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“The Honorable Exception”: Elder Anders Blomberg

From Janssonist Apostle to Shaker Elder and Recruiter

BY JOHN NORTON



The Shakers were one of the many utopian sects that flourished in the 1800s. They had in 1807 founded a community in Pleasant Hill, Mercer county, Kentucky.

In 1848 they were visited by two of the Janssonists, Anders (Andrew) Blomberg and Olof Stoneberg. They had journeyed south from Illinois, via New Harmony, Indiana, as part of an organized effort to study American utopias, and establish relationships where possible.

They wrote back to their leader Erik Jansson on 3 April 1848, saying, in part “...When we came to Louisville, Kentucky, it was like we had come into another kingdom. There are nearly forty thousand inhabitants. There, we found five men from Sweden and one woman, and they were very hot against us in the beginning, especially since they had heard that it was we who were the ones that had burned books in Sweden...when we gave them our explanation, they thought it over and (found) we were not crazy.

“One said he would like to live among us, and we did not deny him, but we must be of the same faith. He said he would write you. His name is George H. Collini. He was storekeeper with Troline at Ovanåker in 1837-1838... And now we are among a colony they call Shakers. They are about 300 men and women, and they have all things in common, and work as they are able. It is forty years since they began to settle here, and they are very fine people in nature, well-meaning and friendly. They have both land and fine buildings and keep everything in fine or-

der, and they do everything for themselves. They believe the second coming of Christ is manifested in them, and they believe the whole world is in darkness, but only they have the true light and shall build the New Jerusalem, and can forgive sins in Christ’s place... and that they shall live perfectly holy, like Christ Jesus, for he that is born of God cannot sin, and all other denominations in the world they call “antichrist,” and they say that from the time the followers of the apostles took part in darkness, the darkness has remained, and they receive us like brothers.”

A move from Bishop Hill

On 18 June 1855 Anders Blomberg, by then the self-taught colony “doctor,” left Bishop Hill, settling in Pleasant Hill with his wife and two of their daughters. He was quickly followed on 27 July 1855 by six other new settlers from Bishop Hill, including the four times-widowed Anna Sophia Pollock Jansson, last wife of colony founder Erik Jansson, and her family.

The connections between Bishop Hill and Pleasant Hill remained very good the following years, but in 1858 there was a decided cooling of relations, probably over the celibacy controversy in Bishop Hill, where the inhabitants had decided to abandon that principle. In 1860 the Bishop Hill colony was dissolved and lands and other assets distributed, not without many problems, between the former colonists.

Despite the Bishop Hill Colony’s failure and desertions, exchange

between the communities continued. On 18 July 1864, a Pleasant Hill journal entry noted that “Mary Jacobs moved from the North to the West Family, and Louisa Hoard (Lovisa Hård af Segerstad) left the North Family to Bishop Hill, IL, from whence she came...” A 28 July entry notes “... The remainder of the Swede Lindeleaf (Lindelöv?) family went to the world, Anna and Louisa from the Center Family, and their mother Charlotte – from the West Lot. The Swedes, with few honorable exceptions, have proved failures.” But the Swedish Shaker experiment was not yet over.

An honorable exception

One of those “honorable exceptions” was former Janssonist apostle and self-taught doctor, now a Shaker elder, Anders (Andrew) Blomberg.

On 28 October 1866, during a “bark bread” famine year in Sweden, Pleasant Hill journals record a letter from Meyer(?) Olof Olson in Dalarna, Sweden, saying, “Come over and help us...there was a company there of 53 in number – including old and young – who had received faith by their epistolary correspondence with this society, and they now want somebody to come from here and see them and help them.” That “somebody” became West Lot Elder Andrew (Anders) Blomberg, himself a native of Dalarna, who set out alone a month later, on 28 November 1866, after having been duly commissioned, and funded with \$555.00, of which \$100.00 came from the Swedish West Lot family itself.

A 10 February 1867 journal entry

reported Anders Blomberg had written from Stockholm "... that his brother Peter and wife of that City had confessed their sins, and the prospect was that many others there would follow their example. Good news for Zion." Thus began the Pleasant Hill Shakers' ambitious foreign recruiting effort.

Anders Blomberg goes to Sweden

A Pleasant Hill journal entry of 4 August 1867 noted Blomberg had "...returned home from a preaching tour in Sweden, and brought one brother and seven visitors with him, and reports about 110, including children, who have joined the Shakers in that land; but most of them have not the means to pay the expenses of emigration to America & hence they remain there for the present. This (Swedish Lutheran) Priesthood was bitterly opposed to the doctrine of celibacy & the Second appearing of Christ in Mother (Ann

...& began to wage persecution before he left for home." Four months later, on 25 December 1867, Pleasant Hill "... made a donation to the poor, and sent \$300.00 to the Believers in Sweden."

Anders Blomberg's Swedish background

Elder Blomberg had planted Shaker seeds in Sweden. But they yielded a mixed harvest. A look at his background explains why.¹

He was born 6 March 1818 at Myggsjö in Orsa Finnmark. He soon lost his father. His mother took him to Västerås, where he was confirmed and became an apprentice tailor. After five years, he was apprenticed to Falun, where he apparently developed a bad drinking habit. But, he came into contact with the "readers" (*läsare*) of that region, and joined a temperance society. After being licensed in his trade in 1840, he was appointed parish tailor at Färnäs near Mora, but also began working

as a lay preacher, holding illegal "conventicles." These soon came to the unfavorable attention of local clergy and sheriffs. He moved to Alfta, Hälsingland, one of the breeding grounds of the new Erik Janssonist movement. By February 1845 he had become a Janssonist apostle, returning home to preach in Dalarna.

The parish vicar at Mora, P.G. Svedelius brought him before the church council for hearing on his illegal preaching. He was dismissed as parish tailor for his religious beliefs. His case was then turned over to Crown authorities. Crown bailiff Robsahm felt Blomberg was insane, and summoned him to the Falun Chancery. He was jailed, and examined by both the County Governor and secretary, then brought to hearing before the Mora District Court on 8 December 1845, where he verbally abused both the clergy and Martin Luther. The county attorney forwarded court minutes to the Royal Sanity Board (*Sundhetskollegium*), which on 3 May 1846, found him



Bishop Hill, Bishop Hill Street, Oct. 2007.

insane in respect to religion, and recommended that he be institutionalized as a danger to the public. He was sent to the Central Mental Hospital in Uppsala after attempting to escape from jail. But by that summer, he was freed on his wife's appeal, and on 20 July 1846, received permission to emigrate with his family. They joined a large party of 164 Janssonists, including some 25 from Dalarna, emigrating aboard the *Solide* of Gävle, arriving New York on 14 October 1846.² His first visit to Pleasant Hill came just 16 months later, as a Janssonist "apostle." He left his post as self-taught Bishop Hill Colony doctor, and moved to Pleasant Hill on 18 June 1855, followed on 27 October by his daughter Sofia, Catherine Donaldson(?) (Carin/Katarina Danielsdotter?) and another Bishop Hill woman.³

By June of 1856, he felt firm enough in his new Shaker faith to author the Shaker song, "Friendly Exhortation," recorded in Sister Betsy Spaulding's book of 320 songs written 1855-58 in Pleasant Hill. It's second verse asked "... all ye simple hearted, Who know your Mother's Name, Come praise the great redeemer, Who made us free from shame. Show then to souls distressed, This new and living way, How they may find salvation, That will forever stay."

He appealed to many "simple hearted" in Dalarna during his 1866 visit. But others were hostile, remembering his Erik Janssonist past. After a series of five meetings at Hemus, Östnor, Öna, Färnäs⁴, and Garsås, he left for the Älvdalen valley on 15 March. There he won constable Säl Per Olsson of Holen, who joined his preaching efforts. Local clergyman C. J. Thunman, who had been forewarned, called a church council meeting on 31 March, and forbade "doctor" Blomberg (as he then called himself) from preaching. The warning was enforced by sheriff C.U. Säfvenström during a meeting at a nearby Baptist chapel. The sheriff ordered Blomberg to leave, and his host Säl Per drove him south, out of town. Both apparently soon departed

Sweden for Pleasant Hill. But Säl Per Olsson returned to his home area in the next year, recruiting some 63 emigrants for Pleasant Hill, who departed in 1868-69, some even illegally.

Initially, the experience of the new immigrants was positive. One, Tenn Margaret Larsson of Näset, who arrived in November 1869, wrote about it later, after returning home to Sweden "... The place is well-situated, as its name indicates, on a beautiful height, with a fine view in all directions. When the party approached, Blomberg came out with another of the Elders, George (Runyon?), and rode with us, asking if we were well, after which they rode ahead, probably to tell of our arrival. When we got there, we were welcomed, and were treated to fine food in a great room. The colony consisted of five large farms, one called North Family, a West Family, a Center Family, a Church Family, and a West Lot. We were to live at West Lot, where there already were many Swedes who had come from Stockholm at the same time as Blomberg. In Pleasant Hill, it was quite nice, though it was winter when we were there, we saw no shortages on the farms, and no one needed to work too hard. But according to Shaker beliefs, they must live as siblings, no one should own anything personally, everything was owned in common. There were other colonies in the area of the same sect. One was called Lebanon."⁵

Anders Blomberg stayed at Pleasant Hill, as one of the "honorable exceptions."⁶ He made at least one more trip to Bishop Hill, where the *Galva News* of 17 February 1881 reported he had preached at the Old Colony Church the previous Sunday, as a guest of former colonist Jonas Malmgren.

In his later years, Elder Anders became ill. About ten days before his death on 26 December 1889, he was found lying nearly senseless in a field outside Pleasant Hill. When asked if he wasn't afraid of wild hogs, he answered that he "...would get to heaven, whether or not the hogs ate him!"⁷ I suspect he made it!

Footnotes

¹ See Swedish historian Emil Herlenius's article series "Anders Blomberg, Parish Tailor, Preacher and Emigrant" in the Swedish newspaper *Falu-Kuriren* 1932-33, later republished in the provincial genealogical society's *Dalfolk* nr. 2 1994.

Local historian Ewert Åhs also published excerpts of letters from the Älvdalen emigrants under the title "With Älvdal People Among the Shakers in America," in *Skansvaktens, Elfdalens hembygdsförenings midsommartidning*, nr. 39 1954. Translated manuscript at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana College, Rock Island, IL; the Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives, Bishop Hill, IL; Pleasant Hill; and the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Springfield, IL.

² Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850*, Chicago, Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 1967, pp. 108-118.

³ Pleasant Hill chroniclers Thomas D. Clark and F. Gerald Ham, in their book *Pleasant Hill and Its Shakers*, Pleasant Hill, 1996, assume B. Dunlavy and George Runyon converted Anders during their 15-27 October 1855 trip from Pleasant Hill to Bishop Hill. However, Anders had already moved to Pleasant Hill almost four months earlier.

⁴ Three Erik Janssonist families, a total of 17 persons, emigrated from Färnäs in 1846 with a large group from the Falun-Malung area, bound for Bishop Hill. See Nils William Olsson, op. cit. pp. 83-85.

⁵ Ewert Åhs, op. cit., translated manuscript pp. 7-8.

⁶ See roster of Swedish immigrants to Pleasant Hill, compiled from Shaker records by archivist L. Curry. Filed at Pleasant Hill Archives and Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives, Bishop Hill, IL 61419.

⁷ See Emil Herlenius, op. cit. Translated transcription, p. 10.

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