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# An Emigrant's Different Life Story

## From Gotland to Kansas – what happened ?

BY KERSTIN JONMYREN

In my line of business as a professional genealogist I have come across many different life stories of Swedish-American emigrants. Many of them, maybe most of them, tell about honest people, who in their new home country managed to achieve decent living conditions primarily by hard work. Still, now and then, hard-working people could change their lives in unexpected ways. A few years ago I got a letter from Arizona. A Swedish-American named James wanted help in finding his roots on Gotland, which is the largest island in the Baltic Sea. An emigrant called Johan Gottberg once left from there for America. Gottberg was presumably born 1821 in Visby, the island's main city.

This was the descendant's scarce information on his great-grandfather from Gotland. The limited information made this case difficult, although I have specialized in Gotlandian genealogy for decades. As could be expected, Gottberg was not born in Visby, but instead in one of about one hundred smaller rural parishes surrounding the city. From experience I know that many emigrants, once they reached America, named the closest city to their home parish as their place of birth in records and censuses. Normally, at least to a Swede, city names are more well-known than the name of rural parishes.

As far as tracking Johan Gottberg was concerned, the rather uncom-

mon surname was a clear advantage. There are a few Gottberg families residing on Gotland today, but very soon I concluded that this man was not related to them. Then I realized, the name itself could be the solution. The vowels *o* and *ö*, which look similar to a non-Swede but are pronounced rather differently in Swedish, could be the key. And that is how I found Johan Göthberg with an *ö* and an *h* – in a parish called Grötlingbo in the southern part of Gotland. Johan Göthberg's life was quite fascinating and divided into two separate phases – Grötlingboud, Gotland, Sweden, and Denmark, Kansas, U.S.A.



*Ljugarn fishing harbor, north of Grötlingboud, around 1900.*

## Grötlingboud, Gotland, Sweden

Grötlingboud is a long and narrow peninsula belonging to the parish Grötlingbo on Gotland. Some parts of Grötlingbo have very fertile soil and the area has probably been populated since the Stone Age, with archaeological remains from the Viking Age. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the peninsula of Grötlingboud was mainly used for grazing sheep, because the soil was poor. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Scandinavian population grew rapidly, causing overpopulation, which forced people to cultivate less fertile soil. Primarily farm laborers and sailors settled down at Grötlingboud.

In 1821, in a house at the uttermost point of the peninsula, Johan Niklas Göthberg was born, son to a sailor and saltpeter boiler. At the age of 25, Johan married Brita Friberg, a sailor's daughter. A couple of years earlier Brita's father had drowned in a storm at sea, thus she lived alone in a small house with her mother. Johan was very needed in the house. Brita gave birth to four children in the years to come, and Johan had to accept all kinds of work to provide for the family. Sometimes he was a farm laborer, sometimes a shepherd and field guard (in those days there were not many fences in the Scandinavian landscape, instead grazing cattle had to be guarded and protected). Primarily, though, Johan Göthberg made his living from being a fisherman.

The fisherman's trade is not always very safe and Johan had, according to family tradition, faced danger a couple of times. At one point his small fishing boat sank at sea, and he survived only because of his strong constitution and stamina. Family tradition also describes Johan Göthberg's personality as rather harsh and erratic. For a couple of years Johan deserted his family and nobody knew where he was. However, much of this changed when Johan found salvation in the Baptist Church.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Baptist movement reached Got-

land. The movement was promoted intensely by preachers all over the island, and its new and progressive religious ideas were well received, and soon many people were affected. The Baptist Church contrasted with the conservative Swedish Luthern Church, with its strict and sometimes lofty ministers. Baptist congregations were founded all over Gotland, and attracted members also among poorer people. The Göthberg family was one of them, and they remained Baptists all along.

In 1875, Brita Göthberg died. In the following year the grown up son Lars left the house to get married and move to another parish. The older son Olof was married already in 1870 and had become a farmer. Since one daughter had died as an infant, there were only two people left in the Göthberg household – Johan and his 23-year-old daughter Catharina.

## Denmark, Kansas, U.S.A.

The story of Johan Göthberg could very well have ended there, but instead it was just about to enter another phase. In 1879, at the age of 58, Johan decided to leave his routine life in Grötlingboud and emigrate from Sweden to America together with his daughter Catharina. The fisherman Johan ended up in Kansas, very far from the any sea. Instead he became a farmer, at first in Concordia, but rather soon he moved to Denmark County – a Danish-Swedish settlement in Kansas.

There, at the age of 64, Johan, who had changed his last name to Gottberg, married a 27 year younger woman from Sweden. She was Sofia Bergman from Närke province in Sweden, a teacher's daughter, who had emigrated together with her young illegitimate son. Sofia and Johan had four children together – Berta, Catherine, Margaret, and Andrew. The fate of Johan's daughter Catharina is unknown, but probably she died rather soon after arriving in America, since one of Johan's younger children was also called Catherine. All the children of the

American Gottberg family lived good and long lives. They all got married and today they have a great number of descendants.

I have seen a photo of Johan Gottberg's American children. They are all slim, tall, and look industrious – just like their father, I have been told. The descendants still know of many stories about Johan Gottberg, mainly about his straightforward and talkative Gotlandian manners. Apparently, he never learned any English, but he was still able to manage quite well, surrounded by mainly Danish and Swedish immigrants.

Göthberg, who became Gottberg, had lived a great part of his life being a fisherman at sea. In his late fifties he ended up being a farmer on the Kansas prairie, far away from any sea, and obviously he was satisfied by it. Among his neighbors in Kansas, he was known to be a gifted farmer and a handy repairman of tools, carriages, and carriage wheels. He lived to be 87 years old. When he died in 1908, he was surrounded by children and grandchildren on his own prosperous farm. Well done, to say the least, by a 58 year-old and very poor immigrant from Gotland, Sweden!

## Grötlingboud revisited

Johan Gottberg never returned to Gotland, although he had both children and grandchildren there. Instead in 1999 his great-grandson James came to visit with his family, only to find that the Swedish family had done very well too. It was a nice family reunion, more than one hundred years after Johan Göthberg emigrated. The old Göthberg home had been torn down long ago. The Grötlingboud, populated by the poorest people of the parish, which Gottberg left behind, has changed considerably since then. The Grötlingboud of today is a very attractive area for exclusive homes, populated primarily by the rich and famous.

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