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From Sweden to Iowa: The Lawson Family

BY MARILYN BODE

The Family Church Letter

The following is a translation from Swedish of a church letter of transfer, mostly a word for word translation. The letter is from the church pastor in Sweden. The translation is by Rev. Ole Olson, minister at the Methodist Church in Dexter, Iowa, around 1950.

“From Sweden and also from Halland län, Höks county (*härad*), Veinge parish, moving to North America the following household: Former farm owner *Pehr Larrson* of this place and of the parents *Lars Bengtsson* and *Elna Hansdotter*, born the 8th and baptized the 15th of May, 1815, and his wife *Elna Nilsson* in Tönnersjö parish, and of the parents *Nils Andersson* and *Pernilla Andersdotter*, born the 6th of June and baptized the 4th of July, 1813, and bringing with them eight children.

“The daughters, *Pernilla*, born the 25th and baptized the 30th of June, 1839. *Beate*, born the 4th and baptized the 8th of March, 1842. *Christina*, born the 7th and baptized the 11th of September, 1844.

“And also the sons *Lars*, born the 11th and baptized the 21st of February, 1847. *Nils* born the 6th and baptized the 17th of June, 1849. *Hans* born the 9th and baptized the 17th of January, 1851. *Anders*, born the 23rd and baptized the 29th of May, 1853. And *Jacob*, born the 20th and baptized the 31st of December, 1855, all within Weinge parish. [One line out, but seemingly it has to do with the ability to read and about Bible knowledge].

“*Pernilla* can read and has tolerable Bible knowledge, *Beate* and *Christina* with help can read and can



Per Larsson a.k.a. Peter Lawson.

recite from memory from the Catechism. Parents have forgotten. Oldest daughter has retained what she learned and only with her and her father is found tolerable good conception of Christianity. Of the children, only the oldest daughter *Pernilla* is to the Lord's Holy Communion permitted and she together with the parents were of this partakers on the day of Ascension on the first of the present month. All members of the household possess good character and the oldest daughter is for marriage free (marriageable). With the exception of the youngest son, the parents and all children are vaccinated.

“The Lord being through life their leader, their comfort (consolation) and help, and having over them his sheltering hand.

“Veinge rectory the 8th of May, 1856 [Name undecipherable], Prebend Dignitary Dean.”



Elna Nilsson a.k.a. Ellen Lawson.

The First 25 Years

Pehr and *Elna Larsson* came to the United States in 1856 with their 8 children, the youngest of whom, *Jacob*, was less than a year old. He was my great-grandfather. In the United States, the family changed its name to *Lawson* and changed several of their first names as well: *Pehr* became *Peter*; *Elna* became *Ellen*; *Pernilla*, *Nellie*; *Beate* became *Beatrice*; *Lars*, *Lewis*; *Hans*, *Peter* (called *Pete*); *Nils*, *Nelson*; and *Anders*, *Andrew*.

After taking up residence in Illinois, *Peter* and *Ellen* had two more children, *Emma* and *Albert*. The 1870 census indicates that *Emma* was 11 in 1870 and *Albert* was 8. In 1870, the family was living in Cedar township, Knox County, Illinois, just south of Galesburg. *Peter* was a farmer and his sons worked on the farm. The Atlas Map of Knox County, 1870,

shows the land as being in sections 14 and 15 of Cedar township.

Lewis went to war

In 1864 while living in Illinois, Lewis, who would have been 17 at the time, served in the Civil War (for the Union). The address given on his papers is Abingdon, Illinois, a small town about 15 miles south of Galesburg. He listed his occupation as farmer. These papers also indicate that he was 5 feet 1 inch tall with blond hair and blue eyes. Lewis was part of the 137th Infantry Illinois volunteers which served 100 days during 1864 beginning June 5 and mustering out September 4, 1864. The 137th Infantry was stationed near Memphis, Tennessee, where they were on picket duty on the Hernando road. He was later given a certificate signed by Abraham Lincoln thanking him for his service, dated December 15, 1864. The original certificate remains in the family.

[Editor's note: see his picture on the front cover.]

The daughters

Nellie was married to Jacob Nelson in August, 1859, by the Rev. T. N. Hasselquist. They had two children. Beatrice married Paul Tulin in Knox



Three Sisters: Nellie, Emma and Beatrice.

County (date unknown) and had one child. It is not known what happened to Christina as there is no record of her after the church letter in Sweden. Emma never married.

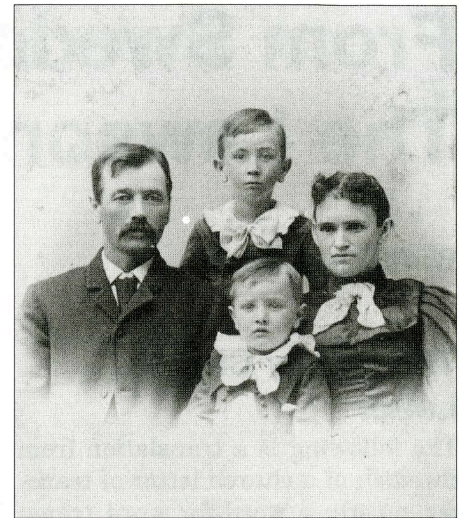
Life in Iowa

Twenty-five years later, in the 1880s, the Lawsons all moved to Iowa. They bought 700 acres of land in Adair and Madison counties. Their main residence was in Harrison township south of Stuart. Nellie and Jacob Nelson and Beatrice and Paul Tulin also moved their families to Iowa. According to family lore, Albert left home and went west before 1900 and it is not known where he lived or when he died.

The parents, Peter and Ellen, died only a few hours apart in December, 1899. She died on Christmas Eve and he died on Christmas Day, unaware that Ellen had passed away a few hours earlier. Ellen was 87 and Peter 85 at the time of their deaths. They are buried in the cemetery in Stuart, Iowa.

The married brothers

Of the brothers, only Nelson and Jacob married. Nelson married Clara Hoffman and had one son who died young. Jacob (always called Jake)



Jake and Minne Lawson with sons Clyde (in back) and Robin.

married Minnie Smith in 1888 and lived in Lincoln township south of Dexter. They had three children: Jacob Clyde Lawson (born in 1890 and always called Clyde), Robin Lawson (born in 1891), and Darlene Lawson (born in 1905). Jake had Bright's disease, a kidney disease, and traveled out west in 1909 looking for a cure from the hot springs in several states. There are a series of postcards that Jake sent to Minnie during this time indicating where he was seeking relief from the pain of his disease. Minnie had heart trouble and her sister, Elizabeth Smith, took care of her and Darlene. Jake and Minnie moved off the farm to a house next to Elizabeth's in Stuart. Minnie died in 1910 at age 43 when Darlene, the youngest child, was about 5 years old, and Jake died 10 weeks later in 1911 of kidney disease at age 55. Minnie's sister, Elizabeth, raised Darlene after her parents' deaths. Neither Robin nor Darlene married.

The bachelor farmers

The three bachelor brothers, Lewis, Andrew, and Pete, farmed with their parents until the deaths of Peter and Ellen and then continued farming together living with their sister Emma until their deaths. Andrew was known for his fine horses and fancy buggies and he served as Director of the Lincoln Mutual Telephone Company in 1902. He had several glass eyes because he had

lost an eye while farming.

Each brother specialized in some aspect of the farming operation: Andrew planted the corn and was known for laying out perfectly straight rows. Pete raised the cattle and Lewis was the hog farmer. They also sold seed corn. In his old age, Lewis liked to work with wood and made wooden puzzles. Lewis was an active member of the GAR [Grand Army of the Republic] for many years and was commissioned by the commander-in-chief of Grand Army as an aide-de-camp in 1936. Emma kept house for her three brothers. They built a rather grand farm house on one of the farms south of Stuart but would not spend the money to paint the walls or hang curtains. Although they spoke English and were good businessmen, they sometimes chose to speak Swedish to each other, probably to keep others out of the conversation. Their nieces and nephews remember them as taciturn, somewhat humorless old people, who did not offer information about their lives as immigrants. Pictures of them in their younger days indicate that they were dapper young men, very well dressed. Pictures of the young Emma show an vibrant, stylish young woman. They lived long lives: Peter died in 1936 at age 85; both Andrew, at age 87, and Lewis, at age 93, died in 1940; and Emma, at age 88, died in 1947. All four are buried in Stuart.

The heirs to the Lawson farms were the children of Clyde Lawson. He married Sarah May Wilder in 1920 and they had seven children: Esther, Robert, Sylvia, Fred, Gene, Roy, and Ruth. Three of the farms still survive as century farms – farms bought and farmed by the Lawson family for more than 100 years. My father is Robert and he and my mother still live on one of the farms.

Our trip to Sweden

In 2000, my parents, my cousin, my husband and I traveled to Sweden to see where our ancestors had lived. From the church letter, we knew where to find the churches that Pehr



Lewis Lawson in front of the family house south of Stuart, Iowa, circa 1939.

and Elna had attended. I made reservations for us to stay in a bed and breakfast called *Alslöfs Gård* on a farm near Veinge. Ingrid and Carl-Viktor Olsson were our hosts and are wonderfully friendly people.

When Ingrid learned that I was interested in the history of my family, she showed me a 3-ring binder with the church records of the Veinge parish – all typed. In those records, I was able to trace Per Larsson's family back for several generations, starting with the information in the church letter.

We attended a church service at Tönnersjö, Elna's family's church. Although the service was in Swedish and we do not speak Swedish, I could sometimes follow the service because of the cadence of some of the elements of the liturgy. For example, there is a cadence to the Lord's prayer that is recognizable, as is the Apostle's Creed. We loved seeing the inside of the church and marveled at how old it is. The churchgoers there were very friendly to us.

We also visited the Veinge church and walked the graveyards at both churches. We know of no relatives in Sweden. The church records indicated that the Larsson family lived in Skogsgård before coming to America. Our Bed and Breakfast host told us how to get there, it was only a short distance away, and we went there to see the land that Pehr and Elna had farmed before coming to

Iowa. There are two large stone barns at *Alslöfs Gård*, one was built in 1837. I like to imagine that Pehr helped to build that barn when he lived in that neighborhood.

Although there are a few mysteries left unsolved with the Lawson family – what happened to Christina and Albert, for example – we know much about the fate of the Larsson/Lawson family that left Sweden in 1856. The primary source of information has been the church letter and some information passed down through the family regarding the name changes and approximately where the Lawson family had lived in Illinois before coming to Iowa. Because the Swedish bachelor farmers and their sister Emma lived such long lives, their great-nephews and great-nieces had access to them when they were willing to give out any information. Several pictures still exist of the original immigrants and their families.

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