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Father Unknown - What to Do?

Elisabeth Thorsell*

A not uncommon problem in working backwards in one's family pedigree is to discover that a child is born to an unwed mother, and one wonders then if it is possible to find the missing father.

This is a problem for which it is impossible to lay down general rules or solutions, but perhaps a few experiences in my research can give hints as to possible ways of solving the mystery.

In olden days when there was a strong social consciousness and an ecclesiastical control the problem with illegitimate children was not as prevalent as it became in the 19th century, as documented by the parish registers. Unfortunately we do not know too much about this problem before 1871 but in that year a publication appeared in Sweden titled *Historisk statistik för Sverige* (Historical Statistics for Sweden), which according to the year of publication (1871) gave the number of unwed mothers as 10% of all women giving birth. Thus it is probable that every genealogist sooner or later will find the word illegitimate (*oäkta*) in the birth registers in some generation.

If one is lucky one may not have to hunt for the child's father very long as in the case of the following child - "Anders Petter, born 28 Jan. 1846, the son of Inga Carin Persdotter, servant (*piga*) from Humlebäcken on the estate of Eksjöhult in Ulrika Parish (Ög.). It was legally determined that the child's father was Anders Fredrik Nilsson, a servant (*dräng*) in Kärn."

If the parish records are not that helpful one will have to attempt other avenues. The first thing to determine is to see if the child as it grows to adulthood uses the same patronymic (a father's name like Larsson) as his mother or maternal

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grandfather. If this is not the case, but carries the name Jonsdotter, the mother is named Larsdotter and the grandfather Svensson, one may suspect that someone named Jon or Jonas was the child's father, and then see if the mother had been a maid servant (*piga*) in the same household as a person named Jon of the approximately the same age. If one finds a Jon who seems to fit the case one may follow him in the parish records in order to see if the clergyman has added a note which may solve the mystery.

Gustaf Pettersson, a servant (*dräng*) in Malma, Västra Ryd Parish (Ög.) wished to move from his parish to Norra Vi, another parish in Östergötland, in 1858. The clergyman noted in the household examination roll that "Anna Lotta Andersdotter in Malma expressly forbids that Gustaf Pettersson be given a certificate of freedom to marry." This Anna Lotta was found on the following page to have given birth 20 Sept. 1858 to an illegitimate son named Johan Alfred, and she seems to have had reasons for naming Gustaf Pettersson as the father of the child and therefore wished to block him from having the certificate, since he was not free to marry, according to her statement. In this specific case the man stated that he was not the father of the child and in 1861 swore an oath that such was the case. The notation in the household examination followed him, nevertheless, until he departed for America in 1866.

If one finds a plausible candidate as the father but have found nothing in the parish records to prove this point, one should follow his career until he dies. A notation may show up much later, for example the child may have been domiciled with the supposed father. It has even occurred that the child finally is mentioned in the estate inventory of the deceased.

The secretary in the Department of the Army (*Krigskollegium*), Fredrik Wilhelm Westée, died in Stockholm 27 Dec. 1882. His estate inventory (*bouppteckning*) was probated 22 Feb. 1883 and according to this document he died without leaving any known heirs. But in examining the volume of estate inventories more closely one found, after the document itself, a will drawn up by Fredrik Wilhelm, dated 1876, which specified that his estate should be divided in two equal parts, one of these to go to his son, Ludvig Wilhelm Alfons Westée, a manufacturer in North America and the other to his daughter Edla Lovisa Adelaide, married to a Gustavi.

This proved that Ludvig Wilhelm Alfons really was the son of Fredrik Wilhelm, which his descendants had claimed right along, but the birth place is still unknown. The sister, Edla Lovisa Adelaide, was married to a battalion adjutant named Gustaf Wilhelm Gustavi, who later lived in Rappestad Parish (Ög.). The

parish records of Rappestad state that Edla was born in Jacob-Johannes Parish in Stockholm in 1840, but she is not to be found in the birth register. In a special volume for the births of illegitimate children there is a note, however, which has been pasted in, dated 1853, in which Fredrik Wilhelm admits that he and his then deceased betrothed, Lovisa Ulrica Nyman, were Edla's parents.

The fact that Edla is not listed as born in Jacob Parish may be due to the fact that she was born in one of the city's birthing centers and that the parents used their prerogative of being registered as "unknown."

The Swedish King Gustaf III was often confronted with cases having to do with mothers, who had taken the life of an infant, and whether he should have them executed or pardoned. He finally became quite concerned by the number of infants killed, and issued a manifesto known as "child murder manifesto" (*barnmordsplakatet*), signed into law 17 Oct. 1778. This order said among other things that "a woman who wished to give birth at an unspecified location, could do so without being molested and without being queried as to her name or other personal details. This functioned quite well in the cities, where one often sees the statement "unknown parents" (*okända föräldrar*) in the birth registers, but scarcely in rural areas, where people usually knew quite a bit about their neighbors.

In the cities, however, despite the notation concerning unknown parents sometimes the mother's age is given as well as an address. If one checks the latter for the time period in question one will often find the residence of a midwife, who took care of the wayward girls, a term used even into modern times. In such cases it is almost hopeless to continue the search.

It is somewhat different if the child was born at a birthing center (*barnbörds hus*) or if the child had been admitted to an orphanage soon after its birth. One should then search the journals and registers, since sometimes the mother deposited with the institution a sealed envelope which might contain the key to the solving of the puzzle by naming the parents of the child.

Let us now return to the illegitimate child in rural Sweden. One should not forget that despite everything else it was considered a crime up until the middle of the 1850s for persons to indulge in pre-marital intercourse or adultery. There were specified punishments to be meted out according to Sweden's Legal Code of 1734 which stated that the first time these crimes were perpetrated the man was to pay a fine of ten daler and the woman five, or for the man 14 days' prison or workhouse and for the woman half that amount. The nature of these crimes was such that it was difficult to prove unless it resulted in the birth of a child.

Of the fines collected half was to go to the parish treasury, and it may pay to search the parish accounts or those of the special account set up for the poor, shortly after the birth of the child to see if the mother paid a fine to the church. If one is fortunate, one might find that a man paid the double amount at about the same time, pretty good evidence for looking a little closer as to who the father might be.

If the mother paid her fine to the parish and to the the poor, the next step is to look at the court records of the hundred (*häråd*). Here the simplest way is to look at the fines paid (*sakörestlängd*), which is generally found bound at the end of the court records themselves at each assizes. In this register one can search for those who were fined, often with a reference to the court case itself, so that one may go directly to the court record, without having to leaf through the entire large volume.

Most of the time it was the county sheriff (*länsman*) who brought charges against the man and the woman, but occasionally it was also the father of the woman who charged his daughter or the woman who brought suit against the child's father for child support.

On 6 Jan. 1836 Maria Larsdotter, a servant (*piga*) in Löt Parish on the island of Öland paid a fine of 32 shillings (*skilling*) to her parish church for having indulged in fornication (*lönskaläge*). On 6 Nov. 1835 she had given birth to her daughter Stina Cajsa, and she now was to be brought into the church after the purification process and she wished to have her debt to the church paid before this event. Stina Cajsa, the daughter, used the patronymic Oldsdotter as an adult, the mother was Maria Larsdotter and the maternal grandfather's name was Lars Andersson, so that the child's patronymic should give us a clue as to who the father was.

In the court records for the northern district of Öland (*Ölands Norra Mot*) for the assizes held during the winter term of 1836 this case came up for consideration under § 285. A. Thiman, the sheriff, had sued Olof Johnson, a farmer in Stora Hagelunda in Alböke Parish (Kalm.) and Maria Larsdotter, a servant in Lundby, Löt Parish "to assume responsibility for having indulged in fornication, urging the court to sentence Olof Johnson, the defendant, to pay child support."

Both parties were present and admitted their guilt. Maria demanded that Olof should pay her annually one barrel of rye as well as 100 daler for the child's subsistence, which he refused to do.

The court then announced its decision that Olof should be fined three daler and 16 skilling and be incarcerated for 14 days in the county jail and in addition pay one daler and 16 skilling to the parish church in Löt. In addition he was to pay