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Roots in reverse

Some people come from Sweden to the U.S. to trace their roots!

BY LILLY SETTERDAHL

We are used to Americans seeking roots in Sweden and Swedes searching for relatives in America, but we seldom read about roots in America. Yet, fifteen percent of the Swedes who immigrated to the U.S. returned to their homeland. If they had American-born children, they, too, made the move.¹

Kurt Persson, Uppsala, Sweden, has roots in Moline, Illinois, but no relatives. "My mother was born here, and I feel at home here," he says. Why else would he visit four years in a row and stay for extended periods? When he first came to the Quad Cities in 2006, it was to walk in the footsteps of his mother and maternal grandparents. Since then, he has become fond of the area. On his fourth visit in the fall of 2009, I sat down with him and asked him a few questions. Kurt towers over most people. His complexion is fair and his hair and beard are white.

The first visit

He says that the first time he came to the area he stayed two weeks at the Super 8 on Rt. 5 in East Moline. He drove himself from O'Hare Airport in Chicago in a rented car and



Kurt Persson.

kept the car until he returned. While staying at the motel, he got in touch with Judy and Dave Johnson of Moline (no relation), Mike Peal of East Moline, and myself. I didn't meet him then, but talked with him on the phone. I asked Mike Peal to help Kurt find his grandfather's grave in Riverside Cemetery, which he did.

Kurt, who is a hobby shooter and belongs to Uppsala *Skytteklubb*, had brought his gun that needed a new part (*kolv*). So one day, he walked into a gun shop in Moline, got his gun fixed, and was invited to practice target shooting with the owner, who is of German heritage. That meeting developed into a lasting friendship. Kurt also belongs to a military history book club and is well read about the wars of the world.

Tracing ancestors

When he returned to the Quad Cities in 2007, once again staying at Super 8 and renting a car, I took him to the Rock Island Historical Society in Moline, where we found that Kurt's grandfather (*morfar*) *Oscar Johansson* (Johnson) worked at People's Power and Gas Company as a fireman (perhaps stoker) and lived at 19th Avenue & 16th Street in Moline. I also took Kurt to the Swenson Center at Augustana College where we found that his grandmother, *Matilda Sofia Nilsson*, had immigrated to Waseca (county and town) in Minnesota, April 15, 1887, at the age of 23. Kurt says that a Swedish farmer in Waseca had advertised for help. She was born Nov. 23, 1863, in Ölmstad, Jönköpings län. Kurt does



Anna Elvira (Vera) Johnson. Photo by K & A Wikner, Wenersborg (Vänernsborg, Sweden).

not know how she met Oscar, who had emigrated Aug. 19, 1887, from Frändefors, Älvsborgs län, to Moline when he was 20 years old. Oscar was born Mar. 16, 1867, in Disingstakan, Frändefors. A judge married them at the Rock Island Courthouse Aug. 31, 1889.

Kurt's mother, *Elvira* (Anna *Elvira*, also called *Vera*) Johnson, was born Sep. 17, 1891, in Moline. She and her older sister, *Hanna Adina*, attended Sunday school at the First Lutheran Church in Moline. Kurt inherited two religious books from his mother: *Jesus: Mästaren med den lärda tungan*, *Biblisk Bildbok för Barn med text af E. A. Zetterstrand*, published by the Lutheran August-

ana Book Concern, Rock Island, Ill., and presented to Elvira Johanson by Svenska Ev. Luth. Söndagsskolan, Moline, Ill., Christmas 1900 and a chapter book, *Tattine* by “Ruth Ogden” (Mrs. Charles W. Ide) with twenty-two illustrations, published by Henry Altemus Company, Philadelphia (n. d.). Frances Smith gave the book to Elvira at an unknown date. Other mementos from America in Kurt’s possession include Indian arrows.

Kurt’s *morfar*, Oscar Johnson, died Oct. 22, 1893, in Moline at the age of 26. The officiating minister at the funeral was the pastor of First Lutheran Church in Moline (Rev. Hemborg). Oscar was not a member of the congregation.

The widow and her two daughters then lived in a house in the 15th block of 7th Avenue in Moline that still stands. Kurt found the house in 2007. How his grandmother supported herself and her children is an open question. Having been a widow for three years, she married her deceased husband’s brother, *Edward Johnson*, born in Frändefors, Dalsland, Mar. 9, 1870. He had emigrated from Disingstakan, Frändefors, in 1894 to Moline, where he worked for Deere & Co. as a “fitter.” Edward married Mathilda Jun. 27, 1896. The family lived at 11th Street & Fifth Avenue in Moline, near First Lutheran Church, but that house is no longer standing.



The house where Mathilda Sophia and her daughters Adina and Elvera lived in Moline, on 7th Avenue.



Tattine, published in 1898.

Back to Sweden

In December 1903, they returned to Sweden with Mathilda’s children Adina, 14, and Elvira, 12, and bought a 20-acre farm at Karlstorp, Vänersnäs, located on an isthmus in Lake Vänern to the east of Vänersborg, Älvsborgs län.

It bothers Kurt that they didn’t erect a tombstone for Oscar before they left. “After all, they had money to buy a farm,” he says. He is now back in Sweden and intends to drive to Vänersnäs and locate the family farm and possibly also his *morfar*’s birthplace in Frändefors.

While the family lived at Vänersnäs, Kurt’s mother, Elvira, married *Nils Axel Persson*, a cousin of hers from Jönköping. Their two eldest children were born in Vänersborg, a son in 1922, and a daughter in 1924. Kurt says that his father was supposed to take over the farm, but when he heard from a brother in Stockholm that there were jobs in the capital city, he took his family and moved to Stockholm.

Mathilda and Edward then moved to Bålsta (Yttergran *socken*) in Uppland, about 50 kilometers northwest of Stockholm, where she died in 1927. Her husband died in Stockholm in 1928.

Kurt was born in 1932 in Gustav Vasa parish, Stockholm, in a working

class neighborhood at Vasastaden, in northern Stockholm, where his father worked as a deliveryman for a brewery.

Kurt attended business school, and his first job was as a typist at SKF (the ball bearing factory), where he typed up orders until he moved to supplies. For about ten years, he and his wife were egg producers on a large scale outside Enköping. His last employment was as a security guard at Carolina Rediviva Library, Uppsala University.

Kurt is a widower with one son and one stepdaughter. Upon his retirement in 2006, he sold his house and moved to a suburban condo. Being free to travel, his favorite destination is Moline. He has visited Kewanee, Andover, and Bishop Hill, Illinois, and the Buffalo Bill Museum in Le Claire, Iowa. His English has improved quite a bit since he was here the first time.

His cousin, Arne, joined him briefly in 2008. It surprised Arne that Kurt had made American friends. Kurt likes the Quad City area and says that it’s easy to make friends here. “I have more friends in Moline than I have in Sweden,” he says, and adds that in Uppsala, all the other hobby shooters are younger people.

Endnote:

- 1) Swedish national remigration rate. In the 1930s, one of every three emigrants returned. For Frändefors, where Kurt’s grandfather was born, the remigration rate was 27 percent, 1881-1931.

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