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# The Search for Johan Petter Axelsson's Father

Christopher Olsson\*

(Sweden is a genealogist's dream. With the help of a highly organized and efficient regional archive "landsarkiv" system, a Swedish-American can usually discover his or her family tree back to the early 1700s. It is time-consuming work, and the old records can challenge even the most experienced genealogist, but with patience and a little luck, most searchers can find their roots.

But occasionally there can be seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Discovering that a forefather was born illegitimate usually means a dead end, at least so far as tracing the forefather's father, grandparents, etc. The following true story is an example of how diligent research overcame this roadblock and was able to build a case for one particular Swedish-American paternal ancestry.)

Johan Petter Axelsson was a 29 year-old merchant sailor when he quit the life of the sea in 1883 and settled down, first in New York City and later in Philadelphia. He was perhaps no different from the thousands of Swedish immigrants who poured into the United States in the period of massive Swedish immigration between 1867 and 1914. Or, perhaps he was.

This particular Swedish immigrant lives on in the memories of his present-day descendants as an "eccentric but well-loved patriarch" (as his 32 year-old great grandson describes him) about whom there were vague whispers of "noble birth." These were fueled, perhaps, by a short but strange "memorandum" which he left his family when he died.

"(I was) born on the ninth day of June, 1854, in Sweden. . . After my father's drowning and my mother's death, one day. . . a stately landau pulled up in our yard drawn by a team of spirited brown horses with a coachman and a footman on the driving seat. . . (It) required the combined strength of the footman and the coachman to put me in the carriage. After this we proceeded forthwith to our destination, namely the fideikommiss (entailed estate) of Ågårdén. It is an old landmark with 9,700 acres of well cultivated ground and a mansion with two kitchens and 32 large roomy chambers and 22 other buildings. . . I lived there till I was past 20 years of age and I have not seen it since I departed from Sweden in the year 1875."

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This singular “autobiography” is frustratingly short of either details or reasons for the “abduction” which Axelsson seems to have resigned himself to very quickly. The tale could be nothing more than the misguided musings of a fading elder, intent on leaving his descendants with a fictional impression of noble origins. Or, it could be the opaque window through which the great grandchildren would discover their own distant family heritage. The great grandchildren decided to search.

Sweden has the incomparable treasure of a vital statistics system that has preserved the minutiae of 300 years of births, deaths, marriages, and other transactions within the social fabric. By 1688 nearly all parish pastors included in their duties the keeping of these records. Whatever value they may have had for the ecclesiastical and government bureaucrats of the past, these records now allow nearly anyone of Swedish background to uncover the story of his or her family history. Although current statistics are still kept by the parish clergymen in Sweden, older records (usually pre-1900) are now stored in the regional archives around the country. In one of these Swedish *landsarkiv* was the story of Johan Petter Axelsson’s origins.

### The Search

Ågården is an estate just outside of Lidköping in the province of Västergötland. It is located in the parish of Råda. The church records of Råda Parish become the starting point for this search.



*The Ågården estate in Västergötland.*

As a part of Skaraborg *län* (county), Råda parish books of the 19th and earlier centuries are now kept in the *landsarkiv* in Göteborg. One of the first records to check there was the *husförhörslängd* or household examination roll for the parish. This tabulation, unique to Sweden and Finland, was a farm-by-farm and house-by-house inventory of all the inhabitants of a parish. It recorded the annual visit by the parish pastor at which time he examined individual parishioners (which included everyone) as to their ability to read the Holy Scriptures and their knowledge (or lack thereof) of Christian fundamentals. Somewhat totalitarian, perhaps, but of extraordinary value to the genealogist today.

These records were often kept for ten years at a time, when a new volume was begun. In checking the Råda *husförhörslängd* for the period 1861–1871 for the Ågården estate we find: a retired captain Johan (or Jan) Winbom, his wife Augusta Ulrika Silfversparre, and — listed after various relatives and boarders — “Captain Winbom’s foster son Jan Petter Axelsson.” The “memorandum” so far, is accurate: Axelsson did live at Ågården.

The *husförhörslängd* confirms the birthdate of 9 June 1854, as well. It also gives the additional information of Axelsson’s place of birth: Götene, a parish about 24 kilometers (15 miles) east of Råda. Anyone who has driven the highway marked E 3 between Göteborg and Stockholm has passed by Götene in the middle of the vast plain of Västergötland.

Armed with this information, the next step was to confirm the birthdate in the birth records of Götene Parish. Unfortunately there was no Johan Petter born on or about 9 June 1854. Remembering that Götene is a “mother parish” (*moderförsamling*) for three neighboring parishes, we quickly found his birth recorded in the birth records of Holmestad Parish, located only five kilometers (three miles) east of Götene.



Birth record of Johan Petter Axelsson in Holmestad Parish.

The birth record (see above) corrects his birthdate — he was born 9 July, not 9 June. His mother’s name is given — Eva Larsdotter — and instead of a father’s name we have the Swedish word “*oäkta*”, i.e., illegitimate.

The Holmestad household examination rolls give us a more detailed picture of Axelsson and his mother. They tell us that he lived with his mother and grandparents on a small farm in the parish, that his grandfather died when he was four years old, and that, when he was seven years old, his mother, Eva Larsdotter, died. Finally in 1862, when he was eight, he moved to Ågården. There is no record of the melodrama of the abduction that Axelsson would describe many years later.

The Holmestad records give all the necessary information for tracing Axelsson's family back in time — but only on his mother's side. Eva Larsdotter's genealogical heritage was made up of many generations of solid but fairly ordinary land-owning farmers. There is no hint of any link with property or nobility. It was not this branch of the family tree that the patriarch Johan Petter Axelsson was alluding to in his veiled hints to his children and grandchildren about their "blue blood" heritage in Sweden.

Well, then, what about the father? The official birth record gives no clue to Axelsson's paternity. Normally this would be the end of the line for further research.

But Axelsson had left his descendants an unusual story of his early years in Sweden in his strange, but so far factually confirmed, "memorandum." What else could be extracted from the dusty church records brought out of the bowels of the Göteborg archives?

If Johan Petter was born 9 July 1854, he must have been conceived approximately nine months earlier. Where was his mother Eva Larsdotter in October 1853? Was there anyone there who can be suspected of being the father?

Returning to the Holmestad parish records we find that Eva Larsdotter moved back to Holmestad after the birth of Johan Petter from the estate of Storebacken in Fullösa Parish, quite near to Holmestad and Götene. The entry for Storebacken estate in the Fullösa *husförhörslängd* is a long one, listing 93 servants in all. Towards the end of the list is Eva Larsdotter, recorded as being a *piga* (maid) on the estate. Going back several pages and looking at the top of the inventory for Storebacken we find the name of the *arendator* (lease-holder) of the estate — "Lieutenant A. F. Pålman, born 3 December 1825 in Råda Parish" (!) Was this the connection? Could the "A." stand for "Axel," the origin of Johan Petter's patronymic?

It was time to return to the household examination rolls for Råda Parish and to check who was living at the estate of Ågården before Johan Petter came to live there in 1862. The rolls for the period 1848–1856 show that among the inhabitants was a son of Augusta Ulrika Silfversparre (by an earlier marriage) named *Axel* Fredric Pålman, born 3 December 1825. Pålman had served as a second lieutenant with the Halland Infantry Battalion from 1847 to 1851. In 1852 he had left Ågården to manage the estate of Storebacken.

Further research revealed that on 21 October 1853 Eva Larsdotter had arrived at Storebacken. If Axel Fredric Pålman was the father of Johan Petter, he must have seduced the newly-hired maid almost immediately — eight months and 19 days after arriving at Storebacken Eva Larsdotter gave birth to her illegitimate son.

The strongest evidence for a connection between Axelsson and the Pålman of Ågården is their decision in 1862 to take the orphaned boy away from his grandmother and raise him as a "foster son" until he was old enough

to make a life of his own. There is one further piece of evidence also. Since Pålman is a noble family in Sweden, it is listed in the definitive book on Swedish nobility — Gustaf Elgenstierna's *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor* (Genealogies of the Swedish Nobility). Elgenstierna mentions that Axel Fredric Pålman died "unmarried, by drowning in Lake Vänern 1 August 1861." Axelsson's short but accurate "memorandum" claims that his father drowned.

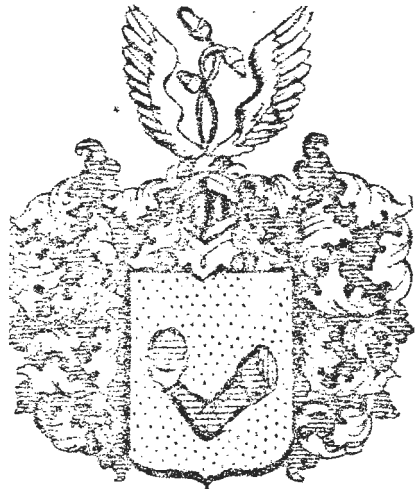
### Conclusion

The evidence is admittedly circumstantial. But the autobiographical "memorandum," the decision by the Pålman's to raise Johan Petter as one of their own, the evidence of the patronymic (Axel = Axelsson), and the evidence of the peoples' movements through use of the collected church records in the archives, all point to one conclusion: Johan Petter Axelsson's father was Axel Fredric Pålman.

Most claims to noble ancestry are not very well founded. Everyone wants to be able to claim distinguished ancestry, but few of those claims hold up. Axelsson's hints to his children and grandchildren have stood up well under the glare of careful genealogical research. Although he died a poor man in distant Philadelphia, he was, in all likelihood, the scion of a very prominent and noble Swedish family.



*Johan Petter Axelsson in his advanced years.*



*487. Pålman.*

*The Pålman Family coat of arms.*