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A Note on Sven Aron Ponthan

Curt Hauffman*

In reading through the March 1985 issue of *Swedish American Genealogist* recently I came across the name of Swan A. Ponthan in the story of Governor John Lind's birthday party. Sven Aron Ponthan, the original version of his name in Sweden, was the son of a Swedish government official (*kammarskrivare*), residing in Stockholm, also named Sven Aron Ponthan, and his wife, Sophia Albertina Wilhelmina Hauffman. The latter was a cousin of my great grandfather.

I can supply additional material on Ponthan, who lived out his days in St. Paul, MN, and who died at his summer residence at 801 Division Avenue, White Bear, MN on 15 August 1911. The obituary of Swan A. Ponthan appeared in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* on 17 Aug. 1911 and since it supplies a few additional details in the life of Ponthan as well as a few errors, I will cite it below, followed by my own comments:

"PONTHAN FUNERAL TODAY

St. Paulite of Noble Birth, Was City Comptroller in 1891.

The remains of Swan A. Ponthan, who died at White Bear village Tuesday afternoon after a long illness, will be buried today. The body will lie in state at the Memorial English Lutheran church, Sixth, near Exchange street, between 11 A.M. and 2 P.M. The funeral services will take place at the church at 2:30.

Mr. Ponthan was a moving figure in St. Paul politics between 1891 and 1909. When John Roche died, in 1891, Mr. Ponthan was chosen comptroller by the council. At different periods in his political career he filled positions in the city government.

Mr. Ponthan was born in Stockholm, Sweden May 12, 1859. He was of noble descent, his father being the Baron Swan Ardon (sic!) Ponthan. Having finished a preparatory college course he entered the University of Sweden. After four years' study at this institution he graduated with honors. He then took a post graduate course in the Rostock University in Germany.

A lover of music, Mr. Ponthan composed several pieces of note. The "Bavarian March," written when only 17 years old, still is played by the Royal Swedish band. He possessed many Swedish decorations. Among them that of the Vasa Order, which is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon any one outside the royal family.

Mr. Ponthan is survived by a widow, two sons and two daughters."

Though the facts surrounding Ponthan's career were in the main correct, several misstatements should be noted, caused, no doubt by the journalist's use of poetic licence or from his non-awareness of Swedish life and customs.

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The Ponthans were not of the nobility and Sven Aron Ponthan's father, Sven Aron Ponthan, Sr., was not a "baron." The exaggerated rarity of the Order of Vasa should also be pointed out. This decoration, dispensed by the King's hand, was given to numerous Swedish citizens as well as deserving Americans for deeds which had brought honor to the Swedish name.

Sven A. Ponthan's military march, published in 1880, when he was 21 years old, not 17, was named *Beväringsmarsch*, which has nothing to do with Bavaria. It was dedicated to Swedish *beväringar*, i.e., conscripts in the Swedish Army.

It is also very interesting that the old Ponthan Swedish family Bible is to be found in St. Paul, MN. The volume is a version of the Holy Scriptures published during the reign of Fredrik I (1720-1751) and printed in Stockholm in 1736. Parts of the Ponthan family genealogy are to be found on the flyleaf of the Bible and read as follows:

"Sven Pontahn was born 6 January 1774. On 21 December 1798 I entered into Holy Matrimony with my present dearly beloved wife, Lowisa Söderman, who was born 20 December 1774. May the Lord keep our marriage blessed and may He allow that our departure from this world not be painful, but rather that the joy of eternity be boundless.

(She died 23 April 1827 at 11 o'clock a.m. Our good father died 24 May 1833 at 11:45 a.m.)

Our daughter Maria Fredrica was born 16 November 1799.

Our daughter Christina Lovisa was born 14 December 1800.

Our daughter Charlotta Carolina was born 25 December 1802.

Our son Swen Aron was born 4 November 1804.

Our son Carl Joakim was born 6 December 1806.

Our daughter Amalia Magdalena was born 9 December 1807.

Our son Johan Adolph was born 26 June 1813 and died 11 December 1814.

Adopted son, Wicktor Israel Engström, was born 11 January 1813.

Carl Joachim died 15 September 1855 at 5 o'clock p.m. His wife, born Norberg (Anna Elisabeth Norberg), died 22 September 1855 at 6:30 p.m.

Lovisa Christina died 19 March 1858 at 4:45 p.m. She was married to a civil servant (*mantalskommissarie*), C. A. Kock, who died 11 May 1854.

Charlotta Carolina died 11 December 1867 at one o'clock a.m.

Sven Aron died 29 January 1877 at 12 o'clock noon."

On the last page of the Bible the Ponthan genealogy continues, likewise given here in translation:

"Sven Aron Ponthan, in whose possession this Bible is, was married to Sofia Vilhelmina Hauffman, born 15 May 1821. Died 6 December 1886 at 12 o'clock noon.

Our son Anton Pontus was born 15 March 1856.

Our son Sven Aron was born 12 May 1859.

Our daughter Vilhelmina was born 17 December 1864 and died 7 July 1865.

Anton Pontus died 18 July 1887 at 1:30 a.m.

Sven Aron Ponthan married 20 September 1886 Alma Gabriella Forshaell, born 9 July 1868.

The daughter Maria Wilhelmina was born 5 July 1887 at 8:20 p.m.

The son Harold Aron was born 30 June 1889 at 2:00 p.m.

The daughter Mabel Henrietta was born 22 July 1891 at 2:30 a.m.

The son Theodore Sven was born 20 September 1901 at 2:10 p.m.

The son Paul Pontus was born 25 December 1904 at 8:00 a.m. and died 18 March 1905 at 5:00 a.m. (added in English) 'I will never forget him'."

Sophia Albertina Wilhelmina Hauffman, the original version of her name, was the daughter of Abraham Ludvig Hauffman, war councillor (*krigsråd*), and his wife, Catharina Gerle. Her ancestors within the Hauffman family are well-known as far back as the 17th century.

Sven Aron Ponthan and Alma Gabriella Forshaell were married in Minneapolis, MN. She was born in Sweden 9 July 1868, the daughter of John Forshaell and his wife Marie E. Särnblad, and came to the United States as an infant with her parents, first to Chicago, IL and later to Mobile, AL. Her father died there, after having caught yellow fever, while preaching a Lutheran sermon on a sailing vessel, bound for Scandinavia from South America. Alma Gabriella caught the fever also, but recovered after a few weeks. Two years later she moved with her mother to Minneapolis, where she as a high school student of sixteen years, met Sven Aron Ponthan. During her long life she was a very active suffragette. She died in St. Paul, MN 20 May 1968, six weeks shy of her 100th birthday.

The number of Sven Aron and Alma Gabriella Ponthan's descendants, totalling 57, are spread all over the United States, the oldest being their son, Theodore Sven, born in 1901 and the youngest, born in 1985.

My finding members of the Ponthan family, with which contacts had been severed long before I was born, is in itself an interesting story. Thanks to an estate inventory (*boupppteckning*) from 1887 I learned that Sven Aron Ponthan was then residing in St. Paul, MN. I visited the American Embassy in Stockholm and studied the telephone directories for St. Paul and found Ponthans listed there. At first I thought that the Ponthan name was quite common in the United States and decided to go through all of the telephone directories in the embassy collection. To my surprise and happiness I discovered that there were Ponthans only in St. Paul. I wrote to one of the addresses listed — and after two years of waiting, during which time I had almost forgotten the matter, a letter arrived from nobody else but the widow of Sven Aron Ponthan, Alma Gabriella Forshaell.

On a visit to Minnesota in 1959 I met this charming, highly intelligent woman, who though a bit of an eccentric, was in the best of health, despite being 91 years old.

Since that first visit, more than 25 years ago, our families have visited each other, both in Sweden and the United States.

This instance proves the great value of telephone books, which can reunite families, separated for more than a century.