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On Håbol Descendants in America

Jan Vegelius*

The Background Legend

Legend has it that on Christmas Eve 1757, a farmer and member of the Swedish Parliament by the name of Per Persson Bågenholm had just sat down with his family for Christmas dinner when there was a knock at the door. This all happened on the Gäserud farm in the parish of Håbol in Dalsland, Sweden.

In walked a young farmer by the name of Erik Persson (1731-1791), declaring that he wanted permission to marry Bågenholm's fifteen year-old daughter, Catharina (1742-1814). Bågenholm, who had better plans for his eldest daughter, had his farm hands throw out the suitor. This was no easy matter, since the young farmer was very strong. He was also stubborn and returned once more to propose again. Again he was thrown out, now with the help of Bågenholm himself. Yet a third time Erik Persson gained entry into the house with the same errand. This time Per Persson Bågenholm gave up and said, "Well, you may as well have the girl, if we are to have Christmas peace."

This is how it came about—if we are to believe the family legend. Erik Persson and Catharina Bågenholm were married and had a total of thirteen children, of which three died in infancy. The surviving children comprised three daughters and seven sons. These seven boys came to be known as the Håbol boys, named after the Håbol farm in Håbol Parish, where they lived. Today the farm is known as Stommen. Similarly, all of the descendants of Erik Persson and Catharina Bågenholm are known as Håbolssläkten or the Håbol clan.

The seven sons became well-known for their strength, pride, unruliness as well as good looks. The enormous physical strength of the brothers is mentioned in many stories. When they competed against each other, no table nor chair would hold. Instead they used a flat stone as a surface for their exercises, a stone which is still to be seen on one of the family farms.

Novels

The many legends and stories of Håbolssläkten have inspired authors to write articles and novels based on the Håbol saga. I need only mention the famous Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf. In her novel *Bannlyst* (*The Banished*), she wrote about the Hånger farm in Dalsland, with much of the contents taken from the Håbol legends.

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Ivan Löfgren's Book

A strange phenomenon in Håbolssläkten is the number of intermarriages in the generation after the Håbol boys. Of their total children, 38 married at least once. Of these, a total of 24 were involved in at least one marriage—married to a cousin, five to cousins' children, and three to other close relatives. Only six of the total married totally outside the clan. This phenomenon is said to explain the great love members of the clan have for the family farm and has spurred them to keep these farms within the family.

Therefore there is a great interest in family history and many in Håbolssläkten have done research in the family history. This was of great help to Ivan Löfgren when in the beginning of the 1960's he wrote a genealogy of Håbolssläkten and a few other related families. Altogether his book, *Bågenholms-Håbolssläkten*, comprises 2,725 tables, of which 970 belong to Håbolssläkten.

Löfgren's book was a great achievement, although it contains many errors and confines itself to mere family tables. Some of the branches have not been researched. A number of persons have suggested a revision of the volume, but nobody seemed willing to accomplish this task. I volunteered to write a brand new book on Håbolssläkten, leaving to other scholars to update other families listed in Löfgren's book.

Den sägenomspunna släkten

In June 1987 the new family history, named *Den sägenomspunna släkten* was published by Infograf in Uppsala and by the family association, *Håbolssläktföreningen*. The volume contains 821 pages and contains no less than 3,284 family tables, more than 1,000 photos and a number of indexes. The volume also contains a great many family legends, biographies, songs and poems connected to Håbolssläkten.

The Research

How was this vast research carried out? Even though Ivan Löfgren was a great genealogist, I found it incumbent on me to check even the families which he had researched. This meant that I had to begin with the parish records of the time of Erik Persson and Catharina Bågenholm and continue forward in time at least until 1895. For the period from 1896 to the present time I normally contacted persons living today, asking them for details. In some cases I had to use the parish records also after 1895—even going as far down as the present time.

The Swedish parish records are really superb. For families who have remained in Sweden, it has been possible to trace almost all of them up to the present time. It is quite rare that a person vanishes from the parish record system. In my own research I have found that it is very seldom that one loses an individual, and in such cases it usually deals with a person who had left for Norway or the U.S.

In principle, therefore, it is quite possible to present a "complete" family group in Sweden, provided it has remained in that country. The one exception might be where illegitimate children are involved. Thus we find that in most instances the information has been collected not only from parish records and old letters, but

much has come by the simple method of a telephone call.

What Kind of Information?

In order to assemble information from members of Håbolssläkten I drew up guidelines which covered five definite pieces of information—

- a. Complete name with most commonly used Christian name underlined.
- b. Date of birth, including day, month and year and place of birth.
- c. Place of domicile.
- d. Profession, trade or title.
- e. Date of death, including day, month and year and place of death (where applicable).

Very often, additional information has been provided, particularly in the U.S., where such information includes day, month and year of a marriage. I have published such facts but have not actively sought such information. Persons who have married into the Håbol clan have been treated in a similar way. For married women we have included the complete maiden name, a practice not always used by the Americans.

Emigration

When a person emigrated, and the country to which he emigrated does not have the excellent parish recording system as in Sweden, genealogical research becomes more difficult. Many members of Håbolssläkten have emigrated to Norway and the U.S., but our parish records have only recorded the country to which they moved. Even if we possess more specific information as to where these emigrants went, we still face problems. While Norway has a similar system of parish records as Sweden, the country lacks our *husförhörslängder* (household examination rolls), where various families are grouped together and can be followed generation after generation. Despite this, it has been possible to follow most of the emigrants to Norway quite well and the presentation of most Norwegian families is as accurate as for the Swedish families. This has also been helped by the strong enthusiasm that our Norwegian clansmen have shown for our project.

Distribution of Håbolssläkten

In order to get a better understanding of the distribution of members of the Håbol clan, I have placed each one of the 3,284 tables in a geographic setting, which I felt was most appropriate. For most of the tables, there were no doubts, for some it was more difficult. Others might have placed them at different domiciles, but on balance I believe we have arrived at the correct result.

The distribution by countries is as follows:

| Country | Number of Tables | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| Sweden | 1,934 | 58.4 |
| United States | 659 | 20.1 |
| Norway | 649 | 19.8 |
| Other countries | 42 | 1.3 |

In breaking down the category, "Other countries," we find that Canada had 17 tables, Denmark 8, Western Germany 4, Spain 2, Argentina 2, Switzerland 2, Austria 2 and one each for Australia, Venezuela, Botswana, Tanzania and the Ivory Coast.

Since the volume was published, additional information has come in, so that in March of 1988 we have acquired 55 new tables, of which 39 are in the U.S. It has not been possible to document the residence of the new American tables, but we know now the domicile of 671 American tables, broken down by states as follows:

| State | Number of Tables | Percentage |
|---------------|------------------|------------|
| Minnesota | 219 | 32.6 |
| California | 66 | 9.8 |
| Washington | 54 | 8.0 |
| Illinois | 44 | 6.6 |
| Wisconsin | 39 | 5.8 |
| New York | 36 | 5.4 |
| Michigan | 27 | 4.0 |
| Texas | 21 | 3.1 |
| Montana | 15 | 2.2 |
| Oregon | 15 | 2.2 |
| Florida | 14 | 2.1 |
| Arizona | 9 | 1.3 |
| Ohio | 9 | 1.3 |
| Wyoming | 8 | 1.2 |
| Vermont | 8 | 1.2 |
| Colorado | 8 | 1.2 |
| Massachusetts | 7 | 1.0 |
| Georgia | 6 | .9 |
| Iowa | 6 | .9 |
| Virginia | 5 | .7 |
| Arkansas | 5 | .7 |
| Pennsylvania | 5 | .7 |
| New Hampshire | 4 | .6 |
| New Jersey | 4 | .6 |
| Nebraska | 4 | .6 |
| Alaska | 3 | .4 |
| Rhode Island | 3 | .4 |

| State | Number of Tables | Percentage |
|----------------|------------------|------------|
| New Mexico | 3 | .4 |
| Kansas | 3 | .4 |
| Indiana | 3 | .4 |
| Nevada | 2 | .3 |
| Connecticut | 2 | .3 |
| Idaho | 2 | .3 |
| Hawaii | 2 | .3 |
| Oklahoma | 2 | .3 |
| Tennessee | 2 | .3 |
| Utah | 1 | .1 |
| Maine | 1 | .1 |
| Missouri | 1 | .1 |
| North Dakota | 1 | .1 |
| North Carolina | 1 | .1 |
| South Carolina | 1 | .1 |

This means that the remaining states, including the District of Columbia, have no families in the Håbol clan so far as we know.

Reactions in the United States

To American relatives I have nearly always used the mail channels—occasionally also used the telephone. Many have never answered, but even in such instances I have been able to get the information via other relatives. Most of those who answered my inquiries have shown great enthusiasm for the project and some relatives have worked quite hard in order to collect information. A few letters, though, have shown little understanding for the project. Thus, a woman, whose husband belonged to Håbolssläkten, threatened to sue me if I published anything on her or her two sons. On the whole, though, the American relatives have been quite encouraging.

How to Find Relatives in the U.S.

As stated earlier, finding a “lost” branch of Håbolssläkten is almost always possible, if that branch has remained in Sweden. If, however, a member of the family went to America, we have no guarantee of finding him or his descendants. The first obstacle is to find the place to which he moved. Even if this can be elicited, the difficulty of following up can be quite challenging. There are of course census lists and city directories, but there are no records such as the household examination rolls that we use. True, the Social Security system maintains a file on all Americans equipped with Social Security cards, but these files are closed to genealogists.

The best way, however, is if relatives in Sweden still maintain contacts with their kinsmen in America. This avenue has been used on many occasions.

Sometimes Americans, looking for their roots in Sweden, have helped. I have had considerable luck in working with persons and institutions who have a tie-in with the Håbol clan. Two institutions which have been helpful in my search are the Swenson Swedish Immigration Center in Rock Island, IL and the Family History Center in Salt Lake City, UT. Individuals who have been very helpful are Chris and Sven O. Sjostedt as well as Barbara Parke, all of St. Paul, MN.

Instead of presenting in detail the many ways of finding relatives in the U.S., I have below presented a couple of real cases which might be of interest to other researchers.

The Petersons of Jamestown, NY

One of my first discoveries after I had begun my genealogical research concerned the four children of Petter Andersson, a farmer, who emigrated ca. 100 years ago from the very cottage where I was born, i.e. Åsen in Steneby Parish in Dalsland. These four emigrants left at different times, followed by their father, Petter.

Nobody seems to have heard of the family since, but we know that one of the sons was Erik Pettersson, born 23 Aug. 1856. A query to the Family History Center in Salt Lake, UT brought about a check of the police records in the city of Göteborg. Here we found that Erik had sailed from Göteborg on 14 Nov. 1879, giving as his destination Salamanca in Cattaraugus Co., NY. I wrote to a couple of churches in and around Salamanca but got only negative answers. I then asked a computer firm in Salt Lake City, UT to help me. For a fee of \$5.00 per state they checked out the 1900 census lists for New York and Minnesota and actually found an Eric Peterson, residing in Jamestown, NY. An accommodating lady at the Fenton Historical Society in Jamestown traced the family in the city records. She found that Eric's eldest son had worked at the Elks' Club in the city and I immediately wrote to the club, where one of Eric's former colleagues succeeded in finding one of Eric's three remaining daughters and the addresses of the other two. They have all now become quite interested in learning more about their Swedish origins.

The Wallins of Austin, PA

Eric Peterson's descendants had all lost contact with the descendants of Eric's brothers and sister Clara. It was therefore very fortunate for me that my cousin, Lena Jansson, found a letter in an old family Bible in the attic of the Stora Havden farm in Steneby. It had been written 6 Nov. 1901 by Clara's husband, John Wallin of Austin, Potter Co., PA. In the letter he informed Clara's aunt, Greta Pettersdotter, that Clara had passed away recently leaving him alone with five children.

I thereupon wrote to various addresses in Pennsylvania. Finally I got a response from Potter County Historical Society in Coudersport, PA, which told me some details of the Wallin family. Clara's brother Andreas (Andrew) had remained single in the Wallin home. I also received the address of a grandson of Clara's, Leonard Wallin, who still lived in the home of his grandparents. Through

Leonard and his sister, Selma Harvey of Gowanda, NY, I thus was able to reach the remaining descendants of Clara Wallin.

The Wyoming Photo

One of the branches of Håbolssläkten is the Sparsnäs branch of Nössemark Parish in Dalsland. In Sweden this line was extinct, but three brothers had moved to the U.S. One of these was Axel Edward Berger (b. 1860). He had emigrated 1893. His wife and two children followed in 1895.

In 1985 a local history of Nössemark had been published and in it I found a picture of Axel Berger together with his wife and three children.

Maj Andreasson of Sparsnäs lent me the photo and some others of the Berger family, as well as photos of a woman—Elvira Peterson and her children Even, Vegelia, Elisabeth and Anna. These people belonged to the Lahögen line—after the Lahögen farm in Nössemark. Elvira and Axel had been raised in the home of Axel's grandmother and Maj Andreasson reasoned that these photographs might be helpful. How right she was!

One of the Berger photos had been taken at Prairie Farm, WI. With that information I turned to my contact in Salt Lake City, Margarita Choquette, who found the family in the census for 1900. The family lived at that time in Big Bend, Chippewa Co., WI. Another contact, Genevieve Reber of Eau Claire, WI, found the Berger family in the 1910 census, still residing in Big Bend. After that date nothing more seemed to be known of the Axel Berger family. In Sweden this problem could have been solved by going to the parish records. But not so in the U.S.

One of the photos borrowed from Maj Andreasson proved, however, to be promising. It depicted Even Peterson riding a horse. In the lower portion of the picture it was possible to decipher the name of E. Peterson, Sundance, WY. Could Sundance be his residence?

Another member of the Lahögen line, Mrs. Ruby Holtzclaw of Broomfield, CO succeeded in finding an old lady, 83 years old, Frances Ruland of Alva, WY. She could tell us that Even Peterson had been a bachelor and had resided in Hulett, WY, about 20 miles from Frances' home. Other bits of information confirmed that we had located the correct Even Peterson.

Thanks to Frances Ruland and her son Dave, we were able to contact many nice descendants of Elvira Peterson. A note from Ed and Betty Thorn of Shawnee, OK told us of Elvira's death in 1938. Among her closest relatives was a brother, Axel Berger of St. Paul, MN. In a letter from the Thorn family we learned that Axel Berger's daughter Alma was married to a banker named Oace in St. Paul. The Sjostedt family in St. Paul gave us the telephone numbers of several persons in St. Paul named Oace. A Mrs. Oace proved to be related to Alma's husband, John Oace. A nephew of John's, Ralph Oace of Portland, OR, could furnish important information on the Bergers, which led us to Norman Berger of St. Paul, who has been very helpful in clearing up the Berger family.

Finally the Sparsnäs family had been found, thanks to a notation on an old photo from Wyoming, but also thanks to a chain of very helpful persons.