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From Göteborg to Galesberg

Hal Bern*

Both of my grandfathers were Swedish, born in a city with some very Swedish roots. I had not appreciated the history of Galesburg, Illinois, until nearly thirty years after I left. Swedes helped build the railroads there beginning in 1854. They worked in the foundries and made farm equipment at George Brown's Corn Planter Works. It is the birthplace of Carl Sandburg and in 1912 was nearly one-third Swedish by birth or descent. A glass covered case in the county courthouse bears witness to those who fought and died in the service of their country. In later years a Swede even became mayor of the city. His name was Ralph B. Johnson, and he was my paternal grandfather's first cousin.

I am oftentimes faced with quizzical looks when I tell people I am Swedish, as most people guess the surname Bern is of Swiss origin. Growing up in Galesburg, Illinois, I often heard references to our Swedish family roots but was too young and disinterested to ask any questions.

I have vivid childhood memories of four generations living in the Bern ancestral home just after World War II, when housing was still in short supply. My great-grandmother, Sofie Hammar Bern, spoke in broken English with a very heavy accent. She sprinkled Swedish words into her speech, which was a bit confusing for a three-year-old child. When we eventually moved into our own home, we never lived more than eight or nine city blocks from my grandparents.

Lloyd Franklin Bern was born in 1904, the middle son of Frank J. Bern and Sofia Hammar Bern. He went to "Swede School" with his brothers and learned enough of the language to keep his mother from scolding him. He served his apprenticeship in Local #29 of the Painters and Decorators Union at a time when there was still much pride in such matters. Many of my memories of him are in his white overalls and shirt without a trace of any spilled paint on his clothes. I loved to watch him strike a painted line with his brush, which looked as if it was made with a straight edge.

Unfortunately, one by one each of these old Galesburg Swedes passed on and took their knowledge of our family origins with them to the grave.

In 1992 I began my search to rediscover this knowledge and locate our origins in Sweden. My mother told me that the old Lutheran Church had some records on microfilm that were available to the public. This sounded promising, and I borrowed the film and headed for the library. At the time, I had never heard of the Swenson Center in Rock Island, Illinois, and did not know that the

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film had been indexed on note cards. Consequently, it took me several hours to look at page after page until my eyes nearly fell out. My first big break was a discovery on page 124 of Reel I. It was an entry documenting the baptism of Frank J. Bern's younger brother, Axel, in 1873. It said that his father, John Johnson Bern, was from "Hellestad."

By now I had read Nils William Olsson's wonderful little booklet called *Tracing Your Swedish Ancestry*. I realized that I needed to know if Hellestad was a city, a village, or a parish. Many hours of pouring over maps with a magnifying glass failed to solve the problem. The Swedish Consulate people were very helpful, but the information was discouraging. There were at least five different places in Sweden that might have been spelled Hellestad or Hällestad in the 1870 time frame. This meant much more detailed research on this side of the water.

My mother suggested that I talk with some relatives of my great-grandfather's sister, Clara Smith. This turned out to be my first genealogical experience with "dumb luck." Her great-grandson had done some work on the family and knew that John Johnson Bern and his wife, Anna Louisa Gustafson, had been married in Sweden before they immigrated to the U.S. in 1862. He told me he had seen a reference to Anna's place of birth as "Ramoberg, Skarb." She was born 1 September 1836 in a place referred to by the family as "the land between the lakes." I had recently purchased *Cradled In Sweden* by Carl-Erik Johansson. There was no place called Ramoberg, but there was a parish called Ransberg located between Lake Vänern and Lake Vättern in the province of Västergötland. My maps disclosed another parish called Hällestad, also in Västergötland, situated approximately 70 km southwest of Ransberg. Armed with this information, I ordered the household examination rolls (*husförhörslängder*) for both parishes.

The records from Ransberg were initially not much help. But in Hällestad, I discovered a fellow named Johannes Berntsson, born in 1792. He had a son, Jonas, born in 1825. I puzzled on this information, keeping in mind Nils William Olsson's words about how Swedish names were changed upon arrival in the United States. Several pages later I found Jonas Johannesson married to Anna Louisa Gustafsdotter. The record said that Jonas was born 24 November 1825 in Hällestad and Anna was born 1 September 1836 in Kyrkefalla. Only later did I discover that Anna had lived with her grandparents in Ransberg after her mother died.

So the mystery had been solved. The Bern surname was merely a shortening of an old patronymic family name. Johannes Berntsson had been lost to our family for three generations, but now he was found. With his rediscovery, our Swedish family name had a logical explanation, and I now knew for certain where to do further research on my father's family.

But this was only half of the project I wanted to complete before a visit to Sweden planned for 1994.

My maternal grandfather, Hjalmar N. Weinberg, was a first generation Swedish-American, the son of immigrant parents born in 1902 in Galesburg. Hjalmar was a bricklayer/contractor in Galesburg for nearly fifty years and there are numerous buildings in that city today built by grandfather's steady hand or under his supervision. In my college years I had worked for my grandfather as a masonry laborer and watched this old school craftsman carefully practice his family trade. He was a very quiet man and I thought at that time difficult to engage in conversation. As I realize only now, he probably would have taken great delight in telling me of his knowledge of his family in Sweden—if I had only asked. But that opportunity vanished forever when he died in 1981.

I knew from years of listening to family stories that my great-grandfather had been Severin Weinberg, another bricklayer, who had been killed in a tragic industrial accident in 1920 when a section of scaffolding collapsed. His death had left six children without a mother or father as Severin's wife, Anna, had died of typhoid fever three years earlier. Hjalmar was eighteen years old when his father died, and he helped support his three younger brothers.

A conversation with my mother revealed that she had saved a 1956 obituary for Severin's twin brother, Peter. Compared to my paternal grandfather, the Swedish home parish of Hjalmar Weinberg's family was relatively easy to find. In this case my mother's lifelong obsession with saving every little scrap of paper came in quite handy. The old yellowed copy of Peter Weinberg's obituary said that he "came to Galesburg in 1892" and he was "a native of Holtsjunga, a province of Vestergotland, Sweden, born November 30, 1870, son of John and Augusta Winberg." The parish spelling was not entirely correct, but close enough to identify Holsljunga (Vägö) as his likely place of birth. This obituary was also the first indication of the correct Swedish spelling of my ancestor's surname. As it turned out, Peter and Severin's father was not John, but Johan Justus Nilsson Winberg. Johan and Augusta were found on a farm called Sjöganäs and had three other sons, two of whom were unknown to our family.

By now I felt like a veteran at reading the handwritten birth (*födelselängd*), marriage (*vigsellängd*), and death records (*dödslängd*) and deciphering the household examination rolls (*husförhörslängder*) as I had located my other Swedish grandfather's family nearly eighteen months earlier. As soon as Johan Justus Nilsson Winberg was located, I knew my next ancestor in this line would be named Nils Winberg. Nils, it turns out, was the first to break with patronymics and use the Winberg surname. He was born 21 April 1790, and I began my quest for his birthplace. Little did I know the challenge that lay ahead. It took several more months of researching microfilms and finally a trip to Sweden in 1994 to locate his place of birth and parents. It is one of those stories genealogists describe as serendipity.

Nils married twice and raised eight children at Hökaberg, a farm (*gård*) in Holsljunga Parish. The difficulty began when I attempted to trace backward to the next generation. I was able to go back to 1823 to Torestorp Parish (Vägö.). The moving out record (*utflytningsslängd*) for that year indicated Nils's correct date of birth and stated that he went to Holsljunga where I had originally found him. The record said that he was from Ramnås. The problem was that there are at least six different places in Sweden called Ramnås or Ramnäs. Due to poor handwriting, I was uncertain of the exact spelling of this place name. Some of these places are farms, some are villages and one is a parish. I looked patiently but unsuccessfully through thirteen rolls of microfilm in efforts to locate further information on Nils Winberg. At one point I had convinced myself that Ramnäs was a farm in Holsljunga parish that no longer existed. Since the birth records for Holsljunga are missing for 1790, I was resigned to the conclusion that Nils's parents would never be found.

The nearest village of any size to Holsljunga is called Kinna, and in 1994 we had decided to make Kinna our headquarters for that part of our trip to Sweden. It was my intention to attend the Sunday service in the parish church where Severin and Peter had been baptized. It was mid-afternoon on Saturday when we arrived in Kinna, so we found a place to stay and decided that we should drive over to check out the church schedule for Sunday. On our return trip to Kinna, we passed through a smaller village called Öxabäck (Vägö.) where we had earlier noticed an antique store that was open. Since we had plenty of time that afternoon, we stopped to browse. My wife looked at furniture, dishes, and other old household artifacts. I went hunting for books. We had only been there a few minutes when I picked up a relatively new book called *Öxabäck Socken— historia gårdar folk*. I knew that this translated roughly to *Öxabäck Parish— History of the Farm People*. In thumbing through the index, I found a farm called Ramnås and on page 181 found a family with the following notation: "Nils 1790 kallade sig Vinberg." My heart nearly jumped out of my chest as I asked the storeowner to confirm my translation—"called himself Vinberg." I liked his even better—"took the name Vinberg." We bought two copies of the book!

When I later told the story of my Öxabäck book to a friend at the local LDS Family History Center, I noted how lucky I was to have made this discovery. He said, "Oh, I think maybe the Lord wanted you to find your ancestor in that book." And I believe he was right.

Back at our bed and breakfast in Kinna that evening I read further and noted that Nils was born with the surname Jönsson. His parents were Jöns Nilsson and Malin Jönsdotter who lived at Backa torp, Ramnås, at the time of his birth. Further research upon my return to the United States confirmed that on 21 April 1790 a son was born to Jöns Nilsson and Malin Jönsdotter at Backa torp, Ramnås. The Öxabäck book said the Jön Nilsson was born 1757 at a farm called Hvitatorpet. His parents were Nils Jönsson (b. 1699) and Anna Jönsdotter (b. 1728) also from Hvitatorpet.

The ruins of Hvitatorpet are visible today at a farm called Rönneberg owned by Inge and Neta Friberg. Although we are not related, we have become very good friends with the Fribergs. We have visited back and forth several times, since I originally discovered my ancestral home on their property in 1994.

In the years since my initial discovery, I have traced the ancestors of Jonas Johannesson and Anna Louisa Gustafsdotter back to the early 1700s in the “land between the lakes.” I have visited their farms and churches and learned a little of their language. I have stayed in the guesthouse at Rönneberg, which is only a few feet from the ruins of Hvitatorpet where the earliest ancestors of Severin Winberg lived. But most of all I have gained a much better understanding and appreciation for my rich Swedish heritage.