

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 19
Number 2 *Double Issue*

Article 10

9-1-1999

An Historian as Genealogist

H. Arnold Barton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barton, H. Arnold (1999) "An Historian as Genealogist," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 19 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol19/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

An Historian as Genealogist

H. Arnold Barton*

Most people who are attracted to genealogy from all walks of life are drawn to it by the desire to find out who they themselves are by learning who their ancestors were. I, too, became fascinated by my own family roots; but, when I began to track them down in the early 1970s, I was already a reasonably well-seasoned historian, with over a decade in the profession. I was, therefore, as anxious—if not more so—to seek out the ways in which the lives of my forebears reflected the broader historical developments taking place around them in both the Old World and the New as I was to learn their identities and the years and places where they were born and died.

My interest was particularly aroused when I moved, in 1970, from California to Illinois, close to places where my immigrant ancestors had first settled in America. This somehow made their story seem more relevant than it had been before. I set to work and continued over the next decade or more. It was a long and fascinating process. In the end it proved richly rewarding.

What did my search reveal about the times and places in which my Swedish forebears lived? Let us begin at the beginning. My paternal grandfather was born Ernst Otto Svensson in 1858 at Bullebo farm in Djursdala Parish, Kalmar County (*län*) in Småland and came to America with his family at the age of eight in 1867, when they settled on the unbroken Iowa prairie.

Ernst Otto was the eighth of the eleven children of the freehold farmer (*hemmansägare*) Sven Svensson, born in neighboring Södra Vi Parish, and his wife, Sara Maria Öhrn, born in nearby Odensvi Parish. Sven's ancestral farm lay in Loxbo village, Södra Vi, whose proprietors have been traced as far back as 1538, during the reign of Gustav Vasa. While there is some question about the earliest of these, the first who can be proven to have been our direct ancestor was established there by 1635, in the reign of Queen Christina.

Studying our forebears in that part of northeastern Småland from the earlier sixteenth century down to the mid-nineteenth century, when so many of them emigrated to the United States and found their place in American life, I found how their lives faithfully mirrored their times and the places where they lived. Obviously, I can give no more than a few examples here.

* H. Arnold Barton is professor emeritus of history at Southern Illinois University and former editor of the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*.

What was perhaps most striking about the early proprietors at Loxbo was the impact of Sweden's many wars during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries upon the Swedish peasants. The tax rolls (*mantalslängder*) preserved at the War Archives (*Krigsarkivet*) in Stockholm reveal how, in 1570, Lasse at Loxbo had to contribute to the special levy for the first ransom of Älvsborg Fortress at the site of present-day Gothenburg, captured by the Danes during the Seven Years' War of the North (1563-70), and how Jon at Loxbo was assessed, in 1613-18, for the second ransom of the same fortress after the War of Kalmar with Denmark (1611-13). A successor, Jon at Loxbo, appears among the local militia in 1628-29, and as our ancestor, Carl at Loxbo, is shown as proprietor already in 1635, it is likely that Jon died in Gustav II Adolf's Baltic campaigning.

I was also struck by what the taxation rolls have to show regarding both the size and the legal status of the Loxbo farm. Its first proprietor, Per at Loxbo, is shown in 1538 to have possessed a full *mantal*, a fiscal unit varying in size according to its estimated productivity. As the generations passed, especially by the mid-nineteenth century, the proprietors held smaller and smaller parts of a *mantal*. This indicates the pressures of a growing population, as further shown by the rising prices for the same parcels of land that were bought and sold during the earlier nineteenth century. When my great-great-grandfather, Jonas Öhrn—Sara Maria's father—sold his one-fourth *mantal* in Odensvi Parish to go to America in 1851, he received 40% more for it than his father had paid for it only nineteen years earlier, in 1832.

Meanwhile, the status of Loxbo in Södra Vi Parish changed with changing conditions. Per at Loxbo held his *mantal* there as *skattejord*, or peasant freehold land, directly taxable by the Crown. During the seventeenth century, it came to be designated as *skattefrälsejord*, that is to say, the taxes it paid were turned over by the Crown to private persons, mainly the aristocratic owners of large estates, in repayment for loans or services. By the middle of the century there was a real danger that Swedish peasants, who had always been free men, might be reduced to some form of serfdom on the model of Denmark and the Baltic lands. This threat was averted by the Reduktion begun by Karl XI in 1680, by which the Crown reclaimed the lands and tax revenues that had been earlier granted to private persons. Freehold rights were then fully restored to those peasants who had lost them, including the proprietors at Loxbo. By the early nineteenth century, when restrictions on the purchase of privileged lands had been eased, some of their descendants were acquiring former noble manors. Among them was Sven Arvidsson, the father of Sven Svensson, who purchased Rumskulla Manor in nearby Rumskulla Parish for one of his sons. Later a grandson would buy Harg Manor in Kisa Parish, Östergötland.

The descendants of Carl at Loxbo in the seventeenth century were clearly doing well for themselves two centuries later, by the early nineteenth century. Sven Arvidsson became a local celebrity in Södra Vi, in time acquiring so much property that it was said he could wander through three adjoining parishes on his own land. But problems arose, in particular economic and religious. Many substantial farmers by mid-century, including my great-grandfather, Sven Svensson, who in 1841 became the master of Bullebo farm in Djursdala Parish, were beginning to see farming not simply as a traditional way of life but as a profitable enterprise. Sven had ambitious plans for improvements, causing him to borrow money during the prosperous 1850s, which became increasingly difficult to pay back during the hard-pressed 1860s. It undoubtedly became clear to him that he could only pay off his debts by selling part of his lands. But how, in that case, was he to provide for his eleven children in a manner considered worthy of a substantial farmer? At this point he began thinking seriously of America, where good land was said to be unlimited, at little or no cost, and where his father-in-law had already emigrated in 1851.

Religion, too, played its part. Sweden, during the earlier nineteenth century, was swept by waves of evangelistic pietism. It was a measure of the Svensson family's rise in social standing that their eldest son, Sven Fredrik, sought to prepare himself for the clergy. This was not easy for a peasant lad from outside the old, established clerical families. Sven Fredrik attended the Fjellstedt and later the Ahlberg schools for lay preachers and colporteurs, where many future Swedish-American pastors received their first preparation. Seeing little future in Sweden, he emigrated in 1866 to America to attend the budding Augustana Lutheran Seminary, then in Paxton, Illinois. He had meanwhile brought his family to "see the light" and during their later years there, Bullebo became known as a nest of pietism and conventicle meetings. To them, too, America came to offer the shining vision of freedom of conscience.

The family's scout was Sven's second son, Ludvig, who emigrated to America in 1864 and soon thereafter enlisted in the Union Army during the final stage of the Civil War. His motives were doubtless practical: to gain quick citizenship, thereby qualifying him to profit by the Homestead Law of 1862.

It has already been seen that the kin was early on the scene in America—how early I had no real conception when I first began my family research. I found that my great-grandmother's father, Jonas Öhrn, arrived in America already in 1851. It became more exciting still, when I was able to find that he had settled in New Sweden, in Jefferson County, Iowa, the first lasting Swedish settlement in the American Middle West, established by Peter Cassel and a small group from Kisa in Östergötland, only six years earlier, in 1845. But then, I discovered that even earlier relatives—at least by marriage and very

likely by blood—Peter and Christina Andersson, from Jonas Öhrn's Odensvi Parish, had joined the Cassel group in Gothenburg and were thus among the first New Sweden settlers! The Anderssons had apparently had no contact with the Cassel group from Kisa before leaving home, and had, in fact, taken out their passport in Kalmar a good two weeks earlier than the Kisa folk had taken out theirs in Linköping. For a descendant of the Great Swedish Migration, this was almost like discovering an ancestor on the *Mayflower*! It was there that the chain connecting our family in America with our kinfolk in Småland and Östergötland first began.

It should be added that after two years in New Sweden, in 1847, Peter and Christina Andersson led a small group of more recent arrivals, including Christina's brother, Anders Edvard Fagerström, fifty miles to the west, where they established the Bergholm colony (now Munterville), in Wapello County, Iowa, thereby beginning a process of stage migration that, over the years, would lead thousands of Swedes and their children to leave the older settlements for new ones farther to the west and north.

Both Jonas Öhrn in 1851 and Sven Svensson in 1867 were typical of the early Swedish peasant emigrants to America: they were substantial farmers with property to sell to pay for their families' travel to America and to purchase land and needed supplies there. Öhrn was, moreover, a good example of the remarkably rapid adaptation of many of the earliest Swedish immigrants to conditions in the new land. From the start, he proved himself a canny businessman. He bought and sold land in and around New Sweden, lent out money at interest, became one of the community's most substantial citizens and a pillar of its Methodist Church. More notable yet seems the case of Andrew Edward Fagerstrom—as he now called himself—who by 1878 farmed 220 acres, was married to a woman from Kentucky, had seven children, was a township trustee, treasurer of the school board, a Baptist, and a Democrat.

Cultural adaptation on the Iowa prairie was, however, generally more gradual. Sven Svensson, who emigrated at the age of fifty, is said never to have learned more than a little farm English, and his wife, Sara Maria, knew even less. They could get by well enough with Swedish in Lost Grove Township, Webster County, where they took land in 1867, amid their own countrymen. Language usage among their numerous children varied, as shown by their preserved letters, depending above all upon their ages when they arrived in America. Sven Fredrik, the eldest son who became an Augustana Lutheran pastor, mastered grammatical Swedish and evidently had at least a reasonably good command of English. While all the children could use Swedish throughout their lives, those in the middle never really learned it properly in school, nor did they ever learn very good English. The younger ones, including my grandfather,

Ernest, acquired proper English, thanks to better education and determination to get ahead in life.

Those of Sven and Sara Maria's children who married all took spouses either born in Sweden or of Swedish parents in America. Meanwhile three of them were able to obtain American college educations. My grandfather, for instance, after teaching school and living in a sod house for a time in newly settled Gothenburg, Nebraska, became a physician. According to family tradition, he took the name Barton out of admiration for Clara Barton, the American Angel of Mercy in the Civil War and later founder of the international Red Cross. The third generation married mainly outside their ethnic group and scattered well beyond the Middle West. Bit by bit, the family found its way into American life, but without losing its pride in its Swedish origins.

* * *

If the Andersson-Öhrn-Svensson kin illustrate the progression from seventeenth-century peasant freeholders in northeastern Småland to prairie farmers in later nineteenth-century Iowa, the family background of my grandmother, Jenny Christina Charlotta Norelius, born at Lenninge farm in Lenninge village, Bollnäs Parish, Hälsingland (Gävleborg *län*) in 1863, illuminates developments in another part of Sweden and other strata in Swedish society.

Her father, Franz Gustaf Norelius, was the *häradskrivare*, or district recorder, for the South Hälsingland Judicial District (*fögderi*), and thus was *herrska*, a member of the gentry class. His family history, since the early eighteenth century, illustrates what the Swedish historian Sten Carlsson described in 1962 as the classic path of upward mobility in the old Sweden: from peasant to clergyman to state official ("*bonde - präst - ämbetsman*").

In 1729, a peasant lad, Johan Ericksson, from Börstil Parish, near Östhammar in Uppland, went off to Uppsala University to prepare himself for a clerical career. He took the name Norelius, with the characteristic Latinized ending then preferred by the clergy, was ordained, and married Christina Unander, daughter of the pastor of the island parish of Vätö, near Norrälje in the northern Stockholm archipelago, whom he succeeded as pastor in 1745.

Although Johan Norelius lived out his life within the radius of some thirty miles in his native province of Uppland, his marriage brought ramifications stretching far out into the world. His brother-in-law, Eric Unander, served, from

1749 to 1760, as one of the Swedish State Church's pastors on the "American Mission" to the old Swedish Lutheran congregations along the Delaware River, which dated back to Sweden's short-lived overseas colony in the seventeenth century. He was thus, so far as I can tell, the very first of my kin to come to America. While there, he married Maria Hesselia, daughter of the Swedish-born Gustaf Hesselius, who is considered the first American artist of any consequence. A great-granddaughter of Gustaf Hesselius, incidentally, married the Swedish painter, Adolf Ulric Wertmüller, who in 1800 left an eminent career in Sweden and France to settle in New Jersey.

Another family relationship, meanwhile, linked the little parsonage by the Baltic to the fabulous lands of the East. Christina Unander had been courted by a young seaman from Vätö named Mattias Holmers, but she rejected him as she was already then engaged to Johan Norelius. Holmers sailed off to the Far East in the service of the Swedish East India Company, founded in Gothenburg in 1731, eventually becoming one of its most illustrious captains and very well off. Having lost Christina, Holmers in due course wooed and, at the age of fifty-eight, married her sixteen-year-old daughter. The couple is reputed to have lived happily together and they had several children, leaving numerous descendants.

Johan Norelius's son followed him as pastor at Vätö. While some of his grandsons settled in Dalarna—one of whose descendants was the well-known artist and illustrator, Eric Norelius—one became the district treasurer at Söderhamn in Hälsingland. His son, Franz Gustaf Norelius, in turn became the father of my grandmother Jenny in 1863, after settling in Bollnäs Parish, where he acquired Lenninge farm.

Franz Gustaf died in 1875, when Jenny was only eleven years old, and what she recalled as an idyllic childhood in Lenninge village suddenly came to an end. His widow, Anna, left in straitened circumstances, had to sell the farm. She moved with her four children, first to Uppsala, then to Stockholm, earning her living as a dressmaker. The latter move was evidently made for Jenny's sake, for she had developed a lovely soprano voice, which gained her admittance to the Royal Academy of Music in 1882. It was surely hoped that this would prepare the way for a successful operatic career that might repair the family's fortune.

Jenny nonetheless had to content herself for some years with teaching voice to young society ladies in Stockholm. She thus seized the chance, in 1889, to tour America with the "Swedish Ladies' Octette." In Omaha she met the young doctor, Ernest Svenson (Barton), and, according to family legend, it was love at first sight. They married in 1890 and moved to Portland, Oregon, where my father, Sven Hildor Barton, was born in 1892.

Jenny was soon joined in America by two of her four siblings, a brother and a sister. This circumstance is of interest in itself and, in my view, surely relates to the social standing of their parents. Franz Gustaf Norelius, as seen, belonged to the gentry. After coming to Lenninge farm, however, he was smitten by the lovely daughter of his farm manager (*rättare*), Anders Andersson Wiberg and his wife Anna Ersdotter, from neighboring Gästrikland province, who were of very humble origins indeed. In 1836, at the time of their daughter Anna's baptism, Anders is noted in the parish register as a *statdräng*, which would put him practically at the bottom of the old peasant society. In return for laboring on a farm, on a year's contract at a time, a *statare* or *statdräng* and his family were given some kind of minimal housing and, for the rest, mainly compensated with *stat*, such as grain, milk, and firewood, as specified in his contract, rather than money. It was a hard and insecure existence, and it speaks well for Anders Wiberg's ambition and energy that he was able to work his way up to farm manager at Lenninge. In 1882, one of his sons emigrated to the small Swedish settlement of Savonburg in eastern Kansas, where he could get land of his own.

In 1861, Franz Gustaf Norelius married Anna Wiberg in Bollnäs Church. She was then expecting their first child. Such a circumstance would not normally have led to marriage between persons of such widely differing social origins at the time. But Franz Gustaf was clearly a man of principle. The marriage must have been deplored by his relatives and friends as a terrible *mésalliance*. Jenny was convinced, however, that her musical talents were inherited from her Wiberg side. For generations they had been village *spelmän*, or fiddlers, and her mother had a lovely, although untrained voice. Her gifts as a singer gave Jenny the chance to go to America in 1889 and what I believe must have been a welcome chance to escape her uncomfortable position half inside—but half outside—the Swedish fashionable world.

Jenny's career was a highly unusual one for a Swedish immigrant in America. The tour of the "Swedish Ladies' Octette" in 1889-90, principally to centers of Swedish settlement in the Middle West and with Jenny often as its featured soloist, was enthusiastically received by local audiences, as was glowingly described in numerous reviews in Swedish-American newspapers. In 1892, shortly after my father's birth, Jenny joined a newly formed "Swedish Ladies' Quartette," which included her sister Vilhelmina and which both performed at the 1892 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and toured up and down the Pacific Coast, singing for delighted audiences.

Various anecdotes have been passed down of the quartet's tours in the still quite wild and woolly West. In Mohave, California, they performed in a warehouse where the local miners paid their admittance in gold dust. Continuing on to Bakersfield, the ladies attended a reception at which his honor the mayor

demonstrated his ability to hit a spittoon across the room. When Jenny was somewhat taken aback at this curious display, a local cowboy proudly exclaimed, "Shucks, ma'am, that wern't nothin', he can spit a lot further than that"—or words to that effect! In San Francisco, meanwhile, the ladies were feted at the sedate Century Club by the cream of local society.

In 1900, Jenny conceived a highly venturesome and ambitious plan: to return to Europe at the age of thirty-seven and resume her musical career in earnest. She surely encountered great disapproval for leaving her husband and two young children in Portland to seek success on the stage. But it is to Ernest's credit that he was liberal enough in his views that he always remained supportive and appreciative of the career she was determined to pursue.

After being coached at the Paris Conservatory for some months by a former teacher of the celebrated Swedish soprano, Christina Nilsson, Jenny performed widely in Europe—mainly in Great Britain—and in America, on both the operatic and the concert stage. Her greatest moments came in 1902, when she substituted for Blanche Marchesi at a Royal Philharmonic concert in London, sang in 1903 with Enrico Caruso at his American debut in Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and in 1905 filled in for the famous Nelly Melba, again in *Rigoletto*, at the Covent Garden Opera in London. Had she had the money needed for publicity, she was convinced, she might have made it right to the top.

That chance did not come. She toured with a couple of lesser-known American opera companies and gave concerts on both sides of the Atlantic. She was often a soloist at concerts given by various of the numerous Swedish-American men's choruses of the time and in 1912 was solo soprano at the annual *Messiah* Festival in Lindsborg, Kansas. At last, in 1914, she was offered the position of prima donna at the Dresden Opera Company in Germany, but the outbreak of World War I that summer intervened and Jenny returned permanently to America. During her later years, from the 1920s until her death in 1942, she was a highly respected voice teacher and operatic coach in Seattle.

Although she last visited Sweden in 1914, she remained both a patriotic American and a proud Swede. From her first arrival in the United States in 1889, she had been intimately involved on the Swedish-American musical and cultural scene. A talk she gave in Swedish on the Seattle radio station KXA's "Nordic Hour" in 1932 well summarizes the attitudes of Swedish America's cultural leaders toward their heritage. She spoke in glowing terms of Sweden's proud past and rich culture, and of the great accomplishments of the Swedes and other Scandinavians in America.

America is a great and rich land with gold and treasures in abundance [she concluded]. But we who come from a smaller land and are not so rich, we have brought with us treasures that cannot be bought with gold. . . . Let us, as free natives of the North, give of our riches to help create a happier and freer America!

* * *

What has my study of two very different families—from widely separated parts of Sweden and social origins and with greatly differing experiences on both sides of the ocean—given me, both as a person and as a historian by vocation?

In the first place like others who have cultivated their genealogies and family histories, I too have learned much about myself by learning who and what my forebears were. I have sought neither to idealize them nor to apologize for them, but simply to take them as they were, in the context of their own times. In this way, I have found my own place, in what the British statesman Edmund Burke described in 1790 as the great chain connecting the living with the dead and those yet to be born.

It has made history come alive for me in a way that a more abstract study of historical trends and developments never could have done. After all, history, as the nineteenth-century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle put it, is the “essence of innumerable biographies.” My family history is the story of real people, facing particular situations in the times in which they lived; people, moreover, who have been intimately connected with my own identity and destiny. The search has brought me through the years into contact with widely diverse worlds, on both sides of the Atlantic, “*från slott till koja*” (“from palace to hut”) as they say in Sweden, or from timbered farmstead and rural parsonage to sod house and the operatic stage. What a colorful and varied picture of past times!

On a more practical level, it has brought home to me the importance of a good historical background in sensing what the possibilities and probabilities might have been at various times and under particular circumstances. Repeatedly, historical knowledge has put me on the right track in seeking out specific genealogical information. But at the same time, I learned of the importance of genealogical and family research in bringing down to earth and putting a personal face on the events and developments of the past.

Finally, I became ever more convinced of the importance of the amateur genealogist and local historian—for the professional historian of the “big picture”—in filling in those concrete personal details that keep history anchored in real life. Many, in both Sweden and the United States, showed great insight, ingenuity, and generosity in providing me with the information I needed for my research. “*Ingen nämnd, men ingen glömd*” (“no one named, but no one forgotten”), to quote the Swedish saying. Such persons have been and remain the indispensable link between the grassroots of real human experience and our broader understanding of the past. And so many of them over the years have become my very good friends!

* * *

This article is based upon my book, *The Search for Ancestors: A Swedish-American Family Saga* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1979), in Swedish translation, *Släkten. En svensk-amerikansk krönika* (Stockholm: LTs förlag., 1981), and “Jenny Norelius, 1863-1942: A Life in Song” (unpublished manuscript; copies at Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois; Swedish-American Historical Society, North Park University, Chicago; Nordic Collection, University of Washington Library, Seattle; and Bollnäs *Hembygdsförening*, Bollnäs, Sweden). These works contain references to the original sources consulted and credit those amateur genealogists and local historians who have given me such invaluable help.