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Suzanne Erickson Wallace

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My own *Allt För Sverige*

The story about finding my Swedish roots

BY SUZANNE ERICKSON WALLACE

Before there was ever internet with its access to the Swedish church records and the U.S. Social Security Death Index, before gedcoms and Disbyt, emails and facebook, there were many years during which I was gradually wanting to know more and more about my Swedish relatives.

Over many years I accumulated an assortment of information: a small yellow piece of paper with a name and city printed on it, two empty envelopes with two different return addresses for the same person in Illinois, another small paper with a street name and number in Gothenburg, a few old photos with a name, many old photos with no names, a letter from 1952 in Swedish, twelve other letters from 1888-1939 in Swedish, a 1948 funeral book, a 1952 probate record, and another letter in Swedish from 1940.

Early fragments of Swedish information

As far back as I can remember, I always knew that my father David Erickson was Swedish and that his parents, my grandmother and grandfather Erickson, immigrated from Sweden, as did my granduncle Justus Anderson (b. 1866 Hagshult, Jön.), grandmother's brother. Little by little I learned that my grandfather Andrew (*Anders*) Emil Erickson (b. 1871 Göteborg, Vgöt.) had come from Gothenburg and Grandmother Amanda Carolina Andersson (b. 1870 Hagshult) from Småland. Like too many of us, I was not interested in their early lives in Sweden and they did not speak much about it. I never knew Grandfather Andrew because he died before I was born, but Grandmother Amanda and her brother Justus were frequent visitors at our home.

There were small hints of other Swedish relatives during my childhood years. At Grandmother Amanda's house I would enjoy going through old photographs that fil-



Father's brother in Gothenburg.

led a dresser drawer. Some of the photos were recent, but others were old 2½" x 4" *cartes-de-visite* or larger 4½" x 6½" cabinet cards from Sweden and the U.S.A. with the names of photographic studios and cities. Only a very few had the name of a person on the back. One in particular showed a mother and father with 6 children outside their home in Sweden, and my uncle Einar Erickson had written, "father's brother in Gothenburg." On another he had written, "father's sister's daughter." On one there was a name - Jennie (*Jenny*) Erickson (b. 1877 V. Frölunda, Vgöt.).

About this same time (1948), when I was walking home from grade school one day, I met a girl about my age. I do not know why I stopped to talk with her, but we discovered we had the same last name - Erickson. Her name was Nancy Erickson, the same name as my older sister. Nancy took me inside her house to meet her grandmother, who turned out to be Jennie Erickson and who said we were related. When I arrived home I asked about these people, and my father concurred that they

were Erickson relatives. My father probably said Jennie Erickson was his aunt. I thought little of it. It would be another 50 years before I would give much thought to this and another 10 years after that before I would make contact once again with Nancy Erickson. By that time my grandmother Amanda and her brother Justus, as well as my father David, were long deceased.

Sources that were missed

My grandmother Amanda died in 1947, and her brother, my granduncle Justus Anderson, died in 1952. At that time my father David Erickson wanted to purchase one of the properties his uncle Justus Anderson owned. (See SAG 2014:3, p.21.) My father was annoyed to learn that this would be delayed because Justus had left some inheritance to relatives in Sweden. Their approval would have to be received before my father could proceed with the purchase. These relatives were Justus's

siblings and their children. All of the siblings were deceased and their numerous offspring had to be located. Five months later the Swedish relatives were found and my father was able to move forward with the purchase. No further thought was given at that time to these relatives in Sweden.

My mother did not believe children should attend funerals, so even though I was 10 when my grandmother Amanda died and 15 when Granduncle Justus died, I did not attend their wakes or funerals. I never met the many local Anderson and Erickson relatives who were present at both funerals; however, I did know where Grandmother Amanda and Grandfather Andrew were buried because my father took me to the cemetery throughout the summers with fresh flowers for the graves. The remembrance book from Grandmother Amanda's funeral would become a valuable source in the future.

Until recent years, I never knew about the numerous relatives living close by. I have discovered that Grandfather Andrew Erickson had three sisters living in our city of Racine, Wisconsin, and a brother in Joliet, Illinois. His oldest sister Augusta Berg (b. 1859 Göteborg) and her large family lived just across the bridge from my grandmother and then moved to the same street as my piano teacher. The pharmacist at our corner drugstore was Augusta's son, my father's cousin. The widow of my



My grandparents Andrew (Anders) Erickson and Amanda Andersson in 1899.

grandmother Amanda's oldest brother, my granduncle John (*Johan Gustaf* Anderson (b. 1858 Hagshult), lived one street over from our house. On Grandmother Amanda's street lived other descendants of her grandfather Gustaf Johannesson's (b. 1801 Tofteryd, Jön.) second marriage. I was surrounded by Swedish relatives, but I knew only my uncle Einar Erickson and cousins Tom and Janet, and I had met my 2nd cousin Nancy Erickson and my grandfather Andrew's sister Jennie Erickson.

Early trip to Sweden

Then, in 1976, I toured Great Britain and Scandinavia. My first impression of Sweden was its similarity to northern Wisconsin where our family had vacation property. On this tour I did not do any searching for relatives even though I had a small piece of yellow paper on which someone, perhaps my father David or his brother Einar, had long ago printed the name Knut Carlsson (b. 1887 Nässjö, Jön.) and the place, Nässjö. Supposedly, Knut Carlsson was a relative in Sweden. Our tour bus made a stop in Gränna, which I knew was not that far away from Nässjö, but I did not ask about Knut. I thought I would not have time to meet Knut Carlsson if I did manage some communication with him. In 1976 very few people in Småland spoke English and I certainly did not know any Swedish. We also visited the city of Göteborg, where Grandfather Andrew Erickson had been born. Somewhere there were descendants of the picture of "father's brother in Gothenburg" and of "father's sister's daughter." I did not know I would return 26 years later.

Finding more sources

After that trip I had occasional thoughts about my unknown Swedish relatives. I had two empty envelopes addressed to Grandmother Amanda in 1925 and 1940 with two different return addresses for a Mrs. F. Erickson in Joliet, Ill. I knew my father had cousins with the Anderson last name, but other than my father's brother Einar Erickson and my cousins Janet and Tom and the name of his aunt Jennie Erickson, I knew of no other Anderson or Erickson relatives. I was becoming more curious. Uncle Einar now had all the photographs from Grandmother Amanda's dresser drawer, even the one of the family, "father's

brother in Gothenburg" and "father's sister's daughter." On every visit to Uncle Einar, I would look at all these photographs and wonder about these people. I never dreamed that one day I would know the descendants of most of these relatives. I had Amanda's funeral book and learned there her date of birth as 25 August 1870 in the parish of Hagshult in Småland. The names of all the visitors at her funeral were listed, and several groups of people shared the same last names. This was a start, but in those years we did not have internet access to the Swedish church records.

In the 1980s I was moving a chest of drawers from my mother's apartment, and under the paper liner in the top drawer was a large manila envelope from Sweden addressed to my grandmother Amanda in 1953, which was 6 years after Amanda had already died. The return address was Nässjö. Inside the envelope was a handwritten letter in Swedish. The envelope also contained a large picture of an elderly man surrounded by many flowers. I wondered who sent this letter. Why did the sender not know that Amanda was already deceased? What could the letter say? I asked around for someone who could read Swedish. It was almost 10 years later that a co-worker, who lived in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood, said he could ask his elderly neighbor from Sweden, a Mrs. Johnson. She graciously translated the letter for me. The letter was from Knut Carlsson's widow – the same Knut Carlsson whose name I had on the small piece of yellow paper on my trip in 1976. Part of the letter was a thank you for the 1952 inheritance from my granduncle Justus Anderson. More of the letter told of Knut's siblings Carl Janne (b. 1889 Nässjö) and David (b. 1895 Nässjö), and also the death of Knut. The large picture was Knut at his 60th birthday. Now I had an actual address to follow, even if it was over 40 years old, and now I wanted to know much more about relatives who still lived in Sweden.

The old letters from Sweden

Following this find, my sister Nancy Erickson Laase said she had some other letters written in Swedish, and she gave me 12 letters dating from 1888 to 1939. When Granduncle Justus Anderson died in 1952, Nancy had found a large velvet photo al-

bum tucked away in a small red and white outbuilding behind Grandmother Amanda's house. The letters were inside the photo album. Fortunately, Justus and my sister Nancy were both savers of memorabilia. I was determined to have these letters translated, but there were too many for me to ask Mrs. Johnson. Thinking back on this, I was probably wrong and should have asked her. Instead, I contacted the Scandinavian Center at North Park University in Chicago where visiting students from Sweden could work on the letters. I sent copies to them, but after a few months I was notified that the student assigned to the task could not read enough of the old script to do the translation, and some of the words were no longer in use now – 100 years later.

I kept looking for someone to do the translations. I bought a Swedish dictionary and tried to translate the letters myself even though I knew no Swedish. The handwriting was not always clear. An "n" could be an "r" and an "e" could be an "l". The job was definitely far beyond my ability. I would talk about the letters in social gatherings. One evening in 1995, while I was playing cards with a friend, the subject came up. My friend said she had a friend in the middle of Wisconsin who was from Sweden, and she was sure this friend could do the translation. She was right. On a trip to our lake home in northern Wisconsin, we dropped off copies of all the letters. Two weeks later we returned to find typed translations of each one. It was amazing. The letters gave first names, community names, and postmarks of nearby towns.

The letters were all addressed to my granduncle Justus, three to him in Sweden and the other nine to him in Racine, Wisconsin, at my grandmother Amanda's house where he lived. The letters were from a variety of people. One was from a friend in Jönshult, Hagshult, discussing emigration; another was from my great-grandmother Johanna Gustafsdotter (b. 1831 Hagshult); and one was from my grandmother Amanda then in Wisconsin. (See SAG 2014:3, p.18-21.) The other 9 were from other family members who had remained in Sweden, including Justus's older sister Wilhelmina Andersson (b. 1862 Hagshult), Wilhelmina's daughter Emy Rylander (b. 1888 Vrigstad, Jön.), and even his nephew Knut Carlsson. The letters were from various years and told of farm names, work, villa-



Amelia Ehn, grandmother Amanda, Jennie Erickson in the 1940s.

ges, churches, engagements, weddings, and sudden and unexpected deaths. There was also a death notice of Kristina Svensson (b. 1856 Hagshult), the oldest sibling of Amanda and Justus. It was a treasure trove and gave me the feeling of knowing these people. There had to have been many other letters, but these 12 were the ones Justus had saved and my sister Nancy had salvaged. Now, I had to find these families.

Writing my own letters

In 1996 I wrote to the Ericksons in Racine, Wisconsin, who were listed in Grandmother Amanda's funeral book. Of all the letters I sent, I had one response. This was from Jennie Erickson's youngest son Ralph Erickson. I sent him copies of photos and names from Grandmother Amanda's funeral book to identify. From Ralph Erickson I learned the last names of my grandfather Andrew Erickson's sisters. He also knew that Nancy Erickson's married name was Paulson and she lived in Oregon. He knew of her sister Judy Despina of Arizona. He also identified relatives in old photos taken in America, including a snapshot of my grandmother Amanda with my grandfather Andrew's sisters Jennie Erickson and Emelina (*Emelina*) Ehn (b. 1862 Göteborg). It was 2003 before I located my 2nd cousins Nancy Erickson Paulson and Judy Erickson Despina. Nancy wrote that Jennie spoke of two brothers still in Sweden. Nancy and Judy provided the date of Jennie Erickson's birth and the names of her seven children. No one, however, could identify any of the pictures from Sweden, in-

cluding "father's brother in Gothenburg" or "father's sister's daughter."

By January 2000 I had enlisted the help of the Swenson Center at Augustana College to search for the immigration of my Anderson and Erickson relatives. They sent me the notice of immigration of several people with the names I had sent them and the possible years of immigration. My grandmother Amanda and her brothers Justus and John (*Johan Gustaf*) were there, the brothers leaving from Hagshult, and Amanda from where she was employed as a maid in Tofteryd. Grandfather Andrew Erickson's sisters Augusta, Emelia, and Jennie had come from the parish of Västra Frölunda. The findings included brother Fritz (*Fredrik*) Eriksson (b. 1869 Göteborg) immigrating much later in 1916. Since I knew the birth date of Jennie Erickson, I could verify her immigration, but I needed Augusta's, Emelia's, and Fritz's birth dates to verify theirs. There was no record of the immigration of my grandfather Andrew (*Anders*) Eriksson.

Court Houses, Libraries, Obituaries

About twice a year I would make the trip to Racine, Wisconsin, where I began a search at the Racine County Courthouse and the Racine Public Library.

At the court house I was able to locate births, marriages, deaths, and further generations. Marriage and death records often included the date and place of birth I was seeking.

The library offered city directories from the earliest days of my relatives' presence in Racine, listing residence and work addresses, occupations, marital status, and spouse names. The library also provided obituaries from years past. A June 1936 obituary of Grandfather Andrew's sister Augusta Berg listed the names of all her children and her siblings, including a sister Amanda Andersson (b. 1869 Göteborg) in Sweden. My grandmother was Amanda Andersson Erickson, so I believed this obituary entry of an Amanda Andersson in Sweden must be an error. Would my grandfather have a wife and a sister with the same name? In Grandfather Andrew's own obituary from 1925 there was no mention of any siblings in Sweden. A brother Fritz Erickson in Joliet, Illinois, was mentioned though, and I had those two old envelopes

with addresses for Mrs. F. Erickson.

Two or three times a year I would see my Erickson cousins Tom and Janet, and they knew I was beginning a real search for our relatives in Sweden. Uncle Einar was now deceased and my cousins were in possession of the many photographs from the past. They designated me the family genealogist and gave me all of the old photographs.

Preparing a 2002 trip to Sweden and finding living relatives

In 2000 I emailed the *Höglandets Turism* (the Highlands' Tourism) in Nässjö about a trip I was now beginning to plan for 2002. I wrote about the letter from Knut Carlsson's widow and of his siblings Janne and David. I also requested maps which would show the places listed in the other old letters I had. The *Höglandets Turism* sent me the name of Carina Bergström, who would do research for me. Over the next few months she was able to send me genealogy which showed grandmother Amanda as having five siblings, and the research went back two generations to 1777 and extended to 1876. I also learned from Carina Bergström's research that Anders Magnus Johansson (b. 1821 Hagshult), the father of Grandmother Amanda and her siblings had died a month before Amanda's birth. Johanna Gustafdotter, their mother, then married a much younger man. (See SAG 2014:3 p. 18-21.)

In 2000 I also decided to learn Swedish and enrolled at North Park University night classes. For the next 2 years I attended classes and also kept listening to Berlitz tapes in a failed effort to understand spoken Swedish.

About this time, March 2001, I remembered Granduncle Justus Anderson's will. At the Racine County Courthouse I had no trouble finding the probate files for Justus Anderson. Here were the names, towns, and signatures of all the relatives in Sweden who had inherited. Even though the probate records were from 50 years before, I believed this was the chance to find my Andersson relatives still in Sweden.

I now emailed the Nässjö tourist office again and gave one of the names – Emy Rylander (b. 1888 Vrigstad, Jön.) of Por-samålen. I received an email from Stig Marz (a Swedish genealogist in Växjö),

who wrote that he was sending me maps and he supposed that I was in touch with Emy's daughters! The marvels of email! Stig Marz and I quickly exchanged several emails. Until a week before, I knew Emy Rylander's name only as a signature on a very old letter. Now Stig Marz was thinking I already knew her daughters, who evidently were very much alive. In April 2001, Stig Marz arranged for me to begin a correspondence with the daughters, my 2nd cousins, especially Vera Träff (b. 1923 Vrigstad, Jön.), who lived near Vrigstad. There was a flurry of handwritten letters in Swedish exchanged between Vera Träff and myself. By now I could read and write Swedish. Her daughter Annica Hansson and I corresponded in English via email. Vera was able to lead me to descendants of 4 more relatives living in Illinois, who had visited her in Sweden. There was another relative in Sweden that she had lost track of, but my Swedish professor found that relative through the mother of his children's Swedish nanny who was from the same area.

My 21-day trip to Sweden was filled with sunny skies, amazing adventures, and many loving relatives. Over the next seven years I made two more trips and met even more relatives. With further research in the U.S.A., Canada, and Sweden I was finally able to identify the photos of "father's sister's daughter" and "father's brother in Gothenburg." And, yes, my grandfather Andrew Erickson did have a sister and a wife with almost identical names. On my last trip I visited the descendants of "father's brother in Gothenburg" and visited the very house I had first seen in the photo so very many years before.



Stig and Göran Petersson with Suzanne at the house in the old photo of father's brother's in Gothenburg (Göteborg) in 2009.

And now . . .

Today I am in contact with so many of my grandmother Amanda's and grandfather Andrew's family members, young and old, mostly young, both here in the U.S.A. and in Sweden. Through letters, emails, phone calls, and social media I learn of births, weddings, vacations, holidays, and even royal happenings. Some write to me in Swedish to give me practice. I write in Swedish to just the oldest. Even though I no longer travel to Sweden, I continue to find new family members periodically. A few have visited me here at our *stuga* in our woods on our lake in northern Wisconsin, which reminds me so much of Sweden.



Suzanne with siblings Nils Erik Svensson and Berit Svensson at Granbacken Hotel in Vrigstad, Sweden, in 2002.

Suzanne Erickson Wallace
has e-mail: <jsw0731@frontier.com>