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Don't Look Too Close— You May Find a Horse Thief! A Genealogical Exposé

Robert P. Anderson*

The search for one's roots can lead to unexpected findings. Modern technology has made genealogical searches extraordinarily easy, but one must be steeled against finding historical data that do not fit the concept of what old family should be like. My maternal great-grandpa, Carl Johan Danielsson, is a case in point. He immigrated to America in 1890 with great-grandma and daughter Elsa, who was my great Auntie Elsa. The other children in the family, including my grandfather, arrived at various times between 1880 and 1890. They all came from south central Sweden. This was the time of the great emigration from Sweden.

The Swedes emigrated for various reasons. Most people came because times were tough in rural Sweden. America was seen as the land of opportunity. Many folks came because they wanted freedom to worship outside of the boundaries set by the state church. Belonging to a free church or congregation set one in a somewhat precarious social position. But what about great-grandpa Carl Johan? What motivated him to follow his eight children to America? Because he died in 1916, there is no family oral tradition of what motivated him to emigrate. The only remaining method of interpreting possible motivation is to go back to historical data available in archival records from Sweden.

Obtaining the records of births, deaths, and marriages is not difficult, if one has a starting point such as the name of the parish where the relative was born or the location from which he/she emigrated. Prior to 1890, all of the population vital statistics were maintained in local parishes by the pastors and clerks of the parish. Since Sweden had a state church—the government supported the pastors—part of the parish obligation was to keep family records. The format for record keeping was well organized, consistent from parish to parish, and very complete in terms of names, dates, and occupations. In modern times these old parish records are maintained in regional, government-supported archives. What is not readily available in formalized records is the history of a person or family prior to emigration. That takes some digging and, in many cases, plain luck. If one is fortunate to locate family members who remained in Sweden, one may discover an oral tradition or history of family members who came to America.

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The only word from mother's side of the family was that great-grandpa and his family came from Hultsfred, Vimmerby, or Mariannelund, all towns within a few miles of each other on the east side of Sweden near the larger city of Kalmar. The area is called Kalmar *län* (county). No one in the family, including Carl Johan's children or their spouses or his grandkids could supply any further information. The family lived in one of these towns over a fifteen-year span, somewhere around 1875 to 1890. The first attempt to find information about the family drew a blank. The second attempt met with success. Success came during a visit to the regional archive in Vadstena, Sweden, where the parish records for Kalmar *län* and Hultsfred were maintained.

"I'm looking for records on my great-grandpa."

"Oh, let me get Birgitta (an archivist); she speaks good English."

To Birgitta: "His name was Carl Johan Danielsson and we think he came from Hultsfred or at least that is what my Uncle told me."

"Okay, lets get the microfilm records of Hultsfred Parish." Oh boy; microfilm records for a ten- or twelve-year period contain a lot of data. Pictures were taken of each page of the church records and then placed on microfilm. The script was in Swedish and in the old-style, cursive handwriting of the parish minister. Going through years of records could take a lot of time. It is like finding a needle in a haystack. With persistence it can be done. The first try at finding his name in parish records didn't work out.

Birgitta: "Do you know what kind of work he did?"

"Well, I think he was a blacksmith. That's what my mother and uncle told me."

"Let's go down to the vault where they keep the original records. Maybe we can find something in the books that lists people by occupation."

The archive was located in an old castle and the microfilm readers were in the main reading room on the first floor. The vault was in the castle cellar area that seemed like the bowels of the old building. It wasn't difficult to locate the Hultsfred Parish books, because Birgitta knew exactly where to go. She pulled down a book from the shelf—each one covered a span of six to ten years—and moved immediately to the period 1885-1890.

The Swedish accent can't be communicated but, "There are ten blacksmiths listed here...No...No...that isn't the name." And so it went through nine names. At number ten, "Here he is, Carl Johan Danielsson." Success! Great-grandpa really existed in Sweden! From the information given in the record, it was relatively easy to backtrack to his home parish.

Minor shock number one. Carl Johan didn't start out in Hultsfred or Vimmerby. His original home was in the village of Nissafors in Källeryd Parish, some distance west of Hultsfred. No one in the family ever mentioned Nissafors. This was a new one. Since time was short and it was necessary to keep to a travel schedule, it was not possible to spend more time at the archive. Birgitta was contacted by mail some time later. Archivists can moonlight and carry out genealogical searches for individuals. The fee is negotiated with the archivist.

Birgitta was asked if she would try to research more about Carl Johan and his family. Before too long, she came up with data about Carl Johan, his wife (my great-grandma) the kids born in Nissafors and their ancestors. Why did they leave the farm, Kämpabo, and move to Hultsfred? Rural folks didn't usually move very far from their home base and Hultsfred was a considerable distance in the 1880s from Nissafors and Kämpabo farm.

Swedes are into the genealogical search game. They were involved in researching family histories long before the "roots" phenomenon became popular in America. Many communities have genealogical societies, composed of local volunteers, who gather and publish data about families in their local parishes. The unsophisticated, American "roots" seeker often doesn't know about these goldmines of family history. Tapping into these data banks is a chance occurrence.

The material on the Danielsson family was sent to Manne Engstrand, my wife's first cousin, who lived in a town about eighty or ninety miles from the Nissafors area. Manne was the genealogical expert who had done extensive research on the Swensson family. It was his retirement hobby. Amateur genealogists are curious folk. They are akin to detectives who get on a trail and can't give up the hunt until they solve the mystery. Manne went to his local genealogy center and searched out data on Källeryd Parish. He came up with four volumes published by the local genealogical society in the Nissafors area (see a complete list at the end of the article). These books presented detailed histories of families in several parishes near Nissafors. The records went back as far as the late 1500s. These narrative accounts were, of course, written in Swedish. Manne located the history of Carl Johan's family and Johanna's family in the volume titled *Kämpabo o Gunillabo i Källeryds socken: 1538-1993* (1994). The history of great-grandma's family went back to the 1600s. Carl Johan lived in Källeryd Parish. Reading the narrative was a major task. It was written in Swedish and plowing through the pages was not easy, especially when one can't read Swedish without the aid of a dictionary. But, the story behind the motivation for immigration became clear after reading the records.

The Clementssons, great-grandpa's parents, lived and farmed acreage halfway between Anderstorp and Nissafors. Halfway means one Swedish mile (about six English miles) from each community. The parish church, Källeryd, was located in Nissafors. Carl Johan's father, Daniel Clementsson, died a tragic death. Legend has it he was kicked in the head by a horse during a shoeing job. He never regained consciousness. The funeral was on the day of the wedding party for his daughter, Anna Catharina. Apparently Daniel's estate was substantial. His wife, Cajsa, inherited it. She made a decision to sell her part of the inheritance to her two children, Carl Johan and Anna Catharina. The sale was made with the provision that she was to get an allowance for the rest of her life. Thus, it came about that the farm Kämpabo, or the part owned by Daniel, was divided into two parts. Carl Johan got one share and Anna Catharina and her new husband got the other share.

The village genealogical publication is not very complimentary of Carl Johan. The translation is as follows: “If Carl Johan was a good-for-nothing (*en slarver*) we do not know, but in contrast to his brother-in-law [Anna Catharina’s husband] who was doing very well, it seemed like he was going downhill.”

Källeryd Parish records show that a parish meeting was held on 13 March 1868 regarding Carl Johan and his family. At the time they were still owners of the land at Kämpabo. Things must have gone from bad to worse. Carl Johan must not have been a very good farmer. Everything indicates that he didn’t have his heart and soul in farming. But, he also developed a secondary occupation as a blacksmith. Actually his best crop was in developing a family. Five children were born in Kämpabo. My grandpa, Donatus Albin, was the oldest. There is also some hint that Carl Johan hit the bottle heavily. It was enough of a problem that the community was aware of his “problem.” The record stated that he had no lodging for his family and no possibility of supporting the many mouths he and Johanna had to feed. The parish committee decided he was to go to Squire Björk from Spexhult in Nässjö Parish in order to negotiate a crofters holding. This town was over forty miles from Nissafors and Kämpabo. Carl Johan’s brother-in-law, Peter Magnusson of Elghult, was commissioned to go with him. Committee members agreed they would decide how to help the Danielsson family after they heard from Squire Björk from Spexhult, i.e., what kind of conditions he set out for Carl Johan. Another local government committee from the parish was assigned the job of giving the family relief from the “poor family” relief fund. For all intents and purposes, Carl Johan and his family were on welfare; but, instead of funds supplied by the federal or state government, the local church parish took on the obligation of helping their own.

The family moved to Nässjö and settled down, but, three months later, on 10 May 1868, Carl Johan wrote back to the home parish and asked for a loan of 100 crowns for the house he planned to build for his family. The Källeryd Parish committee was hard-nosed. They decided not to make the loan unless he showed them the plans and contract. The committee also asked Joseph Alexandersson to go to the building site and make sure the house was built properly. Apparently, the parish committee decided not to make the loan and they also declared that no further help would be forthcoming. That didn’t stop Carl Johan. On 13 September 1868, he wrote again requesting help in his “distressed condition.” He indicated that it was next to impossible for him to engage in his occupation of horseshoeing—he was a farrier and blacksmith—because he didn’t have the money to buy materials. After a long committee meeting he was granted one *skeppund* (170 kg) of bar iron on credit. The iron could be obtained in Jönköping and the parish took responsibility for payment if Carl Johan defaulted on the credit purchase. Again, it was decided not to make any further loans to Danielsson. The genealogical record’s final statement noted: “this is the last sign of life that can be traced to Carl Johan; according to other statements he and his family have immigrated to America.” However, a little later in the record it was noted that Danielsson sold the property in Kämpabo. The transaction must have

been complicated because it lasted for a couple of years. Feelings were running pretty high; the record indicated that Carl had a “finger in the pie” of the transactions.

There are no indications in the available records of what happened in Nässjö. Apparently the family didn't do very well. They moved to Hultsfred, in Kalmar *län*, a bit farther east. There are indications Carl Johan didn't pay back the loans or make any attempt at restitution. In current parlance, we would describe his condition as bankruptcy. To be blunt, the implication is that Carl Johan skipped town and cut off communication with family and friends in Källeryd Parish.

Hultsfred was a larger town; the railroad went there and it even had a railroad station. The Danielsson family settled on Railroad Street, down from the station. Carl Johan and his wife opened a bakery and he became involved in blacksmithing again. The couple also produced some more children. In all there were about nine children. Donatus Albin, the oldest, was restless. He emigrated in 1880. The day before he left Sweden, he married Ida, my grandmother, who was a servant girl.

She was from the Vimmerby area, which is why our family always heard about Vimmerby. Carl Johan apparently never lived there, but it was the home area for grandma. Vimmerby is about one Swedish mile from Hultsfred. The “kids” immigrated to Illinois and the Chicago area. During the 1880-1890 period most of them moved to a Swedish community on Chicago's south side. The lure of Chicago was great, and Carl Johan and Johanna decided to leave Sweden—and their unpaid debts to the parish. The genealogical history also suggests that after the Hultsfred move there was little or no contact with the family remaining in Kämpabo. In 1890 Carl Johan, his wife and youngest daughter, Elsa, immigrated to America. They went to Chicago and the south side Swedish community.

Carl Johan and Johanna moved in with their daughter, Elsa, and her new husband. The flat was in the vicinity of a newly established Swedish mission church. The immigrants who had rejected the state Lutheran church frequently established their own non-denominational churches based loosely on a Pentecostal, congregational model. The doctrine was conservative and there was no church hierarchy beyond the local church. A generic term, which described these congregations, was Mission Friends (*Missionsvänner*). Carl Johan became a member. Apparently he was “saved” and turned over a new leaf. However, he made no attempt to communicate with his family back in Sweden. He did write a few letters to Johanna's family; two of these letters were preserved in Sweden and came into my possession in 1997. The first was written in 1906 and the second in 1911. Carl Johan found the Lord. He quoted Bible verses and sounded like a committed convert. He not only praised the Lord in his letters, particularly the first one, but he bragged about all the wonders of Chicago and about all the money he and Johanna received at their fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration.

These letters were not discovered by the descendants of Carl Johan's sister,

who remained in Sweden, until sometime in the 1990s. The letters had been sent to Johanna's relatives who lived in Källeryd Parish. My inquiries about the Danielssons apparently stirred up some interest in the local genealogical society, which led to the discovery of the letters. Our living relatives in Sweden (descendants from Carl Johan's sister) were surprised and aghast at the tone of the letters. First, his emphasis on religion was described as "crazy." Second, bragging about money and the wealth of America (Chicago particularly) was discrepant from the staid, conservative cultural norm of folks who still live in rural Sweden. The question remained, however—why the total loss of contact from 1890? The living family in Sweden had no idea and Carl Johan's descendants in America certainly had no concept of what went wrong.

The following explanation is based on speculation and some strong circumstantial evidence. The first hypothesis is that Carl Johan left Sweden with "bad" feeling on his part and his family's part. Who disowned whom is not clear. The speculations about the reasons for the family split did not come to light until 1996. I visited Sweden and found distant relatives, i.e., the branch of Carl's family from his sister Anna Catharina. Her grandson, Axel, indicated that his father, Johannes (Anna Catherina's son), had lived in the United States for some years prior to 1911. He came back to Sweden and never really talked about his reasons for not finalizing his immigration. Axel brought out two photographs his father had brought back from America. Axel stated that one was a picture of Elsa and her sister. "Elsa? Do you mean Auntie Elsa?" The photograph had been taken at a studio in the vicinity of 63rd and Halsted Street in Chicago! The second photo was from another studio in the same vicinity. Halsted and 63rd was about three streets from the flat where Carl Johan lived with his wife and daughter and just a short distance from the Swedish church the Danielsons attended. Conclusion: Axel's father (Carl Johan's nephew) either visited or lived by his uncle. There was no way he could have obtained the photos of the Danielsson girls without spending some time in Chicago. The mystery continues. Why did neither side acknowledge the other and pass this meeting down through family folklore?

The second hypothesis is that Carl Johan and his nephew had a battle royal. It was probably a knockdown-dragout affair. It is likely that there were two issues: the debt owned by Carl Johan to Källeryd Parish in Sweden and religion. Carl Johan had broken with the state church of Sweden and had embraced, as a born-again Christian, an evangelical "free" church.

The effect of this split was that neither side talked anymore about the other. The lesson to be learned is that, when one digs into a genealogical history, the events that unfold may not present as nice a picture of family as one might wish. People are people and families are families. Fortunately, now that we have discovered each other after one hundred years of silence, the struggles of our ancestors have been set aside; and, while not forgotten, they have resulted in new bonds of friendship and family ties.

In spite of the circumstances surrounding Carl Johan's immigration to

America, his descendants did very well in the land of opportunity. He would have claimed bragging rights for his grandchildren, great-grandchildren and even great-great-grandchildren. Family members are diverse occupationally. There are physicians, psychologists, teachers, counselors, university professors, engineers, businesspersons, school administrators, clergymen, and even one politician. All in all, the Danielson part of the gene pool contributed to a lot of successful people.

Appendix

Titles of nine books published by Källeryd *Hembygdsförening*, 335 92 Nissafors, Sweden:

- *Källeryd Socken: betraktad genom utdang ur sockenstuve-och kommunal-stämmeprotokoll, 1669-1951* (1991)
- *Beskrivning över Elghult: samt underliggande torp* (1993)
- *Beskrivning över Hjulftult: samt underliggande torp* (1993)
- *Beskrivning över Algustorp och Skog: med underliggande torp* (1993)
- *Beskrivning över Näs, Göhestra: med tillhörande torp* (1993)
- *Hagelstorps-By i Källeryds socken: 1414-1992* (1992)
- *Protokollen berättar om Källeryd Församling under 130 år från 1863-1993; emigrationen från Källeryd till Amerikas Förenta Stater*
- *Beskrivning över Stora o Lilla Bäxhult och Stora o Lilla Svalås* (1993)
- *Kämpabo o Gunillabo i Källeryds socken: 1538-1993* (1994)