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The Mystery of Edd Thorén –

or how a change of name befuddled a descendant

BY JIM BOULDEN

“Yes, there will be Christmas soon but what kind of Christmas will it be in the forest. Oh my precious darling how I wish to be with you at Christmas but sadly enough I will probably be in the wild forest instead, but my hope in God is that next Christmas we will not be so separated, yes there will soon be three months passing and we may then meet again, how fun!”

These words penned in Swedish by Edd Thorén to my great-grandmother Hanna Wahlgren just before Christmas 1896 were so close to her heart that she kept three letters from Edd until she died in 1956.

But who was he?

Genealogy is full of mysteries and questions, particularly Swedish family history. It can take decades to crack the mystery, if you ever can.

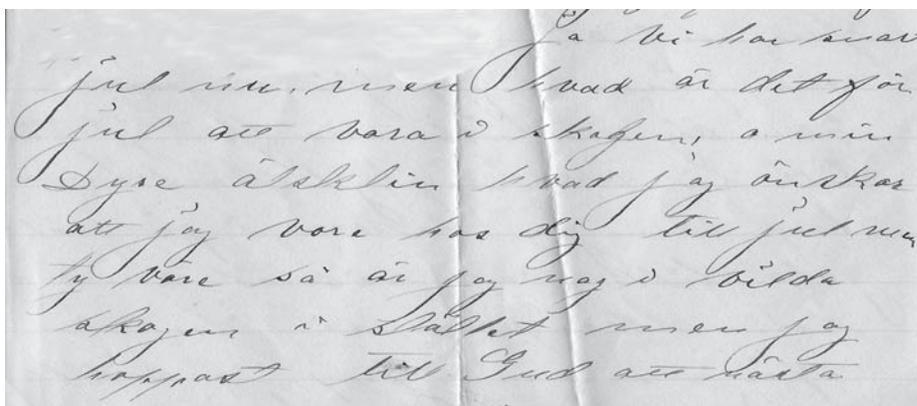
One mystery stuck in the “to do” file was who exactly was Edd Thorén and why did my great-grandmother keep his letters? Three love letters, written from various places in North Dakota and Montana in 1896 and 1897, were among her possessions we found in my grandmother’s attic.

But Johanna Christina Wahlgren (mostly known as Hanna) born in Kråksjö, Ljuder parish, (Kron.) on 19 Mar. 1876, married my great-grandfather Johan Edvin Larsson (known as John Edwin Larson) [b 2 Apr. 1868 in Trökörna (Skar.)] in Schenectady, New York in 1898 and did not marry an Edd Thorén, not that I knew anyway.

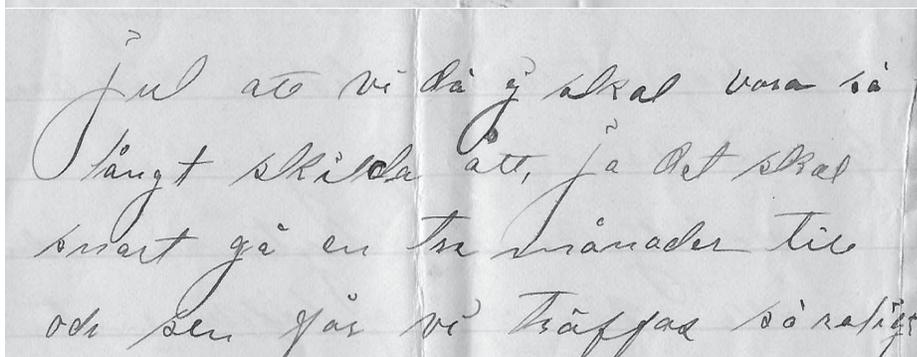
Still she kept these letters her entire life. Letters where Edd professed his love as only a young man missing his beau can.

“I hope you can walk your path without thorns and no clouds will stand in the way of your head,” Edd ended the pre-Christmas letter with.

A year and a half before, Hanna and her brother Carl (b 29 Sep. 1869 in Ljuder) left their parents behind for good.



Ja vi har snart jul nu. men hvad är det för jul att vara i skogen o min Dyra älskling hvad jag önskar att jag vore hos dig till jul men ty värr så är jag nog i vilda skogen i stället men jag hoppas till Gud att nästa Jul att vi då ej skal vara så långt skilda ått, ja det skall snart gå en tre månader till och sen får vi träffas så roligt

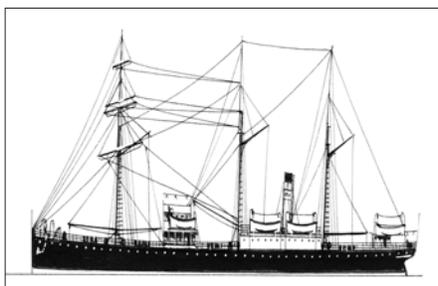


Jul att vi då ej skal vara så långt skilda ått, ja det skall snart gå en tre månader till och sen får vi träffas så roligt

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Carl was leaving from Ljuder, and Hanna from Karlskrona (Blek.) where she



S/S Island.

had been a domestic for short time, and set sail on the ship *Island* (of the Scandinavian-America Line) for New York on 29 May 1895. Johanna Wahlgren was listed as a 19-year-old “servant girl” and Carl was a 25-year-old laborer. Both had tickets for New York. They arrived at Ellis Island on 14 June, where they were recorded as “Wahlgren” and they listed their destination as Hillsboro, North Dakota.

Edd Thorén’s pre-Christmas letter written 18 months later was placed in an



John E. Larsson at age 18.

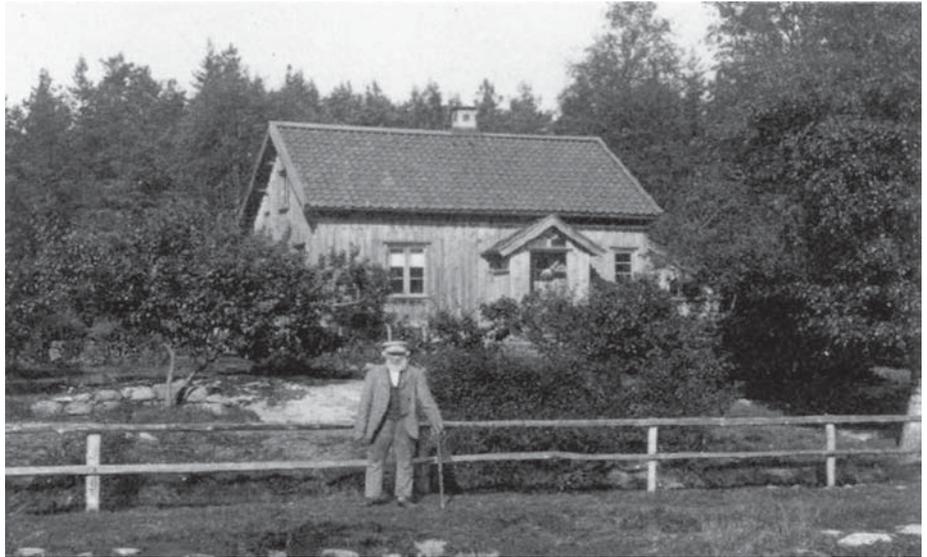
envelope addressed in April to “Miss Hanna Wahlgren” in Hillsboro. It’s likely they met there.

Thorén was not a completely new name to me. John’s mother Anna Svendsdotter first married widower Johannes Persson Thorén (also Johannes Persson) in Tengene, (Skar.), in 1843. They had six children, including Fredrik Johansson Thorén [Fred Thorén] (b. 19 Sep. 1858 in Trökörna), who emigrated in 1891 and eventually settled in Minnesota. Anna next married Lars Svensson on 27 Dec. 1862 in Trökörna (Skar.) and had three sons, including my John. Was John’s half-brother Fred Thorén the writer of the love letters?

I moved on to more pressing genealogical matters until I received an email in 2010 from distant cousin Barbro Backlund of Grästorp. She found my tree on Ancestry and solved the Thorén/Larson mystery.



John and Hanna Larson.



Trökörna Svarte Mosse, the home John left. His father Lars Svensson (1830–1906) is standing by the fence.

“I was so happy when I found your family tree at last,” she wrote. “I have been looking for Thorén siblings for so many years and have not found them before. I was quite sure that their name was Thorén in the U.S..”

Barbro only knew my great-grandfather as Edd Thorén and I only knew him as John E. Larson. He was hiding in plain sight. There was no second man, and no ulterior motive. He simply spent the 1890s using both names until settling on the anglicized version of John Edwin Larson.

Armed with a second name, she found what I already knew. John Larson and his bride Hanna lived in Schenectady, New York, where my grandmother Ella Christina Larson was born in 1899 and her sister Hanna Elisabeth Larson was born in 1905.

He worked for years as a machinist for General Electric, a job he took in 1898 on behest of his brother Carl Larson who emigrated in 1886. That job opportunity was the reason John and his fiancée Hanna left North Dakota after he worked clearing forests for seven years.

Armed with a second name, I finally found his naturalization record.

The emigration record in Sweden said he was heading for Litchfield, Minnesota as a “settler.” The passenger record for 22-year old “Johan E. Larson” for the ship *City of Chicago* that landed in New York City 12 May 1890 stated he was heading for ‘Minn’ with many other men on the ship. But John Larson was not to be found in Litchfield. “Johan Edvin Thorén” was

found. He was naturalized in Litchfield, Minnesota, 4 April 1892, along with his half-brother Fred Thorén.

Beyond that of course, I discovered the mystery writer of the love letters.

The letters gave me insight into his work. He wrote to Hanna from Stillwater, North Dakota, 15 March 1897 that “It is snowing and very cold so it is horrible but can change and become good weather soon. That is what I hope. In this town I don’t want to stay for long.”

Then, from Logan, Montana, on 4 May he wrote “Adolf and I will go and have a look where we can sleep tonight. This is only a small town. Here are bad times as it is in Dak (North Dakota). They pay me little more here than in Dak[ota] but it is much more expensive to live here.”

But it was in the earlier pre-Christmas letter from Hillsboro where Edd decided a lack of money would not stand in the way of his courtship of Hanna.

“(Thelander) asked me if I don’t think it is better to be alone than to have a wife to feed and provide clothes. It may be my highest wish to be able to do this favor for you once. It is my goal I wish I can give you a little home... with you will be happiness,” Edd wrote. “Living alone all my life can be heavy... what do you say my little angel?”

Hanna obviously said yes.

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