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The Atlantic Bridge

by Ted Rosvall*

Every Swedish emigration or family researcher has come across the laconic remark in the “exit” column of a household examination roll (*husförhålls-längd*)—“Moved to North America.” Wherever would one continue a search from such a broad starting point? North America is a continent comprised of two countries, some sixty states or territories, hundreds of millions of people, and few usable indices. Without more specific clues, the search for missing relatives in the U.S. or Canada can be, at best, very challenging. Furthermore, once a researcher begins working with North American material, problems may arise because the information contained in census records, naturalization records, church records, city directories, obituaries, etc., is either sparse or conflicting. “Born in Sweden” may be as close as it ever gets!

Because of the size of the country and the rather limited number of inhabitants, and also because there are more finding aids available, the search on the Swedish side may be easier. But there is still a great need for the ultimate finding aid—the “Atlantic Bridge,” if you wish—between the records in Sweden and those on the North American continent. What basic (minimum) information would have to be included with each entry in such a finding aid?

The genealogical society in Falköping (Falbygdens Släktforskarförening) has, for years, been working on a project designed to find and identify close to 4000 individuals who emigrated from the fifty or so parishes in and around the town of Falköping in Västergötland. A typical entry from the Falköping database speaks to the question posed above. It also illustrates the Falköping “method” of setting up a database, which could serve as a prototype for a full-scale “Atlantic Bridge.” Consider the following:

Inga Lisa Johansdotter [Palmqvist]

*1834 7/2 Rumpegården, Jättened, Gudhem (R)

+1875 8/2 Rockford, Winnebago Co, IL

Here we have the first names *Inga Lisa*, the Swedish surname *Johansdotter* (maiden name if a married woman), and the American surname *Palmqvist*

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(which may be an Americanization of the Swedish name, a totally new adopted name or, as in this case, the married name of a woman). Furthermore we have the exact date and place of birth in Sweden, down to croft/farm, village (*rote*), parish and county (*län*). We also have the exact date and place of death in the U.S., down to town, county and state. If anything else needs to be added, it might be the year of emigration. Otherwise, such an entry is sufficient for the Swedish researcher to find his missing relatives in the U.S., starting perhaps with an obituary, cemetery records or church records in Rockford, IL. The entry data are also sufficient for the American researcher looking for ancestors and relatives in Sweden. The exact date and place of birth given open a direct highway to the Swedish church records, parish offices, and archives.

Imagine a huge database, accessible via CD-ROM or even the Internet, with some 1.3 million entries, similar to the one above, covering the entire period of Swedish emigration in the 19th and 20th centuries. What a magnificent research tool! What fun it would be to bring it all together! Is it an unrealistic dream? It really isn't. The experience, from the work in Falköping, is very promising and serves as an example for any town, county or part of Sweden. A lot has already been done in various parts of the country. What is sorely needed is someone (or some institution) to gather up all the loose ends and tie them together into a full-scale project—"the Atlantic Bridge" between Sweden and North America.

A lot of effort has been put into finding and documenting in the Swedish records all individuals who emigrated from Sweden. The new CD-EMIGRANTEN is the result of years of work on passenger lists and other sources concerning departing emigrants. A careful scanning of Swedish church records, mainly household examination rolls and migration books, has been made in many parts of Sweden and the results are being fed into the EMIBAS project. Another current project (EMISJÖ) aims at a master index for Swedish seamen, many of whom eventually jumped ship in various North American ports. The Swedish side of Swedish emigration research seems to be well taken care of or, at least, moving along nicely. This is less so in the U.S. and in Canada. What sources are there and how can they be used in the advanced genealogical "matchmaking" that "the Atlantic Bridge" requires? Falbygdens Släktforskarförening suggests that the following ingredients be part of the overall recipe.

1. Swedish American Church Records (Svenskamerikanska kyrkoarkiv) (SAKA)

The Swedes brought with them a tradition of excellent record keeping when they started to form new congregations and churches in the new country. Not only did they record the ministerial acts of baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but

they also kept membership rolls that are very similar to the Swedish household examination rolls. Above all, these rolls generally include the one vital piece of information—where in Sweden the members/immigrants were born. This may be the only source in the U.S. that provides this crucial detail. One of the most efficient and diligent Swedish emigration researchers, Bertil Grundström from Tranås, has been scrutinizing Swedish American church records for many years and has produced a database that contains vital information on over half-a-million individuals. Others, including Kurt Andersson from Skara, and Anna-Lena Hultman from Hössna, have specialized in certain areas, using the SAKA rolls as their starting point. Although a gold mine of information, these records must be matched with Swedish church records, especially birth records, since the mistakes in the Swedish American church records are numerous.

For example, the date of birth and even the year of birth are more often wrong than correct. This may have to do with the fact that the two countries have different methods of describing dates. For example, a Swede would immediately interpret the notation 10.8 or 10/8 as August 10, whereas an American would probably guess at October 8. The surnames have almost always been tampered with in the U.S. material. The double “s” in “Andersson” and similar patronymics has generally been reduced to one, the “Johanssons” have mostly been turned into “Johnsons,” and names involving the three extra Swedish letters (å, ä and ö) have been transformed in myriad ways. The parish listed as “place of birth” is, in many cases, instead the “parish of departure,” that is to say, the place the emigrant lived before he or she emigrated.

In spite of these obstacles, the Swedish American church records, available at The House of Emigrants (*Utvandrarnas Hus*) in Växjö, Sweden, and the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL, remain the number one source for finding Swedish emigrants. Matching the information found in the SAKA rolls with the CD EMIGRANTEN or the EMIBAS and EMISJÖ databases should, in most cases, permit a definite identification of the emigrant.

2. Swedish American Newspapers

Swedish American newspapers, published in places like New York, Chicago, Minneapolis, and California are another rich and valuable source for the emigration researcher. They have been rather neglected, however, since the desired information (mainly obituaries) is almost impossible to find, if the exact date and place of death of an individual one is trying to find are not known. Several projects are currently underway to extract information from all obituaries in *Svenska Amerikanaren-Tribunen*, *Sändebudet*, and other similar newspapers and compile it in a new, searchable database.

Since the obituaries generally give birthplaces, or at least an indication as to where in Sweden the deceased came from, this new material will be a wonderful help, especially when the individuals cannot be located in the Swedish American church records. We must not forget that not everyone joined a Swedish congregation: some chose to join Norwegian, German, or even American congregations. Some formed “free” churches of various denominations, and some emigrants chose never to join a church at all. Here too, matching the newspaper database with the Swedish databases should make it possible to confirm that the “Mrs. Palmqvist who died in 1875 in Rockford, IL is indeed the same person who was born in 1834 at Rumpegården in Gudhem Parish.”

It is equally important to scan the local *Swedish* newspapers for items concerning emigrants. Many times the family in Sweden would publish a death advertisement in the local newspaper as soon as they got word that one of their children or siblings had passed away in the U.S. These ads, sometimes accompanied by a small obituary or news item, often provide information as to where the emigrant died—a piece of information that can often guide the researcher to others of the same family or from the same parish who were also residing at that particular place. From time to time, the local Swedish newspapers would also publish letters from emigrants, giving many interesting details about their lives and circumstances in the new country.

3. Estate Inventories (*Bouppteckningar*)

This is an emigration source that has been strangely neglected. The fact is that some of the best clues as to the whereabouts of emigrated relatives may be found in the estate inventories produced following the deaths of those that stayed behind. How so? Well, estate inventories list all the heirs of a deceased person, including those that may have emigrated to the U.S. Whereas earlier estate inventories may only describe emigrant heirs as “the son August in North America” or “the daughter Emma at an unknown place in America,” later ones often give more complete information, such as “the son Otto in Chicago” or “the daughter Anna married to John Lindstrom in Moline.” From the 1920s or 1930s, one can even hope for a complete address and, perhaps, also a letter of attorney from the heir himself. To look for estate inventories following the deaths of the emigrant’s parents is, of course, a must; but one must also remember that the emigrant may be listed as heir after a deceased and childless sister or brother, uncle or aunt, or even a mother-in-law or father-in-law. First cousins are, however, not considered heirs according to Swedish legislation.

For a project covering a whole town, county, or other jurisdictional district, it would make good sense to go through all estate inventories from 1850 to the present, copying the list of heirs for every such document that includes an

emigrant. Chances are that many pleasant surprises will be found. This is due to the fact that many single emigrants often married people from the same area in Sweden and, thus, it is often possible to find otherwise missing emigrants thanks to the estate inventories for members of their spouse's family in Sweden.

4. The "Pamphlet"

Many Americans travel to Sweden every year in search of their roots. They may not know much about their family background in Sweden, but they often know the name of the church or the closest town from which their emigrant ancestor came. Hence, they usually try to find the town, church, farm or house where the family once lived. Here is where the "pamphlet" produced by the local historical or genealogical society comes in handy. Such a document, with a catchy title (e.g., "Searching for your roots? We can help you!"), a map of the area with all churches and parishes listed, and a description of the local emigration project, will doubtless produce a lot of phone calls, letters, and e-mails.

Contact is the operative word, and the contact established may prove beneficial to both parties. The emigration group can lead the visiting American to the right sources and, perhaps, contact local people who will be happy to show the visitors around, guide them to old houses, ruins, cemeteries, etc. The group will, in turn, receive information as to what happened to yet another (or five, or ten) missing emigrants. The "pamphlet" should be placed in all churches, hotels, libraries, tourist bureaus, and other suitable places. It could also be placed in various archives, libraries, and societies in the U.S.

The Internet is also a forum that should not be neglected in this context. An "Emigration Project" home page, listing all the parishes and churches in the area, may be a way of increasing the chances of being found by those on the other side of the Atlantic.

5. Death Certificates

Many states, including Illinois and Massachusetts, have made their early death certificates available to researchers. Extracting and compiling information, from every death certificate that lists the deceased person's place of birth as "Sweden," would result in a tremendous database for further research. Based on name, age/birth date, names of parents, number of years in the U.S., and other information available on the certificate, it ought to be possible to combine this information with information from the Swedish databases mentioned above, thus establishing a lot of perfect matches. This would, of course, be a tremendous undertaking; but done as a "joint venture" by an "immigration research group"

in the U.S. and an "emigration research group" in Sweden, it might be a worthwhile and inspiring project.

6. Inheritance Cases in the Archives of the Swedish Foreign Ministry

The Swedish Foreign Ministry (UD) was often contacted in connection with inheritance cases concerning deceased emigrants. It was their task, when possible, to locate heirs and relatives. Whereas a recent series of articles in *Swedish American Genealogist*¹ dealt with the early files (up to 1901) of this exciting material, the cases actually continue up until the 1950s. The Riksarkivet in Stockholm has a usable card index for these cases.

On a local level, the Court House (Tingsrätten) often had to deal with applications from families in Sweden who needed to have a sister or a brother declared legally dead, so that they could go on with legal matters, ownership of farms, etc. These files can also hold important clues, even if it was not possible at the time of filing to find out what had happened to the individual in question. With modern databases and newly released resources (e.g., the 1920 U.S. Census), the clues contained in these files may now be sufficient to find the whereabouts of individuals who were then missing.

7. Late Passenger Arrivals

Beginning with the year 1898, the documentation of passenger arrivals in New York and other ports suddenly improved drastically. There is not only a usable index for this material but also a wealth of information in the manifestos, including such crucial details as who the immigrant left behind in Sweden (e.g., a father, a wife, an employer), their destination, and to whom they were travelling, including an address and the relationship, if any, to that person. Granted, the major part of the Swedish emigration period took place before 1898, but there were always latecomers. Following the footsteps of a nephew, niece or first cousin who came later, may lead to important information about family members who were earlier emigrants. Therefore, when trying to find a missing early emigrant, it is advisable to do a bit of roundabout research in Sweden on every family member or even neighbor who emigrated after 1898. If they did, the natural next step would be to scan the New York arrival manifestos for details.

¹ Nils William Olsson and Ted Rosvall, parts 1-4 plus addendum, "Inheritance Cases in the Archives of the Swedish Foreign Ministry of Swedes who Died in America," *Swedish American Genealogist* 17 (December 1997): 185-200; 18 (March 1998): 41-53; 18 (June 1998): 84-103; 18 (September 1998): 161-178; 18 (December 1998): 224.

8. County Histories/Heritage Books

The printed materials should not be overlooked when trying to find missing emigrants. Many county histories and heritage books hold hundreds of biographical sketches, sometimes depicting a whole family or “clan.” The information in these books cannot always be trusted, based as it is on information voluntarily provided by family members themselves, but will often give information otherwise extremely hard to come by.

Such sources generally lack good geographical and surname indexes to help researchers find their missing relatives. In addition, they often either list the birth places of immigrants as simply “Sweden” or “Stockholm” or they misspell parish names so badly as to make them unintelligible. A chronological master index, based on birth dates, might prove to be a better tool for the researcher. The Swedish Emigrant Institute in Växjö has the embryo of such a card index, with information excerpted from the library holdings of the institute.

Conclusion

Dr. Nils William Olsson and the late Erik Wikén laid the foundation for this type of emigrant identification research through their monumental work *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850*. This gold mine of information lists over 5000 early emigrants.

Although the major part of the Swedish emigration history took place after 1850 and included approximately 1.3 million emigrants, constructing an “Atlantic Bridge” as presented above should not be an impossible task, provided there are enough individuals willing to participate in the project.