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# Hokey's Awful Secret

Paul G. Hayes\*

We had driven more than 500 miles that July day in 1977, leaving Rocky Mountain National Park, cruising down the Big Thompson Canyon, hurtling onto the treeless plains of eastern Colorado. Behind us were 5,000 miles of a camping trip that had taken us to the Pacific Coast. With three days remaining, there was to be one more stop: at Axtell, Nebraska, and an attempt to clear up the mystery of Hokey Holcomb.

Hokey was my great-grandfather and this would be another try at filling in a story for Hokey's descendants, including my mother, aunts, uncles and cousins, a few of whom remembered seeing the old man before he died, embittered and impoverished, in 1921.

Heading east on Interstate 80 at 10:30 p.m., I hoped to reach Axtell, where I intended to spend the next day at Bethany Lutheran Church and its cemetery and at the Kearney County Courthouse in Minden, to search for the clue that would explain a metamorphosis that had puzzled me for years. Suddenly, seven miles from the Axtell exit, the right wheel fell off our camping trailer. There was a terrifying grinding noise as I braked. In the mirror, I saw a comet's tail of sparks sent up by the steel axle dragging along the pavement at fifty-five miles an hour.

I managed to pull safely onto the shoulder. My wife, Philia, and I and our two sons, Nick and John, got out of the car, rummaged around for flashlights and surveyed the damage as semitrailers roared by in the night. Obviously the next day would be spent arranging repairs. My heart sank as this rare opportunity to clear up Hokey's secret slipped away.

"John," I said, looking into my younger son's face, which shone like a moon in the lights of passing trucks, "there's something out here that Hokey doesn't want us to know. Hokey did this. It's Hokey's curse." That scared the dickens out of John, then ten. Then I laughed and so did John.

Indeed, the next day was mostly taken up by getting the trailer unhitched and towed to Kearney, where a welder repaired the axle and reinstalled the wheel and tire, which we'd retrieved from the shoulder of the freeway. That left only an hour or so to prowl the roads separating the green, irrigated Nebraska cornfields around Axtell.

The prosperity of the scene collided with what I'd heard about the unimaginable hardships that had faced the pioneers here a century earlier,

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hardships that had contributed to the downfall of Hokey Holcomb and changed the fortunes of his family forever.

My great-grandfather had two names—Håkan Håkansson, his Swedish name, and Hokey Holcomb, the comical American corruption of it. He also seemingly had had two personalities. This is evident in photographs. The family had protected a photograph of Håkan Håkansson, the self-assured, lean twenty-four-year-old Swede taken on the day of his wedding, 19 August 1875, to eighteen-year-old Pernilla Nilsson, the blue-eyed, round-faced daughter of Swedish immigrants in Knoxville, Illinois. This was the man the family forgot.

There also is the snapshot of the twenty-five members of Hokey's extended family taken about 1913 in Estherville, Iowa, with Hokey looking far more gaunt and spent than a man aged sixty-two years should. He would be dead seven years later, having lived his last years ever more embittered, ever more complaining, sunk even deeper into poverty.

My grandfather, John Edward Holcomb, a gentle, dignified man, never spoke about his father except for the barest essentials. Hokey had been brought to the U.S. as an infant, the oldest child of John and Nilla Holcomb. He was brought up in Knox County, Illinois, working always as a farm hand. He homesteaded his own 160 acres in Nebraska for a time, then he resettled in northwestern Iowa, where again he worked as a farm hand. My grandfather, second oldest of what was to become a family of ten children, was still a boy when the family came to Iowa. His mother, Pernilla, who was called Nellie, and whose personality was submerged by her stern husband, was remembered for being gentle, quiet, tired, but enduring. She outlived Hokey by ten years.

According to family stories, Hokey arrived in Iowa a failed homesteader and a broken and bitter man. He even had quit being Swedish. My grandfather remembered that speaking Swedish was forbidden in the Iowa home and that Hokey had ceased being a Swedish Lutheran and now was a member of the Methodist Church. This was doubly curious because his younger brother, John Henry Holcomb, who helped bring Hokey and his family to Iowa, was a lifelong pillar of the Swedish Lutheran Church in Swea City, Iowa.

Hokey, his children and grandchildren told me years after his death, had claimed that his health was failing, and it was with this excuse that he had not worked and occasionally had gone "on the county." In stalwart Iowa, this was a disgrace deeply felt by Hokey's children. Obviously, something had gone disastrously wrong in Nebraska, but no one in the family knew what it was. Occasionally, fragments of the time would surface. Grandfather fondly remembered some childhood scenes that became family stories.

One day, for example, when Hokey was off somewhere, a strange group of armed riders approached the farm and demanded that Nellie feed them. Grandfather, possibly eight years old at the time, sat at the head of the table as Nellie fed the mysterious group. Before riding off, they gave her a gold coin.

Grandfather always wanted us to believe that he had presided at a supper of the Jesse James gang.

But there were no such interesting stories about Hokey. What is more, my grandfather either had forgotten or, more incredibly, he may never have known that the family name in Sweden had been Håkansson. Grandfather told his own children and grandchildren that an English family named Holcomb must have moved to Sweden and established there before immigrating to the U.S. That he believed this story, I never doubted. That it is false, I am now certain.

Long after grandfather's death in 1971, I visited a third cousin—the grandson of John Henry Holcomb, Hokey's brother—living near Seattle. My cousin had been given the family Bible that had belonged to John and Nilla Holcomb, the original immigrants. John had entered the names of his entire family, all in Swedish, including the oldest son, Håkan Håkansson, my great-grandfather.

The Bible revealed that Håkan was born 14 February 1851 in the county of Blekinge in southeastern Sweden. I learned later that Jons Håkansson was a crofter, or farmer of a small plot of land, and that in 1853, Jons, his wife, Nilla, and young Håkan joined a party of Nilla's relatives, boarded the *Jenny Pitts* and sailed to the U.S. They made their way to Knox County, Illinois, a gathering place for land-hungry Swedes during the great migration.

But they found the Illinois prairie already owned by Yankee farmers. The Swedish men became farm hands or joined railroad crews. The single women became domestic servants. Nonetheless, the Swedes quickly organized Lutheran churches and established themselves as industrious workers. Jons and Nilla moved frequently, settling onto various farms in northern Illinois, Minnesota and Iowa, before returning for good to Illinois.

Håkan married Pernilla Nilsson, or Nellie Nelson, on 19 August 1875 in Knoxville, Illinois, where she lived with her parents, Ola C. and Christina Nilsson. Their wedding picture says many things about this time. There is Hokey, seated stiffly, wearing a suit, probably loaned to him by the photographer, his bony, huge worker's hands grasping a pair of white gloves, his brown hair slicked down and his mustache neatly trimmed. To his right stands Nellie, a picture of gentleness, obviously unprepared for the harsh furnace of the unsettled Nebraska plains.

Shortly after they were married, the couple joined a group of Swedes from Illinois and Iowa and were led by Nellie's parents and their three strapping sons to Kearney County, Nebraska, where they settled the town of Axtell.<sup>1</sup>

They must have arrived in time to plant in the spring of 1876, breaking the prairie either by oxen or by hand and sowing the precious corn and wheat seed they brought with them. They built shelters in this treeless land. Some settlers

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<sup>1</sup> See additional details in Paul G. Hayes, "Edward James Nelander 1855-1915," *Swedish American Genealogist* XVIII (September 1998): 151-160.

simply dug into the sides of hills, moved in such furniture as they had brought from Illinois and Iowa, and plugged the opening with sod bricks. Others built houses of sod, moving in with the vermin that came with the sod, including spiders and rodents. One day, grandfather recalled, his mother was carrying in an armful of sticks for the fire and one of the sticks came to life, a prairie rattlesnake.



**Fig. 1.** Wedding photograph of Pernilla Nilsson (Nellie Nelson) and Håkan Håkansson (Hokey Holcomb). The studio logo on the back reads: "C. Forell, Photographer, 59 East Main, Galesburg, Ill."

Each family was endowed with its own 160 acres, as granted by the federal Homestead Act. There must have been great hope in the little community that summer.

Then came the first scourge, rising like storm clouds in the south. Millions of grasshoppers arrived on Sunday, 6 August 1876, and left on 24 August, riding

a north wind. In those eighteen days, they consumed every blade of grass, every leaf and kernel of corn, and every onion shoot. The homesteaders were left with nothing to show for their first season of labor. On 4 September, as the summer waned, thirty-eight of the pioneers gathered at one farm where three traveling Swedish Lutheran clergymen were visiting. A service was held in Swedish, hymns were sung, and the Bethany Lutheran congregation was formally organized.

Ola C. Nilsson was one of seven founding trustees. Edward Nelson, Pernilla's oldest brother, was the first recording secretary, a job that Hokey assumed after the first year and held for three years. Later Ola and Hokey negotiated for the land for the first church, built of sod; later still, Ola built a wooden floor to cover the dirt. For two years, services were conducted by visiting clergymen or members of the congregation. In 1879, Pastor J. E. Swanbom arrived.

In the meantime, the Holcomb family grew. Emma was born 16 May 1876. She was three months old when the grasshoppers ate the crops. My grandfather was born 5 March 1878; Samuel, in 1880. That winter, the snow reached four feet deep. Cornstalks, pulled up through the snow, served as fuel for cooking fires. In October 1881, Anna was born. In the fall of 1883, fires swept the prairies. The children were kept inside under wet blankets while adults beat back flames with wet rags.

In 1884, Frank Oscar was born. That year, Hokey built the first frame house in Axtell, with lumber brought in by rail. On 2 February 1886, Henry, the sixth child, was born. Henry died of unrecorded causes in 1888. Shortly after the baby's death, the Holcombs left for Iowa, never to return. Five more children were to be born, but the dream of owning their own farm was gone forever and, for all practical purposes, the family had simply quit being Swedish. They spoke English, they attended Methodist churches, and they seldom talked about Axtell.

I knew the above facts from three sources—a centennial history published by Bethany Lutheran Church in Axtell in 1976, a history of Kearney County, Nebraska, written by Roy C. Bang and published in 1952, and conversations with my great aunt, Lulu Holcomb, the second youngest of Hokey's children.

The hardships of the plains were severe, enough perhaps to cause anyone to give up and leave the homestead. Indeed, most homesteaders did fail. The Congress that passed the Homestead Act did not consider that 160 acres were not enough land to support a family in the Great Plains, where rainfall was a fraction of the amount that fell east of there. Even so, in Kearney County, Nebraska, many Swedes flourished. How well they prospered was evident on that day in 1977, when we drove the roads between their huge, irrigated cornfields, and viewed their large white farmhouses and outbuildings. Well-being was also evident in Bethany Lutheran Church, handsome, well-kept and vibrant with use.

Why had Hokey failed? His secret was intact, but only for one more year.

In July 1978, a mysterious package arrived at our home from Stockholm, Sweden. It contained some family charts and a tape cassette. I remembered that a few years earlier, I had written to the House of Emigrants in Växjö, a library and archives devoted to the great Swedish exodus to America.<sup>2</sup> I inquired about the Holcombs, and I learned later that my letter had been referred to Agnes Wiren. I rushed to put the tape on our recorder. A man's voice, in a rich Swedish accent, began, "Dear Mr. Hayes. You must wonder what this recording has to do with you. It is not a message from the Mission Impossible...."

I was listening to Bo Björklund, who got my letter from Wiren. Björklund was studying emigration from Jämshög Parish in Blekinge, which included some of his wife's ancestors, but also included Jons, Nilla and Håkan Håkansson. He shared what he knew about the group that left Sweden in 1853 for the United States. Also, while visiting his American cousins in Kansas in 1976, Björklund had taken a side trip to Bethany Lutheran Church at Axtell, where he had read the early parish records, all written in Swedish.

Toward the end of the forty-five-minute tape, he said: "I don't know if you want to know what I know about Hokey Holcomb that I found out from the Bethany Church....He had been locked out from the congregation there. He had written his name for a petition for a saloon in Axtell and that happened 7 September 1884."

Hokey's secret was out. Pastor Swanbom, a stern and zealous Lutheran, had barred Hokey from the church because Hokey had supported bringing a saloon to Axtell. In that Swedish community, excommunication was tantamount to banishment from all society. Hokey endured another four years in Nebraska as an outcast and then, probably at his brother's invitation, he gave it up and settled in Iowa, where he became an English-speaking tenant farmer.

A century later, a great-grandson Hokey never knew frequently reflects that if Hokey hadn't wanted a drink or two to ease him through the harsh forge of the plains, his Swedish genes might today be walking around in a prosperous Nebraska farmer. As it is, my grandfather, who had forgotten his Swedish name, married the daughter of German immigrants. Their second daughter, my mother, married the fourth son of an Illinois couple whose ancestors had been Yankees and Virginians, and before that, Scotch-Irish and English colonists. My wife, Philia, was born in Greece, so our sons are half Greek, a quarter British, an eighth German and an eighth Swedish. Our older son's wife is mostly Polish and our younger son is engaged to an Albanian.

And so I conclude that Hokey's awful secret is just one of millions of examples of how the great American melting pot actually worked after the great nineteenth-century emigrations from Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see Ulf Beijbom, "The Research Center at the Emigrant Institute in Växjö," *Swedish American Genealogist* II (June 1982): 49-64.