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# Two Early Swedish Pharmacists in America

Nils William Olsson

The Washington, DC City Directory of 1872 contains a four-page advertisement heralding a new nostrum called Borobalsamine, “a healing antiseptic,” patented at the U.S. Patent Office 12 Sept. 1871 and manufactured by a young pharmacist by the name of Oscar Oldberg. On page 358 of the same directory we find another advertisement, calling attention to two druggists, Oscar and Rudolph Oldberg, residing at 304 Eye Street, N.W., with their apothecary shop located next door, at 300 Eye St., N.W.<sup>1</sup>

Who was Oscar Oldberg, who could afford a four-page bi-colored brochure, tipped in between the pages of the city directory? A closer examination of Oldberg & Co., reveals that we are here dealing with two Swedish brothers, recently arrived from their native land, who in Washington were beginning a new career.

The brothers were the sons of a clergyman in Alfta Parish (Gävl.), Anders Oldberg and his wife, Catharina Fredrika Öhrströmer, Oscar Robert born 22 Jan. 1846 and his younger brother Carl Johan Rudolph, born 5 July 1850.<sup>2</sup>

As will be seen, these early emigrants to our nation's capital were indeed remarkable individuals. Oscar had attended junior college (*gymnasium*) in Gävle, after which he became a pharmacist's apprentice in the apothecary shop of Fredrik Wilhelm Helleday in Falun.<sup>3</sup> Helleday had been a star student of the internationally known Swedish chemist, Jöns Jacob Berzelius, and it was in the spirit of Berzelius that Helleday gathered around him the young pharmacists in his home, teaching them, inspiring them and demonstrating to them the latest discoveries in the fields of chemistry and pharmaceutical science.<sup>4</sup> Oscar Oldberg passed his pharmacist's examination and promptly departed for America in 1864, settling in Washington, DC, where, five years later, he became a member of the faculty of the School of Pharmacy at Georgetown University. Later he became Dear. and Professor of Pharmacy at the National College of Pharmacy in Washington. When he severed his connection with this institution in 1881, the college conferred upon him an honorary degree of Doctor of Pharmacy.

In 1874 he had joined the Marine Hospital Service of the United States, holding the position of chief clerk and acting medical purveyor of that service until 1881, when he resigned. In addition he served as a member of the Committee of Revision and Publication of the Pharmacopoeia of the United States for no less than thirty years.

In 1886 Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, founded its School of Pharmacy and called upon Oscar Oldberg to become its first Dean. He held that position until 1911. He died, probably in Evanston, 27 Feb. 1913.

For a brief while, in 1872, Oscar Oldberg also served as Swedish-Norwegian vice consul in Memphis, TN.

Oldberg was a prodigious writer on pharmaceutical topics, writing more than a dozen books on this subject during his lifetime. Best known is probably his *Companion to the United States Pharmacopoeia*, which he wrote together with his colleague, Otto A. Wall, which first appeared in New York in 1884.<sup>5</sup>

On 19 May 1873 Oscar Oldberg married Emma Parritt, with whom he had three children - Arne,<sup>6</sup> born 1874, Olga, born 1877 and Virgil, born 1878.<sup>7</sup>

Oscar Oldberg's younger brother, Rudolph, though assuredly equally talented, had little opportunity to demonstrate this, since he died in Washington 28 Aug. 1878, having just reached his 28th birthday. The year before he died he had married Susan Johnson, born in 1855.<sup>8</sup>

Rudolph must have been an accomplished botanist in his own right. In 1876 he published in Washington his *Flora Columbiana, A Catalogue of Plants Growing Without Cultivation, Collected by the Members of the Potomac-Side Naturalists' Club*.

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<sup>1</sup>Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C. 1872).

<sup>2</sup>Their mother, Catharina Fredrika Öhrströmer, was the sister of Charlotta Margareta Öhrströmer, the wife of Gustaf Unonius, pioneer Episcopalian clergyman in Chicago. —(L.M.V.) Örnberg, *Svensk släkt-kalender & Svenska ättartal*, I-XIV (Stockholm 1884-1908), XII, p. 380; Gösta Thimon, *Matrikel över Gästrik-Hälsing nation i Uppsala 1811-1961* (Uppsala 1963), p. 73; Ludvig Nyström, *Uppsala ärkestifts herdaminne*. Ny följd. IV (Uppsala 1893), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ernst W. Olson and Martin J. Engberg, *History of the Swedes in Illinois*, I-II (Chicago 1908), II, pp. 21-22.

<sup>4</sup>Alfred Levertin, C.F.V. Schimmelpfennig and K.A. Ahlberg, *Sveriges apotekarhistoria från Konung Gustaf I:s till närvarande tid*, I-VI (Stockholm 1910-1949), III, pp. 1596-1598.

<sup>5</sup>*Who Was Who in America*, I (Chicago 1942), p. 914.

<sup>6</sup>Arne Oldberg was b. in Youngstown, OH 12 July 1874. Early in life he demonstrated his great musical talent. After studies in the United States he went to Europe, where he studied under Theodor Leschetizky in Vienna and Josef Rheinberger in Munich. He returned to the United States and in 1897 joined the faculty of the School of Music at Northwestern University, where he served as Director of the Piano Department as well as the Graduate Department until 1941. He died 17 Feb. 1962. He was a talented artist, teacher, composer and conductor. He composed for the piano but also wrote symphonies, which have been performed by leading symphony orchestras - *Who Was Who in America*, IV (Chicago 1968), p. 717.

<sup>7</sup>Örnberg, XII, p. 380.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

# BORO-BALSAMINE!

[Trade mark registered January 9th, 1872. Process patented September 12th, 1871.]

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Oscar Oldberg's advertisement in the Washington, DC Directory of 1872