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P. Robert Willey

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# *From Höganäs to Worcester: Discovering My Swedish Ancestors*

BY P. ROBERT WILLEY

When I began to research my Swedish ancestors, I did not know how to spell, locate, or pronounce **Höganäs**. My thirty-three year search has led me to take two trips to Sweden.

Verifying clues, hunches, or family legends has led to many interesting surprises. This article represents my genealogical journey to become educated about my ancestors' daily lives and their involvement in the community.

From the middle 1800's to the early 1900's several hundred people left Höganäs, Sweden, for a new life in Worcester County in central Massachusetts. This article is about one family, my maternal grandparents and relatives, who immigrated from Höganäs in southernmost Sweden to Worcester, Massachusetts.

My grandfather, Martin (Svensson) Swanson, born July 20, 1872, began working in one of the coal mines in Höganäs at the age of twelve years. He left Höganäs October 13, 1890, (*Flyttningsbetyg* - Emigration Record) and arrived in Worcester, Massachusetts, November 4, 1890, at the age of eighteen (port of departure and date of arrival unknown). The earliest reference to an address in Worcester was 25 Vernon Street in 1900 in the military & naval population of the 12th Census of the United States (1900).

Ellen Maria Larsson, my grandmother, was born October 29, 1880, (American church record) or October 31, 1880, (Swedish church record) in

Höganäs. On May 30, 1896, (aboard the *SS Hekla*) she arrived in New York at the age of fifteen and traveled to Worcester. I have found no evidence to confirm that my grandparents knew each other prior to coming to this country, though they lived only a few blocks from each other in a town whose population was slightly more than 3,000. My grandmother is listed in the 1900 Census as a "servant of the family" in a private home on William Street. Family oral history says my grandparents met on their second voyage from Sweden to New York in 1901 or 1902.

## **The Genealogist as Family Historian**

The family historian is the keeper of the family records. The genealogist is the developer of the family record from a historical perspective. For example: So far I have documented four countries and ten states where my Swedish ancestors have lived. When I began in 1971 I knew about two dozen Swedish ancestors. I can now identify 400 individuals, dating back to the late 1600's (eleven generations).

My grandfather had six siblings all born in Höganäs, Sweden. One immigrated to Chicago, Illinois, and three to Worcester, Massachusetts:

*Sigrid Paulina Svensson* was born September 1, 1863. She married August Karlsson, born November 20,

1865, in Våxtorp, Sweden, and died September 4, 1931. They raised six children, two of which came to Worcester.

*Gerda Svensson* was born April 24, 1866, and died April 30, 1866.

*Gerda Elise Svensson* was born May 15, 1867. She initially lived in Evanston, Illinois, 1898–1923 (immigration date is mentioned later in this article). She was employed as a domestic for several families and married (October 5, 1916, Evanston, Illinois) her employer's chauffeur Frank Rhodin born 1866 in Sweden. She eventually moved to Worcester (1924–1934), later Riverview, Florida, (1934–1950) and then back to Carlisle and Worcester (1950–1961). She died March 28, 1961. They had no children.

*Martin Svensson* was born March 21, 1870, and died January 26, 1871.

*Ida Svensson* was born March 22, 1875, (immigration date is mentioned later in this article). She married Axel Nelson (date and place unknown) and lived in Chicago (she was listed as next of kin on her brother Martin's fourth naval enlistment in 1898 and allegedly moved to St. Francis, Ontario, in the early 1900's).

*Sigfrid (Fred) Svensson* was born February 27, 1878. Prior to leaving Sweden he began working at the age of twelve in one of the coal mines in Höganäs. He left Höganäs October 12, 1895, at the age of seventeen, arriving in New York November 1, 1895, aboard the *Tingvalla* departing

from Copenhagen, Denmark. Documentation of his early whereabouts was again found in the Ellis Island records on April 28, 1913, when he arrived in New York on the ship *Orotava* from Hamilton, Bermuda. His occupation at the time was as a cook. He had previously lived in this country for seventeen years and became a United States citizen on November 9, 1920, in the Superior Court of Worcester, Massachusetts, (legally changing his name from Sigfrid Svenson to Fred Swanson). His culinary talents led him to travel the Eastern seaboard working for various employers. Subsequently he lived in Carlisle 1930–1958 and Worcester 1958–1960. He married three times. He died September 6, 1960. There were no children. His three wives were:

- Mary K. Brennan “Kitty” – was born 1883 in England. They were married July 1, 1902, (Boston, Massachusetts).

- Signe Brynhildsen was born August 10, 1887, in Horten, Norway. She left on September 28, 1914, (aboard the *Kristianiafjord* departing from Hordaland, Norway) and arrived in Boston at the age of 26. They married May 1, 1915, (Boston, Massachusetts). She died June 7, 1931.

- Rose Raymond Bachelдор was born November 1, 1877, in Cohes, New York. They were married July

8, 1932, (Worcester, Massachusetts). He died January 22, 1951.

I had not been able to find information about my grandmother’s siblings until recently, when old photographs taken in Höganäs were found in a box and provided new clues yet to be pursued. They all remained in Sweden. Her three siblings were:

*Constance Louise Larsson* was born January 26, 1879, and never married.

*Betty Emilia Larsson* was born January 23, 1883. She married Idar Svenson and raised a family.

*Ernst Larsson* was born July 31, 1885. He married Esther (surname not known ) and raised a family.

## Family Supporting Family

Family members who immigrated from Höganäs maintained close relationships with one another as they were building new lives in different places in “Amerika.” This was done by correspondence, attending important family events, and establishing residence near immediate family members.

## The Genealogist as Detective

The genealogist is a persistent detective looking for clues, identi-

fying patterns, clarifying confusions, and solving puzzles in family connections and journeys. For example:

One of the most time consuming and frustrating research tasks has been in locating two of my great-aunts on the Ellis Island web site ([www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)). The names of Gerda Svensson and Ida Svensson were identified as passengers on the ship *Aurania* arriving in New York on May 20, 1897. At first I doubted the validity of the information because the port of departure was Liverpool, England; I had never heard that mentioned as part of the family oral history. After verifying names, dates, and places, I was convinced it indeed was them. However the real challenge was negotiating the Ellis Island web site to document the discovery.

Once having downloaded the passenger record with the information, I found it inexplicably confusing. Several e-mails and phone calls were made to administrators of the web site seeking assistance to clarify the information. Finally the assistant director responsible for overseeing the database communicated that there are many errors in the passenger records on their web site and my only choice was “to go page by page.” This included beginning on page 612 (May 29, 1897) and five hours later arrived at the correct page (76). Coincidentally my grandmother was easily found several years ago on this same web site.

Several years ago our son had received in the mail from my mother’s former pastor an old medal she had inadvertently placed in a church rummage sale, with a picture of King Oscar II, my paternal great-grandfather’s name, the date of 1897, and an inscription on the back (in Swedish). No one in our family knew what it was. I began my inquiry by sending an e-mail to the Consulate General of Sweden in Chicago. They suggested I should contact the Swedish-American Historical Society ([www.swedishamericanhist.org](http://www.swedishamericanhist.org)) who graciously provided a translation of the inscription. My next task was to contact the librarian at Höga-



näs AB, who in turn suggested I communicate with the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm. The end result was that it was identified as a medal commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Högånäs *Stenkolsbolag* (HSB) [Coal Company] given by the King of Sweden to employers to present to employees for their “long and loyal duty.” My maternal great-grandfather had been a worker for many years in one of the local coal mines (as was his father). All sources were found through the internet.

Regarding Martin Swanson’s United States naval record, several years ago I had found extensive information from the Department of the Navy Personnel Command in St. Louis, Missouri. My grandfather had enlisted in Boston on January 26, 1892, and discharged in New York March 12, 1901. His monthly salary in 1895 as a “Landsman” was \$17 per month and in 1926 he began receiving his monthly pension of \$20.

Now I wondered if there was a record of any medals or citations he may have received. In June of last year I sent in an additional information request. Several weeks later I received a Naval Good Conduct Medal along with verification that he was also entitled to the Spanish Campaign Medal, Philippine Campaign Medal, and the China Relief Expeditionary Medal (having served on 15 different vessels). Lending depth to his military records, a family member recently found our grandfather’s detailed “navy log” while he served on the *U.S.S. Yorktown* from November, 1898, to December, 1900, (with the rank of “Boatswain Mate First Class”).

## The Genealogist as Descendent

My grandparents, *Ellen Maria* and *Martin Swanson*, were married February 14, 1903, in the *Svenska Lutherska Gethsemane Kyrkan* in Worcester, Massachusetts. Martin Swanson became a citizen April 29, 1898, (Eastern District Court of New York). *Ellen Maria Swanson* died July 17, 1951. *Martin Swanson* died Novem-

ber 16, 1956. They had four children:

- *Bertha Ella Maria Swanson*, was born September 23, 1903, (our mother) and died March 12, 1992. She married (December 31, 1928, New York, New York) *Roy Chester Willey*, born August 27, 1903, (Worcester, Massachusetts), and died January 16, 1945. They raised three sons (the author and two brothers).

- *Martin Irwin Swanson*, was born December 23, 1904, and died February 4, 1905.

- *Margaret Lillian Swanson*, was born July 8, 1906, and died May 23, 1950. She never married.

- *John Paul Swanson*, was born November 13, 1907, and died July 31, 1975. He married (August 2, 1935) *Margaret Johnson*, born August 20, 1909, (Stockholm, Sweden) and died December 13, 1999. They raised two sons.

## The Genealogist as Archivist

Through archival findings, the genealogist is able to document community involvement and contributions. For example:

I had always heard my grandfather had been active in the local Republican Party. Correspondence with the Worcester Historical Society yielded a picture of him at a Republican Party outing on July 15, 1911, along with records that he was an alderman and member of the Common Council from 1923–1926. The Massachusetts State Archives and State Library identified that in 1929 he was elected to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts House of Representatives (12th district) and served four terms until 1940. Compensation for 1930–1940 was \$2,000. The committees he served on while a state legislator were: 1929–1930, Public Safety (clerk) & Public Service  
1931–1932, Civil Service, Highways & Motor Vehicles  
1933–1934, Counties  
1935–1936, Rules, Highways & Motor Vehicles  
1937–1938, Rules, Banks & Banking  
1939–1940, Rules & State Administration (Assistant Floor Leader)



*Martin, Bertha, (author’s mother) and Ellen Marie Swanson 1906.*

In our library we have a large photograph of him sitting with his elected peers at the State Capitol in 1935. In the front row was his friend Leverett Saltonstall who was elected Massachusetts Governor (1939–1944) and United States Senator (1944–1967).

Further research identifying his public service work included:

- May 17, 1937, he helped to propose legislation for the “Special Commission to Prepare Plans and Programs for the Celebration of the Three Hundredth Anniversary of the First Permanent Settlement of Swedish Colonists in this Country.”

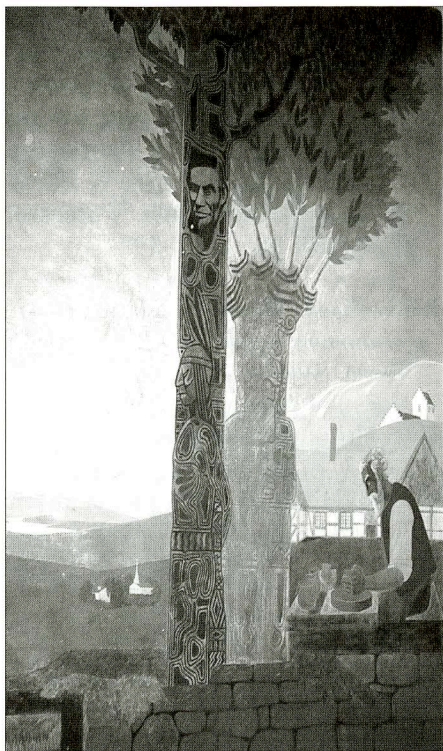
- January 11, 1938, he introduced legislation to create Worcester Junior College.

- June 26, 1942, he was appointed to the Selective Service Board (serving five years).

- He was also a founding director (1930) of the Worcester Bank & Trust Company (previously incorporated on September 23, 1915, as The Skandia Credit Union; later became the Guaranty Bank & Trust Company).

## The Genealogist with Childhood Memories

*Ellen* and *Martin Swanson* became members of the newly formed *Greendale Lutheran Church* (later named



*A part of the Zion murals.*

Zion Lutheran Church) on October 22, 1916. My grandfather's company (independent contractor for foundations, concrete, and asphalt work) built the stone foundation for the church and his son (Swanson & Janson Construction Company) built the chapel in 1948. All of my grandparents' children were confirmed (Swedish) in this church, my two brothers and I were baptized and confirmed there, and our son baptized there. In the chapel is a large mural on the wall depicting the history of the Norton Company and the Swedish Immigration to Worcester. Coincidentally while visiting The House of Emigrants Museum in Växjö, Sweden, (1988) I found Zion Lutheran Church records (in Swedish) which included several family members.

## The Genealogist as Family Collaborator

For years I have been accumulating ancestral information. Finally, two years ago, I decided to make individual files and create two large family trees, listing all the relatives in order to see relationships and develop perspective. This has proven to be an

invaluable step in the self-organization process as well as identifying future genealogical inquiries. My search always takes on new meaning when I successfully communicate by phone, letter, or in person to a previously unknown relative. Several examples:

My mother had frequently mentioned Aunt Betty Carlson (born 1866 in Höganäs) who married Axel Swenson. She was my grandmother's maternal aunt who lived in Worcester. When we moved to Holden, Massachusetts, (a Worcester suburb) in 1958, my mother frequently identified a house within a mile of where we lived as the home of Elsa (Carlson) Johnson, (born June 23, 1897, in Worcester) daughter of Aunt Betty who married George Johnson.

I have no memory of meeting them and thought nothing of it for many years. Then I recently began looking through letters written by my grandmother to our mother in December, 1944, that mentioned these same individuals. From there I was able to obtain a copy of Elsa Johnson's obituary that listed several relatives. In September of last year, I took a chance and sent a letter to an individual with the same last name mentioned in the obituary living on the same street where she had lived. "Voila!" another distant relative located. Subsequently we have ex-

changed family stories along with old photographs of relatives we both previously were unable to identify and about whom we had only vague information. Surprisingly, we each had a photograph in which the same chair was visible and from this we were able to identify connections of people, time, and place.

My grandmother had an obituary (in Swedish) of August Karlsson (husband of Sigrid Paulina Svensson). For years I did not know who he was. With information containing names, dates, and cities my second cousin had given me during our initial visit to Höganäs, in addition to reading through letters he sent me over the years, I began to put together the names and make connections through the use of a sequential order. In July of last year while searching [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) at our local public library, I located a John (Johannes) Carlson born July 10, 1860, in Våxtorp, Sweden, (brother to the previously named August Karlsson) on the 1920 Census living in Humboldt County, California. With the assistance of the public libraries in Kalispell, Montana, and Eureka, California, I was able to locate several obituaries. This led me to communicating with distant relatives now residing in both states.



*Martin Swanson and family at 30 Ararat Street in Worcester around 1918.*

## It's a Small World

My mother had given me her parents' marriage certificate (in Swedish) identifying the date, place, and pastor. What I did not know was the name of the church. To research this I communicated with the Trinity Lutheran Church in Worcester (my grandmother had been a member in the early 1900's - at that time it was called the *Svenska Lutherska Gethsemane Kyrkan*). I was given the name of a person to e-mail my questions. Several weeks later I received a letter that the church archivist had known my mother and my grandparents. I telephoned her and soon learned she and her family lived for many years in the same house in which my mother and her parents had once resided. We have since exchanged documents and memories of local people, places, and events.

## The Genealogist as Networker

One of the most productive techniques in researching my ancestors has been to create a collaborative resource network. Specifically this has involved identifying, communicating, and nurturing interactive relationships with relatives, researchers, and public or private resources over an extended period of time. This has been especially productive when my "research was going nowhere" and I had prematurely concluded all known avenues of

inquiry were exhausted. Likewise, researching my family has often been complicated by cultural nuances, language differences, identification/location of faraway resources, as well as continually uncovering previously forgotten old family documents. However, my attitude quickly changes when "family clues" are found in boxes, closets, garages, letters, basements, or an individual's memory. Once discovered and placed in perspective regarding their possible meaning for further research, they often act as guides for innumerable new directions of inquiry in the evolving journey of discovering my heritage.

## Notes

1. In 1876 the Swedish colony in Worcester numbered about 200. In 1880 the United States Census estimated approximately 1,000. "From Sweden to America. A History of the Migration. A Collective Work of the Uppsala Migration Project" Eds. Hans Norman & Harold Runblom. University of Minnesota Press. 1976.
2. In 1910, Worcester had about 8,000 Swedish born inhabitants. "The Swedish Heritage in America. The Swedish Element in America and American-Swedish Relations in Their Historical Perspective." Allan Kastrup. Swedish Council of America. 1975

3. Almost one out of five Worcestertites was of Swedish descent by 1915 (30,000). "Gå till Amerika - The Swedish Creation Of An Ethnic Identity For Worcester, Massachusetts." Charles W. Estus, Sr., & John McClymer. Worcester Historical Museum. 1994.
4. Swedish House of Emigrants (*Svenska Emigrantinstitutet*) Växjö, Sweden.
5. By the early 1900's Worcester had 13 Swedish speaking church congregations. "The History of the Swedish People in Worcester and Worcester County." *Worcester Evening Post*. May 31, 1936.
6. "Worcester, Massachusetts/Zion Lutheran Church (1914) Register, Minutes and Ministerial Acts, 1914-1949 Swedish/English." Microfilm distributed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 2004.

P. Robert Willey resides in Bloomington, Illinois. E-mail: <bawille@ilstu.edu>

The author lived in the Worcester area from 1945-1962 and 1966-1969.

## Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

About 35% of the Swedish immigrants belonged to a Swedish-American church in America, and the records of those churches are mostly microfilmed and available at the Swenson Center in Rock Island.

Those Swedish-American churches belonged to the *Augustana Synod*, which joined the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (ELCA) in the 1960s.

ELCA seems to have an active archives institution, situated in the Chicago area, where their records are

accessible to the public. Among their collections, they have personal papers of several Swedish pastors, including Gustaf Albert Brandelle, Erland Carlsson (founder of Augustana), Lars Paul Esbjörn, and many others.

They also have congregational papers from Sagetown, Svenska (Bethel), and Swedonia (Berlin), Svenska in Illinois, New Sweden Swedish in Iowa, and Kimball, Karmel Swedish (records 1887-1902) in Nebraska, as a few examples.

On the web site there is also a good on-line catalog of their holdings, both printed books and archival holdings. A search for just "swedish" gave many hits, which made the page a bit slow, but for instance a search for "Olsson" came up with nine hits in a second.

There is also a nice page about all the missionaries to various parts of the world, searchable by country, which gives the names and time frame.

[www.elca.org/archives/index.html](http://www.elca.org/archives/index.html)