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# The Death of Henrik Österman — A Swedish Argonaut

Erik Wikén\*

Gustaf Unonius tells in his *Memoirs*<sup>1</sup> of his meeting in Chicago in 1849 with a Swede named Österman:

“Among the communicants there was a Swede of whom I cannot but make mention here, since I know that in spite of the misstep which had compelled him to leave his fatherland, he left behind many friends, among whom there may still be those who recall the happy, pleasant companion with a heart basically good, though he was weak and easily led astray. I have reference to Österman, a man who was at one time always welcome in the higher circles and wealthy homes of the capital city. He had already been in America a couple of years and had provided for himself a considerable farm in Wisconsin. Just now he was on his way to California.

The day before the announced date of the service, he came to me for a private conversation. We had never met before, but there were nevertheless several points of contact between us. Relatives and friends of mine were well known to him, and it was a pleasure for me to meet a man who had seen them so much more recently than I. But the purpose of his call was not to make a new acquaintance. Did he dare, after what had taken place, to come forward to the table of the Lord, or would I regard it as my duty to deny him the privilege of taking part? It is easy enough to imagine the reply. On this occasion there were so many things which caused the minister to feel such a deep and stirring emotion within himself, that it was not without compassion that he clasped the hand of the penitent. Praise be to Him whose bosom is always open to every child that returns to Him! Among my ministerial activities, there are few that have impressed themselves on me more deeply than that one, when it was my privilege to extend to Österman the bread of life for which his soul hungered. Seldom have I seen anyone at communion more deeply touched than he. When we met later he talked with me confidentially about his former life, of his mother and sister at home. If ever desire for gold was consecrated to good and pure purpose it was in him. Rumor had it that many had gained immeasurable riches with just a turn of the spade in the golden sands of California, and it was Österman's happy dream to be able to atone for the past so far as it depended on money, and again be permitted to return to Sweden. But alas, his golden dream, like so many others, was never to be realized.”

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Unonius then relates that Österman, from what he had been able to learn from Österman's companions on the journey to California, had been killed by an Indian.

The newspaper *Aftonbladet*, published in Stockholm, carried a notice on 17 April 1850 that the former wholesale merchant, named Henrik Österman, had been killed in America. This notice was followed five days later by a translation from an American newspaper (unknown which one) of a long and very interesting letter by Samuel Breck (assuredly not a Swede), dated Old Dry Diggings in northern California 23 Nov. 1849. The letter described in full the seven month-long journey from Chicago to California by a group in which Österman (Easterman) was one of the companions:

“... At the time of our departure from Chicago you were informed of our group and that the journey would take place together with ‘The Detroit Company,’ of which Frank Pixly, formerly of Rochester (NY) was a member. Nothing remarkable happened on the route to Independence (MO). Each member of the group became acquainted with the personalities of the others, the result being that three of the party returned home, thereby reducing our group to four only — Mr. Easterman, Dr. Patrick and Mr. Benson, all of them perfectly suited to each other, thus promising to make the journey across the prairies both useful and pleasant . . .”

On 26 May 1849 one of the comrades died in Independence, whereupon the remainder of the party joined a larger group of California-bound travelers. Eventually they passed through Salt Lake City and finally reached northern California.

“After we had passed over Sierra Nevada and had accomplished one day's journey, we came to Pit River.<sup>2</sup> In this place we posted a security guard, our total number now being only seven. During the second night of our encampment along this river, we tethered our beasts of burden by a bend in the river and made our beds in their midst. All of us felt completely safe and retired for the night as was our custom. At three o'clock in the morning we were awakened by our friend Easterman, who with the most heart-piercing cry was shouting: ‘I have been shot! I have been shot!’ In a trice we were all awake and we discovered our valued friend mortally wounded by an arrow, which had been shot by an Indian. It is sad to relate that Easterman only lived for an hour and a half. We buried our friend, wrapped only in his blankets, without any ceremony. . . .”

Who was this Österman? The editor of the translation of Unonius' *Memoirs*, Nils William Olsson, was not able to identify him.<sup>3</sup> A thorough check of contemporary sources reveals the following facts:

Henrik Österman was born in Albäck, Simtuna Parish (Väst.) 6 March 1811, the son of Henrik Österman, a textile manufacturer (*klädesfabrikör*), and Maria Fredrika Wigström. He came to Stockholm at an early age, where he started his own business. He encountered financial difficulties and when the climate got too hot for him in Stockholm he secured a passport in

that city 8 Oct. 1846 for travel to Hamburg, Germany and several foreign places. He must have gone to America soon thereafter. On 16 Dec. 1846 he was placed in bankruptcy in the Magistrates' Court in Stockholm. The case was delayed from time to time and it was not until 14 June 1848 that the case was closed and Österman was found guilty *in absentia* of betraying his creditors.

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<sup>1</sup>Gustaf Unonius, *A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858*. The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius, I-II (Minneapolis 1950, 1960), II, pp. 167-169.

<sup>2</sup>Pit River in northern California is about 200 miles long. It has its source in north Modoc Co. in northeastern California and flows south and west into the Sacramento River in west central Shasta Co. — *Webster's New Geographical Dictionary* (Springfield, MA 1977), p. 955.

<sup>3</sup>Unonius, *Memoirs*, II, p. 333, note.

# A Swedish Passenger List from 1902

Sheryl Berquist Busterno\*

Passenger manifests or lists have long been a valuable source for researching one's foreign roots. The early lists from the last century, while valuable, seldom gave information concerning the passenger's nativity beyond the country itself. As the 19th century drew to its close and we entered the 20th century, the passenger lists became more comprehensive and furnished us with much supplementary data. Thus the Act of Congress of 3 March 1893, specified that the manifests should include such additional information as:

1. The last residence of the passenger in his native country.
2. The final destination in the U.S.
3. Who paid for the passage.
4. How many dollars did the passenger bring with him.
5. Had the passenger been in the U.S. before, and if so, when and where.
6. Was the passenger to join a relative in the U.S., and if so, what was his or her name and address.

Needless to say this additional data can be very useful in determining which part of the foreign country the passenger came from. To illustrate what the typical passenger manifest of eighty years ago looked like, I have taken the liberty to reproduce the list for the steamship *Oscar II* of the Scandinavian-American Line, plying between Scandinavia and New York. I have shortened

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