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# A Swede Who Had an Unusual Career in the U.S.



**Old letters showed that Uncle was a cowboy**

BY LEIF AND KENTH ROSMARK

When we went through the papers our deceased mother had left us, we found some letters that awakened our curiosity. As children we had heard that she had an Uncle Helge, who had immigrated to America and who had performed with Buffalo Bill's circus; as children we found that fascinating. As we grew up there was no more talk about that. When we found the letters and became interested in knowing more, all who knew anything were dead.

When we started to do more research on this uncle, we found a story that we want to share with SAG readers. Maybe someone recognizes this story and can tell us more about our Uncle Helge?

Our story starts in Vintrosa, just outside Örebro in the middle of Sweden, on 12 May 1895, when Emil Helge Bohlin was born. In the U.S. he will call himself Edward H. Bohlin. His parents were Gustaf Bolin, born 7 June 1851 in Kräklinge (Närk.), died 21 April 1928, and his wife Augusta Karlsson, born 24 March 1855 in Hidinge (Närk.). He is the twelfth in a family of thirteen children, and all of them have first names starting with 'H'.

Already as a child Helge/Edward was different from other children his age. He had many interests, but his main interest was to take apart and then reassemble things that did not have to be taken apart, to his mother's great annoyance.

He must have been quite adven-

turous; at about 12 years of age he gets a job on a boat. The following year, after sailing the open seas, he arrives in Copenhagen and sees Buffalo Bill and his cowboys. With wide-open eyes he sees their performance. Buffalo Bill and his circus are in Copenhagen during a European tour.

Helge/Edward approaches the greying Buffalo Bill and asks, "If I come to the U.S., can I become a cowboy?"

"Of course," answered Buffalo Bill, and patted Edward on his head. You just come over and I will get you a job on my ranch."

Four years later Ed comes to Buffalo Bill's ranch in northern Wyoming. It is not yet known how he got to the U.S. as he has not been found on any passenger lists, but he might well have worked for his passage, as he was a sailor.

"And who are you?" asked the old colonel abruptly.

"I am the boy you promised a job four years ago in Copenhagen," said the young Ed.

"Well, well, not that I recall such a promise, but if you say so it is probably true. And as you are here, you can put your blankets in the bunkhouse and start working."

## **Cowboy life**

Bohlin worked as cowboy for several years. He learned to ride as cowboys do and to master the art of the lasso and the six-shooter. It was also

during this period that he met with Indians and studied their clothing, the combination of colors, and their cuts, something that he put to use later on. He also learned to speak two different Indian languages.

In his spare time he started to make copper belt buckles for his belt, and they aroused envy and admiration from the other cowboys. He also learned to repair and decorate saddles and harnesses.

In 1921 he got a job in vaudeville, where he showed lasso tricks among other things.

One day when he had the day off and nothing special to do, he amused himself by cutting intricate figures in leather. The then famous actor Tom Mix saw him and said, "Ed, your leather work is among the finest I have seen. My advice is that you should move to Hollywood. It will not take long before you are a wealthy man."

In 1922 he moved to Hollywood and played small parts in Indian movies. He also continued with his leather work, but business was slow.

One day during the production of an Ed 'Hoot' Gibson movie there were some problems with the costumes. Bohlin brought forth one of his sketches for a pair of breeches and showed it to the director.

"How much will it cost to have these clothes made?" asked the director.

"\$22 for the pants and just as

much for the jacket,” said Bohlin. An hour later Bohlin was summoned by the director, and told sign a contract. Ed looked at the paper and said,

“I said \$22 for each piece of clothing and here it says \$22,000!” The contract was signed, and for \$22,000 Bohlin produced 300 pairs of pants and 300 jackets according to the sketches he had made.

## Success in Hollywood

This was the beginning of Bohlin’s Hollywood career. He continued in movies, but also started to fulfil his dream of making beautiful, artistic saddles, heavily decorated with silver fittings in old Indian designs. His first business was housed in small and insignificant premises on Cahuenga Boulevard.

The film companies now gave him some assignments; for instance, for *The Ten Commandments*, where he made the harnesses for the wagons, and he also made the harnesses for *Ben Hur*. He made bridles, stirrups, spurs, reins – just about everything a rider and his horse needs. His knowledge about Indian attire now comes in useful as he makes costumes for Indian movies. He also makes belts, gun holsters, belt buckles, and filagree work of many kinds, and silver fittings with valuable stones.

Saddles are his speciality, and that is what makes him famous. The chewing-gum magnate P.K. Wrigley ordered a saddle worth \$5,250, and then he makes another saddle for the actor Tim McCody, worth \$4,350. Now every aspiring star in cowboy cinema wants a Bohlin saddle, as well as very wealthy Californians with luxury ranches, who want to play at being cowboys and get Bohlin saddles. The rumors about the Swedish saddler’s craftsmanship spread outside the boundaries of America. Orders come from Indian Maharajas. The Sultan of Johor, north of Singapore, also wants a Bohlin saddle.

Bohlin now branched out and made other leather items. He has for instance made a telephone for Mae

West, the actress, in which the leather work cost \$475 and the diamonds, inlaid in the leather, another \$3,500. He made similar telephones for P. K. Wrigley, but without the diamonds. On special order his company now produced candlesticks, wall lamps, night lamps, coffee sets, and much more.

As the business took off, he moved to larger and better premises at 6309 Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. He employed 18 artists, all working under his supervision. In 1937 he published an illustrated catalog with 232 pages of all his products.

In 1947 he comes back to Sweden for the first time in 35 years. He brought his products to an exhibit at the NK in Stockholm, which hosted a California exhibition. He brought a saddle, estimated at \$50,000, ornamented with pictures of birds and animals in the Old Wild West. He also brought six trunks full of Indian curios, cowboy clothes, and photos from the old days. He also showed his riding art at the outdoor museum Skansen.

During his visit to Sweden he also visited his family in Örebro. He visited our *morfar*, his brother, in Örebro on a Monday evening in May 1947. He was supposed to come at lunch time, but was delayed and the family had waited impatiently all day. At last he came and was cordially met by all.

After 1947 we know nothing about his life. We do know from those letters, written to our *morfar*, that he had a daughter, born in 1916, and that she was living in Seattle, Washington, in 1937. We know nothing about his wife or any grandchildren, and welcome all help in finding out more about him.

The above information has been gathered from those letters, newspaper clippings, and family tradition.

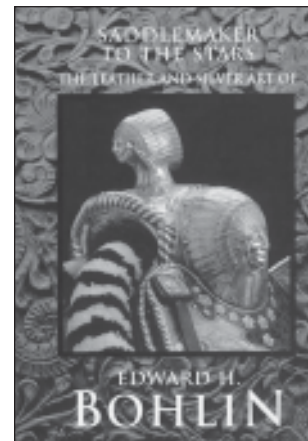
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## Addendum

The SAG editor could not resist the challenge to find out more about Ed Bohlin’s life.

By surfing on the net it was found that there is a book about this remarkable man, *Saddlemaker to the Stars: The Leather and Silver Art of Edward H. Bohlin*, by James Nottage (1997).



With the help of Judy Olson Baouab of Orland Park, IL, a SAG Workshop member, it was also found that Ed had married in 1916 to *Leanna Marie Freeberg*, born 25 Feb. 1898 in Pompeys Pillar, Yellowstone Co. Montana, and died 13 Dec. 1918 in Cody, Park Co., Wyoming. Her parents were Sven Larsson Fröberg from Torsås, Kalmar *län*, and Hilda Sophia Karlsdotter of Vissefjärda, also Kalmar *län*.

Ed and Leanna had one daughter, *Lillian H. Bohlin*, born 9 May 1917 in Wyoming. She married Volney Pinkerton and died 30 Oct. 2000 in Seattle, Washington. It is not yet known if the Pinkertons had children.

After Leanna’s death Bohlin remarried in 24 November 1920 to Harriett Sweem, but this marriage did not last.

On 24 April 1937 Bohlin married again, this time to Lillian S. Holm, born 6 Oct. 1892 in California. She died 22 Oct. 1985 in Los Angeles. Lillian’s parents were both Swedish.

Edward Hugo Bohlin died in May 1980 in Los Angeles.