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1999—THE SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE 1849 GOLD RUSH

One Swede in the Rush to California’s Gold

Bernice Wilson Munsey

I remember the moment my interest in genealogy and history began. It was when I was very young and my father was teaching me my last name. He told me my last name was Wilson—but that it really wasn’t. Then he told me the story that one of my great-grandfathers had been a very poor, orphaned young man in Sweden who heard about the gold rush far away in California and came to America to become rich. He saved just enough money to get to New York. There he became a sailor on an American ship sailing to San Francisco, where he would become a “forty-niner.” The American ship captain, my father said, could not pronounce the young man’s name, Johannes Wigelius, and said he would call him John Wilson. My father also said Wilson was a common name and that many people would ask if I were related to so-and-so Wilson. I was instructed to answer very politely, “Only if they are Swedish.”

Who was Johannes Wigelius who became John Wilson and what became of him after the gold rush? Information from my father’s stories, fragments of memoirs written in a pocket-sized notebook by John Wilson, a pencil and paper biography written by his son, Joseph Wilson, and later research in Swedish and American records provided me with the following information.1

He was born Johannes Fredriksson on 7 July 1827 in Hökhult Södergård, south of the Fröderyd church in Jönköping län, Småland, son of Fredrik Nilsson and Lisa Catrina Abrahamsdotter. When he was three years old, the family moved to the small farmhouse, Sandvik. One year later (1831), they moved to the croft Stycket under Holmeshult. He wrote in his memoirs that, at age six, he was taught to read by his grandmother, Maria Carlsdotter, and his aunt, who lived in the adjoining parish of Myresjö (Jön.), and that after seven months he could read the Bible through and recite the first part of his catechism.

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1 All Swedish data is from church and government records unless otherwise indicated.
This was the extent of his education. It is not known if he was taught to write his name or anything else. When his phonetically-spelled writing is read aloud, his voice can be heard:

My first education [was] at the age of 6 years at my grandmother and aunt[‘s] and after 7 months schooling I could read the holy Bible from one end to the other without missing a word and [could recite] the first part of catechism by heart.²

[translation]
My first education [was] at the age of 6 years at my grandmother and aunt[‘s] and after 7 months schooling I could read the holy Bible from one end to the other without missing a word and [could recite] the first part of catechism by heart.

Johannes was eight in 1835 when he moved with his parents to a small house on the Notteryd farm in Fröderyd Parish. His father abandoned the family and died in Stockholm in 1840. His mother died of typhoid fever in 1841, when he was fourteen. Johannes moved to Horneboda where he lived for four years with his “aunt and uncle,” Annika Johansdotter and Samuel Malm. He praised their support and that of “the preacher” who was, most likely, the father of Lina Sandell, who grew up in Fröderyd and would become the author of many famous hymns.

My father died in November in the year 1839 and my mother the 1 of May 1840 and how dark and dreadful it looked to me to leave the dear home, in the most poor condition and barefooted to labor for my living so it seems my share was not money. I and a staff in my hand went across the valley of time into a world of toil and trouble….the first four years of toil was with my aunt and uncle, and they was true Christians both in spirit and practice and through their influence and the preacher’s labor…³

[translation]
My father died in November in the year 1839 and my mother the 1 of May 1840 and how dark and dreadful it looked to me to leave the dear home, in the most poor condition and barefooted to labor for my living so it seems my share was not money. I and a staff in my hand went across the valley of time into a world of toil and trouble….the first four years of toil was with my aunt and uncle, and they was true Christians both in spirit and practice and through their influence and the preacher’s labor…

³ Ibid.
He was taken in charge of his uncle and aunt. They were Pure Strict Religious people and having very strict Family Rules always attending church on the Sabbath. Never allowing the children to associate with strange children when going to church and on their way they would read religious books and sing religious songs and when returning from church would do the same. This made a strong impression on my Father to respect the Sabbath and his Uncle and Aunt never allowed the children to use profane language. At one time when John was harrowing in the field with a span of oxen, the hornets got after the oxen and the oxen ran away as he could not hold them with the lines and Father swore at the oxen and his uncle heard him swear so his uncle came with a rawhide to punish him and the lad blamed the hornets and oxen but uncle said—Never mind the oxen you swore and you must have the punishment for swearing and it cured him for using profane language.4

In 1846, at age nineteen, Johannes got a job walking cattle to Stockholm (about six hours by car today). He received permission to leave the parish of Fröderyd and registered, as Johannes Fredriksson Wigelius, 3 July 1846 at the parish of Jakob and Johannes in Stockholm. Wigelius? Where did he get that name? He gave his address as Regeringsgatan 50. The building is no longer standing, as the area was redeveloped in the middle of the twentieth century, but it was located behind the present NK building, not far from Jakobs kyrka (church) and the old town (Gamla Staden). His first year in Stockholm, Johannes worked as a clerk in a store but was not satisfied. From 1847 to 1850 he was not in the church census records. He was an apprentice in a piano factory with no pay, only board, for a long time. He slept on the floor beside the instrument he was making. After four years, he had “made big wages” and had saved enough to go to America. Word of the California gold rush had reached Sweden.

Johan Fredriksson Wigelius, journeyman musical instrument maker (musikinstrumentmakaregesäll) left the parish 7 August 1850. He received his passport 8 August 1850 to travel to Göteborg. It is likely he traveled by the Göta Canal. He wrote in his memoirs that he left Stockholm 11 August 1850. In Göteborg, he received his passport to travel to America.

in the Capitol of sveden thi forst yar was most spent in Star klarkin but that did not satisfy my sa i kjäns my kors en lunt the Pianotrad en lebert for for yars witat ene pa unly the bord en den after dat i mede big vejes en it put mi on god standing....så in Gods wisdom hi led mi to dis fri Contri.5

[translation]
[1]In the Capital of Sweden the first year was most[ly] spent in [a] store
clerking but that did not satisfy me so I changed my course and learned the
piano trade and labored for four years without any pay only the board and
then after that I made big wages and it put me in good standing....so in
God’s wisdom he led me to this free country.

So he considered he would want to learn a trade and he had a desire to go to
Stockholm so he had a chance to go with a cattle trader and drive the cattle
and walk all the way to Stockholm.

When he arrived there he engaged to a Piano Factory to learn the trade
for four years. But he was anxious to go to America and during that time he
earned his passage to New York U.S.A. by working at piece work for so
much a piece for overtime work and finally in the year 1849 he left his
native land with only $1.00 in his purse.6

John Wigielius arrived at Castle Garden in New York City on the sailing
ship Zebra 19 November 1850, age twenty-three.7 He had one dollar in his
pocket. He found work the first day in a piano factory, but felt the gold in Cali-
ifornia would be gone by the time he earned the $300 needed to book passage to
California. So, he hired on as a sailor on an American sailing vessel which, he
later wrote, departed New York City 1 January 1851. The ship’s captain is said
to have named him John Wilson. The trip was rough, especially sailing around
Cape Horn. They arrived in San Francisco the end of February 1851.

i left Stockholm the 11 of agust 1850 and landed in Ny ork the last of
november wit my mone most gon i godt work in the factori th forst de en
afretiing Comertebay but stil it siams to me it was not my reit plâs så i began to
mak a plan to go to California en it took thire hundred Dollars to pe the far
en it siams to my i kud not wat to meek the monne, så i mad a plan to work
my va tro as a seler, så i godt on bord on a lardg Amerikan sel wasel the
forst of januju 1851 for to sel rand kephorn wen wi rit the last of Feru the
storm was så strong for too vek, så wi was waring afre moment to be svaed
op of the engre osen my spirtty cundesjon was cast in grit distres firing to
mit mej engri God för if felt the barden of mey sin pras mi don to aferlaster
despär. i vept en krid unto the lord to hef morse on mi end spar miu lif en
saf mi from a watri graf en gif me a spot on the Dri land to lif on vitat mi
floting from on poll to the other hunting for râst en kud fin non i made the
promis to serv him oll mej lif. Pras his holi namn hi hord mej kri en spârd
mej lif en gif mej mi nu såls desein.8

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[translation]
[I] left Stockholm the 11th of August 1850 and landed in New York the last of November with my money almost gone. I got work in the factory the first day and everything [was] comfortable but still it seems to me it was not my right place so I began to make a plan to go to California and it took three hundred dollars to pay the fare and it seems to me I could not wait to make the money, so I made a plan to work my way through as a sailor, so I got on board a large American sailing vessel the first of January 1851 to sail around Cape Horn. When we arrived the last of February the storm was so strong for two weeks, so we was waiting every moment to be swallowed up in the angry ocean. My spiritual condition was cast in great distress fearing to meet my angry God for I felt the burden of my sin press me down to everlasting despair. I wept and cried unto the lord to have mercy on me and spare my life and save me from a watery grave and give me a spot on the dry land to live on without my floating from one pole to the other hunting for rest and could find none. I made the promise to serve him all my life. Praise his holy name he heard my cry and spared my life and gave me my new soul's design.

[H]e left his native land with only $1.00 in his purse as he arrived in America so he hired to a piano Factory and boarded at a hotel but he had to learn the trade over again. But being anxious to get to the gold mines of California he thought it would take a lifetime to earn his passage to San Francisco, Calif. so he hired as a sailor on a sailing vessel around Cape Horn, a voyage of three months arriving at San Francisco, Calif. He hired to a Furniture Dealer and labored there during the great fire of 1850 [sic], after that he went to the Gold Mines on Yuba River....On his voyage around Cape Horn and as they were nearing the point, all was calm and as the crew was sitting around a table eating all of a sudden like a thunderbolt the storm like a "Euroclydon" struck the ship. So the captain gave orders for all sailors on the deck to cut the ropes and they had to jump from one log to another to cut ropes and open up the holds so they lost every piece on deck so they floated into Valpariso to rig over again. During the storm when all hope seemed lost, he made a vow to the Lord that if his life was spared and he would get a spot to live on that he would serve the Lord. There were two instances when he was in great Danger. At one time the second mate ordered him to grease the masts. He went up and came down safely. The second mate asked if he had greased the Spanket gaff and he said yes so he asked if he had greased it on the underside, which he did not do as there was nothing to wear on the underside. The second mate was not satisfied so he ordered him up for the second time and when he got up a sea came in and threw him overboard and as he went overboard a rope flew onto his arm and
he shrieked for help and the Captain came running and asked the second
mate who sent him up in such a storm and the mate could not deny it so the
Captain said—if you do that again I will lock you up until we get into San
Francisco. At another time when he was to be on the lookout, he was sitting
on a chicken coop a sea came in and ducked him. He thought it was
dangerous so came in and sat on the captains cabin and just when he got
there a heavy sea came in and smashed the chicken coop and the hog sty so
they couldn’t find a trace of the chickens or the hogs.9

John Wilson worked three years in California, perhaps not the entire time in
the gold fields/mines. His son, Joseph, wrote that his father was working for a
furniture dealer in San Francisco during the great fire in 1850 [sic], and that he
then went to work in the gold mines on Yuba River. Most descendants know the
story that he rescued a Chinaman being teased and hanged by his pigtail and that
he then had to flee when the tormenters turned on him. Some family members
have been told he ran a store that sold equipment to the miners. A few have been
told he ran a brothel on the Barbary Coast in San Francisco. John Wilson’s
memories are silent on this, or those pages were lost.

after tri yars hard laber in the gold mins hi blást me wit the mins to sekur a
rastin plas in Jefferson County Iowa.10

[translation]
[A]fter three years hard labor in the gold mines he [God] blessed me with
the means to secure a resting place in Jefferson County, Iowa.

He was at the mines for four [sic] years. During this time he escaped several
accidents as the breadth of a hair. At one time he said he was working in the
mines about 150 ft down he observed that it was caving in and instead of
giving a signal for another rope he fastened the one that he had and went up
on a single rope and when he got to the top he was ready to give up as the
man at the top caught him. The miners generally roomed together and at a
time as they were asleep 5 Georgia men came to the door and inquired for
Wilson and without hesitating for a moment he opened the door and walked
out and one struck him in the eye so he ran back about ten feet and took a
leap for the door and grabbed both door posts but they caught him by the
hair and finally he got loose but was on his feet until he got to his bed and
he caught his gun and said—Come on boys. They all disappeared in the
dark. He worked in the mines until he accumulated $1000.00 so he
considered it best to leave and go east. During the four [sic] years that he

was in the mines there were three times besides those mentioned where his life was at stake.\(^{11}\)

Unwilling to sail around Cape Horn and once again endure the dangers, John Wilson returned, as many “forty-niners” did, via mule across the Isthmus of Panama. He was back in New York City for a while, according to his son, Joseph. John Wilson’s memoirs are either silent or pages are missing on this part of his life.

On his journey going back to New York he went by the way of the Isthmus of Panama. There were several in their company and they rode across the Isthmus on mules and they had a jolly time as some of the mules would kick and buck. They had their gold strapped on leather straps under their arms coming into New York. They exchanged their gold and in weighing Father’s Gold the Exchange cheated him on Fifty pounds. Then one of his partners was to weigh his Gold and Father said—Let me handle your gold to be weighed and he took the weight down so he figured the gold and the exchange figures was $50.00 short on their figures but Father made them come to his figures. Now when they were in New York they took in at a tavern and when they got on the street Father told the party wait until he went back for something he had forgot and coming to the room there was a bundle on a chair and lifting it up there he found a $5 Gold Piece, he thought he had not lost any money. But something said to him—you saved that man $50.00 in exchanging his gold, you can keep it so he put it in his purse and said nothing about it...." [Twenty years later, in the 1870s] “He had to go by train 100 miles to settle for the $5.00 Gold Piece. There was only one man of the Party that lived his name was Gust Smithburg and he would not take it and father said he would not leave the house until it was settled so he said he would take half and so father paid him.\(^{12}\)

John Wilson lived half a century in the United States—fifty very productive years. He would marry twice and have twelve children, and he gradually became a very wealthy man. The name Wigelius was gone until he used it as the middle name of his youngest son, his eleventh child. He died 28 October 1901 in Stromsburg, Polk County, Nebraska.

Where had he gotten the name Wigelius? What did he do with the rest of his life after the gold rush? The search for answers continued that interest in genealogy and history begun with the sagas my father told me half a century ago. More later.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.