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The Johnsons of Moline, Illinois

Part II: Gust Johnson, house builder

BY CURTIS C. ROSEMAN

This article highlights the work of Swedish immigrant *Gustaf Adolf Reinhold Johnson*, (born 1880 Sep. 25 in Alseda) (see also SAG 2012/1 p.10), a carpenter and contractor who built eighty houses in Moline and neighboring communities. It is drawn from the book, *Building the American Dream*¹, which utilizes Gust's remarkable set of detailed records that describe his working procedures, work places, and the people with whom he forged business relationships and with whom he labored.



Gust Johnson.

Gust arrived in Boston on November 18, 1899, after crossing the Atlantic on the steamship *New England*. He travelled in the company of his older

sister Hilma Hanna Maria (b. 1877 Dec.19 in Alseda) who had immigrated in 1894, and now had been home for a visit. Hilma and Gust were both going to Chicago, where Gust visited his brother Carl (Carl Johan Viktor, b. 1871 April 16 in Alseda, who had immigrated in 1888). Both Hilma and Gust soon afterwards settled in Moline.

The Johnson siblings, six of whom survived to adulthood, were born to Jonas Peter Danielson and Johanna Kristina Johansdotter. They grew up on the family farm, Holsby Frugård, near Holsbybrunn in southern Sweden, and all but one of them immigrated to the United States.

For the next nine years, Gust worked primarily as a carpenter, both in Moline and for two and a half years in Oakland, California – returning to Moline shortly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake! He attended night school classes in English, mathematics, drawing, and accounting, which substantially aided his subsequent career as a contractor.

In 1906, Gust purchased passage from Göteborg to Moline for his younger sister Esther (Anna Vilhelmina Ester, b. 1889 Dec. 22 in Alseda) and her friend Esther Ekvall. They left Göteborg on April 6.

According to family lore, the Esthers each brought only wool dresses for their summer trip, and they were very hot on the train from the East through Chicago to Moline. Fortunately, tags specifying their destination had been pinned to their dresses. Not speaking English – and no doubt motivated by the early summer heat – they apparently tried to

get off the train at every intervening stop. Luckily they were prevented from doing so by people who could read the tags.



Gust built this cottage on his own lot in 1911 and rented it out for the rest of his life.

From carpenter to contractor

Soon after Gust married Selma Anna Sofia Carlson in 1908, he started building his first house. In the spring of 1909 the couple moved in. Then Gust started his contracting career, which saw three periods of intense house-building activity. The first ended with the entry of the United States into World War I in 1917; the second covered the 1920s, ending with the onset of the Great Depression in 1930; and the third extended from 1937 until 1942 before the United States entered World War II. During World War I, he worked for the U.S. government, and during the Depression and World War II he completed scores of carpentry jobs, ranging from repairing storm windows and building cabinets to repairing fire-damaged homes and building garages.

In the 1910s, Gust built 21 houses, two of which he built for himself to rent. For eighteen of the houses he was the general contractor, hiring others to help with the carpentry and to complete such tasks as plumbing, wiring, and painting. A typical house project took about three months to complete. Gust usually was working on at least two houses at a time, with smaller jobs added to the mix.

During the 1920s, Gust completed 38 houses and after the Depression another 21. The housing types he built were typical of middle-class residential construction of the time. In the 1910s he built mostly two-story structures, either of “four-square” or vernacular design. In the 1920s the majority were one-and-a-half story bungalows with craftsman features. After the Depression, most were rather small, plain structures, often referred to as “minimal traditional” houses.



Four-square house built by Gust Johnson for Charles Chillberg in 1916.

Gust was a hands-on contractor. Most of his houses required a total of 100 to 120 eight-hour days of carpentry labor. On his first contracting job, for Emil Olson in 1911, he supplied most of the labor, but for the vast majority of other projects throughout his career, he supplied about half of the carpenter labor.

Many of the people for whom Gust built houses were not of Swedish descent. He had built a solid reputation for residential construction well beyond his ethnic and family social circles. In contrast, the army of carpenters he hired was composed mainly of Swedes, some of them long-time employees. A total of 31 carpen-

ters helped Gust build houses during his career. Only two did not have Swedish surnames.

In 1924, Gust built a second house for his family, a large bungalow in which Gust and Selma would live the rest of their lives and daughter Dorothy would live most of her life. Seven years later, after the family returned from a second trip to Sweden, the Depression was in full swing and Gust was short of work. He took advantage of the situation by building a smaller house next door, a one-and-a-half story stylish brick bungalow. It was to be the empty nest home for Gust and Selma after the girls moved on. However, that dream did not come true because of Selma's death in 1937.

After working through World War II on scores of small and medium-sized jobs, Gust decided to visit California for a second time. On October 1, 1946—six days after his 66th birthday—Gust drove from Moline to Los Angeles where he had numerous friends, most of whom were from Moline. There he worked as a carpenter over the winter, then returned to Moline in April 1947 where he continued working. He was done building houses; instead he took on

a series of smaller jobs, reminiscent of his work regimen during the Depression and World War II. On Gust's last working day, June 20, 1947, he put in a full eight hours. It was ten years to the day after Selma had died. One week later, on June 27, Gust died.

Lasting legacy

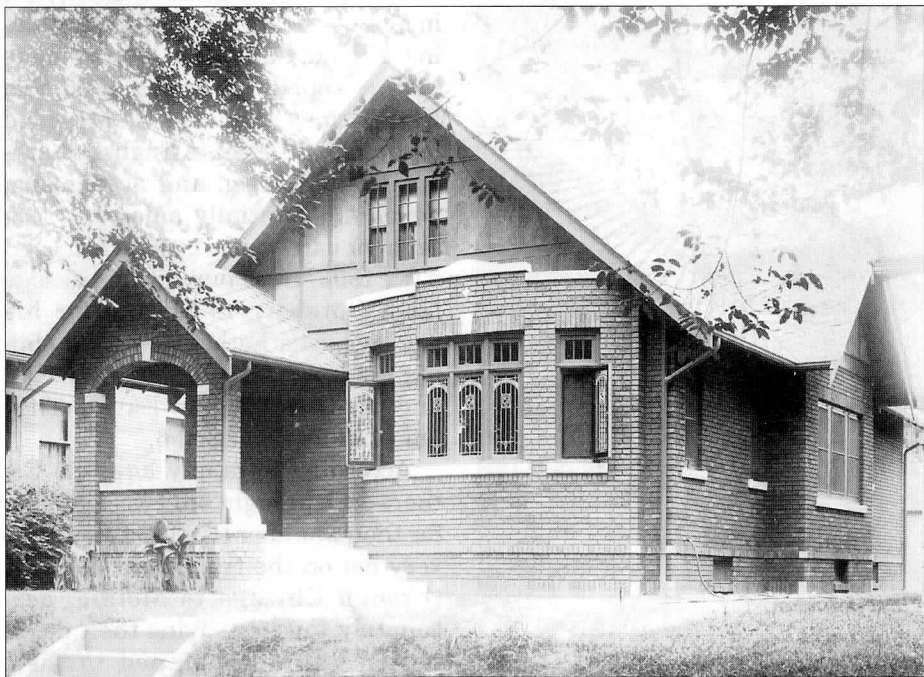
Gust Johnson's professional legacy is easily visible in the early twentieth-century residential neighborhoods of Moline and nearby communities. The vast majority of the eighty houses he built remain on the urban landscape today. In addition, countless garages, porches, additions to homes, and other smaller crafted items remain as products of Gust's hands.

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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Brick bungalow completed by Gust in 1931. The curved array of windows on the front of the house was inspired by similar windows on a castle Gust had seen the year before when he and his family were visiting Switzerland.