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# Unraveling the Mysteries of Vättilösa Parish

Scott Johnson\*

Searching for ancestors is like creating the ultimate detective novel. The story that each of us is called upon to unravel is unique, and the characters we discover along the way are not bungling constables or mysterious jewel thieves but real people, with real hopes and fears and dreams. Even more exciting, they are our own flesh and blood. Each new day, like each turn of the page, brings a new surprise or, just as often, a new obstacle to overcome. My own story serves to illustrate how a little luck, a little patience, and a lot of hard work can put together a story that may not rival Agatha Christie for suspense, but has a conclusion that is just as gratifying.

Like many amateur genealogists, I got my start at a family gathering when I was called upon to help fill in some names on a family tree. The group assembled did fairly well, remembering enough to fill in a great-great-grandparent or two in a couple of branches, but in general the tree was rather sparse. An obsession to identify every ancestor on the chart, which seems to be a prerequisite for this line of work, soon overwhelmed me. In the ensuing weeks, I was able to ask a few questions and fill in the rest of the four-generation chart—except for the Swedish side. I could trace the Johnson line back only three generations, and there it stood.

My grandfather, Roy Johnson, could tell me his parents' names, but that was all. His parents had come to America in the 1880's and had married very late in life, and if they mentioned anything about their own parents, it apparently did not make much of an impression on their younger son. Although one of his grandmothers in Sweden had lived until he was sixteen, my grandfather could not recall ever hearing her name. These setbacks only strengthened my resolve to uncover the real story.

Slowly, I began to assemble the tools required to scale the Swedish side of my family tree. I read books about how to conduct Swedish genealogical research, and I was lucky enough to be able to take classes in the Swedish language at the University of Illinois. Best of all, I was close enough to the family home in Moline, Illinois, to make forays into the office of the Swedish Lutheran church to hunt for more information. I made my first important discovery while examining the church register. Just as in the old country, the book listed each church member and his previous parish of residence, and among them were my great-grandparents:

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\*Scott Johnson resides at 1548 North Victoria Street, St. Paul, MN 55117.

Johan Gabriel Johansson, Vättlösa; Elise Persson, Höör.

Vättlösa is located in the province of Västergötland, in the County of Skaraborg, between the two great Swedish lakes, Vänern and Vättern, near the old city of Skara. Höör, on the other hand, lies in extreme southern Sweden, in the province of Skåne. And so, since my next step was to query the Swedish archives (*landsarkiv*), and because the two parishes are served by separate branches in Göteborg and Lund, my research necessarily split into two parts. An exchange of letters followed, and with the help of the archivists I eventually discovered not only several new ancestors, but also the name of the farmsteads where my immigrant ancestors lived before they pulled up stakes. I later discovered that parish records are available on microfilm from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and I recommend using these films whenever possible.

Perhaps the most eye-opening aspect of my research involved the farmstead names. The archives wrote to me that my Vättlösa ancestors lived at a place named Kärret, and naturally I assumed that this was the name of a village or town within the parish. But a check of a Swedish gazeteer (*Svenska Orter*, 1932) revealed that Kärret was the name of a single farm with a single family—and that's the way most rural place names work in Sweden. We can't always expect the Old World to function by New World rules.

Having exhausted all my leads at the archives, I decided to concentrate on my ancestors in Vättlösa Parish. By this time I was well schooled in the Swedish patronymic tradition and held no illusions about being able to trace my surname, but thought it would be interesting to research the direct paternal line nevertheless. It was also about this time that I realized that the name "Vättlösa" is a homonym of the Swedish word "*vettlös*" meaning "witless." I felt sure that this meant the people there had a sense of humor.<sup>1</sup>

I rallied my best Swedish together and wrote a letter to "a responsible person at Kärret," hoping I'd be able to make myself understood. Two weeks later I received a letter from Evert Persson, the current owner of Kärret, who was eager to hear my story and provide any information he could. Eventually we were able to determine that his great-great-grandfather had bought the farm from my great-great-great-grandfather in 1845. Among the documents that Evert located in his attic was the original purchase contract for Kärret, signed in 1808 by an even more distant ancestor, Petter Andersson. Soon a full correspondence bloomed, and in 1981 my cousin, my wife, and I traveled to Sweden to meet Evert and his family at the old homestead.

Evert met our party at the train station in Skövde, and after introductions, we wasted no time in taking a tour of the countryside. Our first stop was the site of a tenant farm named Sörtorp. This tiny croft had been the last home of my Swedish family, where Johan Johansson had said his last goodbyes to his parents and sister Ida before he left for America in 1886. Ida had remained in Sweden to take care of her parents, and died unmarried at Sörtorp in 1942. The farmstead was thus our last link to the old country, and we were surprised to find that in the intervening

years the farm had been completely overgrown by forest, except for a huge boulder that used to stand in front of the house. Evert told us that the house itself had been bought by a neighbor and moved down the road a mile or so.

That night we retired to Kärret and conversed as best we could, with my skills as a translator being taxed to the limit. During the course of the evening Evert told us that Erik Olsson, the neighbor who had bought Ida's house, had brought over a package for us. We couldn't imagine what this man could have for us; we were amazed to see a package of about 75 photographs and 30 letters that he had found when he prepared to move Ida's house.

The first photograph we picked up was a portrait of my grandfather at the age of four. I was speechless. What hazy ghost of generations to come had compelled this man to save these mementos for 39 years? Who was he saving them for? For us?

The photographs and the letters sparked a new sense of history within me. I could identify most of the people in the pictures—they were my extended family from Moline and Rockford—but except for my grandfather I had never heard their words. Their letters spoke with crystal clarity as the decades that separated us melted away. The things they had to say to their parents and their sister in Sweden were sometimes humorous, sometimes heart-rending, but always revealing.

My great-grandfather, the only son, was terse and formal. "I should mention that we had a baby boy on Wednesday morning," he wrote in 1899, moving on to the next subject without giving the baby's name. Later, he noted that "Frank Petterson plans to travel home next month. I wish I could go with him." But he knew his modest means would never bring him back to his homeland.

By contrast, his sisters were quite loquacious. And their daughters, my grandfather's cousins, wrote beautiful letters in nearly perfect Swedish to Ida, the aunt they had never met. Signe Johnson Carlson wrote of her mother's death after an illness: "Finally I understood that it was serious, so I asked her to forgive me and she said so clearly, 'You know I do, child. Forgive me.' And then she clasped her hands and said, 'Dear God, I will go now,' and then it was over. Dear Aunt, I feel so empty."

We felt these items deserved special preservation, so my grandfather and I decided to donate them to the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana College. During this trip we met with Professor Fritiof Fryxell, a boyhood friend of my grandfather's who also had family ties—his uncle had married my grandfather's aunt in Moline. I had found out only a few weeks before that Fritiof's father had grown up at Måsatorp (also known as Lunden), just a few yards down the dirt road from my ancestors at Sörtorp, and I was eager to find out if he could tell me anything about the old stomping grounds.

Fritiof knew a lot about the parish that our families had abandoned. In fact, he had written an unpublished biography of his father that contained many detailed recollections of life in Sweden, the trip to America, and eventual settlement in Moline. With this manuscript and some additional microfilm research, the mystery of how and why the Johnson family ended up in Moline finally began to come together.

The parish records revealed that the Fryxell family led the exodus from Vättnlösa Parish to the New World. Although the parish's first emigrant was actually the young aristocrat Ivar Alexis Hall, who left for America in 1857,<sup>2</sup> it was Fritiof's great-uncle, Carl Petter Johansson, who sparked *Amerikafeber* among the common folk of Vättnlösa. He left the family farm at Amfinnsryd<sup>3</sup> in 1869 with his wife and five children and headed for New York. They were the first family to leave Vättnlösa Parish for the United States, but many more would follow.

Seven years later, Fritiof's father, Johan (Magnusson) Fryxell, traveled to America with his brother Gustaf on tickets supplied by their cousins, who had settled near Tomkins Cove, New York. The brothers had often talked of joining their relatives in America, but not until after the death of their mother did they feel free to make the journey. Johan and Gustaf spent some time on a farm in New York before working their way west, taking jobs at a quarry at Alabaster, Michigan, on the edge of civilization. John, as he came to be known, was dissatisfied with the solitary existence at Alabaster, and he set his sights instead on Moline, a community filled with Swedish immigrants that he had read about in *Skandia*, a Swedish-American newspaper. On October 11, 1878, Moline received its first visitor from Vättnlösa Parish.

The opportunities for advancement were good in Moline, and over the years the entire Fryxell clan was brought to the bustling city on the shores of the Mississippi: John, Gustaf, brother Carl, sister Johanna Lusty and her family, and even the Carl Johansson family from New York. Right after them came my family: first Christina, who arrived in America in 1885 and immediately married Carl Fryxell, and then Johan Gabriel Johansson, my great-grandfather, who emigrated in 1886. For many years the families of Carl Fryxell and John Johnson lived next door to each other on Fifth Street, continuing the neighborly tradition they had brought from Sweden.

The influence of the migration went beyond the Fryxell and Johnson families, and at least two other friends who lived on the estate at Amfinnsryd also ended up in Moline. According to my count, 139 people had emigrated from Vättnlösa Parish by 1893 and at least 21 of these settled permanently in Moline (or Rock Island), but this total is surely incomplete. Whatever the final figure, it is certain that a healthy branch of the Sons and Daughters of Vättnlösa could be assembled in the hills of western Illinois and beyond.

The information that I have been able to gather about my family in Vättnlösa has far exceeded my expectations, and I've met with more than my share of luck. But it's important to realize that for each of us, many resources do exist, if we dig deep enough to find them. Time is of the essence: both my grandfather and Professor Fryxell have since passed away. I salute them by continuing my research into our common heritage.

**Persons from Vättnlösa Parish Who Resided  
in Moline and Rock Island, IL**

**Johnson and Fryxell Families**

No.	Name	Place of Birth	Date of Birth	Emigrated	Died
1.	Carl Petter Johansson <sup>4</sup> (Charley Johnson)	Vättnlösa	19 Aug. 1826	1869	
2.	Anna Stina Andersdotter	Ledsjö <sup>5</sup>	10 Feb. 1828	1869	
3.	Ida Sofia	Skånings-Åsaka	7 Feb. 1853	1869	
4.	Frans August	Vättnlösa	20 July 1855	1869	
5.	Anders Niklas	Vättnlösa	18 Mar. 1858	1869	
6.	Carl Otto	Vättnlösa	14 Dec. 1862	1869	
7.	Gustaf Herman	Vättnlösa	27 Aug. 1866	1869	
8.	Sven Johan Magnusson <sup>6</sup> (John Fryxell)	Vättnlösa	1 June 1854	1875	30 Jan. 1941
9.	Gustaf Magnusson <sup>6</sup>	Vättnlösa	7 Aug. 1857	1875	23 Aug. 1947
10.	Carl Magnusson <sup>6 7</sup> (Charley Fryxell)	Vättnlösa	4 Sept. 1859	1879	9 Nov. 1894
11.	Gustaf Svensson (Gustaf Lustig or Lusty)	Götene	10 Nov. 1848	1879	27 Aug. 1927
12.	Johanna Magnusson <sup>8</sup>	Istrum	22 Sept. 1850	1879	30 Dec. 1922
13.	Sven Otto	Götene	28 June 1875	1879	29 Oct. 1899
14.	Emma Charlotta	Götene	18 May 1877	1879	10 June 1914
15.	Adolf Fredrik Gustafsson <sup>9</sup>	Vättnlösa	10 Nov. 1861	1882	
16.	Christina Johansson <sup>10</sup>	Ledsjö	4 Sept. 1859	1885	15 Aug. 1913
17.	Johan Gabriel Johansson (John Johnson)	Vättnlösa	7 April 1862	1886	22 July 1936
18.	Pär Alfred Johansson <sup>11</sup> (Peter Johnson)	Vättnlösa	5 July 1859	1885	23 Aug. 1908
19.	Hildur Cecilia Johansson <sup>12</sup>	Vättnlösa	22 Mar. 1892	1907	

## Others

20.	Malkolm Alfred Johansson	Vättlösa	17 Mar. 1863	1891
21.	Karl Johan Ekstedt <sup>13</sup>	Vättlösa	28 Feb. 1862	1892
22.	Frans Oskar Karlsson	Vättlösa	11 Jan. 1866	1892
23.	Tekla Augusta Andersson <sup>14</sup>	Vättlösa	18 Nov. 1876	after 1893
24.	Frank Pettersson <sup>15</sup>			

<sup>1</sup>This is obviously popular folk etymology. Linguistically Vättlösa is made up of two syllables, the first related to the old Swedish word for water, *vetur*, which is found in Lake Vättern. The second syllable may be related to old Swedish *löi*, meaning a grassy valley. Thus Vättlösa may mean "marshy land," —Elof Hellquist, *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, third edition (Lund 1957), pp. 615-616, 1402.

<sup>2</sup>Ivar Alexis von Hall, b. in Lidköping 19 Feb. 1832, the s. of Major General Birger von Hall and Jeanna Carlsson. He became a cadet at the Karlberg Military Academy in Stockholm in 1849, but left in 1850. He must have emigrated twice, since the Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics notes that he left Ledsjö Parish, which abuts Vättlösa, for America in 1851. His departure from Vättlösa in 1857 was his second emigration. He died in the U.S. in 1892. —Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor*, I-IX (Stockholm 1925-1936), III, p. 420; *Personregister till Statistiska Centralbyråns i Stockholm förteckningar över emigranter 1851-1860* (Index of Swedish Emigrants 1851-1860), A 118:387.

<sup>3</sup>Here one would expect Anfinsryd, the form used by the two main Swedish gazeteers of the 19th century—*Historiskt-Geographiskt och Statistiskt Lexikon öfver Sverige* (Stockholm 1859-1869) and C.M. Rosenberg, *Geografiskt-Statistiskt Handlexikon öfver Sverige* (Stockholm 1882-1883). Anfinsryd probably goes back to the person who cleared the land, whose name may have been Annfinn, a Scandinavian name going back to ca. 1300. —Editor

<sup>4</sup>He was the uncle of No. 8, 9, 10, 12 and 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ledsjö, Skånings-Åsaka, Götene and Istrum were all parishes in Skaraborg County.

<sup>6</sup>Nephew of No. 1, brother of No. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Married No. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Niece of No. 1, sister of No. 8, 9 and 10.

<sup>9</sup>Nephew of No. 1, uncle of No. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Married No. 10.

<sup>11</sup>Returned to Sweden, emigr. again in 1887 to Rockford, followed by his wife, Anna Maria Johansson, sister of No. 16 and 17.

<sup>12</sup>Niece of No. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Lived at Amfinnsryd.

<sup>14</sup>Lived at Amfinnsryd. Her father, Anders Larsson, emigr. 1880, perhaps to Moline, IL.

<sup>15</sup>Frank Pettersson was the s. of Petter Ingemarsson.