

3-1-1987

## Gustaf W. Belfrage, Texas Entomologist

Mary Colwick Orbeck

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Orbeck, Mary Colwick (1987) "Gustaf W. Belfrage, Texas Entomologist," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol7/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

# Gustaf W. Belfrage, Texas Entomologist

Mary Colwick Orbeck\*

Friendless and practically forgotten by his family, friends and the world, Gustaf Wilhelm Belfrage, the Swedish-born entomologist, who spent a score of years in the United States, discovering countless new specimens of bugs and insects, died in poverty in a miserable hovel in Norse, TX in 1882.

More than a century later, Belfrage's life accomplishments are now being recognized on an ever-widening scale, not only in Texas, as well as the rest of the United States, but also in Sweden, the country where he was born.

Let us therefore take a closer look at this remarkable Swedish Texan, who, though his name lives on in the scientific literature on both sides of the Atlantic, his life nevertheless remains a mystery, a life of enigma, pathos and loneliness.

Gustaf Wilhelm Belfrage was born in Stockholm, Sweden 12 Dec. 1834, the son of Axel Åke Belfrage, a captain in the elite Svea Life Guards and later chamberlain to the Royal Court of Charles XIV Johan, and Baroness Margareta Sofia Leijonhufvud. His grandfather, Johan Leonard Belfrage had been a major general in the Swedish Army, a man of both means and character.<sup>1</sup>

From such illustrious beginnings one would have expected Gustaf Wilhelm to have made an easy entrée onto the arena of life. This was not to be, however. Since we know so little concerning his early life, it is difficult to know what went wrong. It seems apparent that Gustaf Wilhelm did not have a happy childhood and youth. His father seems to have been a spendthrift and wastrel, who dissipated the very large estates left him by his father as well as his wife's dowry. Dissension in the marriage between his father and mother, which seemed to stem from quarrels over money matters, brought the marriage to a crisis which was dissolved by a decree of divorce in 1849, when Gustaf Wilhelm was but 15 years of age.

There was also an older brother, Axel Leonard Belfrage, born in 1832, who monopolized the father's affections so that Gustaf Wilhelm as a boy developed a spirit of revolt that made it impossible for him to follow his father's prescribed course.<sup>2</sup>

---

\*Mary Colwick Orbeck resides in Clifton, TX and is active in the Bosque Memorial Museum.

We know that when Gustaf Wilhelm was twenty years old he entered the Royal College of Forestry in Stockholm to prepare himself to become a forester.<sup>3</sup> For some unknown reason he left the institution without taking a degree. Instead he received employment on the royal estate of Stjärnsund in the province of Närke as a forester, a position for which no degree was required and which he must have received due to his father's influence at the Court. He did not remain at Stjärnsund and went from one thing to another. It was probably during these years that he developed his addiction to alcohol, an addiction which followed him throughout life, despite valiant efforts to shake it off.

We do not know when he first began to think of emigrating, or the reasons for his leaving for the United States. In a letter written to his friend and mentor, Carl Henrik Boheman, one of Sweden's most eminent entomologists, dated 18 March 1859, Gustaf Wilhelm speaks of his prospective departure as final: "I am going to leave my country forever and depart for the land of the Yankees." In October 1859 Belfrage finally made up his mind to leave Sweden for America and his approximate date of departure is probably late 1859 or early 1860<sup>4</sup>.

Gustaf Wilhelm's first letter from America is dated 8 Aug. 1861 and was sent to Boheman.<sup>5</sup> In it, it appears as if Belfrage had been in America for some time, that he had already sent off a collection of insects to Boheman and that he was in dire economic straits. The Civil War was in its beginning stages and Belfrage poses the question whether he should join the Union forces or sell his insect collection in order to keep from starving. During the last half of the year his situation was so desperate that he was without food and shelter for two days and had to dispose of his insect collection at a great sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

The next time we hear of him, he is in Chicago where he remained until 1866, making trips to collect insect specimens along Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. He even visited the Swedish settlement in Altona in Knox Co., IL.

During his first five years he had entered into correspondence with a number of leading American entomologists who all encouraged him to proceed to Texas to collect beetles and insects. Given letters of introduction by these savants as well as letters from the U.S. Consul in Stockholm and from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, he arrived in New Orleans on 4 Jan. 1867.<sup>7</sup> He proceeded to Texas where he at first settled in Waco, McLennan Co., working as a clerk for a Swedish merchant there, Samuel Johan Forsgard, collecting insects in his spare time.<sup>8</sup>

In April of 1869 Gustaf Wilhelm arrived in Bosque County, TX, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. He made great strides in his studies of the insects of McLennan County; and after his mother's death in 1867, which assured him of a small sum each year from his inheritance, he was able to eke out an existence, helped by payment for orders for insects and bugs from various museums in the United States and abroad.

Competent scientists and naturalists at home and abroad have said that he was one of the very few careful and conscientious collectors in America, and a good deal of the credit for that extraordinary knowledge of the insects of Texas gained early by American scientists is due to his work and that of Jacob Boll<sup>9</sup> of Dallas. He corresponded with many outstanding scientists and naturalists of that period. Among them was E.T. Cresson who wrote that among the 600 species listed in his book a total of 237 had been found by Belfrage.<sup>10</sup>

Orders for insects came to Norse from museums in many parts of the world, including the British Museum, The Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, The Russian National Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg as well as from museums in Philadelphia, Washington, DC and university museums in Texas.

He resided with the Carl Questad family in Norse in an upstairs room or loft for many years and caught his insects near the live oak trees that remain there today. His traps were made from a box with a glass front and a trough into which the insects would fall and was lighted by a lamp placed in the back portion of the box. During the daytime he walked over the countryside collecting with a net. In 1869 he advertised in a scientific journal that he had 25,000 Texas insects for sale. The mounting of the insects was described by editors as the very perfection of neatness. He sold continually and extensively both to amateurs and serious students, perhaps a total of many thousand specimens. Yet, despite this, at the time of his death, his collections totalled 36,881 specimens, pinned in good order, in addition to beetles in paper, sawdust and alcohol as well as butterflies in papers.

Belfrage was also an inventor. In the files at The Bosque Memorial Museum in Clifton, TX there is a document called *Particulars for the Destruction of Cotton and Boll Worms*. It describes the proper application of a solution for which he gives the formula. It is very complete in the necessary steps involved in order to produce the desired results and his opinions were given freely concerning the product. The circular is signed G.W. Belfrage, Clifton, Bosque County, Texas, U.S.A. and was probably mailed out extensively.<sup>11</sup>

Belfrage's drinking problems were another source of grief to him. He had begun this habit as a student in Stockholm. In Texas drinking to excess was quite common. Liquor could be purchased in Bosque County for such ridiculous prices as 25 cents to a dollar for a gallon. As Belfrage became older the bottle more and more mastered him. Again and again he struggled to shake himself of the habit only to fail time and again. His credit was not good. Often in the absence of money he was said to have drained the specimen jars of their alcohol. He sank lower and lower. During the last year and a quarter of his life he did not even open his mail, including the scientific journals which came to him.

By this time he had moved to a small crude cabin on a farm belonging to Chris Pederson. He still received a small annual stipend from his mother's estate but otherwise he relied upon the income from the sale of his specimens. He planned trips to other states on several occasions in order to collect extensively, but nothing ever came of it.

No portraits of Belfrage have been found in America or Sweden even though oil portraits exist for other members of his Swedish family. No entomological papers exist, so far as we know. There were bales of manuscripts found in his cabin at the time of his death which were declared by the Probate Court of Bosque County in 1883 as "bale of manuscripts found in his cabin—no value." There was also a trunk, filled with personal papers and letters, valued at 25 cents. The value of his estate was appraised at \$491.40, which included his vast collection of insects. The little hut was sold to a local person named Andrew Stark, who later rebuilt it into his own house in Norse. The remainder of the estate was listed in the records as—an old sofa, a mattress, a cotton pillow, a sheet, a piece of ducking and a quilt for the bed, a handful of old clothes, some of the ironic and painful reminders of his days of prosperity, a stove, table, chairs, gallon cans, wash basins, coffee pots and frying pans. There was also a library of 194 bound and unbound volumes and pamphlets, most of them concerning insects. After his death, the U.S. National Museum in Washington, DC bought the insect collection.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that several of the local people in Norse and Clifton gave their impressions of Belfrage and they all spoke of him as a pleasant, quiet, truthful and reliable man. The postmaster of Clifton spoke well of him. Dr. O.M. Olson, his personal physician, told of his being a tall, blonde, straight man with quiet refined manners.

My grandfather, John N. Colwick, was only twelve years old when Belfrage died, but during an interview in the late 1920s he related that Gustaf Wilhelm Belfrage was probably the tallest man he had ever met—six feet and three inches or thereabouts. He had deep blue eyes, was of slender build and had pleasant features and a disposition to match.<sup>13</sup>

As a child I can remember people of the Norse community speaking of the strange man, who had, many years ago, run through the fields and meadows with an insect collecting net held high over his head collecting "bugs." It seemed that no one really knew him and perhaps this was his choice. There is no report that he ever was unruly during his drinking bouts but must have indulged quietly in his tragic habit alone.<sup>14</sup>

Gustaf Wilhelm Belfrage died in his little cabin 7 Dec. 1882. He was buried in an unmarked grave in the cemetery at Norse. In 1943 the Biology Club of Southern Methodist University, the Entomology Club of Texas A.M. University and two clubs from Baylor University placed a marker on his grave during a ceremony honoring this Swedish immigrant, collector and naturalist. Here in America, in a lonely church yard at Norse, TX, he found his final resting place in a nameless grave while his titled ancestors for generations had slept beneath marble mausoleums and in ancient crypts in his native Sweden.

### Sources

Much of the material for this article is based on recollections of the author, the granddaughter of John N. Colwick; The Jacob Olson Collection on deposit at The Bosque Memorial Museum in Clifton, TX; a booklet entitled "Naturalists of the Frontier," written in 1929 for the *Southwest Review* by Samuel Wood Geiser, for a

number of years head of the Department of Biology at Southern Methodist University; an article, "Pioneer Scientist Lies in Unnamed Grave," by Samuel Wood Geiser in *The Dallas Morning News*, May 1937; in a work by Ezra Townsend Cresson, "Hymenoptera Texana" published in the *Transactions of the American Entomological Society*, Vol. IV (Philadelphia 1872) in the Texas Collection at Baylor University, Waco, TX.

<sup>1</sup>Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor*, I-IX (Stockholm 1925-1936), I, pp. 268-269; Jenny Belfrage, *Bidrag till släkten Belfrages historia* (Göteborg 1916), pp. 93-94.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Wood Geiser, "Naturalists of the Frontier." III. Gustaf Belfrage in *Southwest Review*, Summer, 1929, p. 389.

<sup>3</sup>Hugo Samzelius, *Kongl. Skogs-och Jägeristaten*. Biografiska studier 1539-1898 (Stockholm 1898-1899), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Wood Geiser, "G.W. Belfrage's Texas Localities" in *Entomological News*, May 1933, pp. 128-129.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Samuel Johan Forsgård was b. in Forserum Parish (from which parish he presumably took his name) in Jönköping län in 1825, the s. of Johannes Samuelsson, a member of the Swedish *Riksdag* (Parliament). He had emigr. to Texas in 1855 and in 1857 had settled in Waco, TX as a baker, confectioner and merchant. —Ernest Severin, Alf L. Scott, T.J. Westerberg and J.M. Ojerholm, *Svenskarne i Texas i ord och bild 1838-1918*, I-II (n.p.n.d.), II, p. 978.

<sup>9</sup>Jacob Boll (1828-1880), Swiss naturalist who studied geology and natural history of Texas from 1874-1880. —*Who Was Who in America*. Historical Volume 1607-1896.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Powell Calvert, "Ezra Townsend Cresson; a Contribution to the History of Entomology in North America with Estimates of Cresson's work on Hymenoptera." *Transactions of the American Entomological Society* (Philadelphia 1928).

<sup>11</sup>On deposit at The Bosque Memorial Museum.

<sup>12</sup>Geiser, "Naturalists of the Frontier," p. 384.

<sup>13</sup>It is interesting to note that several of the local people spoke freely of Mr. Belfrage, but never in any manner of disrespect. He was different, but yet held in awe, possibly because of his difference.

<sup>14</sup>These are the author's reflections, based upon what she has heard and read.



The residence of Gustaf W. Belfrage in Norse, TX.