Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 24 | Number 3 Article 13

9-1-2004

Names in Sweden Throughout History

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Johansson, Kjellberg, Lindelius, Leijonhuvud, and Rask:

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By Kerstin Jonmyren

Quite often I get questions from my research clients about Swedish name changes. They are confused because they don't understand why and how our names were passed down.

To identify people by their father's name is not a new idea. There are examples already in the Bible: Jacob, son of Zebedee, and Jacob, son of Alpheus.

At the end of the Viking era, a large number of rune stones were raised in Sweden; several reasons for this have been offered: one of the better suggestions is that the stones became a fashion among the more powerful farmers to memorialize their families; another that they denote a deed to the land area. There people are sometimes named as son or daughter of someone. One example is Öjul, Erik's son, named on the famous Sparlösa stone.

After the Viking age, this usage solidified; Erik's son became Eriksson, Jacob's daughter became Jacobsdotter. This naming model is usually called **patronymics** and was in practice in all of the Nordic countries. One was given a name at baptism and later was identified also by his or her patronymic, mostly in formal and written contexts. This completely logical naming system lived on unchanged all the way into the 1900s in many places in our country. In principle, patronymics applied to all people, poor or rich. Our 16th century king, known in our time as *Gustaf Vasa*, was not called that in his time. He signed his documents in various ways:

with only Gustaff or with Gustaff Eriksson, because his father was the nobleman Erik Johansson. He came to be called Vasa during later centuries, long after his death, because his family had a picture of a *vase*, a sheaf, on their coat of arms.

Foreign influences

The Scandinavian countries did not live in isolation. We had active ties with countries on the continent, particularly Germany, where another naming practice, family names, was used, the same system as in ancient Rome, where children inherited the family name.

Germans, like the British, often had names that described occupations: Müller, Meyer, and Schumacher, and Miller, Cooper, and Mason.

Old habits change

Sometime in the mid-1800s, when Swedish society was changing, our old naming habits began to change too. Adopting family names had begun earlier; city-dwellers and skilled workers had begun doing so in the early 1700s, and from the middle of the 1800s this custom became common even in the countryside.

The names followed a certain pattern. Some chose nature words like *lind* (linden tree), *berg* (mountain), *gren* (branch), *sjö* (lake), and *holm* (island), and put them together to their liking, such as Berggren, Lindberg, Holmsjö, etc. There were also other patterns to follow: Östergren, Söderlund, Paulin, Berglin, Holmer, Linder, etc. It was rare that farmers took family names. They were described by the people in their villages using the names of their farm. It was *Sven i Västergården* or *Anna i Hultet*. On the other hand, for a craftsman it could be useful to be known by his own family name. The same would apply for city-dwellers, where there were no places to help describe someone during a time when cities were undergoing rapid growth.

Different names in the same family

It was not unusual that one changed family names between generations or that siblings took different family names. I know of a case from the latter half of the 1800s where the father's name was Olof Cedergren. One son was called Olofsson, one daughter Olofsdotter, one son Cedergren, and one son Höglander.

To begin with, many people with new family names were written in the church records with both the patronymic and surname; Sven Johansson Nordin or Erik Svensson Höglund, but soon they became just Sven Nordin or Erik Höglund. The family name was inherited as a rule by the children.

Women's names

The wife of the family was written with her own surname; either a patronymic or a family name from her father. Well into the 1900s the women began to be written with their husbands' surnames, sometimes with the addition of 'née-something,' such as "Elisabeth Carls-

son, née von Malmborg." This might have indicated that she felt that her birth family was of a higher social standing than her husband's.

The patronymic form *-dotter* disappeared during the later part of the 1800s and was changed into *-son*. The pastors wrote Larsson for Larsdotter or Andersson for Andersdotter. In research in the second half of the 1800s one can never guess which surname a child, such as an emigrant, would take, and one must find that out in each case. Maria, daughter of Lars Svensson, could call herself Larsson or Svensson or perhaps even Larsdotter. All this shows that the very old naming system in the Nordic countries was completely dissolving by the end of the 1800s.

The 1900s

Because of social changes, ordinary people, beginning in the cities, began to be titled as Mr., Mrs., and Miss. These titles had earlier been only for the nobility and were used with first names: Mrs. Ebba, Mr. Peder, and Miss Elin. But around the turn of the 20th century there arose the wholly illogical vocative forms Miss Pettersson and Mrs. Gustafsson. First names were reserved for private use within the family, and surnames became the important ones. Businessmen and craftsmen wrote their names often with just first initials and surname, such as Editor E. A. Johansson.

Titles in daily use

Various titles, more or less fanciful, began to be used as a form of address, and it became difficult to know how to address people. Many chose to use circumlocutions because it became so awkward. An example would be that if a neighboring woman was married to a doctor, she would be known as *doktorinnan*, and if you spoke to her you would say "Can Mrs. Doctor Larsson please tell me the time?"

As luck would have it, this time of strange titling did not last long. Now in Sweden we are back to first names as what people go by most and the last names are used in more formal contexts. The custom of the family name remains, as in the Johansson family or the Österberg family, but upon marriage a Swedish couple today can choose whether each will keep his or her own surname, or both will take the man's or woman's name, or they can even chose a totally new third name. If the parents each have different surnames, they can freely choose which of them the child shall have. But the next child, born of the same parents, is to have the same surname as the older sibling.

An almost similar name trend has happened in all three of the Scandinavian countries. Iceland has still kept the logical naming system with -son and -dotter because foreign immigration has never been especially big there.

The First Names

Beginning in the early 1600s, foreign influences showed in that children could be given two or more first names, as opposed to the single names used before. This custom began in the upper classes but slowly became very common among country folk from the 1800s on. To give one's children several, often fanciful and romantic names was free and something even poor people were allowed.

Earlier the number of Swedish first names was very limited and children often were named after their paternal or maternal grandparents. In every village there were perhaps no more than 6 or 7 male or female names. If we name *Anders, Erik, Sven, Nils, Olof, Johan*, and *Peter*, or *Anna, Maria, Lena, Catharina, Elisabeth,* and *Christina* and their parallel forms, we have covered a large part of the 16th century's Swedish population. This means that when doing research, one must be very precise when identifying people. From the 1800s when people to a large extent became literate, they gained access to stories from outside and with that suggestions of new and flowery names. Then came *Amanda, Augusta, Wilhelmina, Selma,* and *Laura*, as well as *Erland, Anton, Verner, Oskar,* and *Valter*, and many others.

When a child was given two or more first names anyone of them could be used in daily speech, and unless you knew the person, you could not be certain if he was known as *Per* or *Johan* or *Albert*, if he was baptized *Per Johan Albert*. I can take an example of this tiresome system from my own family. My father and uncle, born 1898 and 1900, got four first names each. My father went by his second name, my uncle, his fourth. My mother was called by her second of three first names; I myself by the first of three. My sons all go by the second of three first names.

Out-of-wedlock children

There was a large group that was always in a jam during the old logical naming system: children born out of wedlock, those who had no official father. In most cases there is no father's name listed in the birth books for illegitimate children, but quite often they have received a patronymic as an adult. Evidently the pastors approved the name that the child in question stated as an adult and created a patronymic from it. In most cases the people in the parishes also knew who the fathers of these children were.

Still there was a group of children who had no known father. They could sometimes have their mother's patronymic, or make up a new proper family name for themself. Sometimes, but rather unusual, is the usage of a metronymic, *Karinsdotter* or *Stinasson.*

Soldiers' names

The military officers did not approve of all the Johanssons and Anderssons, etc. They wanted to be able to separate the enlisted soldiers by names. Thus short and sometimes strange last names based on different attributes were introduced, for instance: *Stark, Modig,* and *Stolt* (English: Strong, Brave, and Proud). Normally a certain last name was based on the place from where the soldier came. When a new soldier

enlisted and moved there, he normally inherited his predecessor's name. If the soldier left the service he often took a new name or kept his original one. Soldiers' children normally never adopted their fathers' military last names, until during the latter part of the 19th century, when the old name customs changed.

Let us take an example: in one place the soldiers were called *Stark*. A young man called Erik Johansson enlisted. In the church record he became noted as the soldier Erik Johansson Stark. After a number of years he left the army. Then he was just Erik Johansson again or even Erik Höglund, quite a new name. His children were called Anna Eriksdotter and Johan Eriksson. During the latter part of the 19th century they might have kept the surname Stark.

The Pastors' Names

Many, perhaps most, of our pastors throughout the centuries came from the farmer class, sons from slightly larger farms. They left home with ordinary names like *Erik Persson, Johan Nilsson,* or *Anders Andersson*, but soon changed their names. A pastor, a man of learning, needed a surname and it was fitting to have a Latin name. They soon became *Ericus Petri, Johannes Nicolai* and *Andreas Andreae*. During the later 1600s they usually added a surname, based on their home. There were *Angermannus* (from *Ångermanland*), *Helsingius* (from *Hälsingland*), *Crucimontanus* (from *Korsberga*), *Axtelius* (from *Axsta*). These family names could be inherited and the daughters then went by the feminine form, like *Angermannia* and *Helsingia*. But if a pastor's son became a pastor he could just as well take over his father's surname as adopt a new one. On the other hand, if he became something else, such as a merchant, the latin pastor's name often felt wrong, and then he could adopt another name that was more fitting, such as *Kjellgren* or *Almkvist*.

Names in the cities

During the latter half of the 1800s industrialization began in Sweden. Then people were sought at all of the newly-opened factories, and jobless people streamed in from the overpopulated countryside. This happened despite the living conditions being significantly worse in the cities than in the country: miserable and crowded dwellings, the water supply wretched, and sewer and waste removal non-existent.

This made for a shorter life span and greater death rate in the cities than in the country, but that was where the work was. In the cities there was a greater need to be able to tell people's names apart, and there one began to use family names far earlier than in the countryside, even if patronymics existed as well. Almost all well-to-do city people such as merchants and craftsmen adopted family names. These were mostly inherited by the children, names like *Lundin, Paulin, Bergström*, and *Nordgren*. Women kept their inherited family names.

Nobility and Carl Linneaus

The nobility initially began with the same naming practice as the common folk: first names plus patronymics. Increasingly they began to be identified by their coats of arms to distinguish them. It could be *Gumsehuvud, Sparre,* and *Bielke.*

After the House of Nobility (*Riddarhuset*) was founded in 1625 by Axel Oxenstierna, there was a rule that stipulated that every family should have a proper surname. It could be based on their coat of arms, but did not have to be. Many German and Baltic nobles came into Sweden; we got *von Rosen, von Köhler,* and *von Essen*. *Ramsay* and *Hamilton* came from Scotland and many other similar names from the outside. Many higher government offices were reserved for members of the nobility, and the sovereign king ennobled people to fill those offices, and also for many military deeds. Bishop's children were usually ennobled, as a token of gratitude for their father's services. Prominent scientists could also be ennobled.

The world-renowned botanist *Carl Linneaus* is an example of the latter. His origin is an interesting example of movement from one social class to another, it is called *ståndscirkulation* (circulation between the estates, social classes).

Linnaeus' paternal grandfather was a farmer in the 1600s in Vittaryd parish in Småland and was named Ingemar Bengtsson. Because Ingemar had a farm of respectable size and was wealthy, his son Nils Ingemarsson could go to Uppsala and study to become a pastor. There Nils adopted the latin name *Linnaeus*, which was, according to legend, inspired by a big linden (*lind*) tree on his father's farm. He then became *Nicolaus Ingemari Linnaeus* and eventually pastor in Stenbrohult in Småland, which is where his son *Carl* grew up. When he came to Uppsala to study he called himself *Carolus Nicolai Linnaeus*. During diligent work he became famous even internationally for his research results, and in 1757 he was ennobled by king Adolf Fredrik. He became *Carl von Linné*, as French type names were modern then. From farmer to nobleman in three generations!

Carl von Linné's only son, *Carl*, died at age 42 and was unmarried, so the noble name von Linné did not survive. His sisters married nobles and their descendants had family names like Bergencrantz and Duse.

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More reading:

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Åberg, Alf: *Soldier's Surnames in Sweden.* SAG 1984:3.