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The Swedish Bishop Hill Society

The history of the Erik Janssonist colony in Henry Co., Illinois, is well known, and does not need to be repeated here.

However, the mass exodus of the sect began with the departure of Eric Jansson, his family, and a few others via Christiania (now Oslo) in Norway in the spring of 1846 and continued over the next eight years, to 1854. Eric Johnson claimed that there were at the outset some 1,100 of his father's followers who wished to join his new colony in America. Swedish clerical reports from 1846 indicate that around 1,030 persons emigrated that year from the Janssonist districts, mainly in Hälsingland, almost all of them undoubtedly Janssonists. This correlates quite closely with a careful reckoning by Carl Gustaf Blombergsson, the sect's printer, that 1,001 Janssonists arrived in New York between early June in 1846 and 20 March 1847. Others thereafter decided to take the great step when favorable reports reached them from Bishop Hill. Meanwhile, proselytizing continued in Sweden for several years. By 1854, when the last organized group came over, the entire Janssonist emigrating probably totaled around 1,500, the figure most often given.

It has been generally taken for granted that the Janssonist creed simply died out in Sweden when with the Janssonist emigration to America. Yet not all of those who still remained faithful to the prophet left Sweden. Among them were one of the prophet's own brothers and certain others who had played prominent roles in the movement. Some had set out but turned back for family or practical reasons. Was Janssonism altogether dead and buried in Sweden after the departure of the last of the group in 1854?

This hardly seems logical and there are at least a few tantalizing signs that it long lingered on in a kind of concealed underground existence in certain localities and households. "Down to our own day," Emil Herlenius wrote in 1900, "one or another member [of the sect] has lived on, who the whole time has preserved his faith in Eric Jansson that he was 'the great light sent by God.'" By that time there were few, if any, who still openly professed the Janssonist faith even in Bishop Hill itself. Meanwhile, two Janssonists who left the

group in Copenhagen in 1846 made a number of converts.

Growing interest in Sweden

Finally the interest of knowing more about the colony members and their families that were left behind led to the foundation of the Swedish "Bishop Hill *Sällskapet*" on 27 May 1989 in Biskopskulla in Uppland province, where Erik Jansson was born. The society now has about 350 members from all over Sweden and a few Americans.

The purpose of the society is to grow the interest in Sweden for the history of the colony, which was one of the major causes of the great immigration from Sweden to the U.S.A. Another purpose is to continue to keep in contact with present-day Bishop Hill.

The society has a museum close to the Biskopskulla church. It also has a bi-annual journal *Bulletinen* with interesting articles on Janssonist themes, and correspondence from Bishop Hill, so the Swedish members will know what happens there.

There is a *Bishop Hill Day* celebrated every year just before Midsummer at Biskopskulla, at which time the recipient of the *Olov Isaksson Prize* is honored. The recipient for 2017 is former member of the Swedish Parliament, journalist, and author *Hans Lindblad* of Gävle. He was also one of the driving forces behind the 1996 Emigrant Jubilee.

The society also holds a meeting in the fall with some prominent emigration historian as the lecturer.

A visit to the society

As a member of the society I wanted to take part of the annual meeting, which was held on 6 May in the township of Örsundsbro, not very far from Biskopskulla.

As that is not one of my regular routes, I thought it would be a good opportunity to also go to Biskopskulla, but soon found out it was not as easy as I remembered from my previous visit about 25 years ago. My GPS did not want to go there, but I also had an old map book, so after a couple



Biskopskulla church.



of wrong turns I finally found the church, in a very rural setting. It was raining, so I just walked around it. When leaving on a very narrow road I saw a sign to the left that pointed to an Erik Jansson memorial. Of course he would not have liked to be commemorated by the church!

On to the meeting in the old courthouse in Örsundsbro, where I found about 30 members, including my friend *Brita Butler-Wall* from Seattle, who was spending a couple of months in Hälsingland. Brita has written several articles for SAG, and I hope for more. The lecturer of the day was *Lars Åke Wångstedt* of Edsbyn, who told us the story of "The first woman who wrote the story of the Janssonists." This lady was named *Vilhelmina Larsdotter Orström Westberg*, born 16 Dec. 1826 in Österunda (Västm.), died 17 May 1899 in Galva, IL. Her book *Erik-Janssonisternas Historia* was published after her death.

Lars Åke has also written several articles for SAG during the years.

Elisabeth Thorsell

A link to the society is on p. 26.