

6-1-2010

The "America Journey" of Tilda and Emma

Dorinda D. Lundin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lundin, Dorinda D. (2010) "The "America Journey" of Tilda and Emma," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 30 : No. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol30/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

The “America Journey” of Tilda and Emma

TEXT AND PICTURES BY DORINDA D. LUNDIN

One of the most exciting moments in family-history research is that instant when all the details of an ancestor’s “America Journey” come together and the story is made whole. For some, the story comes easily; for others the research is more intense and then, there are those stories that defy retelling. For years, Matilda Charlotta Larson kept her story hidden.

Matilda, born Tilda, was my husband’s maternal grandmother. In an effort to create a family-history website, I agreed to help him research and record both of his grandparents’ immigration stories. They had been strangers in America, Tilda from Öland and Lars from Dalsland, but these two Swedish immigrants would eventually meet, marry, raise a family, and live out their American dreams in a coal mining town called Grassflat.

While each story would begin long ago in Sweden, it was important that each grandparent had his or her own voice and told his or her own story. We hoped that through the research we would uncover the details of what their lives had been like in Sweden and why they chose to leave and come to America. We hoped to understand what it had been like to journey to America as a young immigrant and why each chose to locate in the coal-mining region of central Pennsylvania.

The task presented many research challenges, but none more frustrating than my efforts to detail Tilda’s voyage to America. While we were fortunate to have access to family

journals, letters, and photo albums,¹ it was quickly apparent the essential information needed to complete the story of Tilda’s “America Journey” had been lost to the ravages of time.

Tilda in Sweden

On August 5, 1871, a fourth daughter, Tilda Charlotta, was born to Lars Peter Nilsson and his wife Stina Kajsa Knutsdotter at Lundeby #2 in Persnäs, Kalmar län, on the island of Öland. Lars Peter, originally from Södra Greda in Föra,² married Stina in 1858 and moved to her home parish of Persnäs. They established themselves on a farm at Södravik where the first four children were born: Carolina Sofia (1859), Brita Marie (1862), Nils August (1865), and Kristina Emeli (1867). Tilda Charlotta (1871) and Johan Peter (1874) were born after the family moved to Lundeby #2, a small farm that Lars Peter owned.³

During the mid to late 1800’s much of Sweden endured years of crop failure, over-population, and economic depression. Persnäs, like other rural regions throughout Sweden, suffered acutely from the poverty these times created. Economic recovery was complicated by an established agrarian way of life that required labor-intensive practices, but of Lars Peter’s six children only one, Nils August, was old enough to help till his 7/18th *mantal* of farmland.⁴ While I can find no record confirming this story, family history recounts that Lars Peter would occasionally “go to sea” to supplement the family



Tilda (Matilda) Charlotta Larson shortly after arrival in America.

income. While unconfirmed, it is a plausible tale. Some of Lars Peter’s ancestors had made their livelihood on the sea and on an island such as Öland, even the families of sailors found it necessary to farm the land for sustenance.⁵

In 1880 Lars Peter died from consumption.⁶ He was only 48 years old. Lars Peter left a family of six children, the youngest only 6 years old, a wife whose health was beginning to fail, and serious debt. According to the estate inventory, his assets were 3,135 kronor and his debts 3,517 kronor.⁷ Life had dealt harshly with Lars Peter.

After settling the estate, the household examination records in-

dicating that Stina continued to live gratis on her husband's land, but one by one her children left to make their own lives. Between 1878 and 1882 three daughters left to work on area farms and by 1889 both sons had immigrated to America. One son, Nils August, appears to have left Sweden without obtaining the necessary permission although his name continued to be listed as a household member. Only Tilda remained in Sweden to provide and care for her widowed mother.

Tilda had become a talented dressmaker and now she used this trade to support her mother. To find work, she traveled about the region staying with her patrons while she sewed for their families. Even with this income there was never enough money to cover the expenses of her mother's home. Wanting to remain independent and keep Stina safe, Tilda moved her mother to a nearby cellar house described in family journals as a *kellarstuga*.⁸ When these accommodations proved too expensive to maintain, a small cottage was obtained behind the village schoolhouse. From time to time after Lars Peter's death, usually between jobs, marriages, or emigration, family members moved back and forth through the family home, but none stayed long enough to relieve Tilda of the physical or financial burden. While it appears in 1894 that Tilda's older brother, Nils August, is still at home, a note in the entry indicates, "... he visits in America."⁹

Family records indicate that by the



The "kellarstuga" in Persnäs.

mid 1890's Stina's health had worsened to the point where she could no longer be left alone. Now unable to work away from the home, Tilda realized that something must change. It was agreed that Stina would go to Löt and live with her married daughter Kristina Emili, and Tilda would journey to America.^{10, 11} Daughter Tilda emigrated in 1895 Aug. 31 from Persnäs.

Tilda is missing

Between 1895 and 1900 all traces of Tilda disappear. She does not reappear in any records until 1900 when she marries Lars Magnus Larson in Peale, PA. A check of American census records uncover two possible dates for Tilda's emigration from Sweden, 1895 and 1897,¹² but, as shown above, she did leave in 1895, though she has not been found in the Swedish databases Emihamn, Emibas, or Emiweb. Searches for her arrival in East Coast ports also prove futile. Every effort is made to find records for Tilda, including the use of alternative spellings, parallel family searches, and pure guesses, but each ends with a dead end.

Today, I rely on the digital resources available to the amateur researcher, but I began researching family history long before many of these tools existed. In today's media-saturated age it is important to remember that many non-digital resources remain available to the amateur family historian. The Internet and document subscription services provide swift and convenient access to primary sources once unavailable to the non-professional genealogist, but they do have limitations. As my frustrations with Tilda's missing information grew, a soft voice from the past reminded me not to forget the basic rules of research. I must slow down and carefully review all of my prior work, information, and sources.

The tactic proved beneficial. I had forgotten about a story told to me early in my research. Tilda had not traveled to America alone. According to family documents, Tilda had worked with an assistant seamstress



Emma Carolina Jonsson, a.k.a. Emma C. Peterson.

who was named Emma. When Emma heard that Tilda was leaving for America, she pleaded with her friend and co-worker to go along. Her protestations were successful for she appears in photo albums with her American family and a note that "Aunt" Emma Peterson was not a real aunt.

If I could find Emma's immigration details then perhaps I could find Tilda's, but while there was some information about her American life, no details survived about the Swedish Emma.

The Swedish-American church Records

While visiting the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center located at Augustana College, I had included time to review their collection of Swedish-American church records. I knew that Tilda and her husband Lars had been married in the Nebo Lutheran Church in Peale, PA, and included that parish in my research with the intent of copying the records that pertained to the family and study them later. The records were sparse and difficult to read. One page was so badly damaged it had to be copied in a negative format to insure

its readability.

Though I had used these records several times since they were copied, I had never discovered additional new information. Even so, I was determined to look at everything carefully one more time. When I scanned the documents this time with an eye for different information I was amazed to read the last two entries on the negatively copied document. There, hiding in plain sight, were my two young women: Matilda C. Larson, now using her American name, and her friend, Emma C. Carlson. The entries revealed identical immigration dates and destinations (1895 to Antrim, PA), identical church transfers (1897 to Nebo Lutheran in Peale), and personal information about Emma including her birth date of 1873 and her last residence in Sweden, the Kalmar village of Löt, a parish just south of Persnäs.¹³

Back to Swedish records

Armed with this information, I next returned to the household examination records for Löt parish in Kalmar. A search for a female born in 1873 with a father named Carl soon gave

me Emma's Swedish records. Emma Carolina Carlson had been born on October 14, 1873, in Högsby, Löt, Kalmar län. She was the daughter of Carl Peter Jönsson and Kajsa Stina Olsdotter. When she left Löt for America on August 31, 1895, Emma was listed as living at No. 2 Öfra Wannborga Utmark with her widowed mother and brother Gustaf Victor.¹⁴ Emma was found in Emibas as Emma Carolina Jonsson, but not in Emihamn.

It is important to note that emigration from Öland did not always follow the traditional routes of other Swedish regions. Before a bridge was constructed, the island was isolated and dependent upon ferries and ships for transportation. Emigrants from Öland could either leave by traveling north to Stockholm or south towards Europe and the southern Swedish cities. Tilda and Emma could have come to America by way of a European port.

I returned to Ancestry to re-search East Coast arrivals but this time omitted any suggestion of departure port. Finally, success! Within an hour, I had my travelers in New York City on September 28, 1895.¹⁵

Tilda and Emma had left their villages and traveled to Helsingborg



Tilda and her husband Lars Magnus Larsson.

on Sweden's west coast. Though not a major embarkation port for America, Helsingborg was a port of call for the German-owned Hamburg-American Line. An interesting note according to Ancestry is that Helsingborg's emigration data was not listed on *Emihamn* until 1929 complicating my efforts to find the women.¹⁶

According to the ship's "Customs List of Passengers," the two travelers boarded the immigrant ship *Venetia* in Helsingborg. It steamed to Göteborg for more passengers, then to Kristiansand in Norway for its remaining complement of 680 emigrants, cargo, and cabin passengers. From Norway the *Venetia* traveled west directly to New York, discharging its passengers at the Hamburg-American Line docks in Hoboken, NJ.¹⁷ Once cleared through customs, the two women most probably boarded an immigrant train in Hoboken for transport to the coal fields of Antrim, PA, the home of Tilda's brother Nils August.

Once the two women arrived in Antrim, contrary to family stories, Emma may not have left Tilda for work in Jamestown, NY. It is more likely that both young women were drawn to that vibrant city¹⁸ for periodic employment and a Swedish social life. There was even a suggestion that Tilda may have met her husband-to-be in Jamestown, but all that is known for sure is that Antrim remained both Tilda and Emma's home parish until 1897.



Persnäs church on the island of Öland.

In 1897, with coal production waning in the Antrim mines, the mine owner, Clearfield Bituminous Coal Company, encouraged its Tioga County miners to move south to their newest mines and a utopian planned community called Peale. Emma, Tilda, and other family members picked up and moved on once again, this time to the Peale-Grassflat mines.¹⁹

One Final Note

In wanting to know how Tilda and Emma might have traveled from Öland to Helsingborg, I investigated the railroad history of Sweden. While ferries could still have transported them in 1895, the railroads were now fairly well developed including narrow-gauge secondary routes that connected trunk rail lines to port cities.

After consulting an 1890's Swedish railroad map,²⁰ I realized that the easiest and fastest route for our travelers would have been by rail south from Kalmar, then west across southern Sweden to the coast on a rail line connecting to both Malmö and Helsingborg.

In 2002 my cousin and I visited my relatives in Skåne. As a way of helping us understand what Sweden was like during my grandmother's time, the same period as Tilda and Emma's, we were treated to a day excursion aboard a historically preserved narrow gauge railroad. With its period-attired conductor, preserved carriages, and steam locomotive, the train traveled a route across southern Sweden first towards the Baltic, then on its return towards the west coast. It is possible that a little over a hundred years before, on just such a train, perhaps along that very rail bed, two young women sat and talked excitedly about the adventures before them. That adventure was their "America Journey," a journey to the rest of their lives.

Endnotes

- 1) The family of Tilda's daughter, Edith, retains a private collection of family journals, letters, and scrapbooks.
- 2) *Husförhörlängd Föra* (Kalmar) (1851-1860 p. 26) Genline AB.
- 3) *Husförhörlängd Persnäs* (Kalmar) (1861-1870 p. 203), (1871-1880 p. 171), (1881-1885 p. 163), (1886-1894 p. 178), Genline AB.
- 4) *Husförhörlängd Persnäs* (Kalmar) (1871-1880 p. 171) Genline AB.
- 5) Anderson, Larry Alan, *My Wallander Swedish Family*, Vol I and II, 2006, Privately published, Crosby, Texas. (This volume is a comprehensive genealogy which includes Lars Peter Nilsson's ancestors on Öland and was developed in conjunction with Swedish genealogists. Mr. Anderson's relatives are connected to Tilda through her sister Kristina Emili.)
- 6) (Persnäs F:1) (provided by SAG editor).
- 7) Vadstena archives, Ölands Norra Mot, volume Fll: 77, page 1023 (provided by SAG editor).
- 8) *Kellarstuga* is most likely a coined term used by the family. "Källare" is a Swedish word that means basement, cellar; older spelling could be "kellare."
- 9) When merging family documents and parish records conflicting information often emerged. The 1910 U.S. Census gave 1886 as the immigration date for Tilda's brother Nils August. Parish records continue to show him as part of his Swedish household in the 1886-1894 household examination and a note that "he visits in America." There is no record of his leaving Sweden. Nils August may or may not have had official permission to leave the country. U.S. Census, Cooper Township, Clearfield, PA, 1910, Ancestry.com, *Husförhörlängd Persnäs* (Kalmar) 1886-1894, Genline AB.
- 10) Family journal entry by Edith Matilda Larson Lundin about her mother.
- 11) SAG Editor's note: Stina Kajsa died in 1896 Aug 1. She is recorded as living in Persnäs village, but there is a note that she actually died in Arbelunda in the nearby parish of Löt and is buried there. She was living with daughter Christina Emilia and husband, Lars Johansson Lundqvist in his 2nd marriage. He was, born 1822 Apr. 5 in Arbelunda, Löt, and died 1900 June 19 in Arbelunda, Löt. [Löt AIIa:1, p. 7 (1898-1915). Löt C:3:9].
- 12) U.S. Census for Cooper Township, Clearfield County, PA, 1900, 1910, Ancestry.com.
- 13) Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Rock Island, Ill., The Swedish-American Church Records Collection, Nebo Lutheran Parish Register, Peale, PA.
- 14) *Husförhörlängd, Löt* (Kalmar) 1871-1885, p. 218, 1886-1897, p. 357, Genline AB.
- 15) New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957, "Venetia, September 28, 1895," Ancestry.com.
- 16) About Swedish Emigration Records, 1783-1951, *Emihamn*, Helsingborg 1929-1950, Ancestry.com.
- 17) Blanck, Maggie, "The Steamship Companies and Railroads in Hoboken," <http://maggieblanck.com/Hoboken/Hoboken.html>
- 18) Ebersole, Helen G. "The New City: What Jamestown was like in 1886," *Jamestown (NY) Post-Journal*, 29 March 1986. Tempo, <http://prendergastlibrary.org/jamestown;1886.htm>
- 19) Feldmeier, Jeffrey L., "An Overview of the Underground Coal-Mining Era at Grassflat and Environs," <http://grassflat.bravehost.com/mining.html>
- 20) Rail map of Sweden (1901), History of rail transport in Sweden, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/history_of_rail_transport_in_Sweden

Address for the Lundin family website:
http://web.me.com/lundind/The_Larsons_of_Grassflat_II/Welcome.html (user name: *grassflat*, password: *matilda*).

The author:

Dorinda D. Lundin, 5 Smith Road, Woodstock, CT 06281
 Her e-mail is
 <elundin3460@charter.net>