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Life in Småland in the 1850s

An old man in America remembers his childhood in Sweden

BY ANDREW ERIC WENSTRAND

Introduction

The author, *Anders Erik Petersson*, was born 2 Dec. 1834 at Tälleryd 3 in Vena parish (Kalm.), the 5th son and youngest child of *Peter Månsson* and his wife *Maja Stina Nilsson*. Unfortunately, the father, Peter Månsson, died on 1 April 1836 of consumption. His widow Maja Stina remarried *Sven Peter Svensson*.

On 1 Jan. 1854 Erik left from nearby Kristdala (Kalm.) for North America. He settled with some friends near Galesburg, IL, and married there. His wife died and he went back to Sweden. It is not known exactly when he came back to Sweden, but he seems to have gone directly to Kristdala, where he enrolled in the teacher's school run by Pastor Per August Ahlberg, who had previously worked in Vena.

In 1861 Erik moved back to Vena and at that time used the surname Hvenstrand. In 1862 he moved as a schoolteacher to Nyköping S:t Nicolai. In 1864 he married *Nicolina Charlotta Wilhelmina Widmark*, (b. 21 Aug. 1825 in Nyköping, d. there on 8 Mar. 1865).

Erik after that moved to several places, sometimes listed as a teacher, sometimes as a farmer. In 1869 he came as a teacher to Vårdnäs (Östg.), where he met his 3rd wife, *Ida Wilhelmina Sandström* (b. 12 Mar. 1847 in Stora Åby [Östg.]). Some years later they settled in Motåla (Östg.), where their only child, *David Erik Wilhelm* was born on 6 May 1876.

On 30 April 1880 the Wenstrand family and 2 male servants left Göteborg with tickets for Chicago.

In the U.S. Andrew Eric Wenstrand had a distinguished career in the Mission Covenant Church. He started the Mission Covenant church in Bishop Hill, Henry Co., IL.

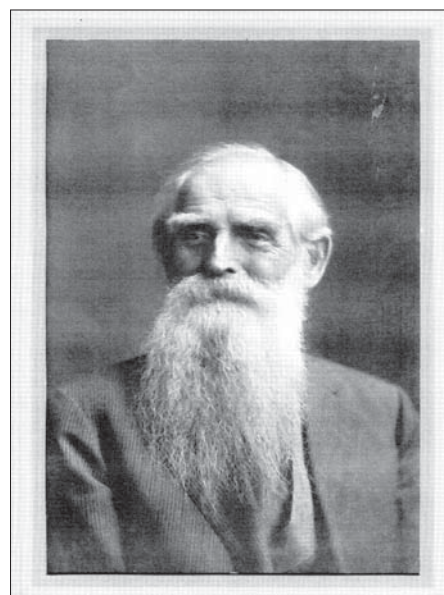
As a retired man his thoughts went back to his childhood, and he wrote his memoirs in Swedish, which were later translated into English.

Here is Eric's story:



Tälleryd was a small town with about twenty farms with their outbuildings. There was one area of about four homes that had their own names such as "Uppby" or "Utby," but they all had a common government. The resident who was the leading citizen was the town custodian – usually called the town man. He was the spokesman and leader of those who were called together for their deliberations. Everything was well-ordered. I recall how we boys listened to the older men during the town meetings. We had to be quiet and orderly, and if we broke the rules we were in for a serious reprimand. The town, when I lived there, was an anomalous cluster of buildings, dwelling places, cattle buildings, woodsheds, and storehouses. For the most part the houses were built on hills and in between the small parcels of land the inhabitants had planted fruit trees and berry bushes. And each had a small plot of land used as a kitchen garden.

All were well cared for and promised favorable yield. Now this town has undergone legal changes and has developed a better system. If the people weren't a model in moral terms, especially in the way the young people behaved, they did have many good habits, among which must be mentioned their helpfulness to each other as well as their fine social spirit. If someone became sick or was in distress, their neighbors always hurried to help those in need. During this time there were poor people who went around the parish begging for assistance or needed accommodations



Andrew Eric Wenstrand in 1918.

for the night. The town developed a practice. A "club" was founded for shelter seekers and when he or she, child or youth, was in need of these services, they were shown that they didn't need to stay on the streets but could find a roof over their heads. Their bed was usually on the floor of the great house. They were given a straw sheaf and from that made a place to sleep. There were typically plenty of such people before Christmas. Our dear mother had seen to it that when she did her Christmas baking she always baked many small loaves which she gave to the poorer neighbors. Think about getting a whole loaf – that was something unusual for these



The Fattigklubba, which a beggar was given to carry to the next farm, and which showed that the bearer was entitled to parish poor relief.

small children.

In our house I will never forget the sorrowful sight of these poor people in long lines going from door to door. They came and went until they found something, but what thankfulness when they received these

loaves. If we small ones were around we received permission from Mother to give these to the pleading children. I think this was well done. I cannot remember any poor person being turned away. As was said, it was a good decision that the "club" of people took care of the people in need of a night's lodging. After a certain time they had to move on their way after eating dinner. The lot of the poor people is truly hard.

At Christmastime

Christmas was, of course, the greatest festival. Preparation for this festivity was many-sided and began in the fall many weeks before December 25. In our home, and probably in most homes, mothers regulated within the home everything pertaining to outfitting for winter with warm clothes and garments, and to get what was needed to keep our feet warm and dry. Usually one would receive something new for Christmas, namely some everyday articles. The task was to obtain the proper materials and buy cloth as appropriate. From sheep's wool was made *frieze* (homespun cloth) and from linen, underclothing and all sorts of bed and table linens were made. When the material was ready, it wasn't easy to get the town or parish tailor to one's home to make clothing for both sexes. If we were to get anything new for our feet, the shoemaker had to be commissioned. Both of these craftsmen went from farm to farm in order to carry out their work.

About Flax and Linen

When flax was ripe the seeds were taken off, the stalks prepared and dried, washed, spun to a bobbin, woven, and bleached for all the household needs. So different from the situation now in this country, where one can obtain everything ready-made. Do not complain, mothers; it used to be a lot of work.

More on Christmas time

Let me mention how we young ones were delighted with our new Christmas clothes that we thought were "something." Then came our Christmas food which consisted of a meal with all the wonders that Mother had baked, together with the Christmas cheese. Each of us had his or her "Christmas pile" which could not be "attacked" before the passage of at least half of the



A "Julhög".

days before "Twenty-Day Knut" (13th of January). [Editor's note: that day is still regarded as the official end of Christmas in Sweden].

Father naturally took care of the "outside" work. Cultivation of the land together with the fall work in the fields and meadows was done with zeal so that they would be done with the threshing before Christmas. And that was tiring labor. As no child or youth could thresh, I learned to help when I was able to perform threshing with what we called "row clearing and beating," consisting of shorter but thicker straw bundled with a longer and more slender strands. Then the longer and more slender portions were grasped by hand and swung around in a way that would thresh out the seeds onto the barn floor. This was done with rye, barley, and oats. Now one had grain and straw that satisfied the needs of both people and animals. The threshing usually took place in the morning. One got up at 2 or 3 o'clock and worked until dawn, then performing the usual farm chores. Then we ate breakfast and went to the for-

est doing lumber and cordwood cutting, and later made charcoal.

The preparations for Christmas included brewing and baking and, among some of the country people, distilling brandy. The farmer malted his own corn and brewed his own beer. Bread was baked in such abundance that it would be sufficient for several months. Thus women could take their time with their housework more than they could otherwise during the year. The distilling of brandy was necessary because drinking was so common and people knew they could obtain alcohol much more cheaply by making it themselves than by buying it. For others, it seemed that the drink was a sort of fattening agent for cattle before slaughter, especially for hogs.

At this time of the year it was usual to butcher a head of cattle or hogs and much of the meat was salted down for the needs for the coming year. They prepared meat, pork, grain and potato sausage, as well as preserves, etc. For example, the people used the butchered animals' blood to make, with the addition of flour and other ingredients, black pudding and black bread. These products, when dried, could be kept for most of the year. Moistened and softened, then roasted in a pan of fat, it was considered a delicacy. At this time we were not concerned about the Bible's admonition against using blood. It was a



The family farm at Tälleryd, Vena parish, (Kalm.).

reminder of what was to come and it was certainly natural that we little ones were really eager for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Christmas was called “dipping day” for then we dipped our Christmas bread in the gravy in a kettle in which the juices from the meat and pork had been cooked. The days before Christmas were called “*dan före dan . . . före dopparedan.*”

[Editor's note: Dopparedagen means the 24th of December, the day Christmas starts, and during the meal the custom was and still is to dip bread in broth.] There was also a custom in our town that early on Christmas Eve morning we went to the wood box to saw and split the wood intended for the Christmas wood. Even then the town inhabitants would vie to be the first to light his or her pile. We thought it festive to see fires here and there among the neighbors, and those who weren't up working on this pleasant task were regarded as lazy and good-for-nothing.

In the large house there was a special

place in a corner near the kitchen range which we called the box-room. This closet was filled sometimes to the ceiling with choice wood which would not be used until festive days. We children were proud to have the most beautiful wood and gladly went around the neighborhood to see how children of the same age were doing with their wood.

All the work outside the house should be finished in the morning so that in the afternoon we young folks took our skates as soon as we found smooth ice. In preparations within the house it was certainly necessary that everything be tidied up and scrubbed. In the cupboards and on the shelves the polished copper and brass shone, as did the tin vessels, and the floors were strewn with finely cut spruce twigs, which gave a wonderful aroma to the home.

That Christmas porridge (*gröt*) and *lute-fisk* were not found at the Christmas table

was only natural. Butter was amply found and Christmas drink in scrubbed cups had made the rounds. Then it was called “the house on the hill” which usually was called “the high street” since the building was at a higher elevation than any other in the whole town. Christmas trees were not known then.

Cattle would be provided for in a special way and the birds got saved oat sheaves tied to a high pole. We used to do that when we lived in the country and had cultivated land. We would go into the cow yards with our arms filled with specially baked bread and greeted the inhabitants with “Merry Christmas.” All eyes were on the food that Mother had dealt out to each creature. The horses whinnied, the sheep bleated their thanks, the chickens cackled – but the pigs just slobbered their share.

This article is an excerpt from the book “Wenstrand. A Chronicle of Family Roots from Sweden 1755 to the United States of America 1993”. Compiled by William S. Wenstrand.

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Map of some of the parishes in Kalmar County. Source: Atlas över Rikets indelningar, published by Statistics Sweden (1992).

Kyrktagning, what was that?

It is usually called “Introduction of the mother” in English.

The custom dates back to the Bible where Moses taught that after a mother had born a child, she was basically not to have visitors or be out in society for about six weeks minimum.

Eventually, the command to let the mother stay home, rest, and not mingle with society for a time period was interpreted to mean that the mother had sinned by giving birth, and she had to be cleansed of

that sin via a formal ceremony held in a church meeting. In older times, the mother might literally have had to crawl up the aisle of the church, begging forgiveness for her sin. In later time periods, she would walk up to the front of the church, the minister would take her hand, and he would say she was cleansed and formally welcome her back into society.

There was not always six weeks from the time of the birth to the introduction of the mother, so the introduction date can-

not be used to figure back to a birth date for the child.

Sometimes this date of the mother's introduction or “churcing day” (*kyrktagning*) is simply listed to the side or at the bottom of the christening, instead of being listed in a separate record.

If you do not find an introduction after the known birth of a child, it's possible that the mother died in childbirth or shortly thereafter.

Source: *FamilySearch Wiki*.