Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 20 | Number 1

3-1-2000

Olphult? The Sandgren Files. Part 1

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Sometimes the most difficult task in tracing your Swedish roots is deciphering Swedish place names, for example, the birthplaces of your immigrant ancestors. Not only are they hard to find in the American source material—“born in Sweden” is often all you get—but, even if you do come across a Swedish place name, you may still be in for disappointments. You will often find that the town or parish you are looking for is neither on maps nor in geographical reference books. You suspect that the place name has somehow been misinterpreted, misspelled, or tampered with so as to make it unintelligible. The following research story will illustrate this.

The object of my search was, on the surface, simple and straightforward—to find the origin of August S. Johnson, who was born in Sweden on 17 March 1855 and died in St Joseph, Missouri, on 29 April 1931. In 1885 he and my distant relative, Maria (Mary) Sandgren (1858-1947), were married in St Joseph, and the couple had at least five children. When I started this research some twenty-five years ago, two of their daughters—Mrs. Hedwig Gocke (1887-1979) and Miss Frances Johnson (1899-1995)—were still alive, but neither of them had any idea as to the birthplace of their father or even the names of their paternal grandparents. They did, however, suggest that their father was probably from the southern part of Sweden, maybe even from Skåne, the southernmost province of Sweden.

Now followed all the usual research methods employing census records, naturalization records, obituaries, church records, cemetery records, a death certificate, etc. On a visit to St Joseph twenty years ago, I even visited the county clerk and asked if I could see the original, local death certificate. I wanted to see if there was any clue there that the people in Jefferson City, who had transcribed the centrally filed death certificate, had missed. And yes, there was one more clue. Although the local death certificate (see Fig. 1) listed August’s birthplace as merely “Unknown, Swedeen [sic],” his father’s birthplace was listed as “Olphult, Swedeen [sic].”

Back in Sweden, I searched every map and geographical index that I could find, but nowhere was an “Olphult” to be found. I debated with myself that I may have misread the notation in St Joseph; maybe the word did not start with an O after all. Maybe it was an A and maybe the place name was “Alphult,” a

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name that sounded a little more reasonable. Alas, there were no “Alphults” around either, and so the search came to a standstill that lasted for twenty years.

Fig. 1. State of Missouri Death Certificate for August S. Johnson. Note line 14, which lists his father’s birthplace as Olphult, Sweden [sic].

This summer, while visiting the Emigrantinstitutet in Växjö, Sweden, I was delighted to find that the EMIBAS project had grown considerably since my last visit there. The EMIBAS is a searchable database with information on several hundred thousand Swedish emigrants. The information in this database has largely been extracted from the Swedish church records, from the household examination rolls, and from the migration rolls. The beauty of the database format is, of course, that it is searchable in so many different ways and that, with
a bit of luck and a little know-how, you can filter forth just about anyone, even if you begin with very little information. In this case, I decided to let the computer search for a man named August who was born 17 March 1855. A few seconds passed, and then there he was; or was he?

SVEN AUGUST JOHANSSON; coppersmith apprentice; born 17 March 1855 in Sandsjö; emigrated from Lund stadsförsamling [in southern Sweden] 30 August 1875.

The first name “Sven” neatly fits in as the middle initial S that August S. Johnson used in America. The entry even gave the address in Lund and the page number in the household examination roll, which I naturally used at a subsequent visit to the Landsarkivet (regional archives) in Lund. In that book, I found the additional information that Sven August Johansson had arrived in Lund in 1872 from Öljehult Parish in the province of Blekinge.

Turning immediately to the records of Öljehult, I found Sven August Johansson living with his parents, Johannes Olofsson and Sissa Danielsdotter, and three siblings, in the village of Belganet. Moving my eyes a little further up on the page, I found the name of the parish listed; and, my goodness, did it say “Olphult”? Well, no, actually not. There were two dots above the O, for the extra Swedish letter Ö. But apart from that, the j and the e in Öljehult had been written in such a way that they together looked very much like a lowercase p. Hence, “Öljehult” looked like “Olphult” and this is how some document of August’s must have been interpreted by an American county clerk in St Joseph, Missouri, when his death certificate was composed. Of course, “Öljehult” was not even his place of birth, but the place where he grew up and from where he probably had a transit document of some sort that he brought along to his new, adopted country.

Fantasy is sorely needed when dealing with Swedish place names found in U.S. documents. The EMIBAS, once finished and available on CD, will, however, no doubt solve many mysteries for the researcher.