Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 22 | Number 1 Article 2

3-1-2002

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Recommended Citation
Oakes, Larry (2002) "Footprints of Family," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol22/iss1/2

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Footprints of Family[+]

Larry Oakes*

Part 1: A Swedish Homecoming

The family of Swedes faced my family of Americans.

We were in a parking lot outside Motala, Sweden, searching for our heritage. The Swedish man from town was telling us these were our relatives. Could that be true?

I pulled out a copy of an old photo from my briefcase. It was of my great-great-grandparents' farmhouse in northern Wisconsin, taken about 1905. Long-dead ancestors with farmer tans and Sunday clothes looked out from the porch.

One of the Swedes, a man named Rune, took one look and almost jumped out of his shoes. He hurried to his car. He came back with a grin on his face.

In his hands was a framed copy of that very same photo—same house, same people, same frozen moment.

Both families responded in the universal language of the gasp.

With his daughter translating, Rune said the picture had hung in his grandfather's home in Sweden for decades. "His brother sent it from America," he said.

Returning his huge grin, I said: "This proves we have the same blood."

Wondrous things can happen when you go digging for your roots.

Gravity of Family

Four years ago, a single afternoon with my father changed my life.

While Mom was at a high school reunion, Dad and I rooted around Oulu Township, Wisconsin, site of a homestead staked out in the late 1800s by my dad's great-grandparents. Their name was Gustafson; they had come from Sweden.

We searched several cemeteries for their graves. It didn't help that we knew only his first name, but not hers.

It jarred me to realize that our family literally had lost my great-great-grandparents. And it occurred to me that our family was losing even the memory of them and the others who had transplanted us from Scandinavia.

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Perhaps it was those realizations. Perhaps it was finding new common ground with my dad. All I know is, that day I began to feel the hunger, the pull—family gravity, I called it. It came on suddenly, and was powerful.

Under its influence, I scoured cemeteries to put names to faces in old photographs. I searched courthouses, attics, and archives to find mention of forgotten hometowns in Sweden, Finland, and Norway.

I sent e-mails and letters asking if anybody with our family names still lived there. One unforgettable day, seven months after I began searching, the mailman stuffed a letter with Swedish stamps into our box. "Dear relative," it began, and I wept.

Word spread in Sweden that an American branch of the family had made contact and more letters came. I developed an e-mail correspondence with Gunilla Klange of Stockholm. We share a great-great-great-grandpa, born in 1799.

Presents crossed in the mail. Gradually, letters began to end with "love." A family cleaved by the biggest migration in history was back in touch.

I shared discoveries and documents with my parents and brother, Greg. We had animated discussions, spinning off even more questions. It became inevitable that we would make a pilgrimage to the Old Country.

Old Country. My grandmother used the term when I was a boy. It was as if saying the word "Finland" would evoke too many feelings. Finnish relatives had occasionally pleaded with her by letter to visit, but she lived frugally on a small pension.

Eventually the Finnish relatives died, and she died too, without ever returning. Nor did our people from Sweden.

But the world has changed since they left it. Extraordinary journeys need no longer be one-way.

This is the story of our journey back to the Old Country. It is dedicated to those who could not go home again. We did so in their place, and in their name.

We found, to our wonder, that there still is a sense of home there for our American family. We found that you can learn a lot about what made you who you are. We learned that you can restore your family's memory.

It's one of the best stories I know, especially in these recent times of sadness and uncertainty, when family has become more important than ever.

Sailing on Moonbeams

On the night of July 3, 2001, seven of us—my parents, my wife, Patty, our three kids, and me—left Minneapolis-St. Paul on an Icelandair jet. We were bound for Stockholm. My brother and his wife and daughter were to meet us there, flying from Cleveland.

As the wheels left the runway, I sighed. It had taken three years for our three families' schedules and budgets to mesh. I had worried that something might prevent us from making the trip together.

Something almost did—my mother-in-law had recently learned that she had stomach cancer. But she urged us to go anyway. As we left in search of our history, we knew that the family members still making that history are the ones to appreciate most.

Darkness fell. The blondest group of flight attendants I'd ever seen handed out blankets and the passengers grew quiet. I pressed my forehead against the window.

The moon was nearly full. Through breaks in the clouds I could see its sheen on the North Atlantic six miles below. I thought about what it must have been like for those ship-borne immigrants more than a century ago.

They were headed for a place with a language they didn't speak, toward a future full of difficulty. But they were willing to endure the hardship because they sensed the truth in America's promise: with freedom and opportunity, people have a shot at being happy.

Industrialization and a population boom had eaten up jobs and land in Europe. Swedish society had classes, with unequal restrictions on land ownership and voting. The country had a despised peacetime draft and a state-affiliated Lutheran church that many citizens found oppressive.

Like most immigrants, my ancestors were not in the favored classes. And we've learned that the Gustafsons might have been part of a Baptist movement taking root in their region.

So they became part of 1.2 million Swedes—one-fifth of the nation's population—who were drawn to America between 1840 and 1930. For most, the price was never seeing their homeland or parents again.

Down there on the waves, they probably had salt herring, bedbugs, seasickness, and a lot of second thoughts. Six miles up, I had eaten a surprisingly good airline dinner and watched a movie. I had a blanket over my legs, a glass of merlot in my hand, my wife's head on my shoulder, and my parents and children dozing in surrounding seats.

And I was closing in on a dream at 500 miles an hour.

As the moon and I looked down into the black chasm my ancestors had crossed, I silently thanked God for the sacrifices they made for their future—and for ours.

The Homecoming

When the wheels touched down at Stockholm's Arlanda Airport, I felt as though we had returned to a place we'd never been. We stepped into the din of hundreds of Swedish-speaking voices.

It was enchanting to be enveloped in the language our people spoke for thousands of years. I barely understood a word, but I grinned like an idiot.

We changed a few hundred dollars into a few thousand *kronor,* rented a couple of Volvo wagons, and went out to find our heritage.

Sweden, with its pines and fields, looked like home. The freeway went through rock cuts that reminded me of Lake Superior's North Shore.

"No wonder the Swedes felt at home in Minnesota," my wife said. "Though probably not when winter came."

Despite the similarities, there was no doubt that we were in a foreign country. It took a while, for instance, to learn that *utfart* means "exit."

Predictably, for the males in our family, the word became a reliable source of amusement in a variety of contexts. Just as predictably, each misuse of the word caused the females to exchange looks that said: "Why did we marry these bozos?"

Stockholm, cradle of kings, Vikings, and ABBA, was everything the guidebooks said it was: ancient, beautiful, efficient, clean, cosmopolitan, cultured—a Nordic Venice. The freeway took us over blue waters crowded with boats as we passed the center city and utfarted into Hägersten.

That's the suburb where my relative Gunilla Klange lives with her husband and son. They met us at our hotel, and I recognized Gunilla immediately from pictures she'd sent.

She had short, light-brown hair and a whole-face smile that made her eyes crinkle. And, as my mom later pointed out, she has the same prominent jaw as my dad, my brother, and I do.

"What if we don't like each other in person?" she'd written me once. But our time in Stockholm buried that fear. It didn't take long for our families to realize that this was good; this felt right.

Golden Nights

The Klanges showed us all over Stockholm. We enjoyed the sights, but what we really loved was the time with them.

At dinner one night, they introduced us to traditional foods and customs, such as singing old Swedish drinking songs and tossing back a shot of *snaps*. The Swedish liqueur glowed in me like an ember.

Hearing the songs, tasting the *gravad lax* (marinated salmon), *matches sill* (herring with sour cream and red onion), and *kavring* (a soft, sweet brown bread), I felt we were piercing the curtain that fell behind so many of the immigrants after they left.

Most of our forebears had to devote so much energy to becoming American that some of their traditions were lost. I'm talking about those things that make a person feel his foundation—that sense you're not a seedling, but rather the newest ring on an old tree. I felt that with the Klanges. I could see what I had hungered for.

Standing, we Americans ceremoniously presented our Swedish family with wild rice, maple syrup, T-shirts, a Duluth Pack tote bag, buckeye candy, feed store caps, and other tokens of Minnesota and Ohio.

I passed out small, smooth stones I'd gathered from the North Shore.

For most of the summer in Stockholm, dusk lasts almost until dawn. That night, dozens of brightly colored hot-air balloons floated in the arching golden twilight.

The Klanges' balcony doorway framed the scene as we talked and laughed and toasted far into the yellow-orange night.

Wracking my *snaps*-mottled memory for a phrase from Berlitz, I said: *"Tack så mycket—det har varit en underbar kväll!"* ("Thanks so much—it's been a wonderful evening!")

I'm sure I butchered the pronunciation, but never had a canned phrase more perfectly expressed what I felt.

A Missed Connection

On our last day in Stockholm, we asked the Klanges to take us via subway to the suburb of Sundbyberg.

It was from Sundbyberg that my mother's immigrant grandfather, Ernest Sterner, received letters from his mother and brother. I had the letters translated a couple of years ago.

Ernest's father went to America first, and disappeared, leaving Ernest's mother to raise ten kids on her own in Sweden.

When Ernest arrived in America after the turn of the century, he became a chauffeur in Minneapolis and married a comely Norwegian. Family lore has it that they were very happy, until Ovidia died during the birth of their third child. Their wedding picture still hangs in my parents' house.

Perhaps grief closed him off. The letters from Ernest's mother and brother are full of pleas for him to write them. He must not have done so very often.

At the Sundbyberg parish church, a woman consulted records and told us that Ernest's brother, Sigurd, and mother, Amanda, were buried a couple of blocks away. Then she really floored us. "Do you want to know who from the family is responsible for the upkeep of the graves?" she asked, with Gunilla translating.

"Yes!" we all said together.

The name was May Schei of Sundbyberg. I realized with a start that she must be Sigurd's daughter—Ernest's niece. I had brought photocopies of snapshots Sigurd had sent Ernest in the 1930s of his daughter, May.

My mom beamed while the secretary looked up May's phone number, which Gunilla punched into her cell phone. I savored the thought of seeing May's face as Mom presented her with childhood pictures of herself.

An old woman answered, but she seemed confused. She couldn't understand what Gunilla wanted. She kept leaving the phone to call to someone who apparently wasn't hearing her.

Was this May? Was something wrong with her? Gunilla couldn't get her to communicate. Finally, she hung up and said she would write to May and see if she could get some answers before our trip was over.

Damn, I thought. Dad consoled Mom: "They're your relatives, all right."

That afternoon, with the Volvos loaded to the dome lights, we shouted hearty and grateful goodbyes and headed north into the Swedish countryside. We decided that you can have any color house that you want in Sweden, as long as it's red or yellow.

By dinnertime we'd arrived at Sala, a little town with a huge church tower, a market square, and a park with a pond and an arched walking bridge.

Four years ago, none of us had heard of this town. Now we knew that our people went back centuries there—had literally burrowed into its earth, in search of silver.

We went there to dig, too. But what we found was more precious than any metal.

Part 2: The Echoes of Ek

In October 1888, twenty-year-old Gustaf Viktor Ek left his hometown of Sala, Sweden. For generations, Eks had dug silver in the king's mine on the edge of town.

They were poor, and the work was hard and dangerous. Gustaf's great-uncle had been crushed to death in the mine. Another Ek died in a fall down a shaft.

Gustaf wanted a different life. Following his older brother, he made his way to Göteborg and sailed for America. There, he took the name Victor Oak, later Oakes.

He never returned. And because he didn't, I, his great-grandson, Lawrence Victor Oakes III, was born an American.

The Oakeses have had every opportunity the Eks didn't. But until recently, I was oblivious to that fact. I didn't know the Eks were miners. I'd never heard of a place called Sala. My family had lost its memory.

Forgotten Password

On a hot afternoon this past July, one hundred thirteen years after Gustaf Ek left Sala, two rented cars rolled into town and up to the Hotell Svea. As we unfolded ourselves from the cars and stretched, my father's eyes settled on the old railroad depot across the parking lot. He said, "That's probably where Grandpa Victor got on a train to start his trip to America."

It seemed that we had found one of our family's footprints. My voice felt a little husky as I replied: "Yep, we're back where he started."

The word Sala has become magic to me. In 1997, it was the password that opened the door to a forgotten chamber of our family's history. For months that

year I rummaged in courthouses and family basements, looking for clues to Victor's life.

Victor was a railroad track-gang foreman who died in Duluth in the 1940s. We knew little beyond that.

At courthouses and in archives, I searched his marriage certificate, census records, and death certificate for his birthplace. All simply said, "Sweden."

Finally, at the bottom of a desk drawer in my ninety-five-year-old great-aunt's house, I found a yellowed, handwritten list of long-dead relatives. Next to Victor, it said, "Sala, Sweden."

That night I typed those words into an Internet search engine and within seconds was looking at the town's home page. I clicked on the "e-post" icon and composed a message to town officials.

I knew it was a long shot. But three weeks later, I got my first letter from Sweden. I gasped when I saw the name on the return address: Ihrene Ek. "Dear relative," her letter began, and I blinked back tears. I was finally being taken by the hand and led inside.

Ihrene's letter opened a world for us: how Victor came from silver miners; who he left behind; how his lineage goes back in Sala to at least 1799, with the birth of Anders Ek.

Anders was my great-great-great-grandpa and hers, too. She wrote of how she had learned through her own research about the "Ek branch" that moved to America, and that she'd wondered if we'd ever find our way back.

"It's a dream come true," she wrote.

In Their Footsteps

Ihrene had spread the news about us to other Swedish relatives. That led to a letter from another distant cousin, Gunilla Klange of Stockholm, who was to become the Swede with whom I communicate most.

But Ihrene, tall, poised, and serious like the Eks in old photos, will always be special in a different way because she was the first Old Country relative to contact us.

Upon our arrival in Sala, she and her family took us from our hotel to a twilight picnic in a forest above the mine's shaft towers.

Ihrene knew this would be an important place for us. Much of our conversation that long, sunlit evening was about what life had been like for the mining families that lived there as long ago as the 1500s.

Late that night, I wandered the cobblestone streets alone. I tried to imagine the lives of the Eks, who had walked the same stones one hundred years ago and more.

I have their DNA, and yet they are strangers. Trapped in my own compartment of time, the only way I can get closer is to walk in their footsteps,

to gaze upon the same steeple or ridge and imprint a few images in my memory to match some that they probably had in theirs.

I walked past the towering church, the market square, the old city hall. I was glad that landmarks last, and sorry that people don't.

Sala's Red Carpet

Although our people were far from Sala's leading citizens, the town treated us like royalty. Officials ceremoniously welcomed us. Genealogist Maj-Britt Johansson put on a feast at her home. Museums opened for private tours. The newspaper did a story on us.

Ihrene tried to explain that they were proud that descendants of the city's emigrants would come all the way back. To know we still claim each other, across an ocean and after a century, means a lot to them, she said.

We felt the same, and were especially moved by their efforts to help us touch our family's past.

One afternoon they brought us inside Kristina Church, where most of the Eks were baptized, confirmed, married, and mourned.

The minister, organist, and a group of parishioners were waiting for us. Built in the seventeenth century, the church was gilded and ornate, with an enormous golden chandelier hanging from its high vaulted ceiling. We all looked up and turned slowly around.

They waited while we took dozens of pictures, then asked us to sit for a special service. "These are hymns your people would sing," the minister said.

One song made Greg, my brother, tremble. The minister said the workers sang it each morning, asking God's favor and protection before entering the mine. The tune was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Holding our hymnbooks, we sang the Swedish words as best we could.

Afterward, church ladies served us coffee and rolls; this must be a worldwide Lutheran requirement.

Greg was smiling and shaking his head. He said: "'A Mighty Fortress' has always been my favorite hymn. I can't believe they sang that tune every day." Someone from the family responded, "Must be in your genes."

Later, we visited a miner's cottage on a lake north of town. This was where Victor was born and grew up.

Ihrene had sent me a picture of how it looked when Victor left. Like many Swedish cottages from the nineteenth century, it was a small rectangular box, single-story, made of squared-off timbers stacked horizontally. It had a window on either side of the centered door and a tile roof topped by a brick chimney.

Although someone later built an addition, my son, Mike, held up the old photo and clearly identified the original structure. It even had what appeared to be the same tile roof, nine courses from eave to peak.

The owner showed us into the two small rooms where seven Eks had lived when Victor was young. One room had a small corner fireplace and served as kitchen and living room. The other had been a bedroom. The ceilings had since been covered with wallboard and the walls were freshly painted and wallpapered. The wooden floor was varnished.

It looked like a comfortable little house. It was a bit difficult to imagine the poverty, the overcrowding, the hunger that were common then. It was a little hard to imagine the cholera, diphtheria, and other diseases that plucked many names from the Ek family tree.

A few hundred feet behind the house was the raised bed where a railroad track once ran. Ihrene said the tracks were laid in the 1870s, when Victor was still a boy. I sensed she was right when she suggested that with the first train, Victor began to wonder about the big world outside of Sala.

"Can you feel the wings of history here?" Ihrene asked.

Echoes in the Earth

Finally, it was time to visit the old silver mine. Our guides were Ihrene Ek and Bob Engelbertsson, a professor at Örebro University and an authority on the mine.

He had sent me copies of some of the mine's old payroll records. I'm still amazed that after knowing nothing about the Eks all my life, I now know that my great-great-grandfather received part of his wages in Swedish *riksdaler,* part in barley, and part in rye.

We donned hard hats, rubber boots, and rain ponchos and trudged into a room with a statue depicting a typical miner two hundred years ago. The small young man had shoulder-length black hair, crude and tattered shirt and pants, and blocky sandals with thick wooden soles to keep his feet off the wet tunnel floor.

We passed a huge harness, once used to lower draft horses into the shafts. "Here is where they would sing before going down," Bob said.

As we entered the series of dimly lit, sloping tunnels and stairways, I began to get a sense of how tough the Eks must have been. It was cold and clammy. Before electricity, torches must have barely pierced its darkness.

The tunnels burrow hundreds of feet into the earth. It could take miners a half-hour just to walk to their work site. In the short daylight of the Swedish winter, they no doubt entered, worked, and emerged in darkness. Now, and presumably then, an estimated 10,000 bats hibernate in the mine each winter.

The tunnels open onto great, dark stone rooms—two hundred of them. Shafts were named for monarchs—Christina, Karl XI.

Silver from this mine—Sweden's biggest and periodically Europe's—financed the once warlike country's many conquests.

His voice echoing, Bob explained how, before dynamite, miners heated the silver-laced walls with wood fires to soften the stone before going to work on it with hand tools. I touched a wall. I imagined the smoke, the fatigue.

I felt so many things. Reverence. Awe. Sadness for the meanness of their existence. Gratitude for the chance to see this far back into our family's story. And gratitude to them for carrying on, for working, and living and loving as best they could.

My younger daughter leaned into me for warmth and asked when we could go back up into the sun. I wrapped an arm and part of my poncho around her. "Soon," I said.

Gift of Magic

We ate moose, an ancestral food, at Ihrene's house on our last night in Sala. I savored it as though I would never taste it again. Later, Ihrene took me aside and placed a tarnished brass lantern in my hands.

"It is from the mine," she said. "It is what the miners carried in your great-great-grandfather's time. I found this in an antique store in Sala. I want you to have it."

I was so touched that I hardly knew what to say. "I'll treasure it," I finally managed.

"I feel I am going to miss you," she said as our families said goodbye.

After driving a quarter-mile, I looked back. They were still waving from the porch, standing in that everlasting Swedish twilight.

Sala had put such a lump in my throat that I thought it would stay there permanently. I thought that after Sala, anything else would be a letdown. The Swede in me said that a guy could expect only so much magic.

But Sweden proved me wrong.

Part 3: Born in This Room

Our parade of four cars snaked along the narrow forest road. As we crested a hill, the trees gave way to a clearing. Below lay a shallow valley, its carpet of grassy pastures green and yellow in the July sun.

A few horses grazed inside low fences. The rutted dirt road rose and dipped along the valley like a slack, pale-yellow ribbon.

Just where the road climbed and disappeared into the forest, the buildings of a small farm stood, vermilion against the green wall of trees.

I had come 5,000 miles to see that farm. I hadn't expected it to be so beautiful.

The farm has a name: Norra Trollfall. Translated from Swedish, it means "North Troll Falls." It lies in a land where people once believed in trolls, a few miles from a village called Godegård, in the center of lower Sweden.

This valley was a cradle of my family, home to some of our oldest-known ancestors. We went there last summer to feel our past and divine our history. It had been 115 years since our immigrants left.

We thought it was about time someone went back.

Finding the Name

Carl Anton Gustafson, my great-great-grandfather, was born at Norra Trollfall in 1848. His wife, Hulda Charlotta Gustafsdotter, was born ten years later on a nearby farm called Kvarnkullen ("Mill Hill"). They moved to America in 1887 with their two daughters.

I didn't know any of this until recently, after my dad and I searched unsuccessfully for the Gustafsons' graves. I started researching.

A death certificate filed in Bayfield County, Wisconsin, yielded Hulda's name and the names of her parents. But none of the documents said what town they had come from.

Carl's obituary listed a funeral home: Bell Brothers of Duluth. The home amazed me; they'd saved all their information on Carl, who died in 1934. My heart raced when I saw they had taken down his birthplace: "Norra Trollfall, Godegård, Sweden."

Within months I had a file full of data on Carl's and Hulda's families, back to the 1700s. I was happy to have learned so much about their past in Sweden. I would have been even happier if we had found their graves in America.

Family Reunion

These were the people in our parade through the woods to Norra Trollfall: Jan Allertzon, our incredible guide and the keeper of public records in nearby Motala, drove the first car.

Next came the two rented station wagons with us Americans. Last came the Hjertner family from nearby Örebro—our latest newfound relatives.

Earlier, I had written to Jan, requesting information about ancestors. He e-mailed some, but then I didn't hear from him again until he showed up at the resort where we stayed near Motala.

Turns out Jan had been very busy on our behalf, but I hadn't received the progress reports he tried to e-mail via a translator. If I had, I would have known that he and a local genealogist had found the Hjertners, Swedish descendants of our same Norra Trollfall ancestors.

Jan, who wouldn't take any money for his trouble, said the Hjertners were ecstatic about our arrival and wanted to join us for a tour of the family farms.

I grinned, shook my head, and stammered thanks in English and Swedish. If I hadn't descended from Swedes, I would have hugged him.

The Troll House

Norra Trollfall was the last farm on our tour. We were ready to burst from the coffee, lemonade, rolls, meats, and cheeses the owners put out for us at every stop.

At the first three farms, some outbuildings remained, but the original houses had been replaced or changed.

But when someone built a new house at Norra Trollfall in the early 1900s, they left the old one. Jan estimated the wooden structure with the stone foundation and tile roof had been there since the 1700s.

This house is where Carl was born into a *torpare's* family. A *torpare* was a tenant farmer, a renter. Part of his crop or profit went to the owner of some nearby manor.

To Swedes of such station, land ownership was a nearly unattainable dream. Carl and Hulda were no doubt tempted by America's promise of land.

When I mentioned that they had helped start a small Baptist church in Wisconsin, Jan said religious intolerance could have been another reason they left.

He said a Baptist movement had been taking root in the region at that time. Such "free church" movements often preached emigration to America as a way to escape the state Lutheran church.

My throat felt tight as I entered the house where Carl had entered the world. Everything was small. I had to duck to go from room to room. My eight-year-old reached up to show that she could touch the door headers.

The plaster-over-stone living room fireplace was the size of a small hutch. Its chimney was shared by a fireplace in the kitchen. A steel stove had been retrofitted into the large kitchen firebox, but you could still see the hearth where our people had once hung their stew pot.

It was hard to keep a foothold on the circular wooden stairs built like an afterthought into a narrow stairwell near the front door. Its treads tapered from a few inches wide at the outside of the spiral to almost nothing at the hub.

Upstairs, a small bedroom and storage room were tucked into the peak of the gabled roof. What appeared to be crayfish traps hung from the rough-hewn rafters. It was hot up there, and musty.

I thought that the boys probably had slept here. Carl was the oldest of ten children, eight of them boys. They must have been packed like sardines to sleep in that room.

Pieces of the Past

I looked at rafters that had been hewn before the American Revolution. Reaching up, I pulled off a small shard of brittle pine bark.

I felt guilty about taking even this fragment from what seemed almost a museum. But I also felt entitled; this had been my family's home.

Back downstairs, I sat in a living room chair. I looked into the soot-blackened fireplace and imagined a winter night in the 1700s, candles flickering, wind howling, a man carving a tool of some kind, a woman at a spinning wheel, a baby swaddled in a cradle. Despite disease and crop failures, that baby lived, and now so do I.

I would have almost given a little finger to spend the night sitting within those walls. But the owner had been gracious; I didn't want to overstay our welcome.

Outside, I walked into a pasture. Carl never returned here, and I knew I might not, either. I wanted something permanent, something to help me remember this day, this feeling, for a long, long time.

I dug a few inches into the soil. I pulled an empty plastic medicine bottle from my pocket and scooped it full of earth. I capped the bottle and filled in the hole.

The dirt never made it home—it was seized in Minneapolis on the remote chance it would spread hoof-and-mouth disease or some foreign pest.

On the way back to the cars, I came to a pile of stones. Impulsively, I pocketed a couple of walnut-sized ones. Thank God they were rainwashed, free of dirt. The airport agent let me keep them.

Oskar's Gold Watch

That evening, we had ice cream with the Hjertners at an outdoor cafe in Medevi. Their patriarch, Rune, a short, ebullient man of sixty-four, laid an ornate gold pocket watch on the table. He told us its story as his 15-year-old daughter, Maria, translated:

One of Carl's brothers, Oskar, went to America just before he was to be drafted into the Swedish Army. Oskar was Rune's grandfather, my great-great-great-uncle.

In America, Oskar saved most of what he earned iron mining and logging. After six years, he returned to Sweden with that gold watch and a pile of money.

He then bought the farm their father had never been able to own—Norra Trollfall. Oskar in Östergötland and Carl in Wisconsin became lords of their own manors.

Rune said he still might have an "America letter" from one of Carl and Hulda's daughters. The letter told of a great "prairie fire" from which people ran for their lives.

Dad and I couldn't make sense of it. Jennie and Agnes lived in northeastern Minnesota, not on the prairie. Then it hit me, and I almost shouted: "Hinckley! The Hinckley fire that killed all those people!"

Rune promised to look for the letter and mail a copy. For our part, we promised not to wait for Minnesota's next disaster to send another America letter.

Then Rune spoke for a while, looking at us each in turn with misty eyes.

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He said this has been a special day, and he thanks you for looking for us," Maria said. "He said it is one of the high points of his life."

Part 4: Following the Heart Home

Slowly, the church cook translated: "She—say—you—maybe—not—in—right—place."

My wife, Patty, began to cry.

We were in the town of Evijärvi, Finland, last July, trying to find the farm where Patty's mom's ancestors had lived in the 1800s.

The secretary at the parish church didn't speak English. But the cook, a big-boned woman in a white apron, took time out from preparing a wedding feast to translate what she could. A deacon helped search the old books of long-dead parishioners.

It was a long process. The church people eventually were stumped, and noting it was already late on a Friday afternoon, they suggested we check a neighboring parish on Monday.

Patty nodded, but we both knew that was impossible; come Monday, we'd be on a plane for home.

The secretary must have seen how important this was to us. Before we got to the door, she asked us to wait.

The Mission

Our 10-member family group had taken a ferry from Sweden to Finland, mostly to see the area around Vaasa, where my dad's mother, Hilda, was born. But Patty and I also had scheduled a day in Evijärvi to do some research into her side of the family.

Before we left the United States, something had happened that made this side trip more important: Patty's mother, Gladys, found out she had stomach cancer.

Gladys, a granddaughter of Finnish immigrants, grew up near New York Mills, Minnesota, in a farm enclave so Finnish that she didn't learn English until she went to school.

I have always loved how you can sometimes detect tinges of the Old Country in her speech, although she's never been there. I've been thinking a lot lately about all the things I love about her.

When doctors diagnosed the cancer, going to Scandinavia suddenly seemed out of the question. But Gladys and her husband, Jerry, wouldn't hear of us canceling.

All through Sweden and Finland, she was in our thoughts. We called frequently, and we bought gifts. But by the time we got to Finland, what we most wanted to give Gladys was her history—pictures and stories of the place that echoes in her voice.

So Patty and I drove a couple hours on nearly empty country highways from Vaasa to Evijärvi, a pretty town wrapped around a hill, next to a large lake.

Samaritans and Wildflowers

After asking us to wait, the church secretary returned to the archive books and made several phone calls. Patty sat. I paced.

Finally, the secretary looked up, smiled and announced that she had found the farm. I high-fived the relieved Patty, then rounded the counter and hugged the startled secretary.

She beckoned for Patty to join us, and we looked over her shoulder at the one-hundred-fifty-year-old document preserved on microfilm.

It said that Gladys' ancestors, a family named Abrahamson, had lived on a farm called "No. 2 Norr Ena," which means "North End." She pressed a button, and the machine made us a copy while the deacon pulled out a map and made a couple of phone calls. He motioned for us to follow him.

I offered the secretary a fistful of Finnish *maarka.* She wouldn't accept them until I said they were a donation to the church.

Then we followed the deacon's little red car for about fifteen miles along a hilly two-lane highway through pine forests. We stopped at a house, where he turned us over to a woman who spoke a few words of English and seemed happy to help. It was as though a tag team of Finnish Good Samaritans was relaying us to our destination.

The woman brought us to a farm. Yes, the old widow who lived there told us, she knew where Norr Ena was. No, she said, there was nothing left but a field. But then she pointed to a painting on her kitchen wall.

It showed a scene from long ago: a small lake, a hillside behind, a network of cultivated fields and many buildings, including what appeared to be small dwellings—for tenant farmers, probably.

"Norr Ena," she said. We were dumbstruck.

The widow allowed us to bring the painting out into the sun, where we took pictures of it. After grateful goodbyes, we drove down to the lake. Wildflowers decorated the gentle, grassy slope, all the way to the water. They swayed in a warm breeze. "It's beautiful," Patty said.

We took pictures. Then I watched from the road as my wife walked into the field where Gladys' great-great-grandparents, Thomas and Greta Abrahamson, had worked a swatch of Norr Ena in the 1850s.

On the hillside where their five children might have played, Patty picked wildflowers for her mom.

Gunilla Comes Through

In Turku, Finland, we drove up clanking steel ramps and into the belly of a Viking Line ferry for our overnight journey back across the Gulf of Bothnia to Sweden. Twelve hours later, we were in Stockholm.

In the nine days since we had left, our amazing relative Gunilla had gotten through to my mother's relatives in the suburb of Sundbyberg. She had tried calling one of them, May Schei, when we first arrived in Sweden, but the woman who answered the phone had seemed confused.

Gunilla now explained that the woman was indeed May, the niece of my mom's grandfather, Ernest Sterner. May, Gunilla had discovered, is senile. Her husband, Elias, hadn't been near the phone when we called.

He was eager to meet us, as was their daughter, Ane, a college professor. We drove to Ane's apartment for lunch. I found a kindred spirit in the slender, intellectual Ane.

She'd written a family tree and seemed to get great satisfaction out of adding our names to it. Facing off with our respective papers, we played catch with one hundred years of family history.

Dad seemed happy for Mom. She'd trouped along for two weeks while we reconnected with his relatives; now it was her turn, and she was beaming.

Ane took us to the cemetery, where she and Helena Robinson, another of Ernest's grandnieces, showed us family graves. My mother's great-grandmother Amanda was buried there. Her husband had gone to America and vanished. Her headstone had no name, just one word: "Mor."

Mother. What better epitaph for a woman who raised ten kids alone?

Family Treasure

Ane and Helena brought us to meet May and Elias. He greeted us warmly. It was hard to tell how much she understood, but she seemed to enjoy our company and the old pictures of her that we had brought along.

Their house was full of family treasures.

I was drawn to an old black-and-white studio portrait on a wall. It was of a young woman with tightly pulled-back dark hair, a pretty face and a Mona Lisa-like ambiguity in her expression.

It was Amanda, they said—the Mor in the cemetery, my great-great-grandmother. I felt a sudden tenderness somewhere inside, where a voice said: "I'm so happy to finally meet you."

On another wall hung a painting that May had done of the red cottage, called Backgården, where Amanda had raised the children. We didn't know the name of Ernest's father, the husband who vanished in America. The Scheis told us his name was Erland.

There was a story, they said, that Erland might have been murdered while carrying a railroad payroll. The family never confirmed it. They knew only that he stopped sending Amanda money, and they never heard from him again.

Ane said that Amanda joked that it was a good thing he emigrated, or she would have had fifteen children.

Too soon, it was time to go. We exchanged addresses and promised to exchange pictures, old letters, and more information. It was a pact to bind these strands of our family together again.

They walked us to our car. May got into the spirit of the goodbyes. She took both my hands and led me in an impromptu waltz. For a few magic moments we danced on the grass as she hummed a tune and smiled.

We left the Old Country the next day. On the flight home, I thought once more of Victor Ek, Ernest Sterner, the Gustafsons, and the others.

Following less than four hundred years after Columbus, they secured for our family a place in the New World.

I wished they could see how well it's turning out for us there. I wished they could see how much we loved coming back to their homeland, and how happy we are to be what they made us: Americans.

The Circle Closes

Early one Saturday I drove the forty miles from Duluth to Oulu Township in Wisconsin, where this story began.

I parked beside the long-shuttered Swedish Baptist Church, walked out back and stood before the graves of my great-great-grandparents, Carl and Hulda Gustafson.

I had found them in 1998, after finally locating old cemetery records, handwritten in Swedish. They were buried side-by-side in unmarked graves.

The next summer, my dad and I corrected that indignity by placing a granite marker. In addition to their names and years of births and deaths, it says, "Swedish Immigrants—Oulu Pioneers."

I pulled a walnut-sized stone from my pocket. Three weeks before, I had taken it from a field at Norra Trollfall, the farm in Sweden where Carl was born in 1848.

With a garden trowel I dug a hole in front of the granite marker. I set the Norra Trollfall stone in the hole, then filled it back in.

I stood there a while, watching an orange sun climb through the trees. Then I got in my car and drove home.

Part 5: Your Own Story

Start at Home

A lot of your family's story might be right under your nose; begin at home and work outward.

Scour your house and relatives' houses for old photos and documents before someone throws them away. Make copies for yourself if relatives want to keep theirs. Color copies can look as good or better than originals.

On old photos, note the town where the studio was located; it can be an Old Country clue. Thank your lucky stars if someone has written identities on the photos; then do your descendants a favor by doing the same on your photos.

If an important old photo is in bad shape, have a negative and new print made to preserve the image.

Other things to watch for: old family Bibles—some have histories written or stored in them; certificates of baptism, marriage, citizenship, and death; school records; wedding announcements; obituaries; deeds, wills, and military papers.

Scan them for ancestors' parents' names, place of birth, and year of immigration, which you will need later.

If you have foreign letters, get them translated.

Give copies of all important materials to an interested relative, both to share the fun and back up your files. You also can scan your material, store it digitally, and e-mail it to relatives.

Draw simple trees for each branch of the family. This will help you keep relatives straight and clarify your next step.

Take a tape recorder and grill your oldest family members or those who knew them, before it's too late. Bring photos of unidentified people. Prod them into telling old family stories. It's a great way to interact with the family while adding to your information.

Tapping Local Resources

It's sad to lose track of relatives, alive or dead. An inventory of family graves is a precious gift to your grandchildren, and to theirs.

Note locations and, when possible, take pictures to preserve the writing on the stone and make it easier for future generations to find.

Track down unknown graves using newspaper obituaries from the library, death certificates from the courthouse, or records from local funeral homes or cemeteries.

The graveyard keeper, or sexton, often can provide a map for your files, showing the location of your family member's plot.

Courthouses can be family gold mines.

For example, at a county register of deeds I learned that my great-great-grandparents sold some of their farm's trees to a logging company for $1,700—a princely sum in 1899. It helps explain the nice farmhouse they built. The office also had their U.S. Homestead land patent on file.

At a county recorder's office I found a marriage license application taken out by my great-grandparents in 1897. It gave his parents' names in Sweden -- something I hadn't known. Recorders also have death certificates for relatives who died in that county.

Many local libraries have U.S. census records on microfilm. Often, they will list the year an immigrant arrived in the United States. They also have a line for "birthplace," although often only the country is recorded, not the town.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has the world's largest genealogical library, has family history centers in nineteen Minnesota towns.

The centers are open to the public and have access to vast stores of microfilmed documents from all over the world. For more information, go to <http://www.familysearch.org> or call 1-801-240-2331.

Statewide Resources

It's getting easier all the time to find family history in Minnesota. Once you've gone beyond local resources, the process is easier and faster with a computer, but it can be done without one.

This year the Minnesota Historical Society opened an online index of people who died in the state between 1908 and 1946. You can find it at <http://www.mnhs.org>. From the site you can order a copy of the certificate for $8. The phone number is 651-296-2143.

The Golden Valley-based Minnesota Genealogical Society offers classes, a library, and referrals to nearly all statewide genealogy services. It has branch societies for ten different ethnic groups.

They include some you'd expect in Minnesota, such as German, Swedish, and Norwegian. But there's also Danish, Icelandic, Polish, Irish, and others. For information, go to <http://www.mtn.org/mgs> or call 763-595-9347.

The Iron Range Research Center in Chisholm, Minnesota, contains one of the largest collections of genealogical materials in the Upper Midwest, including such diverse offerings as Sicilian deaths, African-American records, and lists of orphans.

This fall, the center's Conrad Peterzen completed indexing all naturalizations performed in Minnesota before 1955, a mammoth nineteen-year task that generated dozens of volumes.

One of the center's librarians showed me citizenship Declaration of Intention documents for my relatives, naming the ships they arrived on. He then showed me a book with old pictures of the ships—exciting! For more information, go to <http://www.ironrangeresearchcenter.org> or call 1-800-372-6437.

Minnesota also has institutes and associations for descendants of various immigrant groups. For example, the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis

stages many cultural events, and you can get Swedish atlases, dictionaries, and advice books at its bookstore. Go to <http://www.americanswedishinst.org> or call 612-871-4907.

National and International Resources

As you search branches into national and overseas records, the personal computer becomes an almost indispensable tool; it's like having the archives of dozens of nations in your home.

If you don't have a computer, get on the Internet at the public library; you'll see what I mean.

Recently, I typed my great-grandmother's probable hometown—Aalesund, Norway—into a Web search engine. I instantly got dozens of hits, including English-language Web pages with photo tours of the gorgeous fjord town and e-mail addresses of government offices, libraries, and ordinary citizens.

The genealogical help sites on the Web could fill hundreds of newspaper columns, so I'll just list a few of the more exciting ones I've run across recently:

• **http://www.ellisislandrecords.org**

Here you can type in the name of an ancestor who arrived in New York between 1892 and 1924 and instantly get their arrival record, showing hometown, name of ship, their age, and date of arrival.

For a fee you can order a copy of the actual page of the ship's manifest, where your ancestor's name appears.

• **http//www.familysearch.org**

This is the gateway to the unparalleled collection of worldwide genealogical data kept by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Why do they collect it? Members of the church believe that families can maintain eternal connections to their ancestors, provided they know them by name. For them, family history is a divine mission.

Anyone can tap the vast store of records and get research guidance. Many of the birth, death, census, immigration, and other pubic records are now on CD or online.

• **http://www.genhomepage.com**

The Minnesota Genealogical Society calls this "one of the better general starting places on the Web." It has lots of how-to information and links to other helpful sites.

• **http://www.mtn.org/mgs**

This is the Minnesota Genealogical Society's home page, and it contains dozens of helpful links to vast stores of information on the Web.