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An American baseball team

Brita Butler-Wall

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An American baseball team with roots in Västergötland

BY BRITA BUTLER-WALL



Wall Brothers' Baseball Team, ca. 1912-1922. Oris Wall at left rear.

In the 1910's a baseball team made history in the state of Washington. Not only because of their scoring record, but because they were all brothers.

According to a local newspaper, "The nine Wall brothers developed into one of the champion baseball teams of the Northwest. So unusual a spectacle was this family in its baseball career that they were soon touring the larger centers of the country and beating their opponents with regularity."¹

And the Wall boys were 100% Swedish. Their grandparents, Hedvig Helgesson and Niclas Wall emigrated from Sweden to a homestead in Wisconsin, where their mother Emily was born. Emily married her first cousin, Swedish immigrant John

Wall, and the family continued west to South Dakota and then on to the Pacific Northwest, where the nine sons formed a baseball team.

Johannes Helgesson and Anna Olofsdotter from Östad

The boys' great-great-grandfather was *Johannes Helgesson*, (born 25 July 1807 in Östad, Vägö), a tenant farmer (*arrendator*) from Östad parish, not far from Alingsås. This parish lies on the west side of Lake Mjörn, at the edge of the wilderness area of Risveden. Johannes Helgesson was one of the farmers who worked for Östad *Säteri*, a manor first mentioned in the year 1400, when such land was awarded to the

minor nobility of Västergötland. In 1774 Niclas Sahlgren, a director of the East India Company in Göteborg, established the Östad Foundation, which operated Östad Orphanage (*barnhus*) from 1774 to 1945. Its mission was to "save the children of poor parents from misery and ruin, and through a suitable upbringing turn them into faithful workers in agriculture."

On 19 June 1831, Johannes married *Anna Olofsdotter*, (born 27 July 1809 in Östad) from the nearby village of Tån² and brought her to his farm at Östad *Säteri*; there they had five children. In May of 1844, Johannes and Anna left for the nearby parish of Lena, where they owned a farm called Stommen. Most of his siblings also left the farm and became

6	Johannes Helgeson	1807	25/1			America	X	X	X
7	Anna Olofsdotter	1809	27/1				X	X	X
8	Beata	1832	10/1		norrbottens län		X	X	X
9	Hedvig	1834	3/12				X	X	X
10	Anders	1837	10/10				X	X	X
11	Henric	1841	10/1				X	X	X
12	Carl	1844	4/1				X	X	X
13	Helge Theodor	Lena	1847	3/7	Lena	9/7			
14	Hedvig	Lena	1850	23/7	Lena	5/7			
15	Anders Thoreson	1830	3/1				X	X	X

The moving-out records for Lena parish in 1852, showing when the Helgeson family and their dräng Anders left for the U.S. (Lena B:4, picture 159 (1850–1885) picture from Arkiv Digital).

grandfather [Johannes Helgeson] out of the house, and put him in a hole dug in the bluff north of the garden that had been used for a cellar, and the Bergs and the Sam Andersons loaded their chickens and pigs into wagons and headed for La Crosse. I never heard what your family done, but suppose you were scared stiff like all the rest.”⁸

Life goes on

Johannes’s wife Anna Olofsdotter had died in 1862, and when Johannes died in 1878, Hattie inherited some of the Helgeson homestead. The property included a limestone quarry and stone crusher, sawmill, and blacksmith shop. By 1881 Nicholas and Hattie owned 360 acres at Half-Way Creek.⁹ They attended the Half-Way Creek Lutheran Church, and Nicholas served as school clerk and director, supervisor, and justice of the peace.

In 1882 Nicholas Wall died, at the age of 55, in an accident with runaway horses, and Hattie Helgeson died in 1916. They are buried near her parents at Helgeson cemetery,



The Helgeson grave. Photo by David Wall, 2009.

either servants or landless cottagers (*backstugusittare*).

In April of 1852 Johannes and Anna immigrated with their children to America,³ departing from Göteborg. With them went their farmhand Anders Thoresson, b. 1830 in Östad. The Helgeson⁴ household arrived in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, in 1852 and homesteaded at Sweden Coulee east of Holmen in 1853.

Hattie and Nicholas

Two years later, on July 12, 1855, their eldest daughter, Hedvig ‘Hattie’ Helgeson, married Nicholas Wall, in Sweden known as Niclas Eriksson Wall. He was born 13 April 1827 at Bögared Lillegård in Norska Skogsbygden parish, Kullings härad, Älvsborgs län,⁵ a son to the drummer Eric Wall, born 1788 Dec. 10 in Ör, Älvsborg län, province of Dalsland, and his wife Cajsa Svensdotter, born 1795 March 16 in Färgelanda, Älvsborg län, province of Dalsland.

Although family lore says Nicholas was an apprentice to Johannes Helgeson, there is no such documentation in the Swedish church records. It is possible that Niclas met the Helgeson family on the journey to America.

When Niclas arrived in America, his name became Nicholas. He homesteaded 40 acres adjoining the Helgeson homestead and set up a blacksmith business. Nicholas and Hattie’s

first house – two rooms and a loft – was made of logs, later enclosed in clapboard siding. Within a few years Nicholas bought a neighboring property and increased his holdings. Nicholas and Hattie had ten children – their eldest daughter was Emily Amanda, born in 1856.

Nicholas goes to war

In 1865, Nicholas Wall enlisted in the Union Army as a Wisconsin volunteer. At the age of 37 he served as a private in I Company, 44th Infantry regiment. His service record gives his coloring and height: “blue eyes, brown hair, sandy complexion, 5’9”.⁶ In a letter home to Hattie sent from Paducah, Kentucky, on April 12, 1865, he tells his wife how the soldiers reacted at hearing that the Civil War had ended three days earlier:

“Now there was great joy here when we got the message for the second time that Lee and his army were captured. They all cheered, and shot a salute with the cannons so that the earth shook.”⁷

An Indian scare

When Johannes was 58 or 59 years old, the family had an ‘Indian scare,’ according to a letter from Hattie’s brother:

“Can you remember when Swede Coulie [sic] had an Indian scare? It must have been in ’65 or ’66. I was not at home. They carried your

Sweden Coulee, Holmen, Wisconsin, on land homesteaded by Johannes and Anna in 1853.

Most of their children stayed in Wisconsin, except two daughters who married and moved to Canada, and their oldest daughter Emily, who married immigrant John Wall.

Johan August Wall from Horla

Johan August Olausson Wall, or John Wall, as he was known in America, was born in Horla, Vägö, 1 June 1852 and came to the United States in 1871.¹⁰ His father was Olaus Eriksson, born 18 August 1818 in Närunga and his wife Johanna Svensdotter, born 7 January 1826 in Horla. When checking this family closer, it turned out that Olaus was the older brother of Niklas Eriksson Wall.¹¹ Olaus went to America in 1870 without telling anyone, and his wife and other children seems to have followed him in 1873.

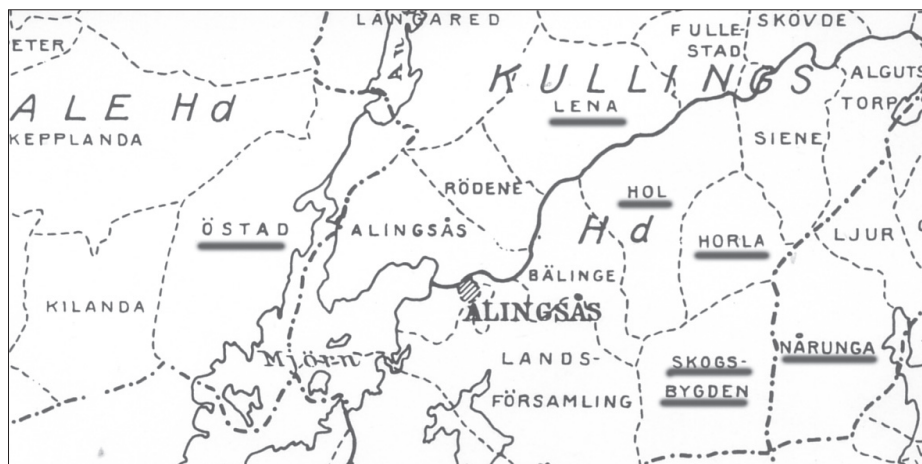
In 1871, John settled in Onalaska, Wisconsin, near his relatives. In 1879 he married his first cousin, Emily Amanda Wall.



Emily Amanda Wall, 1856-1920. Photo ca 1879.

John and Emily Wall in the Dakota territory

Soon after their marriage in March of 1879, John Wall and his pregnant wife Emily headed 300 miles west via horse and wagon for Dakota territory,



Map of Kullings and Ale härad in western Västergötland.

where they could homestead 160 acres. In Volga, in what is now South Dakota, they lived in a sod house (as late as the 1950s, a trace of that house was visible in the field). Between 1879 and 1896 Emily gave birth to nine boys – Jess, Alvin, Philip, Ted, Ansel, Oris, Ernest, Edgar, and Ray. Three years later, she gave birth to her last child – a girl, Alice.

In Dakota territory, the Wall family raised wheat and cattle, but the Panic of 1893 led to the Bank Crash of 1894. With drought and a bad eco-



John Wall, 1852-1910. Photo ca 1900.

nom, it was a tough go, and everyone pitched in. When he was only eight or nine years old, their son Oris learnt to plow with a team of horses. In 1900, the family gave up and walked off the homestead, leaving two threshing machines behind.

The Wall family in the Pacific Northwest

John and the older boys took the train out west to Portland, Oregon – almost 2,000 miles – and later sent for Emily and the rest of the children. First, the family settled near Scappoose, Oregon, and made their living from fishing.

Soon they moved to southern Washington and settled on a homestead at Mt. Norway, near the town of Washougal on the Columbia River. According to descendant Bernard Wall, who farmed on Mt. Norway until the 1990s, the Wall Ranch was “160 acres of darn poor ground.”¹²

With so many mouths to feed, times were tough for John and Emily Wall. At age 11 or 12, son Oris worked for room and board for a Danish-born farmer Jacob Jorgensen, whose farm was near a sawmill. In that job, Oris “chased a lot of cows on the sidehill toward the river.”¹³

Like many Swedish immigrants, John Wall was both a farmer and carpenter. With the help of his older sons, he built a large farm house and barns. Above the woodshed they built a gymnasium, which attracted neighbors and friends to the Wall Ranch for frequent entertainment such as roller skating, basketball, and lively debates on the topics of the day.



Wall Ranch on Mt. Norway, Washington. From left; Daughter Alice, Mother Emily, and sons Ted, Oris, Edgar, Jesse, Ansel, Ernest, Alvin, Phil, and Ray Wall. Photo 1910.

In 1908 John Wall built a two-room schoolhouse on Mt. Norway which was used as a school at least five months of the year - from late fall to early spring. Students walked as far as two miles each way to attend. When the school was consolidated with another district in 1929, the building became a center for community picnics, dances, parties, and a literary society.¹⁴ According to family lore, the Wall brothers were energetic, progressive gentlemen and natty dressers, even wearing suits and hats to the Fourth of July picnics.¹⁵

As young men, all nine Wall boys became loggers. They felled and hauled old growth timber in Lewis River country, sometimes working for Du Bois sawmill, a company operating out of Vancouver, Washington, that “set up dams along the Washougal River to catch logs which were sent downriver.”¹⁶ The work was dangerous – constructing trestles of logs to span ravines for the logging railroads, topping trees, climbing spar poles, riding 200-year-old logs in the mill pond or at the log boom near Woodland, Washington.

By 1905, Washington had become the leading state in lumber production, and in Clark County logging was an important industry, with 200,000 acres of timberland. Most of the timber was red and yellow fir, cedar, and hemlock.¹ Many of the Wall boys

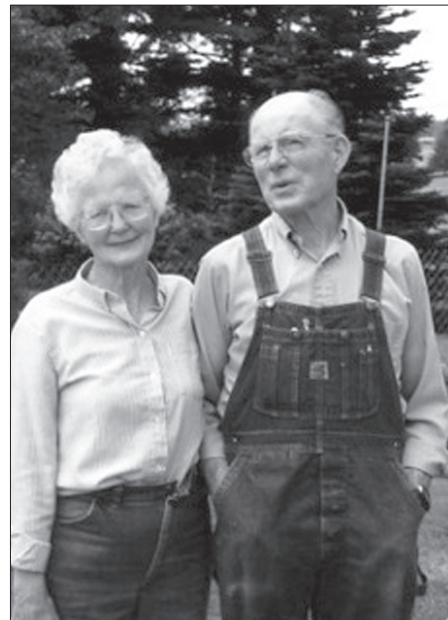
were also engineers on logging railroads and “donkey engineers,” operating a steam-powered winch.

Besides logging, the Wall brothers seined salmon near Stevenson on the Columbia River. They took the nets out in boats and dragged them out of the water with horses. Once Oris helped land a sturgeon at Skamania that weighed 400-500 pounds. They sold the King salmon and other fish to canneries all along the river, canneries which shipped all over the world.

John Wall died in 1910 and Emily in 1920, both in Washougal. The Wall brothers competed as a team until

1922 when Phil died in a logging accident at age 38. All the boys stayed in Washington state, except Al and Ernest, who retired to Arizona and California, respectively.

After Oris died in 1952, his son Bernard continued to farm on Mt. Norway.



Florence and Bernard Wall, son of Swedish-American baseball player Oris Wall. Photo by David Wall, ca. 1992.

Endnotes:

- ¹ *Northwestern Farm News*, 10, 6. Vancouver WA, June 1944. Note



Oris Wall in white shirt, on top of log. Undated photo.

that 'country' does not mean nation, but probably Western Washington.

² Source: Östad marriage records, volume C:4, picture 136. AD Online.

³ Moving-out records for Lena parish. Volume B:4, picture 159.

⁴ In America they spelled the name Helgeson.

⁵ Flyleaf on family Bible lists Kullings härad. Närunga-Norska Skogsbygden birth records. Volume C:4, page 306.

⁶ "Wall, Nicholas" [http://vesterheim.org/Civil War/db/w/wal/index.html](http://vesterheim.org/Civil%20War/db/w/wal/index.html)(.)

⁷ Letter from Nicholas Wall to Hattie Wall, dated Paducah, Kentucky, April 12, 1865. Translated by B. Butler-Wall.

⁸ Letter from Theodore Helgesen to Hilma Wall, Denver, Colorado, May 6, 1929.

⁹ Butterfield, Consul Wilshire. *History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin*, "Town of Onalaska Biographical Sketches." Chicago: Western Historical Society. 1881.

¹⁰ Clerical survey for Hol parish. Volume Hol AI:7, page 44.

¹¹ Närunga-Norska Skogsbygden birth records. Volume C:4, page 255.

¹² Bernard Wall, personal communication, 2010.

¹³ Bernard Wall, personal communication, 2010.



In 1994, Bernard and Florence Wall took their son David and his family to visit Östad säteri, and our daughters got to see where their great-great-great-grandparents had lived when they made the eventful decision to immigrate to America.

¹⁴ Anderson, Marc. "Mt. Norway School alums take a fond look back." *Camas-Washougal Post-Record*. Dec. 10, 1975.

¹⁵ Bernard Wall, personal communication, 2010.

¹⁶ "Lumbering had its heyday in county." *Cenaqua-Bicentennial issue*. *Camas-Washougal Post-Record*. 1976, 79.

¹⁷ "Lumbering had its heyday in county." *Cenaqua-Bicentennial issue*. *Camas-Washougal Post-Record*. 1976, 79.

Thanks to Florence and Bernard Wall for sharing family photographs, documents, and stories, and for the family trip to Östad Säteri. Thanks also to earlier family history research done by Elvah Bratberg Ristinen, Dorothy Skogen Leon, and Viola Bratberg Bolton and special thanks to Elisabeth Thorsell for locating Niclas Wall and John Wall in Sweden.

The author:
Brita Butler-Wall
E-mail:
<babutlerwall@gmail.com>
tel. 206-523-4922).



The participants of the SwedGen Tour 2011 are by now seriously into mentally packing their bags. The people of the group will be *Anneli Andersson, Charlotte Börjesson, Gunnilla Didriksson, Anna-Lena Hultman, Bengt-Olof Käck* and *Birgitta Eriksson*. The latter two are experts on old maps, and are representing the

SwedGen Tour will soon be underway

Lantmäteriet (see page 1). This group of Swedes will be joined by *Kathy Meade* of Chicago, who used to work for Geline, and now volunteers at the Swedish American Museum in Chicago and the Arlington Heights Memorial Library in Arlington Heights and assists patrons in researching their Swedish heritage.

The official web site is:

<<http://www.lilleskogen.se/>>

Look up the website for exact lecture times, and addresses.

Tour schedule:

- * Saturday, September 10, 2011 – Chicago, IL
- * Sunday, September 11, 2011 – Rock Island, IL
- * Saturday, September 17, 2011 – Denver, CO
- * Tuesday, September 20, 2011 – Salt Lake City, UT
- * Wednesday, September 21, 2011 – Salt Lake City, UT