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## "To my sister Mrs. Eleanor Kernor ... "

Ronald J. Johnson

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# “To my sister Mrs. Eleanor Kernor..”

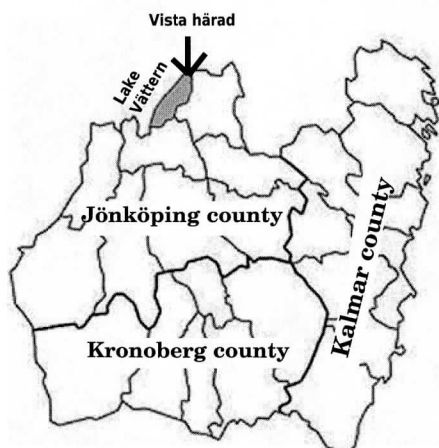
## A few words in a probate solves a mystery

BY RONALD J. JOHNSON

Hoary habitués of the annual SAG Workshop in Salt Lake City will know that over the years there I have been less immersed in the long and deep river of personal family history back in time to its myriad sources than wading in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century shallows of a rivulet of Swedish immigration to one small place in southern Minnesota. Although narrow, the stream of emigrants would spring from many places in Sweden over a course of nearly eighty years.

At the outset, however, its well-spring lay in and around Vista härad in northern Jönköpings län. Thus it was that the party of Swedes who ventured as pioneers to Waseca County, Minnesota, in 1857 named their new home “Vista.”<sup>1</sup>

Before the poor harvest years at the end of the 1860s drove masses of Swedes to leave their country, the Vista settlement in Waseca County grew very little through immigration.



Vista härad consisted of Gränna, Ölmostad, Skärstad, and Visingsö parishes.

In 1858, it had thirty adults and children born in Sweden, along with six children born in America, all living in Otisco (Twp. 106North, Range 22West) and (New) Richland (105N, 22W) townships. By the end of the American Civil War, there were still only *about* thirty-two Swedes, augmented by twenty-one American-born children, in Otisco and New Richland townships.<sup>2</sup> The Swedish community also included a household of five immigrants and two children of American birth nearby in Berlin (105N, 21W), Steele County. One other Swedish family, a somewhat enigmatic couple and their only son, was already resident in another adjacent civil division of Steele County, Lemond (106N, 21W), before the Vista Swedes arrived. After the father, Henrik Brandborg – accidentally or on purpose – blew the top of his head off with a shotgun at the cusp of 1864, his wife and son moved to a farm alongside their compatriots in Otisco Township.<sup>3</sup>

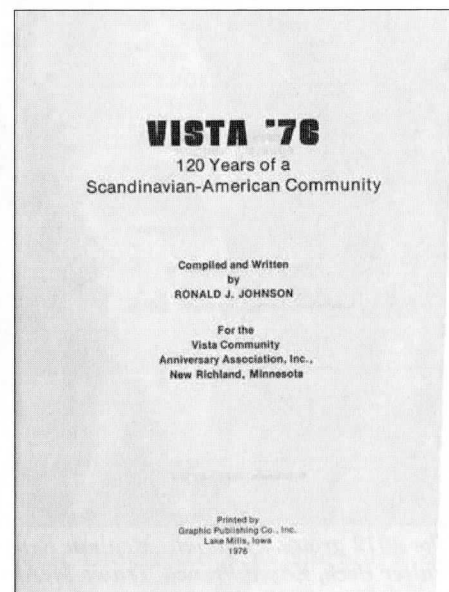
The Swedes came to Waseca County for land, and all of the first settlers made their living from farming. The Vista enclave of Swedish heritage was and remains to this day exclusively rural; it never engendered even a hamlet of its own. But one of the early Swedish families first set up a business in the nearest town. Around 1863, Gustaf C. Runnerstrom established the first butcher shop in the village of Wilton, a place long since disappeared, but at that time the county seat and a bustling center of commerce. The meat market,

however, “was more or less a failure,” according to a descendant,<sup>4</sup> but around the same time, on 14 August 1863, Runnerstrom had also acquired eighty acres in section 14 of Otisco Township.<sup>5</sup> In 1865, the Runnerstrom family was living in the township, where in a few years Runnerstrom built his property holdings up to 320 acres, a notably large farm in those times.

One of his land acquisitions did not sit well with his fellow Swedes, as reported in the *Waseca Weekly News* of 26 January 1872:

### Notice to leave

“Mr. Runnerstrom, of Otisco, some time since bought some railroad land which a couple of Swede families had been cultivating, and which they desired to purchase. After getting his contract, he gave them a written



notice to leave in fourteen days. Some of the neighbors then served a notice on Mr. R. to leave the country in fourteen days. Mr. R., probably a little agitated, applied to an attorney, who advised him to have them arrested for making threats. So, on Friday last, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Messrs. A. L. Warner, Mose Johnson, L. F. Peterson, John Peterson, John Larsen and Chas. Gustofson. On Saturday they all appeared.

“A motion was made to dismiss the prisoners on the ground that the warrant did not state facts sufficient to justify an arrest. The court so viewed the matter, and the prisoners were discharged. After a little further investigation, the attorney came to the conclusion, we believe, that there was not enough of the affair to make a respectable lawsuit, and so the matter dropped.”

The alleged reprobates under arrest in this case were, in fact, stalwarts of the Swedish community; Mose Johnson, L. F. Peterson, John Peterson, and John Larson were all men from the original settlement party and founding members of the Vista Lutheran Church. Two of them were to be pillars of the Mission Church as well.

## Runnerstrom's marital problems

Runnerstrom also had issues within his marriage. By 1880, he and his wife are listed in the census as divorced, and they were living apart in consecutively enumerated households. Mrs. Runnerstrom and their young adult son, Gustaf R. Runnerstrom, remained on the original eighty acres, while the senior Runnerstrom resided on the former railroad land to the south in section 23.

Mother and son lived together until an unfortunate accident in 1886. Reportedly an epileptic, she is thought to have suffered a seizure, thereby overturning a lamp and burning herself severely. “Her clothing was nearly all burned off on one side, and the flesh on that side literally cooked.” Her son, who was out

milking at the time, put out the fire with two pails of milk he was bringing to the house, otherwise the accident would have proved fatal and the house burned.” The house may have been saved, but not Mrs. Runnerstrom, who died a few days later on 28 March 1886.<sup>6</sup>

The Runnerstroms lived in the Swedish settlement, but they were not members of either the original Lutheran church or later Mission church around which the community was centered. Since the records of the two Swedish-American congregations are the principal source of specific information about the immigrants, the origins of the Runnerstrom family long remained shrouded for me.

## Who were the Runnerstroms?

The flock of immigrants at Vista numbered several hundred, many readily found in the Swedish church records, but, of course, it is not the ninety-and-nine, but the strays (and the black sheep) that concern and challenge the metaphorical shepherd the most.

The names of these lost ones – given as Gustave, Chastie, and a son, Hans Christian Ronnerstroem, all born in Sweden, along with Gustave Elise and Gustave, born in Wisconsin – were found in the town of Port Washington, Ozaukee County, Wisconsin, in the 1860 census.<sup>7</sup> Various censuses provide proximate ages of family members, but a specific birthdate is recorded only for the patriarch, Gustaf C. That was in his death record, an often unreliable source, and at odds with the date given in a questionnaire completed by a grandson in 1952. The grandson also wrote that Gustaf C. Runnerstrom was born in Stockholm and “owned the site and up and left it to go to America where the present Capital of Sweden now stands.”<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the question of defining the “Capital of Sweden,” this assertion of ownership appeared to be dubious family lore. Nevertheless, as querying *Emibas* – the emigrant

database then (2001) still under development at the Swedish Emigrant Institute – had no success, the sole point of reference in Sweden for Gustaf remained Stockholm. However, such a large city of multiple parishes was not a haystack that I could conceivably search. Moreover, was “Runnerström” the name of the needle for which I would be looking, or was this a surname assumed only after emigration?

During the SAG Workshop in 2007, I consulted Elisabeth Thorsell about my Runnerström-in-Stockholm problem. “ET” suggested searching Stockholm probate records. My notes for the next day simply read: “too many files.” That haystack was also too big, especially in view of other priorities for the limited time in Salt Lake City.

It is not only the mills of God that grind slowly: since 1996 I had known there was a Waseca County probate file for Gustaf Runnerstrom, but not until the next SAG Workshop in 2008 did I search it out on microfilm at the Family History Library. If not a Swedish probate, as proposed by Elisabeth, then perhaps an American one would lend some clue to my search?

Gustaf C. Runnerstrom died 6 April 1903 in Otisco Township. He left a will, which was administered by his younger son, Gustaf R. There were four heirs, three of them within the township. G. R., already in possession of the northern 160 acres of the family property, now inherited the rest, the quarter-section of erstwhile railroad land in section 23. He was directed to pay his sister, Gustava Alice Blowers, \$1,500. Alice then did not fail to challenge the will, claiming that their father had not been of sound mind and had been subject to the undue influence of her brother and his wife when the will was written in the father's last days. The elder son, (Hans) Christian, is listed as “whereabouts unknown,” and is “given and devised,” a sum of five dollars, i.e., his interest legally disposed of thereby.

“To my sister, Mrs. Eleanor Kernor,” also in Otisco Township, the

That he the said Gustaf R Runnerstrom shall pay to or cause to be paid to Gustava Alice Blomberg's heirs Runnerstrom her heirs or assigns the sum of Fifteen Hundred dollars and that the aforesaid Gustaf R. Runnerstrom shall pay or cause to be paid to my sister Mrs Eleanor Kernor the sum of Fifteen Hundred dollars: Said sum of money amounting to three thousand dollars to be paid upon the probating of this will.

The will of Gustaf Runnerstrom held the vital clue!

deceased directed another \$1,500 to be paid.<sup>9</sup>

## The eureka moment!

That six-word phrase provided the eureka moment, the key to my search for the origins of the Runnerstrom family, for I had previously identified this woman, Elna Nilsdotter Körner.

Elna Nilsdotter had been born 21 November 1848 at Bulltofta, Västra Skrävlinge (Skån.), to the widow Sissa Larsdotter, her third child out-of-wedlock since her husband Lars Andersson was recorded as having removed to *Evigheten* (eternity) in 1838. Elna herself bore a short-lived child, August, out of wedlock in 1868. As a result, she was obliged on Sunday, 25 April 1869, to make confession of fornication. Five days later, she left the rural parish for Malmö, the city immediately adjacent to Västra Skrävlinge.<sup>10</sup>

The soldier Carl Körner had also lived in Västra Skrävlinge. A hired hand at Bulltoftagård since 1863, Körner moved to Malmö in 1868.<sup>11</sup> There, in Malmö Caroli's *husförhörs-längder*, Soldier Körner is tagged at various locations for several years with the notation that the maid Elna Nilsdotter at Bulltofta wishes to prevent him from getting a moving certificate because of his having had relations with her. One suspects he was the father of her child back in Västra Skrävlinge. In any case, and at long last, he married her on 17 October 1874.<sup>12</sup> This was none too soon, as their daughter, Augusta Maria, came along promptly on 27

November.<sup>13</sup> They had one more child, Carl August, born 6 December 1879 in Malmö,<sup>14</sup> but their married life was turbulent. Carl Körner was arrested for vagrancy in 1882 and again in 1886, and the couple were warned and admonished twice for marital discord, first by the pastor in 1887 and then by the church council in 1890. Finally, on 22 July 1891, they were granted a divorce by the cathedral chapter of Lund.<sup>15</sup>

## The first Körner immigrants

Elna and her son Carl August Körner emigrated from Malmö Caroli on 10 August 1894. Leaving Gothenburg on 7 September, they arrived in New York 22 September on the *Slavonia*.<sup>16</sup> Their destination was Lemn (Lemond, Steele County), Minn., and in the next year's state census, "Ella Nelson" and "Agust Körnar" are residing in Otisco Township with none other than Gustaf Runner-

strom. Augusta Maria followed from Malmö on 5 September 1898,<sup>17</sup> and the three Körners are found in the city of Waseca in 1900. Elna and Carl August lived in Otisco Township until 1919. They then moved to Minneapolis, joining Augusta Maria, and all three lived there for the rest of their lives.<sup>18</sup>

These facts about the Körner family I knew long before the day I read Gustaf Runnerstrom's will in 2008. But, despite their common residence in 1895—information taken down nearly forty years earlier—I had not connected the Körners and Runnerstrom as relatives. I could only wonder what would have brought this middle-aged woman and her adult children from urban Sweden to rural Minnesota.

## More clues in the church records

I had researched the Swedish church records back to the birth of Elna, but had not discovered Gustaf, her half-brother born twenty-two years earlier, as he had left the parish before then. But now, it was only a matter of tracing their mother through half a dozen volumes to find Gustaf Christian, born 14 November 1826 at Rögla No. 1, Hardeberga (Skån.), to Sissa Larsdotter.<sup>19</sup> In 1829, leaving Gustaf Christian with her parents, Sissa moved to Burlöv (Skån.), where she married Lars Andersson on 1830 Jan. 22. Sissa and Lars had two children, Anders in 1830, and Gertrud in 1834, and Gustaf Christian came to live



Hardeberga CI:3 (1810-1861) Bild 76 (Arkiv Digital). (This entry in the Birth records is hard to read, due to the ink on the previous page shining through).

with the family before they all moved to Bulltofta in Västra Skrävlinge (Skån.) in 1835, the place from which Lars Andersson went to his eternal home three years later.<sup>20</sup>

Gustaf Christian had assumed the patronymic Larsson by the time he left Västra Skrävlinge for Lund in 1843. Three years later, he became apprenticed to a mason in Lund. As was common practice, when he advanced from apprentice to journeyman he took a surname, becoming Gustaf Runnerström.<sup>21</sup>

On 8 March 1850, the newly-minted journeyman mason Runnerström married Kjersti Hansdotter in Lund.<sup>22</sup> Kjersti had been born 4 January 1828 in Lund to the workman Hans Jönsson and his wife, Elsa Svendsdotter.<sup>23</sup> Three children were born to the Runnerströms in Lund: Gustafva Lovisa in 1850, Hans Christian in 1852, and Alma Charlotta in early 1855. That year, 1855, was pivotal for the Runnerström family: the younger daughter died at less than four months of age in May, followed by her four-year-old sister in July. The church record shows that Gustaf Runnerström went to America in 1855 without a moving-out certificate. On 30 October 1855, Kjersti Hansdotter Runnerström received a certificate to go to Copenhagen.<sup>24</sup>

Kjersti and their surviving child, Hans Christian, did not return to Lund. Instead, the Runnerström family next turns up in Port Washington, Wisconsin, in 1860 with two more children born in that state: the future unhappy heir, Gustava Elise (Alice), 25 December 1857, and the brother whom she would accuse of undue influence in the making of their father's will, Gustaf R., 14 November 1859.

With the 1860 census, the research circle comes back to the point at which I had been obliged to leave the Runnerstroms for decades until 16 October 2008, when I read the bequest "to my sister, Mrs. Eleanor Kernor." The puzzle of Gustaf's origins and family name was now pieced together. The boy said to have been



The Runnerstrom house in Otisco in 1893.

born in Stockholm was instead born near Lund on the diagonally opposite side of the country. The man who supposedly left behind ownership of the site of the "where the present Capital of Sweden now stands," was rather the *oäkta* son of a crofter's daughter and raised in the family of a *statdräng*, a yet lower level of landless laborer. The child without a father after whom to be called earned a family name of his own making, Runnerström, through learning the trade of masonry.<sup>25</sup>

For me, the discovery that Gustaf Runnerstrom had been trained as a mason in Sweden switched on a lightbulb of recollection: the Runnerstrom house! From forty or more years before, I had a dim memory of an imposing farmhouse alongside a minor road in Otisco Township. A recent trip refreshed the mind. There it still was, commodious, if somewhat the worse for wear. It was not built by Gustaf C., but rather by his son, Gustaf R., in 1893, during his father's lifetime. I know of no other brick farmhouse in the area around the Swedish settlement community than

the structure of cream-colored bricks erected by the mason's son.

## Endnotes

1. An overview of this settlement's history can be found in Ronald J. Johnson, "Vista '76: 120 Years of a Scandinavian-American Community (New Richland, MN)": Vista Community Anniversary Association, 1976).
2. Minnesota State Census, 1865. As this census does not record nativity, the number of Swedes is approximated and distinguished from the much larger Norwegian population of the area through interpolation from the names of the Swedes enumerated in the 1860 and 1870 federal censuses and from other sources.
3. See: Ronald J. Johnson, "Searching for the Origins of Charles William Brandborg," *Swedish American Genealogist*, 21:4 (December 2001), 177-188. The more recently discovered death notice is in the *Owatonna Plaindealer* (Owatonna, MN), 7 Jan 1864, p. 3.
4. Family history questionnaire completed by Arnold Runnerstrom, 1952. Waseca County Historical Society, Waseca, MN.
5. Waseca County Land Records. U. S. General Land Office: Original Entry

- Tract, Book T 106 N. Minnesota Historical Society, SAM 35, Roll 12, Book 35, p. 148.
6. *Waseca Radical*, 24 Mar 1886, and *Waseca County Herald*, 26 Mar 1886. Waseca County vital records, deaths, vol. A, p. 9, line 39.
  7. 1860 U.S. Census, Dwelling 429, Family 371, Port Washington, Ozaukee, Wisconsin.
  8. Arnold Runnerstrom questionnaire, 1952.
  9. Waseca County Probate Court, No. 1159, Gustaf Runnerstrom, Box 34, File 1, 1903 (FHL film 1845393).
  10. Västra Skrävlinge (Skån.) CI:4 (1842-1868), p. 35; AI:7 (1846-1850), p. 164; AI:10 (1862-1869), p. 140.
  11. Västra Skrävlinge AI:10, p. 102. Malmö Caroli (Skån.) AI:53 (1869-1878), p. 53, p. 77, the first of seven entries in six volumes for the unmarried Körner in Malmö.
  12. Malmö Caroli E:5B (1873-1876), p. 289.
  13. Malmö Caroli C:3 (1871-1875), p. 495.
  14. Malmö Caroli C:15 (1878-1880), p. 415.
  15. Notations across six volumes culminate in Malmö Caroli AI:124 (1884-1892), p. 64.
  16. Malmö Caroli AI:121 (1892-1899), p. 371. *Emihamn* 54:249:2843, 54:249:2842. New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 (ancestry.com).
  17. Malmö Sankt Petri AIIa:1 (1896-1900), p. 163.
  18. *New Richland Star* (New Richland, MN), 11 Jul & 14 Nov 1919. Minnesota death certificates 1929-MN-021652 (Elna), 1928-MN-018949 (Augusta Maria), 1938-MN-022869 (Carl August).
  19. Hardeberga (Skån.), CI:3 (1810-1861), image 76.
  20. Burlöv (Skån.), AI:5 (1825-1834), pp. 139, 134, addendum p. II (image 6). Västra Skrävlinge AI:4 (1831-1836), p. 100.
  21. Lund stadsförsamling (Skån.), AI:23 (1836-1843), p. 66; AI:27 (1843-1847), p. 391; AI:33 (1847-1852), p. 23.
  22. Lund stadsförsamling EI:3 (1815-1861), p. 133.
  23. Lund stadsförsamling CI:8 (1826-1848), image 30.
  24. Lund stadsförsamling AI:34 (1848-1853), p. 121; AI:39 (1852-1858), p. 275.
  25. Perhaps the fatherless boy or his mother had some help from bene-

factors. More than thirty years after he left Sweden, Runnerstrom had a copy of a local newspaper sent to "his old friend and patron L. Kokom, of Malmo, Bulltofta, Sweden. Wants to let his old friends know he has not forgotten them as well as give them an insight into United States ways and characteristics" (*Waseca Radical*, 22 Feb 1888). "L. Kokom" was undoubtedly Ludvig Kockum. Carl Ludvig Paulus Kockum, born 1835 in Västra Skävlinge, was from 1857 the third-generation Kockum proprietor of Bulltoftagård, the large estate on which the young Gustaf Christian had lived from 1835 to 1843 in the family of his farm-laborer stepfather and soon-widowed mother. His mother continued to live there as a dependent lodger (*inhysesjon*) until she died in 1874.

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