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The Johnsons of Moline, Illinois

Part I: A Swedish immigrant family

BY CURTIS C. ROSEMAN

Swedish immigrants Gustaf [Gust.] Adolph Reinhold Johnson (b. Sep. 25, 1880 in Alseda, Jönk. – 1947) and Selma Anna Sofia Carlson (Johnson) (b. Oct. 26, 1879 in Alseda, Jönk. – 1937) built a family in Moline. Selma worked as a domestic for ten years before she and Gust were married in 1908. Gust became a prolific carpenter and contractor, building some eighty houses in the area.

This is the first of two articles drawn from a new book, *Building the American Dream* (1). The book chronicles the family story using diaries, letters, and other written documents, in addition to family lore. It describes everyday family life: at home and in the neighborhood; in church, social, and family activities; and in travels to nearby as well as distant places.

Selma Carlson

Selma was the first child born to Carl Johan August Carlson (b. Oct. 17, 1854, in Vetlanda, Jönk.) and his first wife Clara Sofia Samueldotter (b. Nov. 10, 1856, in Alseda parish, Jönk.). The family of three left Huskvarn in Alseda, Sweden, on August 27, 1881, when Selma was almost two years old, and sailed from Liverpool to New York on the steamer *Republic*.

After living for a year in nearby Altona, Illinois, they settled in Moline, where Carl J.A. would spend over thirty years working as a blacksmith at the Moline Plow Company. After having two more children, one of whom died as an infant, Selma's mother Clara passed away in 1885 at age 27. Two years later Carl J.A. married Mathilda Asplund (b. May 25, 1856, in Eksjö, Jönk.), a widow

who had just arrived from Sweden. This couple went on to produce four additional Carlson children, all female.

Beginning 1898, at age nineteen, Selma worked for ten years as a domestic for a prominent Moline family, Minnie Stephens Allen and her husband Frank G. Allen. Minnie's father, George W. Stephens, was a major investor in Moline Plow Company, with which Frank became associated after marrying Minnie.

As part of her job, Selma spent some time at the Allen summer home in Michillinda, Michigan. One summer she brought along her younger half-sister Hilda whose health was failing, hoping that the fresh air on the shores of Lake Michigan would help Hilda. It was not to be; Hilda died at the age of twelve.



Selma Carlson, right, and Ellen Kalenberg working as domestic servants for the Allen family, 1904.

The Johnson family

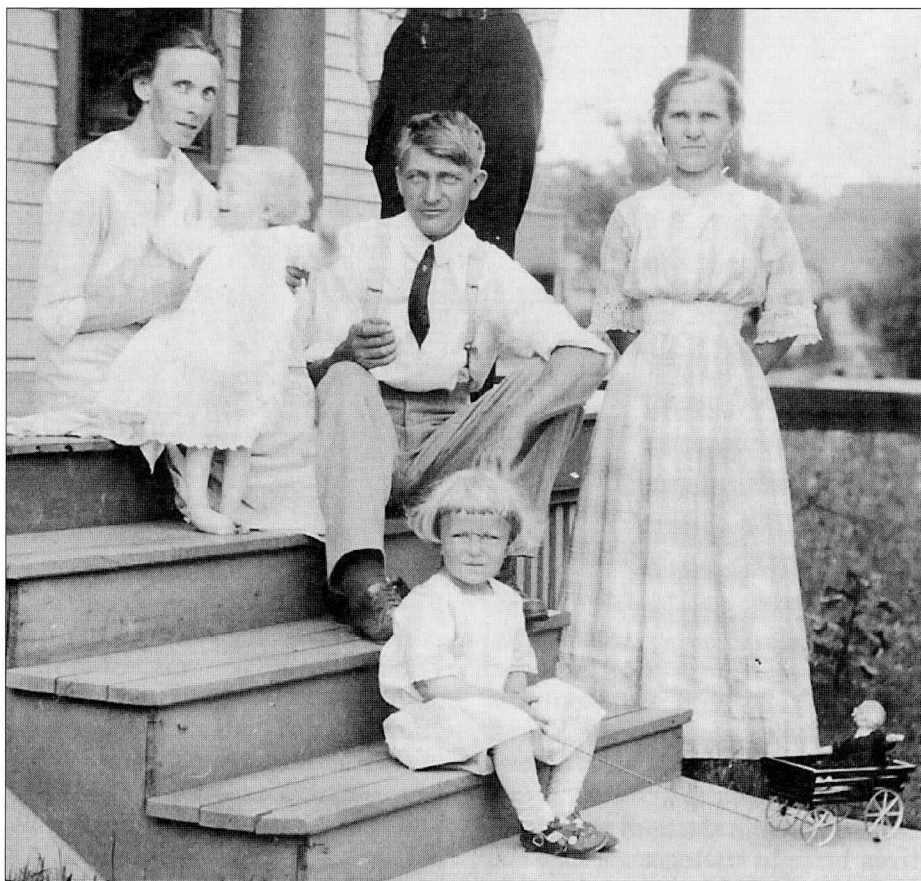
Gust arrived in Moline in late 1899 and began working as a carpenter. Soon thereafter he met Selma, probably at the Mission Tabernacle Church, their lifelong church home that was affiliated with the Evangelical Mission Covenant Church.

Selma and Gust were married on May 21, 1908, at the Carlson home. The composition of the invitation list provides strong evidence of Selma and Gust's deep entrenchment in a Swedish-heritage social circle. Of some 115 families, couples, or individuals invited to the Carlson-Johnson wedding, at least 105 had surnames of Swedish origin.

About a year after the marriage, the couple moved into their new home – the first house constructed by Gust – and proceeded to raise two daughters, Dorothy Marjorie Johnson born in 1910 and Elinor Esther Johnson in 1912. By 1914 Gust had earned enough money to allow the family of four to spend a long summer in Sweden visiting friends and relatives. Gust had grown up in Sweden, but Selma had no memories of Sweden, having left as a two-year-old. As their boat approached Malmö, while crossing the Öresund Strait, Selma observed in her diary:

I was the only one that could sing 'Du Gamla Du Fria' [the Swedish national anthem, "Thou Ancient, Thou Free"], others were too full of tears when they saw their native land, but as I only think of America as my own, I guess I couldn't have the same feeling as if I had known it to be my birth place, or rather remembered it to be.

Dorothy and Elinor were grad-



The Johnson family, July 4, 1913. Gust is flanked by Selma on his right and Selma's sister-in-law Iduna Carlson on his left. In front are the Johnson's daughters Elinor and Dorothy.

uated from Moline High School and Augustana College in neighboring Rock Island, Illinois. Although their mother Selma did not reach that level of formal education, she clearly had intellectual qualities and instincts. As a young adult she wrote essays on such topics as women's suffrage and gave numerous oral presentations. Family lore has it that Gust had opposed sending the girls to college while Selma strongly supported the idea. After her freshman year at Augustana, Dorothy worked for a year at a John Deere factory and paid rent for the privilege of living at home. Selma saved Dorothy's rent money to be used for tuition in subsequent years.

When the girls were in college in 1930, the family took another trip to Sweden, this time coupled with a tour of the European continent. This was the last time Gust saw his mother, Johanna Kristina Johansdotter (b. Oct. 26, 1848, in Alseda) who would pass away in April 22, 1934,



Dorothy and Elinor Johnson, February 1930, when they both were students at Augustana College.

in Alseda. His father, Jonas Peter Danielsson (b. July 24 1839, in Alseda), had already passed away on Sep. 5, 1922.

Then in 1933, having successfully raised two daughters, the Johnson couple celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary at their home in Moline.

Family transitions and tragedies

While attending college in the early 1930s, Elinor met Martin Olson (b. May 23, 1905, in Winburne, Penn.), who was studying at Augustana Theological Seminary. In 1933, Olson became the pastor at the First Lutheran Church in Brainerd, Minnesota, and then in 1936 he accepted a call to do missionary work in Africa at Iambi in Tanganyika Territory. Soon after the call, Marty and Elinor were married. On January 5, 1937, they left for Tanganyika, where they became fully immersed in missionary work as evidenced by detailed letters written by Elinor.

Back in Moline, Selma was heart-broken by the loss of her daughter to the other side of the world. Selma had a history of illness and in 1919 and 1920 had spent several weeks in the hospital. She again became ill after Elinor left and then passed away in June, 1937, at the age of 58.

In late 1940, some three and a half years after arriving in Africa, it was nearing time for Elinor and Marty Olson to come home on furlough. Unfortunately Elinor would never return to Moline. Her unborn baby perished on December 1 of that year due to an ectopic pregnancy. Elinor died the next day, at the age of 28, from a pulmonary embolism. She is buried at Iambi Station, in what is now Tanzania.

Dorothy had married Clifford Roseman in 1934. After working as a carpenter for Gust for five years, Cliff operated the College Pharmacy on the Augustana College campus. After the college razed the building in 1962, the couple opened a downsized business, the College Sundries. Dorothy worked full-time at the stores from the mid-1950s until 1976. In her role as storekeeper, she was a valued friend and counselor to Augustana students, faculty, and staff, as well as countless nearby community members.

In spite of some tragic events that struck their lives, the Johnsons did achieve the American Dream by hard

work, and having a rich family life, interesting travel experiences, and productive work.

Endnote:

1) The book, *Building the American Dream: Swedish Immigrant Carpenter, Contractor, and Family in Moline, Illinois*, by Curtis C. Roseman, was published in 2012 by Heritage Documentaries, Inc.

More details and ordering information can be found at

www.heritagedocumentaries.org

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A farm in Alseda during the wintertime.

Carl-Werner Pettersson in Memoriam

Airline Captain Carl-Werner Pettersson of Brinkelid, Åseda, Sweden, born in 1933, has passed away on March 1, 2012. His closest relatives are his children Nicke and Emelie.

Carl-Werner Pettersson was the foremost guardian of the contacts from the Great Immigration. He was unequalled in knowledge of persons and as a travel guide who has for decades re-connected thousands of Swedes with their “unknown family.” He was a friend of Vilhelm Moberg and organized, among other things, the last meeting of Moberg and his pathfinder in Moberg Land, Ted Norelius of Lindstrom in Chisago County, Minn.

Why he did not take over the family farm in Brinkelid, Carl-Werner has told many times. The airline from Stockholm to Malmö passed over his home, and in the attic there was a chest with America-letters and photos. The experience of digging among the old memories from his family at the same time as his ears were filled by the exotic sound from the airplanes was what showed him his path in life. Carl-Werner was educated as an engineer and got his flying certificate in Linköping, was hired by Linjeflyg, and advanced to become an airline captain. Now and then he pondered that chest of Ame-

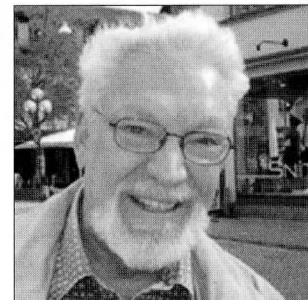
rica memories at home.

His search in the land of the relatives brought us together. One day in the early 1970s I was visited by an eager pilot who covered my desk with his papers. Could the Emigrant Institute help him? Carl-Werner started to unravel the threads

– soon American relatives could be counted in the hundreds and the Emigrant Institute had found its flying ambassador.

His first assignment was to introduce the Antipodian research project concerning Australia and New Zealand. In Chicago he found his base in the offices of the travel agent Donald Ahlm on North Michigan Avenue. In Minnesota he was seen so often that people started to mix up Karl Oskar and Carl-Werner. Naturally this symbol of “*Hälsa dem därhemma*” was elected the first president of the newly founded “*Emigrantinstitutets Vänner*” (Friends of the Emigrant Institute) when it was founded in 1984.

The happy combination of a talent for storytelling and a well-modulated voice got Radio Kronoberg interested in having him on air, whether he told about transatlantic relations, events in Åseda, or just plain talks accompanied by music. Request from radio stations in Minnesota made him the “Voice of Småland” in America. Possibly it was his radio engage-



ments that made Carl-Werner take out his guitar and become the lead singer of *Sösdala Brothers* which he toured with for several years. He became even more well-known as a lecturer, especially on Swedish aviation history. He never forgot his flying colleagues, and it was not by chance that the last of Carl-Werner's flights as a charter pilot was filled with veterans from Linjeflyg and SAS.

Mourning cannot be connected with such a person. No, it is sunshine and happiness that counts! Like the time when we together hurried between the hotels in Chicago, just because Carl-Werner wanted to shake hands with all the porters and receptionists that he knew. Or the “Nice to see you, Carl!” we heard all the time while we walked down Main Street in Lindstrom.

*By Ulf Beijbom
Professor, former director of the
Swedish Emigrant Institute*