

6-1-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Stark, Helena (2013) "Allt för Sverige from the inside," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 33 : No. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol33/iss2/6>

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# *Allt för Sverige* from the inside



## The head genealogist of the TV show tells her story

BY HELENA STARK

"I know that grandmother's father came on a boat in the early 1900s. His name was Swanson and he came from Smaland." Or "I have always loved meatballs and often shop at IKEA!" Or "My maternal grandmother's paternal grandfather emigrated in 1878 and came from Werm-land."

OK, there are really many variations when you read all the applications from the Americans who are applying to be on the TV show *Allt för Sverige* that will be recorded this summer for the third time. This will be aired during the fall in Sweden.

Some of the applications seem like jokes, and I wonder if they know anything for certain about their Swedish origins. On the other hand some applications comes with an enormous family tree attached, and then they will be disappointed, as the idea for the program is that the Americans with Swedish roots are to come to Sweden to find their origins, not just to confirm what they already know.

What is really sad is to see how much time and effort has been spent to build that family tree, but there is not a single source mentioned. How are we to know that their tree is correct?

Then we have to go back to square one and start all over again ....

### Finding the right participants

The task is to find the perfect participant who knows a little about the origins of their family, without knowing too much, but still able to trace the roots back to Swedish soil. It is a balancing act. Sometimes I, as

the genealogist in charge, end up in a clash with the editorial board of the TV production company. They are of course looking for unique personalities who reach out from the screen, while I at the same time try to find genealogies that really make research possible, that give us as correct information as possible, and where we can find moving life stories that we can give the audience. But by now in the third season we find the most fantastic persons, who also have family trees with all the ingredients we are looking for.

First the casting team at the production company chooses their favorites among the considerable numbers of applications, and then it is my turn to start the basic research to see which of the applicants it is possible to research in Sweden. All immigrants are not possible to identify in Sweden. Some with very Swedish names can come from Norway or Finland; they are rejected at once. Some immigrants chose a new start in life when they landed on American soil and changed their name, so they are not possible to trace back to their Swedish origins. Or you lack exact information about the birth date or place they left from, and because of this can not be certain who this person was in Sweden. There were many Carl Svenssons in Småland, for example.

Most of them you are able to follow from the new participant back to Sweden, and then the research is very exciting for me.

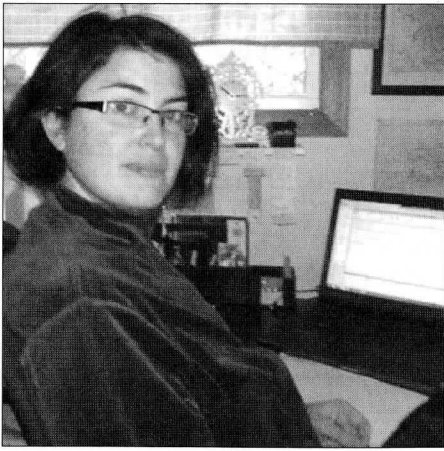
### It is different on how far back you can go

First of all I start with working on the American part of the family tree.

I have to find all links from the applicants for this new season of *Allt för Sverige* back to the immigrant. In some cases this can be five or six generations between the applicant and the immigrant. Sometimes it is only one or two generations, as happened to one of the participants in season two. What astonishes me is that few of the applicants know the names of their grandmother and grandfather, when and where they were born, and where they lived. They may have been American citizens and lived until quite recently. It is as if their lives were just deleted. Then it is even more important to really investigate and save their histories for the future.

When I have found the immigrant in the U.S.A. and charted his life as far as possible by censuses, marriage certificates, birth certificates for the children, address books, military draft records, and finally death certificates, it is time to follow the immigrant's travel backwards over the Atlantic.

Is it possible to find their names on the passenger lists when they arrived in New York, or Boston, or, why not, in New Orleans? If we are lucky we find the immigrant here. Then we will see on which ship she travelled from Sweden, or if they first landed in England on the big journey of their lives. Information about the port and date of departure can explain a lot. Did she travel alone? Did she travel with a female friend or about the same age and from the same place? Did the whole family emigrate to search for happiness in America? Many travelled from Göteborg, but I have followed some emigrants that took the route via Denmark or



Genealogist Helena Stark at work in her office in Alunda, Sweden.

Germany and sometimes France before they bought a ticket for the American steamer over the Atlantic.

Everyone that does genealogy knows about the adrenaline rush you get when you find the right person from the right place at the right point of time. One gets one's brain re-energized and develops more new ideas than can find room on my desk. "If he was born there, I can find his parents, his siblings, .... I wonder if more family members left? What was the reason that he chose to emigrate?"

At the same time as I am working

on a great number of family trees to find emigrants and the family that stayed, the work continues for the production company to select the participants for this year. In the end we have found ten participants that will travel to Sweden at the end of May. The team at the production company now has busy days to find places for filming, people to take part in the show, arrange the logistics, and much more. But even here in my office at Alunda there will be a rush to find the stories about the emigrants and their lives that will be told on the TV show. We are to find living relatives for all of the participants, even if at the end there is only one who really gets to meet with the Swedish family.

A very common question that I get is if the ones who have to leave the show early also get to meet their family? Are they told if they have any relatives in Sweden today? The answer is that all the participants get all the information we have found during the research period when they leave the program. They also get the hand-lettered family tree I have made for them which shows their relation to the emigrant and their Swedish roots. They do not get to

meet with their Swedish family during their stay as participants in the show, but several of them come back and have a close relationship with their newfound family in Sweden. Do you remember Vernon from season two of *Allt för Sverige*? He is coming back in May with his mother and will visit with many relatives and places where his forebears once lived and worked.

Working with *Allt för Sverige* is incredibly exciting and giving for me as a genealogist, even if the period from February to May is very intense and demanding. I face new challenges all the time. That is what is so fascinating with working as a genealogist. I never know what ends up on my desk.

First published in Swedish in *Släkt-historiskt Forum* 3/2013. Translation by Elisabeth Thorsell and Chris Olsson.

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The 2012 group. From left: Meghan Reilly, Matt Robinson, Vern Ferguson, Debra Sisneros, Anna Brita Mohr, Thure Gustafson, Walter Beck, Karen French, Travis McAfee, and Kelsey Stiles.