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At The Portal of America

A descendant ponders the immigrant's feelings at Ellis Island

BY KAREN J. SANGREN

There I stood. The crowd around me kept pushing closer and closer. Everyone wanted to make the next boat to Ellis Island. The line was ten or so people wide and the gangplank was too narrow to accommodate all those wanting to get on board. All around me I heard intonations of different languages. Six people in front of me spoke a dialect of German. I strained to make out any words that I could understand. To the right a couple spoke in a strong British accent. To the left I heard Chinese and behind me was French. Other voices spoke in languages I could not identify.

Is this what it must have been like for our own family members who emigrated from Sweden as the 19th century turned into the 20th? Had they felt as isolated from the people around them as I felt that Sunday morning? Would their immigration papers be in order? Did they worry that an immigration official would use chalk to draw a large white X on their shoulder if they were found not to be of sound body and mind? Would they be sent back home? My mind raced back to all the stories I had gathered on our family history during the past several years.

The immigrant's feelings

These were poignant moments and I wanted to *feel* them, as well as remember them, as I stood there in line. My only worry that brisk fall morning in 1999 was that the battery

had gone dead in my camera. Would the gift shop on Ellis Island sell camera batteries?

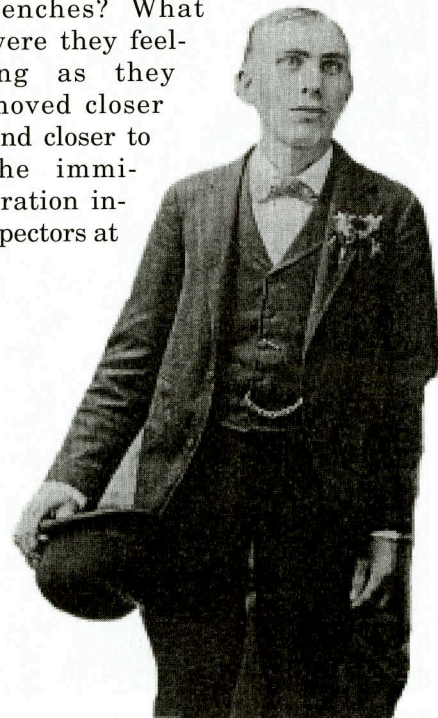
Grandpa Youngquist's worries in 1895 had been very different. Carl August had been only 13 years old when he and his two teenaged sisters, Elin and Anna, stood in line at Ellis Island with their two older siblings, Gust and Edla. Gust had immigrated in 1892 and Edla in 1893. They returned to Sweden to escort their younger siblings to America two years later. They were all so young to enter this foreign land, never to return home again. How could they do it? How did any of them do it? The courage. The desperation for new beginnings.

Would I have had this same kind of courage? As our ferry dropped off its passengers, I entered Ellis Island's main building through the former Baggage Room on the lower floor. I stood there and looked at the display of immigrants' luggage. There were trunks and suitcases of various types and sizes – none of them very large – and all travel worn. Were these the kinds of bags our family members carried? Could all they owned in Sweden have fit into suitcases this size? My own suitcase at the hotel was packed with clothes and souvenirs waiting to fly home with me that evening. My closets were full of much more in San Diego. How could one hundred years have enabled so many remarkable changes? The sacrifices had been

great, but look what a century of change had brought.

The Registry room

As I moved up to the Registry Room on the second floor with its high vaulted ceilings, my eyes fell on the benches at the far end of the room. These were some of the originals and they were there to be sat on. The curators of the museum wanted visitors to see them, to sit on them, to touch history. Twelve million immigrants had used these and similar benches over the 62 years of Ellis Island's history. Had any of our family members sat on these very benches? What were they feeling as they moved closer and closer to the immigration inspectors at



the end of the grand hall? What might Grandpa Youngquist have been thinking at this point? Did he worry that he would be separated from his sisters? Would anyone speak to him in Swedish? Did he look out the window and see the Statue of Liberty as they sat there? The sounds and smells of hundreds of tired travelers all around him must have been numbing.

When the final inspections were completed, what must these new arrivals have felt then? How did they manage to find their trains to Colorado? Massachusetts? New Hampshire? South Dakota? and California? How did they find work to pay for their travels? Of course, I had now learned the answers to most of these questions in the past years, but even so... – what raw courage it had tak-

en to make the contacts, to network with other recent immigrants, and to find work.

Ellis Island Museum display cases exhibited information as to how 19th and early 20th century immigrant churches and local social services provided help for the recent arrivals to get settled. New immigrants to America could find in these locations a place to hear and speak their mother tongue and share common cultural traditions. Churches and social agencies provided vital networking opportunities for jobs and places to live for the newcomers.

How to keep the story alive

As I finished my tour of the main building and walked around the peri-

meter of Ellis Island, I wondered how I could keep our family story unique as I continued to assemble its papers, pictures, and archival data. We were merely one family of 12,000,000 other stories much like our own. Swedish immigrants alone made up 1.3 million stories. My research into roots and our family's past was nothing new. Linguists and historians had been writing about this subject for decades. The mass media had given much time to the topic during the last years of the 20th Century. Baby-boomers had begun to take notice, as they found older members of their families passing on. The keepers of family stories and records were being handed down to the next generation. Television news segments had provided many ways to encourage people to trace their roots and create a



The Great Hall (the Registry Room) at Ellis Island. (Photo 2000 by E. Thorsell)

family tree. Efforts to record our own family story had preceded all the publicity on this topic. Even so, the work now seemed rather trivialized and somewhat common.

Memories of Sweden

Then my eyes drifted across New York Harbor and beyond. Memories of my 1999 summer trip to Sweden came to mind. While I had been in Sweden multiple times, on that visit I had been able to put many missing pieces together on the personal histories of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I had climbed the mountainside to Grandma Sangren's birthplace for the first time and stood on its foundations. The walls and roof were long gone from the original small house or *stuga*. It had been home to ten children. Their father was a shoemaker. I had felt cool breezes on my face as I gazed across the dense green forest. Birch leaves sparkled in the sun. How could Anna Sangren have left this heavenly place for a life in Los Angeles? The same could be said for Grandpa Sangren. I had found his beautiful lakeside village of Söderbärke (Dala.) too.

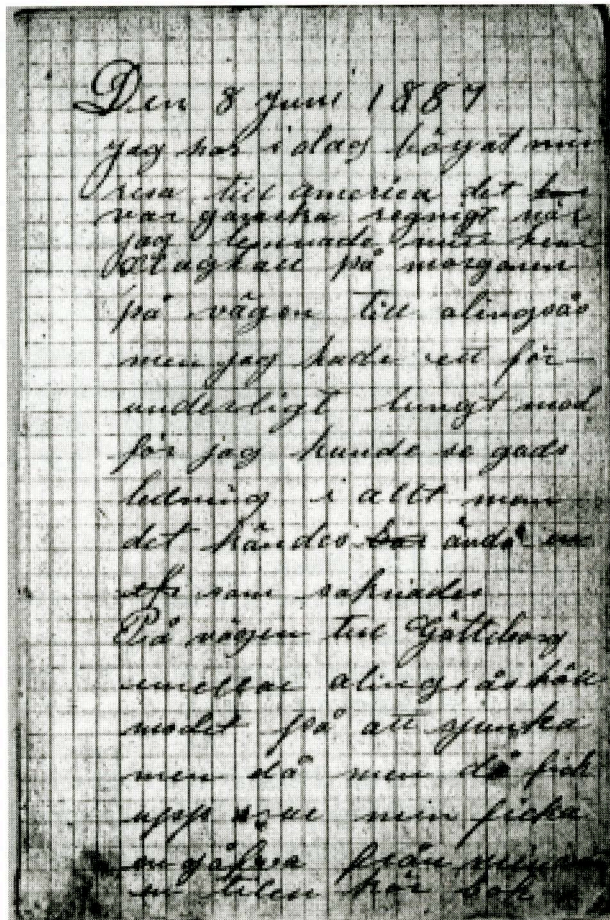
I had revisited the birthplace of Grandpa Carl August Youngquist and stood on the foundation of his family *stuga* as well – the house where he and his seven siblings were born. The children were orphaned there after the deaths of both parents by the time Grandpa was seven. Then there was the quaint house in Linderås where my great-grandmother had lived. I had seen that too. It had taken all day to locate it. Relatives from the opposite side of the family drove three hours out of their way to insure that I found the right house. How could Sofia Johnson have left this lovely location for Colorado and then California? Without her influence, would our family have valued higher education as much as we do? A skilled seamstress, Grandma Sofia wanted more for her children and often said, "A college education is something no one can take away from you." Her children, grandchildren, and great-grand-

children – of which I am one – listened.

I thought about the diary of my great-grandfather Swan Johnson who, at 20 years of age, had written on June 8, 1887:

"I have today started my journey to America. It was quite rainy when I left my home, Slaghall, in the morning on the way to Alingsås. But I had a remarkably calm spirit, because I could see God's guidance in everything. It still felt like something was missing. On the way to Göteborg from Alingsås, my mood was sinking, but then I took out from my pocket a gift from my friend, a little dear book. Then I saw the saying, 'As I have been with Moses, so shall I also be with you. I will not abandon you.'

Joshua 1:5."



And on July 28, 1887, he wrote:
*"It is now evening (11 o'clock) and we have **seen the coast of America**. Many big lighthouses are shining to guide the sailor right. I then think about the many lighthouses that God*

has shown me, so that I should not go down and perish. I am such a vessel on the stormy sea of this world, but God be thanks, he has given me a safe Pilot who knows the way. May I only be still and obey the voice of the spirit. I will now go to rest, and in the morning, God willing, put my foot on American soil."

Somehow none of these stories seemed very trivial as I headed back to the boat and Battery Park in lower Manhattan. We may have been only one family of 12,000,000. But as each immigrant story somehow seemed the same, each story was unique. Birth and death dates were important to record and I had recorded hundreds of them in the last several years. But lessons learned and lives lived out with courage, faith, and

purpose, also needed to be preserved and retold to those who would come after.

I returned home to San Diego to add more data to the collection, and to keep writing.

Note: "At the Portal of America" is an excerpt from *Remembering Heritage: Our Swedish Roots*, a bound 2004 volume on the histories, writings, photographs, and family trees of the Swan Johnson, Carl August Youngquist, and Gustaf Sangren families. It also includes an introductory section on 19th century Swedish peasant history.

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