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Mathilda Swenson of the VOA

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Mathilda Swenson, the first female District Master in the VASA Order of America, the District Lodge of Connecticut No. 1, 1911

BY CHARLOTTE BÖRJESSON

The Lodge Engelbrekt No. 8, Meriden, Conn., U.S.A., was organized/started on November 12th, 1897, and had 15 members. Mathilda Louisa Swenson was the chaplain, and her husband, Bernard Swenson, was the vice-chairman.

On October 25th, 1911, the 16th district meeting for District Lodge No. 1 was held in the Odd Fellows' Hall, Waterbury, CT. The meeting was chaired for the first time in the district lodge's history by District Master Mathilda Swenson who led this meeting in a meritorious way.

She was one of the most active members in the district lodge and in her own Lodge Engelbrekt No. 8, where she was a charter member. During her service she visited all 30 lodges in the district and today there

are only 6 lodges left. Through her pleasant manner Mathilda received the members' respect and trust. The district lodge awarded Mathilda an "order emblem" in gold at the end of her service.

This information can be read in the commemorative publication – "25-year history of the District Lodge of Connecticut No. 1, Vasa Order of America, 1896-1921." I bought this book in an antique store in Borås, Sweden, but the commemorative publication is also available on the internet.¹

So, who was Mathilda Swenson?

I read the commemorative publication, and I searched for information on "Ancestry.com" for the U.S. sources. With that information, I went on to find her background in Sweden. Some of the information I found varied with regard to names and years. Because of different information about her birth, I did not at first find her in the Swedish church records or other documentation. The information I had obtained from the publication was that she was born on April 4th, 1857, in Persberg, Nerike. The date when she came to America varies between the years 1880-1883 on Ancestry.com.²

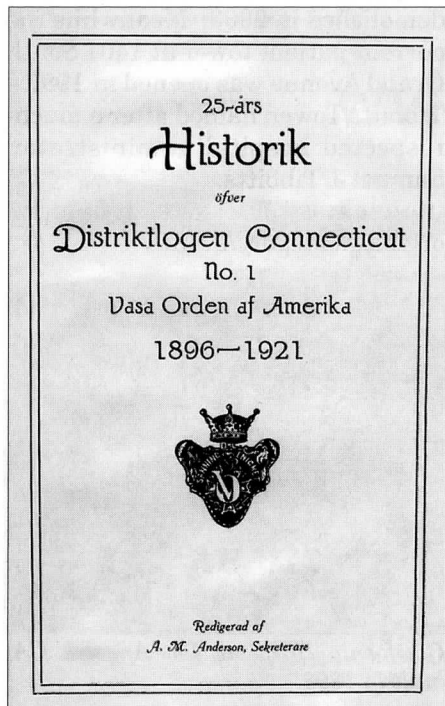
Mathilda married Bernard Swenson in America and they were both employed by the *Connecticut School for Boys* in Meriden. Mathilda was the school's laundress and Bernard was the shoemaker for many years. During one period they even lived at



the school. They belonged to the "The Swedish Baptist Church" in Meriden, where Bernhard was a member of the planning committee.

Vasa Order's archives in Bishop Hill, Illinois

When I contacted the Vasa Order's archives in Bishop Hill, IL, I received from archivist Lars Jenner scanned images from Mathilda's and Bernard's lodge's member-directory. There, it appears a Mathilda that was born in Nora Bergslag's parish, which is in Örebro county in Västmanland, and both of them became members of the VASA Order on November 12th, 1897. The corresponding information is also reflected in *EmiVasa*,





The Pershyttan blast furnace in Nora Bergsförsamling. Photo E. Thorsell 2009.

Namn:	MATILDA SVENSSON
Födelseid:	1857-04-04
Födelseort:	NORA
Födellän:	T
Yrke:	HUSARBETE
Hemstat:	CT
Adress:	56 HILLSIDE AVE MERIDEN
Dödsdatum:	1919-05-19 Ort:
Logenr:	8 Medlem/år: 1897

Information on Matilda in EmiVasa.

which is a register of 58,000 members of the Vasa Order of America.³

There is no Mathilda in the birth record with the birth date April 4th, 1857, in Nora Bergslag's parish. In the register of emigrants, I can't find her either. I am now looking in the registers of buried in Connecticut to see if I can get some more information. At the website "Find A Grave" I find the gravestone in a picture taken in the Walnut Grove Cemetery in Meriden. On the headstone there are just the names and the years of birth and death. Besides Mathilda and Bernhard there was also a daughter, Hanna O. born in 1884, but she died only 9 years old.⁴

Mathilda's birth record

I still believed that Mathilda was

born in Nora Bergslag's parish, so I returned to the birth record again and went through all who were born from 1852 on. Now I find a Mathilda Lovisa born April 4, 1854, in Gamla (Old) Pershyttan. The mother is a maid, Christina (Stina) Andersdotter, and Mathilda was born illegitimate and no father was listed.⁵ These data are worth following as Pershyttan is likely listed as Persberg in America.

Matilda and her mother moved around a lot in the parish over the years, and probably lived a hard and poor life. In the household records it says that the mother Christina is punished and has to pay penance for theft.⁶ Mathilda had a sister, Johanna, born 20 July 1864, who was also illegitimate without a named father.⁷ She died 7 April 1865 of a "swelling in her throat".⁸ Her mother is then recorded as a "grufpiga", which means that she worked in one of the mines. In the spring of 1869 Mathilda ran away from the communion, and she was accused of unchaste living according to the household record.⁹ Her mother married in 1869, but the marriage did not last long, as she died on January 27, 1871.¹⁰

Mathilda got married twice

When Mathilda married the miner Gustaf Löfgren (b. 30 Jan. 1849) on 16th December 1871 in Nora Bergslag's parish, she was a minor without parents, so her deceased mother's husband, Anders Persson, had to give his consent to the marriage instead.¹¹ In connection with the marriage, it is also the first time that Matilda's surname, Gustafsdotter, is recorded.¹¹

Mathilda and Gustaf moved in 1874 from Gamla (Old) Pershyttan to live at various mines and mills in Färnebo parish, Värmland. From that time on her name is Lovisa in the parish registers, and it states that she had good knowledge in reading and had knowledge of the Lutheran catechism.¹

When they move from Värmland in the year 1883, they first settled at Västjädra in Dingtuna¹³ parish and then in Kolbäck parish, both in Västmanland. In the household records in the following years, Lovisa is mentioned, but with the statement that Gustaf's wife had run away to

America around 1883.¹⁴ The household records for 1888 show that Gustaf had received a letter of divorce, from the Västerås diocese, from his wife on April 27, 1888.¹⁴ Gustaf, now a lumberjack, remarried in 1893, had children, and died in January 1927 in Rytterne parish, Västmanland.¹⁵

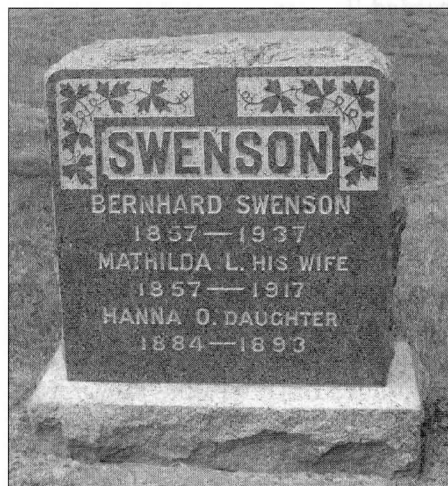
I have found no documentation as to when Matilda left Sweden or where and when she arrived in America. Yet I am sure that this is the correct Mathilda Lovisa that I have found, and who married Bernard Swenson in America.

Origins of Bernard

Bernard was born in November 18th, 1857, in Skyekärr, Hällaryd parish, Blekinge.¹⁶ In the birth record he is called Bernt, and he was a stonemason in Sweden. During the 1870s he moved to Karlskrona, but came back to Skyekärr from Karlshamn in 1879.¹⁷ After that date there is nothing recorded about him in Hällaryd. In 1887 he is listed among those who left without notifying the clergyman, but with a note "living in America".¹⁸ When he emigrated, and when he arrived in America is not yet known.

There are different dates given on when Mathilda and Bernhard got married in the sources that I have had access to, from 1882 to 1888.

Jill Seaholm of the Swenson Center at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, has found Mathilda and



The Swenson tombstone at Walnut Grove Cemetery, Meriden, CT.

Bernhard as members of the Calvary Baptist Church in Meriden. There the wedding date is noted as April 14th, 1883. If this date is correct, then Mathilda was still married to Gustaf Löfgren, as the divorce record was from 1888.

Matilda's and Bernard's daughter Hannah was born March 1, 1884, and in connection with her death, her parents are said to be Matilda L. Anderson and Bernard Swanson. Mathilda died in her home May 19th, 1917, of a heart problem she had had for a long time. This information I got from an obituary found by Janis Franco, Meriden Public Library, CT.

There are still gaps and questions remaining about Mathilda and her life. In any case, it is probably true that both Mathilda and Bernhard had a better and more satisfying life in America.

Unanswered questions

Why they left Sweden, I think I will never figure out. Where did they first meet? Why is Hannah's mother's name Mathilda Anderson? Had she emigrated as Anderson and not as Gustafsdotter or Gustafsson? Why is she three years younger in America? Some of the answers I might find when I find the documentation on when and where Mathilda arrived in America.

Notes:

1. Website: <http://issuu.com/vasa-order/docs/25rshistorik00vasa>
2. The 1900 and 1910 Federal Census for Connecticut, New Haven County, Meriden (www.ancestry.com).
3. This database is available on the CD "Emigration 2001" and "Emigranten Populär 2006." The Vasa Archives in Bishop Hill has now doubled the information in the database, and has a research request form, see the *link page*!
4. Website: www.findagrave.com with Memorial # 13256614.
5. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.). Birth records (1842-1858), C:8b (picture 78).
6. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.).

household records (1851-1861), AI:15c p. 270.

7. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.). Birth records (1861-1888), C:12: (picture 147).
- 8) Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.). Death records (1861-1894), F:10: (picture 55).
9. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.), household records, (1861-1871), AI:16d, p. 324.
10. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.), household records (1861-1871), AI:16d, p. 322.
11. Nora Bergsförsamling (Öre.). Marriage records (1861-1901), EI:9; (picture 94).
12. Färnebo (Värm.). Household records (1861-1875) AI:26, p. 176. (1876-1885) AI:36, p. 118, 48.
13. Dingtuna (Väst.). Household records (1876-1886), AI:20 p. 645, 537, 561.
14. Kolbäck (Väst.). Household records (1881-1890), AI:17b p. 170,172.
15. Rytterne (Väst.). Household records (1922-1933), AIIa:4 p. 194.
16. Hällaryd (Blek.). Birth records (1845-1861), CI:7, p. 111.
17. Hällaryd (Blek.). Household records (1877-1884) AI:15, p. 536.
18. Hällaryd (Blek.). Household records (1884-1889) AI:17, p. 465.

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