

9-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Johnson Norman, Darlene (2004) "Who are these Swedish Immigrants," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 24 : No. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol24/iss3/2>

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Who Are These Swedish Immigrants of Attleboro, Massachusetts?

or

Questions I Wish I Had Asked My Grandparents Before It Was Too Late!

BY DARLENE JOHNSON NORMAN

In the fall of 2002, I had asked my father about a certain old picture that I believed was in my Grandparents' photo box now stored in my aunt's house. In spite of the fact that they didn't find the picture I requested, I received a group picture of 37 persons from my Aunt Edith at Christmastime. I had never seen it before and it had no identification. The picture was mounted on heavy cardboard but the border, which might have given the name of the photographer, had been removed in order to make it fit in a standard 8" x 10" frame covered with glass. My father could recognize both my grandfather, *Emil Johnson*, as number 32 in the third row and his Uncle *Anton* who was seated. We believe the picture may have been taken about 1906.

Attleboro immigrants

To help provide some background information, I will share what is known about a few of the Swedish immigrants in Attleboro. Emil Johnson was the youngest of eight children in his family who immigrated to America. His older brother, Anton, and family are seated in the second row. Anton and Elizabeth's first child, Alfhild, was born 23 January 1905, so the picture may have been taken about 1906-7. Copies of this picture have been sent to several persons with the hope that someone may provide names for more individuals.

Chain migration from Halland

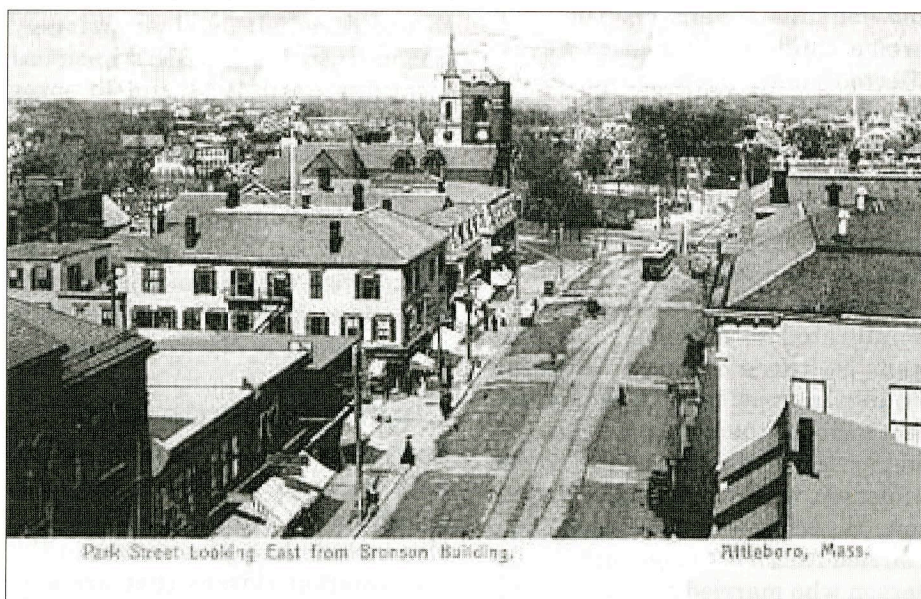
Our genealogical research has shown

that numerous young Swedish adults on our family tree immigrated to the Providence/Attleboro area in the late 1800s. In 1883, 19 year-old Ben (Bernander Berntsson) Benson¹ emigrated from his home parish, *Skällinge*, which is located a few kilometers east of Varberg in Halland *län*. He was followed by three of his siblings² before a cousin, named Hanna (Eliasdotter) Johnson,³ of a neighboring parish called *Nösslinge*, emigrated in 1891. At 18 years of age, she was the first member of her family to leave her homeland.

Hanna's destination was Providence, Rhode Island, but in later years she lived in Pawtucket. All of Hanna's seven siblings immigrated to America between 1891 and 1905. They were Johan (John), Albertina, Emelia,⁴ Anton, Carl,⁵ Josefina,⁶ and Emil⁷ Johnson, my grandfather. Interestingly, four of them eventually returned to Sweden to live for the

rest of their lives. In Sweden, their father's name was Elias Johansson and following the patronymic naming pattern, they were known as Eliassons, but when they arrived in America, each of them called themselves Johnson. John Johnson settled in Providence while six of his younger siblings went on to the town of Attleboro, Massachusetts, which was the hub of jewelry production in those days.

Since three of their cousins, Ben, John A., and John B. Benson, had already emigrated to Attleboro, they must have heard about the job market in that city through letters. The oldest cousin, Ben Benson, had found a job driving a streetcar and was listed as a motorman in the Attleboro city directories. At one time John B. Benson was a gardener and later he built a large home at the foot of Cliff street where they took in boarders for many years. He was a



janitor at the high school for many years. When Emelia and Josefina (Eliasson) Johnson arrived in Attleboro, they found work in a huge wood-framed mansion called the Sheffield House on North Main Street. They became the “cook” and “housekeeper” for the wealthy family of George Sheffield.⁸ When their brother, Carl Johnson, immigrated in 1903, he also was employed by that family for a few years according to his son, George.

The three Benson brothers came from a family of ten children in Sweden.⁹ Their older sister, Bernhardina, had married Johan Svensson and they also had ten children. Subsequently, beginning in 1901, Bernhardina’s five older children began immigrating to America.¹⁰ First to come were Alma and Carl Johansson in 1901, followed by Oscar, Axel, and Ellen. However, each of the five siblings used the surname Arvidson in America though they would have been Johanssons had they followed the patronymic naming pattern in Sweden. As it happens, the five younger siblings that remained in Sweden are known as “Svenssons.” Doesn’t that make a case for diligent preservation of the original family surname?

A Västergötland addition

Meanwhile, not far from Skällinge, in the parish of *Mårdaklev* in Älvsborg län, lived the family of Anders and Johanna Johansson. They had twelve children.¹¹ “America Fever” affected young people in all of the Swedish parishes along the west coast and the first of the Andersson siblings to emigrate was Klara. At 18 years of age, she arrived in Pawtucket in 1887 and was known by the surname Anderson. By 1913, ten of the twelve Anderson children had immigrated to Attleboro. As time went by, three of these Anderson siblings married into our family tree that includes the Bensons, Johnsons, and Arvidsons. They are Anna Louisa Anderson, who married John B. Benson, H. Elizabeth Anderson, who married Anton Johnson, and Ed Anderson who married Alma Arvidson.

The Swedish community in Attleboro

The Swedish immigrant families brought their language, traditions, and faith with them when they came to a new country in search of greater opportunities. In Attleboro, they tended to live in the same neighborhood as other relatives and friends where they felt comfortable communicating in their native language.¹² When the new immigrants arrived, they frequently boarded in the homes of relatives. Language and family kept the immigrants closely bonded together.

Some of the Swedes were skilled in construction and woodworking. They built homes three stories high called “three-deckers” in which there was a full apartment on each floor. When a son or daughter married, they could move into the upper flat of their parents’ home and get a bargain on the rent.

As early as 1892, some of the Swedes in Attleboro gathered to worship in each other’s homes until their meetings grew too large and then they rented a room in the YMCA.¹³ In 1903, the Swedish Evangelical Free Church was formed with twenty-five charter members. In the 1913 Attleboro City Directory it is listed as the “Swedish Evangelical Free Church, South Main, cor Beacon” which indicates it was located at the corner of South Main Street and Beacon Street. They continued to use Swedish as their primary language in the Church’s business meetings until 1944 and in some worship services until 1946. In 1949, the name of the church was changed from Swedish Evangelical Free Church to Evangelical Covenant Church of Attleboro and its affiliation with that denomination was formalized in 1953. The congregation now worships in North Attleboro.

Church Records tells

Early church record books show the date persons were received into membership or were married, and also include lists of students in the confirmation classes that are still

preserved in the Evangelical Covenant Church.¹⁴ The pastor even recorded the name of the parish in Sweden from which the members had come. We know that Carl and Hulda Johnson’s children were confirmed in the Covenant Church.¹⁵ Anton and Elizabeth Johnson were faithful members of the same church.

Emil Johnson worked in a jewelry factory during the five years he lived in Attleboro and he boarded at the home of his brother, Anton, at 48 John Street.¹⁶ He left in 1911 to settle near more Swedes in rural Houston County, Minnesota, where he married Ada (Augustsdotter) Johnson whom he had met in Attleboro. They continued to speak Swedish in their farm home near the town of Houston. Swedish was the primary language of their children until they entered first grade in the one-room country school and the time had arrived to learn English.

Who are they?

We wonder if this picture shows a group of young families who gathered for a church meeting in Attleboro? Or could it be a group of relatives who had gathered for an evening of fellowship or reunion? The picture shows that thirty-seven people, dressed in their Sunday best, had gathered together inside someone’s home. They took the time to arrange themselves into orderly rows in front of the piano so that almost everyone could be seen by the camera. Could there be a copy of this picture in your ancestor’s box of memories? Did anyone write down the names of everyone pictured for descendants to contemplate almost one hundred years later?

The Anderson Family had a wonderful group picture taken of their whole family with spouses and children outdoors on a lovely day in 1910. Amazingly, a copy of that picture was found with all persons identified! With the help of some Anderson descendants, it has been possible to determine the names of some persons on this indoor group picture.



Indoor Group Picture Identification taken about 1906.

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Front Row:</i> | | |
| 1. | 15. | 32. Emil Johnson (DN) |
| 2. | 16. | 33. Carl Adolf Anderson |
| 3. | 17. | 34. Louis Anderson |
| 4. | 18. | |
| 5. Selma Svenson Johnson | 19. | <i>Row 5:</i> |
| | 20. | 35. Edward Anderson |
| <i>Row 2:</i> | 21. | 36. John Benson (PM) |
| 6. Anna Svenson Ström (EL) | 22. | 37. Annie Anderson Benson (PM) |
| 7. | | |
| 8. | <i>Row 4:</i> | (AH) per Anita Sandberg Hanna |
| 9. Anton Johnson (DN) | 23. Johanna Anderson (PM) | 2/2003 |
| 10. Alfild Johnson | 24. Klas Charles Anderson (PM) | (PM) per Priscilla Anderson |
| 11. Elizabeth Anderson Johnson | 25. Nathaniel Sandberg (AH) | MacGregor 6/03 |
| 12. Birger Johnson (PM) | 26. Hilda Anderson Sandberg (AH) | (GE) per Gertrude Swanson |
| | 27. Clara Anderson Swanson | Erickson |
| | 28. Ruth Swanson? (GE) | (DN) per Darlene Johnson Norman |
| <i>Row 3:</i> | 29. Lillian Swanson? (GE) | |
| 13. | 30. Alma Anderson | |
| 14. | 31. | |

Endnotes

- ¹ On 20 April 1883, Bernander Berntsson boarded the *Orlando* and left Göteborg bound for Hull, England, along with the following three young men: Adolf E. Anderson, Swen A. Jonson, and Swen J. Anderson. Both Adolf and Bernander listed their destination as New York while the two Swens were bound for Sheffield. FHL film #0216594, page 3.
- ² Three of Bernander's siblings were: Johan Albin Berntsson, age 18, passenger #3572, boarded the *Romeo* and left Göteborg bound for Hull, England, on 4 May 1888. His destination was Providence, RI. FHL film #0216600. On 29 March 1889, Matilda Berntsson, age 23, passenger #3461, boarded the *Livorno* bound for Hull, England. Her destination was Boston, MA. FHL film #0216602. On 20 June 1890, J. B. Berntsson, age 21 from Skällinge, Halland, boarded the *Romeo* and left Göteborg bound for Hull, England. His destination was Boston. FHL film #0216604.
- ³ On 27 March 1891, Hanna Eliason, age 18, passenger #7425, boarded the *Romeo* and left Göteborg bound for Hull, England. Her destination was New York. FHL film #0216,606.
- ⁴ On 20 October 1899, Beata Eliason, age 24, passenger #8930 and her brother, Anton, age 23, passenger #8931, from Nösslinge parish in Halland, boarded the *Romeo* in Göteborg bound for Hull, England. FHL film #0216617.
- ⁵ On 25 March 1903, Carl O. Johansson, age 22, passenger #35432 of Nösslinge, boarded the *Rollo* bound for Grimsby, England. FHL film #0216622. He left Liverpool aboard the *Umbria*, passenger #35432, and arrived in New York 6 April 1903. His destination was his brother, Anton Johanson, 19 Cliff Street, Attleboro, MA. FHL film #01399021.
- ⁶ On 4 September 1903, Josefina Johanson, age 20, passenger #41109 of Nösslinge, boarded the *Ariosto* bound for Hull, England. FHL film #0216623. She left Liverpool 8 September 1903 aboard the *Saxonia*, passenger #26, and arrived in Boston on 17 September, 1903. Her destination was her sisters, Emelia Jonson-Mrs. Geo. Sheffield, Attleboro, MA. & Hannah Johnson, 25 Washington St., Pawtucket. FHL film #1404191.
- ⁷ On 24 February 1905, Emil Eliason, age 19, passenger #57644 of Nösslinge, boarded the *Calypso* bound for Hull, England. FHL film #0216626. He left Liverpool aboard the *Saxonia* of the Cunard Line and arrived in Boston 10 March 1905. FHL film #1724634.
- ⁸ 1910 Federal Census for Attleboro, MA, ED 102, Supervisor's District 49, Ward Precinct W, Sheet 13A The Sheffield family lived at 302 N Main Street.
- ⁹ The ten children of Bernt Aron Johansson and Anna Louisa Andersdotter are listed on the 1863-1872 *husförhörslängd* for the Öfralia farm in Skällinge parish on page 194 in the middle of FHL film #0,400,305. They are *Johan Adolf, Bernhardina Albertina, Anton Edvard, Bernander, Matilda Louisa, Johan Bernt, Johan Albin, Clas Aron, Carolina Augusta, and Carl Julius*.
- ¹⁰ Listed on *husförhörslängd* for Nedralia farm on page 81 in Skällinge parish in Halland län. Bernhardina's children were *Alma Elfrida, Carl, Clara Matilda* (died young), *Axel, Oscar, Clara Melissa, Ellen Elizabeth, Bernardina Charlotta, Sven Daniel, Gunnar, Ernst, and Arvid*. FHL film #0400305. Received information regarding immigration of five Arvidson siblings from Edith Arvidson Layton, the daughter of Carl Arvidson who immigrated in 1901 and lived on East Fourth Street according to 1930 Federal Census of Attleboro City in Bristol County, Ward 2, ED 3-16, Supervisor's District 10, Sheet # 16B, Line 84. In spite of spending some time searching the 1901 immigration index for exact surname and date that Carl left Sweden, the search has been unsuccessful.
- ¹¹ Children of Anders Johansson and Johanna Gustafva were *Gustafva Clare Lina, Johannes Andrew, Clara Josefina, Claus (Charles), Anna Louisa, Johan August, Edward L., Hanna Elizabeth, Carl Adolf, Ida Sofia, Axel Ludvig (Louis A.)*, and *Hilda Maria*. Received list of children from Gertrude Swanson Erickson, daughter of Ida Sofia Anderson Swanson, whose husband was one of the first to gather Anderson genealogy.
- ¹² Received information and pictures of homes in Swedish neighborhood in Attleboro from Anita Sandberg Hanna, daughter of Hilda Maria Anderson Sandberg, who grew up in Attleboro.
- ¹³ Copy of *The Beacon*, Banquet Beacon Special Edition, October 5, 2003, received from Gertrude Swanson Erickson. See "Beginnings - The Establishing of our Congregation", page 4 and 5.
- ¹⁴ Searched Book 1 and Book 2 of Evangelical Covenant Church in North Attleboro by appointment on October 7, 2003. Those records are also available on film at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* Book 2, page 218, Confirmation Classes, list for class of 1922 and 1929.
- ¹⁶ 1910 Federal Census for Attleboro, MA, ED 101, Supervisors District 119, Sheet #8B, Line 72.

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