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The Swedish-Born Orphan

A photographic mystery

BY MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK

As mysteries go, this was pretty intriguing. When my last article on orphan heirloom rescues (that is, playing sleuth to get stray items back to rightful owners) appeared, I received the following from Marjie Mountainsong:

“I would like your help in returning a photo in my possession. When my mother died, I inherited her wonderful collection of old photos. I’ve managed to return some special ones to the families who might most enjoy them, but have been puzzled by one (see front cover). It’s a studio portrait of a young woman, possibly in her late teens, and the following lines are penned on the back: *Theresa White; Killed Oct. 26, 1922; Funeral Oct. 29, 1922; Given to Mrs. Johnson.* Some distance below in pencil rather than pen is the date: January 1899. Mrs. Johnson would be my Swedish great-grandmother, Brita Kajsa Johnson, wife of Nels Johnson, who homesteaded in Mille Lacs County near Lawrence, Minnesota (now Wahkon), from 1892 until 1932, coming there from several years of residence in Duluth, Minnesota.

“I do not know whether the name White is a birth name or a married name. If she died in Minnesota, I would guess that some newspaper carried a notice of her unexpected death. The Minnesota Death Index online lists a Theresa Antoinette White as dying 26 October 1922 in St. Louis County¹. That would be the area that includes Duluth, Minnesota.”

A young woman killed? How? What happened to her? And why did

Mrs. Johnson wind up with her photo? So many questions. I had to try to find some answers.

Surfing time

As always, my first instinct was to search the Internet. Marjie had given me a head start by locating the listing for Theresa’s death. Since the date was identical to the one on the back of the photo, I was quite confident it was the same woman, so I started my search by trying to put her in context through census records.

Since Theresa died in 1922, I decided to start with the 1920 census and work backward. I looked for White families living in St. Louis County, Minnesota, and found Gilbert White with his wife, Theresa A.

This Theresa had been born around 1879-1880 in Sweden. That would have made her nineteen or twenty at the time of the photo (January 1899), so those dates fit. Also, her photo had been given to a Swedish woman, so her own birth in Sweden seemed to fit as well. I was reasonably sure I had found the Theresa I was seeking.

Learning more about Theresa

Theresa was forty years old and had no children enumerated with her in the 1920 census – but could she have had a child or two already grown and out of the house? If so, their lines could lead to descendants, so I backed up to 1910 to see if there were any children in the house. Fortunately, the family had stayed in

place, so it was easy to find Gilbert White in 1910, but sadly, the census confirmed that there were no children. I would have to go back in time to find collateral relatives who might have descendants alive today. The census also revealed that Gilbert and Theresa had married around 1906, so Theresa would have been listed under her maiden name in 1900 – but I didn’t know what that was.

Ancestry.com is in the midst of creating an every-name index for the 1900 census and is more than halfway through the project, but Minnesota is one of the states that has not yet been completed.

I couldn’t just search on Swedish-born Theresas of an appropriate age (although that will be possible in the near future). In any case, a census record wouldn’t satisfy my curiosity about her death, so what else could I do?

How was she killed?

At this point, I consulted a favorite site of mine, Joe Beine’s *Online Searchable Death Indexes & Records* (www.deathindexes.com). I clicked on Minnesota and saw that the Minnesota Historical Society also had an online index of Minnesota deaths. I duplicated my earlier search and found the listing for Theresa’s death – and then I noticed the “Add to Order” button. I clicked on it and discovered that I could have a copy of her death certificate mailed to me for \$8. That would certainly help solve the riddle of her death, so why not?

Then I spotted a box that said “Obituary Research Services.” I

clicked on it and learned that I could order a search for her obituary for \$15 (\$12, if you're a Minnesota resident). Since she was killed, I was virtually certain there would be an article about her death, so I decided to make the investment. One week later, I received the death certificate, and two weeks after that, I received the obituary. I confess that this quick and efficient service made me jealous of those with Minnesota roots.

An Unfortunate Accident

The death certificate answered my first question: Her death was given as, "struck by RR engine while crossing track. Accidental. Died from shock." The article about her death – front-page news in the *Pine County Pioneer*, a newspaper in the area where she had lived most of her life – explained that she died of injuries sustained when she alighted from one train and failed to notice an approaching freight train on a nearby track.

The article went on to reveal many more details. Her parents were Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Erickson of Pine City, Minnesota; she was born in Sweden in 1879 and came here in infancy with her parents (later research in earlier census records indicated it had been in 1882); she had married on 10 June, 1906, and moved to Duluth about a year later. She was also an only child, so there were no sibling lines to follow forward in time in the quest for living relatives. The story it told was a sad one, but in genealogical terms, this article was a gold mine. Among other details was a list of friends and relatives who had attended her funeral. First on the list was Mrs. Nels Johnson, the owner of the photo.

What's the Connection?

At this point, I contacted Marjie with this information, including the fact that her great-grandmother was a friend or relative of the mystery woman. In fact, we were later to learn that the first eight people mentioned in Theresa's obituary were relatives of Marjie's. Marjie, it

turns out, is quite a detective, and rather fortuitously, was traveling in Minnesota at the time, even though she lives in Oregon. She decided to join in the hunt.

She started by researching the obituary file for Theresa's parents, as well as the 1905 Agricultural Census for Pine County, at the Pine City, Minnesota, library. Marjie found all these records and some clues about additional possible relatives, but nothing that explained the connection to Mrs. Nels Johnson. As she explains, "Seemingly, I had reached a brick wall, but it finally struck me that I still had another option. I went to the Minnesota Historical Society Library and found the microfilm for the 1922 *Wahkon Enterprise* (the newspaper of the town in which my great-grandmother had resided at the time). I started scrolling and found this in the 3 November, 1922, issue: 'Mr. and Mrs. Dr. Swennes and Mrs. N. J. Johnson motored to Pine City Sunday to attend the funeral of Mrs. White. Mrs. White is a cousin of Mrs. Johnson.'"

Marjie went on to say, "You can, of course, believe that the two adjacent microfilm reader occupants were treated to a burst of joy from their neighbor."

Time to cross the Pond

The mystery is mostly solved. Theresa White and Mrs. Nels Johnson were cousins, and given that Theresa was an only child and had no offspring of her own, Marjie has decided that the orphan photo was already home, as she may well be one of Theresa's closest living relatives.

That doesn't mean that the search is quite over, though. Marjie wants to find out the exact nature of the cousin relationship, and fortunately, she now has the means. I asked what she knew of her great-grandmother's origins in Sweden, and she replied with these details:

Date of birth: 6 July 1860

Birthplace: Gissjö; Torp (parish); Västernorrland (province)

Parents: Anders Kristmansson and Märta Susanna Bjelkström

I took this information and treated myself to a twenty-day subscription to *Genline* (www.genline.com), a new resource of online, digitized Swedish Church records. Sure enough, there she was in the 1860 births, and, better yet, a household examination showed her with her entire family and their exact birth dates, back to the 1820s. Once again, I felt a twinge of jealousy – this time, for those of Swedish ancestry! Because Marjie's such a competent researcher, I'll leave her to connect the rest of the dots via Genline, and I have no doubts that she'll do so soon. And Theresa's photo and rediscovered story will remain safe with the one who cared enough to ask questions in the first place.

Note:

1) You can search the Minnesota Death Index at Ancestry.com, or at the Minnesota Historical Society web site www.mnhs.org/index.htm

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Editor's note:

I contacted Marjie Mountainsong and asked her if I could borrow a copy of the photo of Theresa as an illustration for the article above.

She not only sent the photo of Theresa but also a photo of her great-grandparents and two of their children, and an amazing story of serendipity, so read on



Marjie's story

After an extended cross-country genealogical road trip, I had many leads I wanted to pursue and I decided to put Theresa and her family on the back-burner. Another old photo in my mother's collection was of my grandmother, Severa Johnson Swennes, and her cousin, Severn Swordling, circa 1889.

While traveling through Spokane, Washington, I had found Andrew (the father of Severn) Swordling's obituary. Listed among the survivors was a brother, John Shulene¹. Upon returning home, I tracked down a direct descendant of John Shulene, a grandson with the same name. John was quite surprised by my phone call as he had no knowledge of his grandfather's sister, Brita Kajsa Andersdotter Swordling Johnson. He had, however, been told how each brother claimed a different name following his military service in Sweden.

John knew details of both his grandfather's and Andrew Swordling's life.

I was listening intently when I heard him say, "my father had a sister named Evenda and she married Gilbert White. They had one son, Gilbert Jr." The critical question hung on my lips until John paused. I asked, "Did this Gilbert White live in Duluth, Minnesota?" "Yes," John replied.

More questions followed quickly, establishing that Evenda's husband, Gilbert White, worked for the Northern Pacific Railroad as a traveling auditor, the same position held by Theresa's husband. I was almost positive I had found Theresa's Gilbert in his second marriage. Then I asked, "Was he ever married to a woman named Theresa?" John replied that Gilbert was quite old when he married Evenda and he certainly could have been married previously.

He generously offered to contact his cousin, Gilbert Jr., and inquire.

Shortly thereafter, I learned that Gilbert Jr. had no direct knowledge of an earlier marriage for his father in part because Gilbert Sr. had died



Nils and Brita Kajsa Johnson with oldest children Severa and Emelia 1891.

when young Gilbert was only 8 years old and his mother had died when he was a teenager. However, he suspected there might have been an earlier marriage. He mentioned that he inherited a decorative folder with an old photo of his father standing closely beside a woman he did not recognize.

John took the lead in arranging a first meeting where all our con-

tributions were spread out on the dining room table. The 1899 photo of Theresa was compared with the later photo of Gilbert White and the mystery woman.

Theresa's striking facial features appeared in both photos. Supported by other data, it became very clear that Gilbert had married twice (a fact that his lengthy obituary did not mention) and both women were

directly related to my great-grandmother, one as a cousin and the other as a niece.

Note:

1) My great-grandmother's marriage certificate (dated 16 December, 1882, in Rush City, Minnesota) has the signature of "John Sjöling" as a witness, probably an earlier spelling of "Shulene."

Editor's additions:

As the SAG editor can not resist research challenges, she also asked Marjie for more dates on the Johnsons and on Theresa's family.

Marjie responded by giving the birth dates on Nils Jonas Johnson and his wife Anna Britta Björkman, and also a little on the family of Theresa. She thought her parents Charles Erickson and Anna Brita Björkman had married in 1878, and that Theresa had been born 13 August 1879 in an unknown place. Marjie also mentioned that Nils Jonas's exit permit came from the same place as Anna Brita's, so it was not hard to decide trying a little with Torp records.

The first step though was to try the "Emihamn database," but the results were negative, these two families could not be identified there.

So *Genline* was the next step, and luckily enough the records for Torp in Västernorrland had been published there.

Nils Jonas was found as having been born 1856 April 18 in Karrsjö village, son of the *nybyggare* (settler) Jon Larsson and his wife Sara Magdalena Nilsson.

The 1870-79 clerical survey [Torp AI:14a, p. 272] showed Nils Jonas family like this:

Jonas Larsson, born 11 Dec. 1821
w. Sara Magdalena Nilsson, born 2 Jan. 1829
s. Lars Petter, born 30 Jan. 1851
d. Märta Magdalena, born 3 Jan. 1853
d. Brita Kajsa, born 28 Dec. 1854
s. *Nils Jonas*, born 18 Apr. 1858
d. Kristina, born 12 June 1861
s. Erik Olof, born 20 June 1865

There is no parish of birth listed for anyone in the family, but a certain guess is that they all are born in Torp.

Brita Kajsa was born 6 July 1860, daughter of Anders Kristmansson and his wife Märta Susanna Bjelkström in Gissjö. She married Nils Jonas on 16 December 1882 in Rush City, Minnesota. Their oldest children were *Severa*, born 8 September 1883 in Pine City, Minn., and *Emelia (Millie)*, born 9 May 1890 in Duluth, Minn.

Severa later married and became Mrs. Ole S. Swennes. *Millie* married also and became Mrs. John E. Ford.

Then I checked the marriage records for Torp to try to find Theresa's parents there. This search was negative, but next I tried to find her birth, also in Torp:

13 August 1879 *Theresa Antoinetta*, daughter of the laborer Carl August Eriksson and his wife Anna Britta Björkman of Torpshammar.

The Torp clerical survey [AI:14b, p.436] showed the family like this:

Carl August Eriksson, born 27 November 1842 in Fliseryd, Kalmar county
w. Anna Brita Björkman, born 10 February 1856 in Torp
d. *Theresa Antoinetta*, born August 13 1879 in Torp

According to the clerical survey the parents had married in Torp on 6 July 1879, just a few weeks before the birth of Theresa, and that was nothing unusual in those days.

Carl August had come in 1875 from faraway Fliseryd. Maybe he had been recruited as a skilled worker from a paper mill there when they started the paper mill in Torpshammar in the 1870s? Further research might tell.

His future wife Anna Brita was also found in the Torp birth records:

Anna Brita, born 10 February 1856, daughter of the farmer Henrik Björkman and his wife Britta Kajsa Bjelkström of Gissjö.

The Bjelkström sisters were children of the farmer Anders Olsson and his wife Anna Jönsdotter of Gissjö. Anders did not use his family surname when the girls were born, but might have done so later. His father was the old man Olof Bjelkström of Gissjö, born in 1762.

How Britta Kajsa and Theresa were cousins

