ten page summary in English. All of these books have excellent references to literature in the field which can furnish additional tips for future research.

Unfortunately none of these books referred to above are available in an English translation.

Editor’s note:

This was first published in *Inte bara kyrkböcker – Släktforskarnas Årsbok 1990*, then translated by Nils William Olsson and published in the Dec. 1992 issue of *Swedish American Genealogist*.

The Bernadotte Family – 200 years in Sweden



On the 21st of August 1810 the Swedish parliament, assembled in Örebro, elected the French Marshal *Jean Baptiste Bernadotte*, Prince of Ponte Corvo, to be the new Crown Prince and become the King of Sweden, when his adoptive father, King Karl XIII, died.

The King had originally wanted a Danish prince to inherit the Crown, but many Swedish officers wanted a well-know and very efficient French Marshal, and also a friend of Napoleon’s instead. They hoped that he would help Sweden to regain Finland, which had been conquered by Russia in 1809.

These officers and some French lobbyists were very successful, and Bernadotte was elected and later changed his name to Carl Johan.

However, he did not share the view that he was to start a war with Russia; instead he joined the coalition against Napoleon, and helped to dethrone him. After that he turned against Denmark, and conquered Norway in 1814, which had for centuries been a part of Denmark. The union between Sweden and Norway lasted until 1905. Since the war against Denmark in 1814 Sweden has not participated in any war.

The Bernadotte dynasty has created kings Karl XIV Johan (1818–1844), Oscar I (1844–1859), Karl XV (1859–1872), Oscar II (1872–1907), Gustaf V (1907–1950), Gustaf VI Adolf (1950–1973), and now Carl XVI Gustaf, who has been the King of Sweden since 1973.