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A Summer Tour in the Tracks of the Ancestors

BY ELAINE LARSON NEUHAUS

In June 1996 my husband, Carl, and I took a 10-day bus tour originating in Rapid City and ending in Salt Lake City. While there we were able to spend half a day at the Family History Center Library. After learning how many records they held with family history, we became interested in searching for our ancestors. Since my father’s “delayed” birth certificate contained the names and place of birth for my farfar and farmor, that was the beginning of my search.

My Larsson Side
My paternal grandfather was Carl Wilhelm Larsson born in Ankarsrum, Hjorted, Sweden, and my paternal grandmother was Alma Desideria Säker, born in Grythyttan, Sweden. I posted my first query on a Swedish website and the first reply I received was from Robert Samuelsson of Gagnef. He told me that he lived very close to the archives in Leksand, Sweden, and that he had found some of the records for my Larsson side.

My Säker Side
Grythyttan, just northeast of Karlskoga, is where my great-grandfather (farmors far) Gustav Jonsson Säker was born. Next I received an e-mail from Kjell Nordkvist, a volunteer who works in the Karlskoga Emigration Center. By coincidence, Kjell had a good friend whose wife was also a Säker and a distant cousin of mine (fourth cousin). Her husband had researched the whole family back to 1570, and he made copies of all the ancestor records for me.

Connecting with Sweden
About a year before our planned trip in 1999, I received a letter in the mail postmarked “Sweden.” Since I did not know anyone in Sweden and had been corresponding with both Robert Samuelsson and Kjell Nordkvist by e-mail, I was very anxious to open the envelope and learn “who was sending me a letter?” It turned out to be a second cousin named Birgitta Larsson Fluch, living just north of Stockholm in Mästa! Her grandfather Johan Petter Larsson, born 1868, and my grandfather Carl Wilhelm Larsson, born 1870, were brothers, two of twelve children. Birgitta had received a phone call from Robert Samuelsson about our plans to visit Sweden the following year. In the letter, Birgitta wrote that the family in Sweden did not know there were living relatives in the U.S. and said that she would like to begin corresponding with me.

Birgitta and her husband Rudi invited us to stay in their home for several days and visit other cousins living in the Stockholm area. This alone should have been the biggest thrill of my lifetime, but then the following week I received an e-mail from yet another Larsson. Kerstin Gardner was the granddaughter of the youngest of the twelve Larsson children, Helga Eleonora Larsson, born 1897, and she invited us to spend several days visiting her home in Västervik, which is about a four-hour ride by bus south of Stockholm.

Birgitta and Kerstin never knew each other so I was able to introduce them “via” the Internet! Birgitta and I were closer in age, and both of us were retired. Kerstin being the youngest was still working and a schoolteacher.

Kerstin sent an interesting request. She said her headmaster had asked that when we visited the school, would Carl and I spend some time with one of his sixth grade classes. In Sweden the children are taught English as a second language but they use audiotapes. He wanted them to experience hearing the language spoken orally with someone from America. I had a good friend who was a sixth grade teacher in one of our local schools. I asked her if it was possible for the class to each write a letter to a student in Sweden and we would deliver them. She was excited about the project. In addition to the students’ letters, my husband Carl went to the school to take photos of the class and included other areas of the school including the library and the lunchroom. He thought the students in Sweden would be interested in seeing schools in our country. When we visited the school in Västervik, we discovered their students had already written letters for us to take back to our school. After reading them we found that there were very similar to the ones we had brought from the U.S. So it shows that children are the same everywhere. Carl also took pictures at the school in Sweden and had them developed into slides for a presentation when we returned home.
Arriving in Sweden

Finally the day arrived when we left the Atlanta airport heading for New York, changed planes, and landed the next day at the airport in Stockholm. Waiting for us with a large sign so that we would recognize them were Birgitta, her husband Rudi, another cousin, Torbjörn, his wife Irene, and cousin Güsta. I don’t know who were the most excited, Carl and I, or the cousins and their spouses. They had never known that they had any living relatives in the United States and, of course, I had never known of their existence. While we now live in the state of Georgia, fabled southern hospitality does not hold a candle to Swedish hospitality!

During the months of corresponding with Birgitta and Kerstin via the Internet, another relative had also contacted me. He is the son of my cousin Torbjörn and his name is Björn (which means bear in Swedish). Björn was a law school student in Stockholm. We wrote frequently, and became good friends. We were both avid readers and enjoyed many of the same authors such as John Grisham and Clive Cussler. Carl collected all the hard-covered books (about twenty) by these two authors that we had already read, put them in a spare suitcase, and took them to Sweden with the other gifts.

While we arrived in Sweden “bearing gifts” we were equally surprised with also being recipients of gifts. I presented Birgitta with a framed counted cross-stitched picture, and she had also made one to give to me! While we traveled to Sweden with an extra large suitcase to bring gifts, we were to return home with the suitcase replaced with the gifts we received.

During our first week in Sweden, as houseguests of cousin Birgitta, we first took a bus tour of Stockholm. We also visited the Vasa Museum and its famous ship, and walked through Gamla Stan (Old Town). We visited the church and the little shops. The first Sunday in Sweden, Birgitta took us to the lovely old church where she sings in the choir. The churches in Sweden are very old and ornate with its members so faithfully preserving their beauty. Even the church cemetery grounds, with its walkways of crushed stone, are raked every day. The stones are those from old graves, no longer rented (like the ones owned in the U.S.) by the families of the deceased, who had died so very long ago. We visited Sigtuna, the oldest town in Sweden dating back to 980 A.D. In the evenings, Birgitta prepared many of the typical Swedish meals for us to experience. Some evenings we played card games and ate ice cream that is so typical in the U.S. And we played Saturday night Bingo via the television, which is broadcast throughout the whole of Sweden!

To Västervik

After the first week the cousins put Carl and me on a bus. From Stockholm, we traveled the four hours to the seaside town of Västervik, where we were cousin Kerstin’s guests for the next week. She and her husband Rolf had a unique home located on the outskirts of town. It had once been a combination of a one-room schoolhouse with the living quarters attached for the teacher. The main floor with the large classroom contained many pieces of antique furniture. Across the road from their home is the church where Kerstin is the organist.

The second week, when we were with Kerstin, we were able to visit the place where my far far Carl Wil-
New Internet friends
The year before, I had met a young fellow on the Internet by the name of Roger Olofsson. He read my query for my ancestor search on one of the Swedish websites. Roger offered to help me search for my ancestors in Sweden in exchange for my helping him to find living relatives in the U.S. Roger and I became Internet friends and it was not until the weeks before our planned trip that I shared our itinerary with him and found that he also lives in Västervik. We made plans to meet in person, and one evening, Kerstin, Rolf, Carl, and I met with Roger and his girl friend Elisabet at a local restaurant. We had a delightful evening and have kept in touch.

On the last day we were guests of Kerstin and Rolf, we visited the glass factory in Orrefors and afterwards had afternoon coffee with an aunt of Rolf’s before traveling to the Emigration Center and museum in Växjö. It was a surprise to see a recreated street of Chicago in the early days about the time when my grandparents had first arrived in the U.S. The street map on display was the identical one that I have showing where my maternal great-grandparents, the Samuelssons, had lived.

And to Karlskoga
At the end of the week Kerstin and Rolf put us on the bus for Karlskoga. The second morning at the hotel the desk clerk said she had a message that we would be picked up at 4 p.m! It was a real mystery of who knew we were here and who was picking us up. A nice young man, Jan-Erik Öhrn, in his 40’s, arrived with his wife and his mother, Sonja Säker Öhrn, who was another distant cousin of mine. She had also learned of my existence and that we would be in Karlskoga to visit the birthplace of my farmors far, Gustav Jonsson Säker, who was the brother of Sonja’s farfars far. She did not speak English so her son was not only our chauffeur but also our translator. Jan-Erik drove us around the area to show us all the places where our ancestors had lived including the farm where Sonja’s and my great-grandfathers were born and lived. The couple that now owned the house had several photos and copies of documents concerning our ancestors that they gave to us. The following day, we were able to meet with Kjell Nordkvist, the volunteer at the emigration center, and able to thank him in person. From there we walked to the Karlskoga kyrka to see the church where my farmors far, Gustav Jonsson Säker, was baptized as an infant.

Visit in Grythyttan
The next day we rented a car and traveled north to Grythyttan, the town where my farmor was born. It is the “home” of a famous restaurant and culinary school. We had a delightful meal and then visited the cemetery. My farmors far, Gustav Jonsson Säker, died in 1904 and a couple of months later, my farmors mor came to Chicago. At the cemetery, the caretaker told us about the cemetery plots being rented for only twenty-five years and if the fee was not renewed, it was then used for another burial. If there had been a grave marker at the time, it would have been removed and crushed for gravel used for the walkways. To help us, the caretaker asked for my ancestor notes as he thought maybe he would be able to find a family name for me. When he saw the name Jacob Finne who arrived in Grythyttan in 1570, the gentleman became quite excited. He told me “you have a very famous ancestor!” It seems that Jacob Finne was born in Finland and the Swedish government at that time offered land in Sweden to people in Finland (which was an integrated part of the kingdom). These men would come to Sweden and start a village. Because they could not pronounce his Finnish name, Jacob was given the surname of Finne.

Soon going home
After our stay in Karlskoga, we again traveled by bus to Uppland and spent the night in a hotel. The next morning Birgitta and Rudi took us to the archives to show us where Birgitta had been researching her ancestors on her mother’s side of the family. Then we traveled back to their home in Mästra where we spent the rest of our stay in Sweden. During that week we visited another glass factory, which was interesting. While the glass pieces created there were nice, they were not quite as beautiful as the ones in Orrefors.

Visiting a large department store in downtown Stockholm was another experience, especially the meat market, the toy department, and the music department. Clothing and houseware departments were very similar to the U.S. but fun to visit. Our last Sunday in Sweden, the cousins hosted a smörgåsbord for us at the Ulriksdals Wärdshus just outside of Stockholm. There were twenty-six relatives in attendance with the cousins, their children, and their grandchildren. We dined in the special room where the queen of Sweden dines and I had never seen herring prepared in so many different ways. I still prefer our traditional pickled herring in cream sauce or wine sauce, though.

If I had not become interested in searching for my Swedish ancestors, I would never have found these living and loving relatives or had this wonderful and memorable experience. We plan to return again some day to Sweden for another visit and hopefully one day they will visit us so we are able to share our home and country with them.

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