

12-1-2016

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Ann Wick

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Recommended Citation

Wick, Ann (2016) "The Search for Selma Lagerlöf's American Nephew," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 36 : No. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol36/iss4/2>

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The Search for Selma Lagerlöf's American Nephew

An old mystery is now solved

By ANN WICK

Volunteer work helping to preserve the stories of the past can lead to unexpected research projects. One of the more fragile ephemera that contain records of our daily lives are newspapers. Because of the process used to make newsprint from wood pulp, the acid used in production rapidly destroys the paper and in a major effort to preserve the information, libraries and other institutions scan and convert the information to digital form. At Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, the Scandinavian Immigrant Experience Archives, managed by Archivist Kjerstin Ringdahl, is part of this effort to preserve Scandinavian history. This past year I was asked to scan and save for inclusion in the Scandinavian Immigrant Experience web page several scrapbooks and related information written by or about Stephan Forslund.

Stephan Forslund was very active in the Swedish community in Tacoma during the 1920's through the 1970's. He worked for the Griffin Wheel Company in Tacoma but also wrote a column for the *Tacoma News Tribune* in the 1950's. He saved many of his articles in several scrapbooks which were left to the PLU Scandinavian Archives. After retirement, he started writing a book about the history of Tacoma's Swedish settlement but it was never published. While scanning the book draft for inclusion in the archives, I could not help reading what I was scanning and a particular paragraph caught my attention.

"Sandgren and Lind decided that there must be a crying need for a Swedish newspaper out in the Pacific Northwest and came to Seattle in 1888. A previous attempt to publish a Swedish paper had been made in 1885 by Frans Lagerlof, which folded after a few issues. Ernst Skarstedt, a prominent Swedish-American journalist in his

day who was something of a traveler, visited Lagerlof in Seattle about this time and describes him as a gloomy and melancholy man who had no use for Seattle, the Washington Territory, nor for the United States in general. Besides trying to be an editor, he was also a teacher in a public school. He must have been in an awful hurry to get out of town when he left, for he sold the whole aggregate of Swedish type and some other equipment to a German printer for 5 dollars. Lagerlof was a relation to Selma Lagerlof (sic), noted Swedish authoress and Nobel Prize winner, who made many attempts to locate him. He must have been a rather close relative as she has a brother who emigrated and was never heard from."

Since Selma Lagerlöf is a very distant relative of mine, I wondered if it could be true that a brother of hers lived in Seattle. A quick check on Findagrave.com showed that there was a Johan and Nathalia Lagerlöf buried in Lake View Cemetery in Seattle. Could this be the brother? No information was given on the cemetery site that he was related to Selma Lagerlöf.

Preliminary research for a Franz(s) Lagerlof or Franz(s) Lagerlöf in Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.com or the U.S./WA census records was unsuccessful. Furthermore, as later records would prove, Selma's brother was not yet in the United States in the 1880's. But was the Lagerlöf buried in Seattle still Selma's brother? More documentation was needed.¹

Selma Lagerlöf Genealogy

The family history for Selma Lagerlöf is well-known. She was the fifth of six children born to Erik Gustaf Lagerlöf and Louise (Wallroth) Lagerlöf. Her two older

brothers were Karl Daniel (b. 1850) and Johan Gustaf (b. 1854). Her sisters were Johanna Maria (b. 1851), Anna Georgina (b. 1856), and Gerda Julia (b. 1862). Johanna Maria died in 1854 of dysentery, a few months after Johan Gustaf was born. All of them were born at Mårbacka in Östra Ämtervik, Värmland. The family lost the farm because of debt in 1884 and Selma's father died in 1885 in Östra Ämtervik. Selma later purchased her family home back using money from winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1909.

Tracking down the burial information for her siblings, showed that all the siblings except one, died in Sweden. Selma, of course, died at Mårbacka. But information for Johan Gustaf Lagerlöf stated only "USA." Family trees published on the Internet had information about Johan Gustaf's death and history but the facts often conflicted so I needed to go back to the source material to be certain this was the correct Johan Gustaf at Lake View.

Johan Gustaf Lagerlöf

He was born at Mårbacka on 5 April 1854, the second son of Erik Gustaf and Louise, and the third child. He lived with his family at Mårbacka from 1854 to 1877. In 1873 he went briefly to Filipstad, perhaps as a student for further study, but in 1877 he left his family home for Göteborg. Perhaps he went there as his older brother Daniel lived in Göteborg. He moved back to Filipstad in 1882. In 1883 he moved to Lidköping from Filipstad. There he met and married Eva Maria Nathalia Rappe Lidbom, widow of the tobacco factory owner Conrad Lidbom. Johan worked in the factory as a clerk.

Eva Maria Nathalia Rappe Lidbom Lagerlöf

She was the third daughter of Baron Johan Axel Gustaf Rappe, a cavalry officer, and Eugenia Charlotta von Platen. There were fourteen children in the family born from 1847 to 1869 and Eva Maria *Nathalia* was born 19 May 1854 in Sörby parish (Kron.). As the father was in the military, the family moved several times in this period. Interestingly, Nathalia Rappe Lagerlof (sic) is listed in the Lineage Book of the Daughters of the American Revolution as a descendent of Count Curt Bogislaus Ludwig von Stedingk who fought in the Siege of Savannah, 1779. This qualifies her for membership in the DAR!²

Nathalia left home in 1878 to marry *Conrad* Julius Alexis Lidbom, a widower with a 7-year-old daughter, Signe Sofia Lidbom (born 1871) from a previous marriage to Ingeborg Nanny Södergren. A daughter, *Astrid*, was born on September 26, 1879, in Lidköping to Conrad and Nathalia. Conrad died in 1881 from bronchial pneumonia. Nathalia was now a widow with two young daughters. On 18 December 1886 she married Johan Gustaf Lagerlöf.

When Nathalia married Johan Gustaf in December, Signe, at the age of 15 in August, 1886, had already left to live with her grandfather August Södergren in Örebro. When he died March 27, 1894, Signe left for Uppsala on September 28, 1894. Conrad and Eva's daughter Astrid stayed with Johan Gustaf and her mother, Nathalia. A son, *Pehr Johan* was born to Johan Gustaf and Nathalia 27 December 1887. The family lived at No. 7-8, Lidköping.

Johan Gustaf and Nathalia (Nanny)

In 1890, Johan left Lidköping for America, leaving Eva, Astrid, and Pehr (now Per) in Lidköping. They moved to No. 10 Lidköping.

Johan Gustaf left on May 16, 1890, on the *Ariosto* from Göteborg to Hull and then on the *City of Chester* from Liverpool to New York, arriving June 2, 1890, with the final destination listed as Chicago. He was listed as a laborer. He settled in Joliet, Illinois.

Nathalia, now known as "Nanny", Astrid, and Pehr joined Johan Gustaf in 1895.



Johan Lagerlöf 1893 in Minneapolis.

They left on the *Ariosto* on September 20, 1895, from Sweden to England and then travelled First Class (!) on the *City of Rome*, arriving in New York October 5, 1895. They lived in Joliet, Illinois, Ward 1, for several years when once again Johan had the urge to move on. He went to Seattle, Washington, about 1906 or 1907 where he was listed in the city directory as working in "cigars and fruit" at 401, later 526?, Madison (presumably in a small shop) and living at 415 Madison. The Seattle city directories are somewhat unclear from this point onwards. In the 1908 directory, Johan and "Percy" are listed at 525 Madison, residence at 1110 Terry Ave, with no mention of Nanny or Astrid. Percy is listed as a student at the University of Washington which seems unlikely. In the 1910 U.S. census, John, Nannie, and Percy (age 22) are listed as living in Seattle, ED 146, Ward 3. In the 1910 Seattle city directory, John and Percy are listed as living at 227 Queen Ave., with John/Johan Gustaf working as a confectioner. Nannie is not mentioned. In 1912 the city directory lists John G, Nanny, and Percy "G," as living at 227 Queen Ave. John is a confectioner and Percy is listed as a "clerk."

Johan Gustaf died in Seattle 25 June, 1912. He is buried in Lake View Cemetery, Seattle, King County, WA. So that part of the tale is true. Selma had a brother who lived for over twenty years in Seattle and is buried there. But what happened to Nathalia, Pehr Johan, and his half-sister, Astrid?

Eva Maria Nathalia (Nannie) Lagerlöf

After Johan's death, Nathalia (now known as Nannie) and Pehr (now 25) moved to 1708 26th Ave. N. in Seattle. Nannie is listed as a widow and Percy J. as a "computer"/civil engineer. In 1917 they moved to 707 N. 63rd and then back to 26th Ave in 1919. In 1922 Percy is listed as an engineer at the 26th Ave. address. In 1924, Mrs. Nathalia Lagerlof, is living at 5251 12th Ave NE., Seattle. Nathalia dies 2 March 1926 and is buried in the same plot as Johan Gustaf in Lake View Cemetery, Seattle.

Astrid (Ester) Lagerlöf

Astrid must have remained in Illinois when her mother and Pehr went to Seattle. I did not find a record for her in the 1910 Illinois census. No record was found of her marriage to William Henry Holke either, but by 1919/20, Astrid (now known as Ester), William, and two children were living in Seattle at 1708 26th Ave. N. with Nanny. The marriage possibly was around 1912 or 1913 as the daughter, Mildred N. Holke, was age 6, born in Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, 4 March 1913, and the son, Donald H. Holke, was age 2, born 6 November 1918 in Seattle. The family moved several times between 1920 and 1929. William and Astrid lived at 1726 Harvard Ave., Seattle. Astrid died June 26, 1929, in Seattle and her ashes were buried in Washelli Columbarium, King Co., WA. Her grave stone simply states "E. Holke 1881- 1929." William Holke died January 7, 1942, in Seattle.

Mildred Holke is listed in the 1930 and 1940 U.S. censuses as living with her father at 1708 26th Ave. N., Seattle. No further information was found on what happened to her after 1940.

Donald Holke married 3 Feb. 1940 to Lillian Marie Hudgins, born 1918, died 2001. He died 24 January 2008, in Grandview, Yakima Co., WA. Both are buried in the Vashon Island Cemetery, Island County, WA. Donald and Lillian had two children, Penny (1943-2012) and Donald H. (1947-1967). The son Donald died in Viet Nam and was awarded numerous medals for bravery. Penny married and was a mother. Penny and Donald are also buried in the Vashon Island Cemetery.

Pehr Johan Lagerlöf

Pehr Johan was known as Per, John, P.J., and Percy; and Lagerlöf, Lagerlof (no ö), and Lagerloff.

He might have attended the University of Washington studying engineering for a brief period in 1908 according to the Seattle city directory but this is unlikely (see below). He worked as a clerk as a young person, then a drafter, then a “computer” (sic)/ civil engineer, then as a road surveyor and resident engineer for the WA Department of Highways. After leaving home, he lived at 2016 W 10th St, Port Angeles, WA, and was drafted August 26, 1918, and served as an engineer on the 166 Dep Brig Co C 70 until his discharge 5 Dec. 1918. In 1920 he lived in Melbourne (the town no longer exists but was located south of Montesano, WA), and worked as a surveyor for logging roads. He moved by 1930 to Port Orchard, WA, and lived in a rental on Sidney Street with a Richard Johnson



Per's memorial at Lone Mountain Cemetery (Billion Graves).

A Swedish book gives more information

In 2010 Swedish writer Torbjörn Sjöqvist published the book *Kära Syster! Jag tyckes hafva otur i allt. Om Johan Lagerlöf och hans syster Selma* (Dear Sister! I seem to have had bad luck in everything. About Johan Lagerlöf and his sister Selma) (ISBN 978-919788555-0-8).

In this book the author has gone through the collections of family letters that exist, both in print and in the Royal Library, to members of the family from Johan. There are 112 letters to Johan's mother and 29 from sister Selma. Many excerpts from the letters shows a clearer picture of Johan and his family's life in Sweden and the U.S.

An early letter shows that Johan supported his sister Selma when she studied at the teacher's college in Stockholm, both by convincing their father that it was right for Selma to get an education, and also with money, for which she was always grateful to him.

These letters also tell a lot about how Johan struggled with his various efforts to

and worked as resident engineer for the State Highway Department. Sometime after 1930, he moved to Nevada. In 1935 he lived in Boulder City, Clark Co., Nevada, and by 1940 he lived in Humboldt, Pershing Co., Nevada, and worked as a “mucker” in a tungsten mine. His 1940 draft card states he worked for the Nevada-Massachusetts Company, Mill City, Nevada, and lived in Humboldt, Nevada. Both the 1930 and 1940 U.S. censuses list the highest level of education as 8th grade. He died October 25, 1978, and is buried in Lone Mountain Cemetery, Lovelock, Nevada, where he is listed as a WWI veteran and as Percy Lagerloff. He never married.

Conclusion

I still have no idea who Franz Lagerlof (sic) was or why Stephan Forslund thought he was related to Selma Lagerlöf, but I do know that Selma Lagerlöf's brother and sister-in-law lived and are buried in Seattle and that the only child of Johan Gustaf and Eva, Pehr, left no recorded descendants, but his mother, Nanny, did leave descendants in the United States.

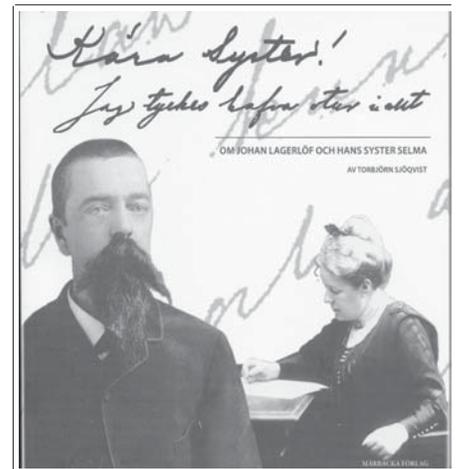
Editor's endnotes:

1) The above mentioned *Franz Lagerlöf* was born 15 Sep. 1849 in Skellefteå (Vbn.) [birth

records burned], and immigrated 1 Sep. 1882 from Söderala (Gäv.) according to *Emibas*. He returned to Umeå, Sweden, in December 1886, and died 15 June 1923 in Norrtälje (Stock.) [Swedish Death Index 1901-2013]. He was not a member of the same family as author Selma Lagerlöf.

2) Nathalia Rappe Lagerlöf's mother was the baroness Eugenie von Platen (1826–1887), whose mother was baroness Nathalia von Stedingk (1803–1862). Nathalia's father was count Curt von Stedingk (1746–1837), a colonel serving with the Anhalt regiment in the siege of Savannah during the Revolutionary War in 1779.

Author Ann Wick has the following e-mail: [skogkatt@earthlink.net]



thought there would be good opportunities for son Per to study and become an engineer. He was now 19 years old. Johan opened a fruit and cigar shop in Seattle, which seemed to do OK, but not great. But they still needed more money from Selma as wife Nanny was ill and needed operations. She and Per joined Johan in Seattle, and Per started his studies at the University of Washington, which was planned to take about four years, but for various reasons he never graduated. At this time Johan became seriously ill, probably of some liver disease. As he had stopped working he now had time to read all Selma's books and enjoyed them.

After Johan's death Selma still supported Nanny, but after her death in 1926, Per does not keep up writing to his aunt Selma, and he was lost to his Swedish family.

Now his fate is known, thanks to the good research in the preceding article.