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Susan Dalhed

Elisabeth Thorsell

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A victim of a sea catastrophe

BY SUSAN DALHED &
ELISABETH THORSELL

After the article "An almost forgotten tragedy at sea" [about the *Empress of Ireland*, which sank 29 May 1914 in the St. Lawrence River] was published in SAG 2006/4, I received an e-mail from a SAG reader who wanted to know if more was known of the victim John Gustafson from Minneapolis, who was reported as "lost?"

An article in *Svenska Amerikanska Posten* from June 1914 listed John Gustafson as being not from Minneapolis, but from Houston in Houston County, Minnesota.

This little research was done at The Swenson Center while on my way to the SAG workshop in Salt Lake City. One of the researchers in the group was *Susan Dalhed* from Eagan, Minn., and while we were looking at her papers, I noticed that she had some people from Houston in her research. I told her the story of John Gustafson, and she promised to look for him when she had the time.

A couple of months later I got a very thick letter from Susan, which held a lot of copies with information about John, and the other victims from Houston.

It turned out that the *A. Carlson* from Minneapolis also came from Houston as well as *Ulf Johnson*, who is not on the list, as he was going to Christiania in Norway.

News items about John

The local newspaper *Houston Signal* published a little notice on 28 May 1914, that mentioned that Andrew Carlson, Ulf Johnson, and John Gustafson, and two women, D.A. Tiffany and Will Omodt, were all going to Scandinavia the same week.

Next week, 4 June, the *Houston Signal* had an article about the disaster and the three missing men from

the area, and that their bodies had not yet been found. It was also mentioned that John had worked as a farmhand in the area for several years, and that he planned to go home and marry his girlfriend and then return with her. John's brother Clarence had now left the area to go to Quebec and try to find his brother's remains.

On 11 June the *Houston Signal* reported that they had received a telegram that so far they had not found the body, and that 800 bodies were still on the sunken ship.

The last notice in the *Houston Signal* about John Gustafson was published 18 June, when his brother Clarence returned home after a fruitless search.

Susan Dalhed wrote that she could find no information of a burial for John, nor anything about the settlement of his estate, which probably did not amount to much, as he was just a young farmhand.

John was one of the many who went to the U.S. in the hope of a good future, but only found early death.

Who was John?

The next step in the story of John was to find out where he was born and where he came from.

A good lead was found in the 1910 census, where he is listed as a farmhand with his brother Clarence, both employed by Charles H. Johnson of Wiscoy in Winona County, Minn. Here it was recorded that John was 22 years old and had immigrated in 1907; Clarence was 24 years old and had immigrated in 1905.

The database *Emihamn* showed a Johan Emil Gustafsson leaving his home in Stannared in Halland, and Göteborg on 11 Sept. 1907 with a destination of Houston, Minn.!

The *Ellis Island* database showed

him as arriving in New York on 22 Sep. 1907 on the *S/S St. Paul*, belonging to the American Line. John was listed as being 5 foot 11 inches tall, having a light complexion, yellow hair and blue eyes. And best of all, he was going to his brother Clarence Gustafson in Houston, Minn.! His homeplace was given as Stannared!

Then a quick look into the 1900 Census of Sweden (*Sveriges befolkning 1900*) showed the following family:

Karlsdotter, Anna Britta b. 1862
Mother, widow
Gustafsson, Klas August, b. 1886
son
Johan Emil, b. 1887 son
Klara Augusta, b. 1893 daughter
Albin Natanael, b. 1895 son

and they all lived at Stannared 11, also called Stomgården.

A check into the clerical survey for 1880-1900 showed that everyone in the family was born in Stannared, and that the father of the family was the sharecropper Gustaf Nilsson, born 1855, who died in 1896, so the Gustafsson patronymic was quite correct. Johan Emil had been born 11 Dec. 1887, and brother Klas August 5 Feb. 1886.

What about Clarence?

Clarence is evidently an Americanization of Klas. He left Sweden from Stannared by way of Göteborg on 24 Feb. 1905 with a ticket for New York. When John came two years later, Clarence was in Houston, and in 1910 he and John were in Winona County, but by 1914 they had moved back to Houston. In 1920 Clarence lived on his own in Money Creek, Houston County. He is still there in 1930, and it is not now known when he died.