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The Information about John Root—a Misleading Tangle^o

Börje Östberg*

Editor's Note: The following letter, which I received on 14 February 2001, serves as a good introduction to the accompanying article. The footnotes are mine.

Dear Dr. Erickson!

A [foot]note 9 is attached to the article in *SAG* (December 2000),¹ "What Did You Go Out to See?," regarding my article in *SAG* (June 1988)² and Erik Wikén's article in *SAG* (December 1990)³ about the identity of John Root.

I found out about Wikén's article long afterward and felt it was too late to submit a reply.

However, both my article and Wikén's were published in the magazine *Dalfolk* (1995:2) and I was offered [a chance] to reply soon thereafter. My reply was published in *Dalfolk* (1995:4). Wikén had been offered to submit an answer to my reply in the same issue, but declined.

I enclose a copy of my reply in *Dalfolk* (1995:4) for your information. The essence of it is that information about Root's identity from people of Bishop Hill is useless because Root—a fired clergyman in a colony led by Erik Jansson, who hated the clergy—had to carefully hide his past when attempting to build a social status in Bishop Hill.

Best regards,

Börje Östberg

^o This article by Börje Östberg was first published in *Dalfolk* (1995:4) under the title "Uppgifterna om John Root en härva av villospår." Reprinted by permission of the author and the editor of *Dalfolk*. It was translated from the Swedish by Ingrid A Lang Translations, 13415 10th Ave. S.E., Milaca, MN 56353. E-mail: <ingrid@maxminn.com>.

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¹ Anna Söderblom; translated by John E. Norton, "What Did You Go Out to See?," *Swedish American Genealogist* XX (December 2000): 189-210.

² Börje Östberg, "Who Was John Root?," *Swedish American Genealogist* VIII (June 1988): 73-79.

³ Erik Wikén, "John Root Once More," *Swedish American Genealogist* X (December 2000): 178-185.



In *Dalfolk* 1995:2, I presented my hypothesis that John Root, who murdered Bishop Hill's leader Erik Jansson, was identical to the clergyman Carl Johan Reutermark who was fired for alcohol abuse. Reutermark crossed the Atlantic as a deckhand, escaped in New York harbor, and disappeared without a trace. A couple of months later, John Root appeared in Bishop Hill.

In the same issue of *Dalfolk*, Erik Wikén states he cannot accept this hypothesis for two reasons. Root is said to be from Stockholm, both in a letter from a member of the Bishop Hill Colony and also in a statement by another Swedish-American. Also, Root is noted to have been twenty-six years old in the American census of 1850. Wikén calls this a source of important value even if it clearly is no more reliable than Root's own statement.

More information than what is given by Wikén is available about John Root in letters and memoranda from the time shortly after the murder. Root supposedly came from a well-to-do family in Stockholm and was a non-commissioned officer in Sweden. If this was true, Root's origin would have been known a long time ago. That is how excellent the Swedish national registration and military rolls are, which is well known. The reason so many historians and genealogists have failed in their attempts to trace Root in Sweden is basically that they have looked at Swedish families by the name of Roth (Rooth, Rut, Ruth, etc.).

The Swedish-American historian of religion, S. G. Youngert at Augustana College, was most probably correct when he talked about "a person who called himself Rooth. However, this was not his correct name." (From the collection of articles, *Swedes in America*, Stockholm 1925-1926). Youngert continues: "He was one of these incorrigible souls who sometimes were sent to America by authorities and guardians in order to get rid of them." The wording gives the impression that Youngert knew who Root was, but did not want to reveal it.

One piece of information unquestionably came from Root himself—the statement that he was twenty-six years old in 1850. An eyewitness's impression is that this information regarding his age is false.

The emigrant, Trued Pearson (Persson), was present during Root's trial shortly after his arrival in the U.S. in 1851. He describes Root in his notes as "still in his best years and handsome, sitting in a chair with his legal representative." (Published in 1937, after his death, with the title *A pioneer from Skåne in America*).

"... still in his best years"—this is not how one would describe a man in his twenties, but possibly someone around forty-five years of age.

As every genealogist knows, people frequently lied about their age for different reasons. A closely related example: Root was accompanied to Bishop Hill by a former captain at Rättvik Company, Karl Zimmerman, who had recently participated in the United States' war against Mexico. When he signed on for the war, he stated his age as thirty-three, when in fact he was forty-eight.

John Root spread false information about himself so that his origin could not be traced. This is similar to Carl Jonas Lovis (Love) Almqvist when he was

fleeing in America under the name Lewis Gustavi (i.e., Gustavsson; his father's name was Gustav). The false tracks reached Sweden from Bishop Hill in several letters from members of the colony to family members.

My hypothesis implies that Root was a clergyman, fired because of alcohol abuse, who attempted to build a new social standing within the religious colony of Erik Jansson, who had a hatred of the clergy. In order to succeed he had to conceal his identity with all means possible. His statement that he came from Stockholm almost proved he did not.

In conclusion

The following speaks for my hypothesis: 1) that Reutermark disappeared without a trace shortly before Root showed up "out of nowhere" in Bishop Hill; 2) that Root stated he had taken part in the war against Mexico, which was also said about Reutermark in Sweden; and 3) that the name Carl Johan Reutermark when adapted in English becomes John Root because "reut" is pronounced "root" in English.

Separately, these circumstances are not enough. Together, they support the hypothesis that it was Reutermark who called himself Root in America and committed the murder of Erik Jansson.