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Brita Olsdotter from Östanå:

beyond the nuclear family

BY BRITA BUTLER-WALL

For years, I held the romantic vision of a wind-blown Swedish ancestor standing alone on the deck of an immigrant ship. Surrounded by strangers, she sailed off bravely into the unknown.

Not so. First, I found that Brita Olsdotter (b. 1806), her husband, and four children all together clambered aboard the brig *Sophia af Gefle* late in 1846, arriving in New York 7 Jan. 1847. And then I discovered that, on her long journey from Hälsingland to the American Midwest, she was not alone; she had a surprising amount of company.

My great-great-grandmother Brita Olsdotter came from Jon Sjuls's farm, Östanå village, Ovanåker parish, in the Voxna Valley of Hälsingland province.

She was part of the great Jansonist immigration to the Bishop Hill Colony in Illinois. Using archival, library, and on-line sources, I explored her networks — household, extended family, fellow villagers, fellow parishioners, and fellow travelers. In focusing on the people around her, I came to understand her better, despite the century and a half between us.

The household

Cecilia Wejryd argues in her thesis that the relevant unit in rural Sweden in the 1800s was not the nuclear family, but the household.¹ The large farms in Hälsingland often included grandparents, unmarried aunts and uncles, hired farmhands or hired girls, and sometimes a foster child or other dependent.

N:o	Namn.	Född	Flyttade		Läser inman	Läser utan till			Begrav- p.
			Från	Till		Lutl.	Syeb.	Lindb.	
	Jon Sjuls	1802 25							
	Brita Olsdotter	1806 29							
	Jon Olof	1821 26		Amerika	4-23	1-5		1-5	
	Dalla Brita	1824 27		1846	6-4	1-5		1-5	
	Per Olof	1829 8							
	Jon Eric	1841 28							

Ovanåker AI:15, page 309 (1839–1848). Entry for Östanå 4, 'Jon Sjuls.'
Picture from AD Online.

The clerical survey /household examination record/ (*husförhörs-längd*) of Jon Sjuls's farm bears this out. Not only did Brita's nuclear family leave for America, but so did the widowed grandfather (Brita's father), the hired man, and both hired girls. In 1846, the entire household packed up and left.²

In examining the Gävle passport records, I found that Brita's husband was issued a passport for all but the hired hand.³

But given Nils William Olsson's research (SPANY), it appears that the widowed grandfather, and his niece (one of the two hired girls) were missing from the ships' passenger manifests.⁴

A later clerical survey revealed that the grandfather had returned to Jon Sjuls's farm to live with his younger daughter's family.⁵ The niece

did not return to Jon Sjuls's farm, and I lost track of her.

What about the hired hand Jonas Hansson? In his *prästbevis*, or vicar's certificate, Pastor Tjerneld states that Jonas Hansson from Bollnäs had been excommunicated due to his Jansonist beliefs.⁶ Tjerneld adds that he was, however, a decent man, unmarried, and free to leave the parish for America. On 1846 July 18th, Jonas was issued his own passport under the signature of Governor Lars Magnus Lagerheim. According to the diary of seaman Johan Edvard Liljeholm, once in New York, Jansonist Jonas Hansson became a zealous faith healer.⁷

The extended family

So Brita left with her entire household. By searching Bob Nelson's on-line database, I discovered that other



Ovanåker and Alfta parishes in Gävleborg län. To the right, just outside the map, are the cities of Bollnäs and Söderhamn. Map from www.eniro.se.

members of her extended family also immigrated to the Bishop Hill Colony around the same time.⁸ Brita's aunt Margta immigrated along with her crofter husband, their two daughters, and even the husband's sisters and their families. On Brita's husband's side, two sisters immigrated with their husbands, children, and other in-laws.

So with a little more sleuthing, I realized that my ancestor and her family had immigrated to America with over two dozen men, women, and children who had been part of her life for years – some related by blood, and others by marriage.

These Jansonists had obtained passports in Gävle at different times, left on different sailing ships, and arrived in New York on different dates. What this means is that when Brita Olsdotter finally reached Illinois, she already had a family network in place.

Fellow villagers

Curiosity led me back to SPANY and the household examination records to see who else from Brita's village might have emigrated. Aside from one soldier who had moved away from the village, no one from the other seven farm households or the landless at the fringes of the village had immigrated.

Today, it is hard to grasp the

impact on a village when even one entire household and their extended families moved away for good. The Jansonist emigrants were generally healthy people in their productive years. The villagers they left behind were left with the burden of taking care of the elderly, those who could not work, and other indigent villagers. Because tithing was obligatory in the 1800s, the loss of these Jansonist families also meant a loss to the state church and parish coffers.

Interestingly, although the soldier and his family made it to New York, no one in his family ended up in the Bishop Hill Colony. Did they die on the journey or defect from the sect? Or were they just struggling to make ends meet and looking for a free trip to America on a Jansonist ship?

Fellow parishioners

Brita's network extended beyond Östanå to the dozen villages within Ovanåker parish. Living in the Voxna valley for centuries, her family had married outside the village, and she had relatives sprinkled throughout the area.

Various parishioners from Ovanåker arrived in New York on one of the 16 Jansonist ships.⁹ These were people Brita had seen at church all her life. One Colony document listing the total members in the Colony at 655, includes 37 men, women, and

children from Ovanåker parish.¹⁰ Even beyond her own extended family, Brita Olsdotter could still hear the Ovanåker dialect in America.¹¹

Fellow travelers

Finally, I checked to see who else had made the journey with Brita Olsdotter. The passport register lists the names of those who received passports on the same day, indicating those living in the seaport at the same time while waiting for a ship. Brita's family is listed along with others from parishes further down the Voxna Valley.

By checking SPANY, I found that none of the immigrants from Brita's parish sailed on her ship, other than the village soldier. The voyage of these 95 immigrants took over 12 weeks. On board, Brita got to know travelers from five other parishes, many from the neighboring parish of Alfta. These rural Jansonists from the same valley no doubt had much in common.

Of course, the journey was not over until they settled in the Colony. From immigrant letters and newspaper items, I discovered that a half-dozen parties of Jansonists had converged in New York. Over 400 Jansonists proceeded together on their inland journey through the Erie Canal, the Great Lakes, and Chicago. Two news



Former Bishop Hill colonists, 1896. Photo from Bishop Hill Heritage Association archives.

accounts – the 50th wedding anniversary of Brita's daughter¹² and the obituary of her daughter-in-law¹³ – provided details of her 160-mile overland trek to the frontier of north-western Illinois.

With the help of Bishop Hill archivist Cheryl Dowell, I located photographs of some who made the long journey with her, fellow travelers whose faces she saw every day.

Conclusion

Unlike the Jansonists, few Swedes immigrated in large organized groups, but many did immigrate with people they knew. Brita Oldsdotter left her home with her nuclear family, her hired help, and members of her extended family. She spent months in the seaport with others from her village, parish, and valley. She sailed over the Atlantic with almost a hundred Jansonists from neighboring parishes, and made the overland trek with hundreds more from north-central Sweden. Once in the Colony, she found familiar faces, familiar voices, and familiar values.

In doing genealogy, names and dates are just the beginning. Our Swedish ancestors lived and worked in community. By locating Brita Oldsdotter's social networks, I began to understand how she coped with her arduous journey. I got a better sense of the challenges she faced and her sources of support. In leaving Hälsingland for America, Brita Oldsdotter was indeed brave. She may have been wind-blown. But she was certainly not alone.

Endnotes

- ¹ Wejryd, Cecilia, *Erik Janson och erikjansarna i 1840-talets Sverige = The book burning lay readers: Erik Jansson and the Erikjansonists in Sweden during the 1840's*. Uppsala, Stiftshistoriska Kommittén i Uppsala, 2002.
- ² Clerical Survey (Household Examination Records) Ovanåker A1:15, p. 309 (1838-1848), 309. AD Online.
- ³ Gävle Passport Record #1499, 8th August, 1846. Photocopy retrieved



The Steeple Building, (Tornbyggningen), site of Bishop Hill Heritage Association archives. Photo: E.Thorsell 2010.

- at *Migranternas Hus*, Alfta.
- ⁴ Olsson, Nils William, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York, 1820-1850 (SPANY)*, Chicago, The Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 1967. Information also available in SPAUS, 1995.
- ⁵ Clerical Survey (Household Examination Records), Ovanåker A1:16, p. 316, (1847-1860), AD Online.
- ⁶ Tjerneld, J. E., *Prästbevis* No. 1/1846. *Drängen Jonas Hansson. Ofvanåker i Gefleborgs län*, 11 May 1846. Photocopy retrieved in Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives.
- ⁷ Liljeholm, Johan Edvard, *Detta förlovade land: "resa i Amerika 1846-1850"*, ed. Olov Isaksson. Stockholm, 1981.
- ⁸ Nelson, Bob. Genealogy of the members of the Bishop Hill Colony and related families. *Link on p. 38*.
- ⁹ Wikén, Erik, "New Light on the Erik Janssonists' Emigration, 1845-1854." *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* vol. 35, July 1984.
- ¹⁰ Unnamed list of Colony members. 1857. Typed ms. retrieved in Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives.
- ¹¹ Lindén, Petrus, *Ord och Uttryck i*

Ovanåkersmålet, Ovanåkers Hembygdsförening, 1977.

- ¹² Celebrate Great Event. Aged Bishop Hill Couple Celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary Friday. *The Galva News*, April 12, 1916.
- ¹³ Another Pioneer of Bishop Hill is Called to Reward. Obituary of Christine Berglund, widow of Olof Olson. Photocopy retrieved from Krans Museum, Bishop Hill IL, dated 18 April, 1915.



Brita Butler-Wall 2010 at Swenson Center. Photo: E. Thorsell.

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