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The Eric Norelius Bible

Marilyn McGriff*

Recently an interesting item was discovered on a book shelf in an Isanti County (MN) home. It was a common English Bible with a very uncommon provenance. In preparation for an auction sale, Linda Akers Johnson of rural Cambridge, MN was going through an assortment of books, which had belonged to her late grandparents—Aleck and Vera Peterson. Most of the items in the collection had originated with Mrs. Johnson's great grandparents, the P.O. Petersons and the H. Andrew Larsons, who had immigrated to America from the province of Medelpad in Sweden and the Älvdalen Parish in Kopparberg County respectively. They had homesteaded in Isanti County late in the 19th century.

The books were moved from their farmstead to a home in Cambridge proper in the next generation. No consideration was ever given to discarding or dispersing the books until that generation also was gone and the house was to be sold. Linda Johnson's interest in genealogy and family history compelled her to examine the wide variety of belongings which had been accumulated by her forebears in order to determine which items should be retained by the family and thus not be subject to the auctioneer's gavel.

There were many Swedish Bibles in the collection, along with a wide variety of other books, written in Swedish and thus incomprehensible to this fourth generation Swede. One of the books, however, was an old but well preserved Bible in the English language with the signature on the flyleaf "E. Norelius," dated 14 Dec. 1850.

Linda Johnson knew immediately that this particular book must be placed in the pile not destined for the auction block. On the basis of her interest in history she recognized the Norelius name as being prominent in Swedish Baptist history. She remembered also from her connection with the North Isanti Baptist Church that a Swede by the name of Andrew Norelius had been instrumental in the founding of that church and that this fact had been brought out in a book published for the church's 125th anniversary. She also remembered having seen the Norelius tombstones in the North Isanti Baptist Cemetery, the same cemetery in which her grandparents and great grandparents were interred.

But the name on the Bible flyleaf was that of E. Norelius, which stood for Eric Norelius, a key person in the history of the Swedish Lutherans in America and a brother of Andrew, the Baptist leader.¹

There were other names in the Bible also. On the inside of the front cover as well as on the flyleaf were names written in pencil—names like O.G. Hedstrom, Jonas Hedstrom and Erik Sannman.

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Who were these individuals? Linda Johnson decided to visit her nearest historical society, the Isanti County Historical Society, where she found the answers to her questions. All of these names figure prominently in Conrad Bergendoff's recent publication, a translation of the first volume of Eric Norelius' two-volume work on the Swedes in America and the history of the Swedish Lutherans, entitled *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America 1845-1860*.²

From Eric Norelius' treatise she learned that O.G. Hedstrom was Olof Gustaf Hedstrom, the father of Swedish Methodism in America. It was Hedstrom, who had arrived as a Swedish sailor in this country in 1825, had decided to remain here and after conversion to Methodism, entered the Methodist ministry a decade later.³ His chief ministry was centered on board an old ship, docked in the New York harbor, bought by the Methodist Congregation in New York and renamed the *Bethel* ship. Aboard this stationary vessel Pastor Hedstrom preached to Scandinavian immigrants, recently arrived in this country. He conducted his ministry aboard this vessel for thirty years, beginning in 1845. To all newcomers aboard the ship he presented copies of the Holy Bible in the English language, provided free by the American Bible Society. The Bible found by Linda Johnson had been issued by this society, and Eric Norelius must have received his copy a few days after his arrival in New York, when we know he visited Hedstrom in order to ask his advice on entering the ministry.⁴ Norelius had arrived in New York 1 Nov. 1850 aboard the Swedish vessel *Oden* but must have dated his signature during the month of December, after he arrived in Illinois.

The name of Jonas Hedstrom is also featured prominently in Norelius' history.⁵ He was the younger brother of Olof Gustaf, and had arrived in New York in 1833 together with Olof Gustaf and another brother Elias.⁶ Olof Gustaf had returned to Sweden for a visit after seven years in this country and had convinced his two younger brothers to return with him to the United States. Jonas also became a Methodist and went to Illinois, settling in the small village of Victoria in 1846. Here he founded the first Swedish Methodist church west of New York. Jonas was also a blacksmith and worked at the forge as much as he did in the pulpit.

The brothers Hedstrom developed a successful teamwork, by which Olof Gustaf would meet the recently arrived Swedish immigrants in New York, then suggest that they stop off on their way West to see brother Jonas in Victoria. The result of this type of relay work was that Jonas was able to convince a great many of the newcomers to join his religious group.

The third name in the Norelius Bible is that of Erik Sannman.⁷ He is not featured as much in the Norelius history as the Hedstrom brothers. Sannman or Sandman came from Hudiksvall in north central Sweden, the same city in which Eric Norelius had been graduated from the secondary school, so that it is possible that the two knew each other in Sweden. Norelius notes that letters from Sannman and others who had emigrated in 1849 had been responsible for "kindling a flaming emigration fever," so that more than 100 persons from parishes in Hälsingland and Medelpad had departed for America in 1850, including Eric Norelius himself.⁸ From information gleaned from the Norelius history we can place Erik Sannman in Illinois briefly in 1850. The place listed for him in the Norelius Bible is Galsborg (sic!), Illinois.⁹ By 1852 Sannman, now

located in Lansing, IA, was listed among the Baptist followers of Gustaf Palmquist,¹⁰ Anders Norelius' friend and colleague, who established a number of Baptist congregations in Iowa and Illinois.

Curiously, the Bible discovered by Linda Johnson, becomes an important contribution to the diverse religious views which prevailed in the Swedish settlements in the 1850s. The listing of the Hedstrom brothers and Erik Sannman, along with the signature of Eric Norelius provide us with the human touch, illustrating the interaction of the various religious beliefs and yet pointing to a spirit of ecumenicity.

Because of the prominence of Eric Norelius in the history of Swedish Lutheranism in America, Mrs. Johnson has decided to donate this valuable Bible to the Archives of the Minnesota Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, located in Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN, which already possesses a large collection of Eric Norelius material.

Linda Johnson is grateful for the detailed accounts which Eric Norelius provided during his many years in the Lutheran ministry, thus making it easy to identify the names on the front cover and flyleaf of this most interesting volume.

The mystery of how this particular Bible found its way to an Isanti County farmhouse still remains. The idea that a Bible kept by the patriarch of the Swedish Lutheran movement in America also came to repose in the home of a Baptist farm couple in Minnesota is also an intriguing one.

¹Eric Norelius was b. in Norrbäck (from which place he presumably took his surname) in Hassela Parish (Gävl.) 26 Oct. 1833, the s. of Anders Pehrsson, crofter, and Lisa Jonsdotter. He helped found the Augustana Lutheran Church in 1860 and served as its president from 1899 to 1911. He d. in Vasa, Goodhue Co., MN 15 March 1916. On board the *Oden* was also his older brother Anders (Andrew) Andersson, who used his patronymic until after his arrival in the U.S. Andrew was also b. in Norrbäck 1 July 1830. He early converted to Baptism and was one of the charter members of the Swedish Baptist Church in Rock Island, IL in 1852. In 1856 he was ordained a minister in the Baptist Church. He served as a chaplain in the Union Army in the Civil War, after which he settled in Kiron, IA, where he d. 10 April 1927, almost 97 years of age. —Emeroy Johnson, *Eric Norelius* (Rock Island, IL 1954), p. 10; Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* (Stockholm and Chicago 1967) (*SPANY*), pp. 254-255.

²Published by the Augustana Historical Society in Rock Island, IL in 1984.

³Olof Gustaf Hedstrom was b. in Tvinnesheda, Nottebäck Parish (Kron.) 11 May 1803, the s. of Johan Carlsson Hedström, an army corporal, and Annika Pehrsson. He d. in New York 5 May 1877. —*SPANY*, pp. 12-13.

⁴Eric Norelius visited Olof Gustaf Hedstrom on board the *Bethel* ship a few days after his arrival in New York and had a lengthy discussion with Hedstrom concerning doctrinal matters. Hedstrom advised Norelius to become a Methodist, but Norelius turned down the offer. —Johnson, *Eric Norelius*, p. 5.

⁵Jonas Hedstrom, a younger brother of Olof Gustaf, was b. in Nottebäck 7 Aug. 1813. He d. in Victoria, IL 11 May 1859. —*SPANY*, pp. 12-13.

⁶The youngest brother Elias, who accompanied the two older brothers aboard the *Minerva*, which arrived in New York 17 Oct. 1833, was b. in Nottebäck 23 July 1816. He went to Detroit, where he became a cabinetmaker and d. 10 Feb. 1855. —*Ibid.*

⁷Erik Sannman was b. in Rogsta Parish (Gävl.) 13 Oct. 1805, the s. of Eric Andersson, crofter, and Christina Jonsdotter. He emigr. to America in 1849, after having received a passport in Gävle 15 Oct. 1849. He was accompanied by his wife, Margareta Månscotter, b. in Tuna Parish (Vn.) 13 May 1803. He is listed variously as Sandman and Sundman. —Information from Yarnösanö District Archives.

⁸Norelius, *Pioneer Swedish Settlements*, p. 21.

⁹In the 1850 Census Eric Sunnan (sic!), 45 years old, a wagonmaker by trade, was residing in Knoxville Knox Co., IL with his wife Margaret, 47 years of age. —Seventh U.S. Census, Illinois, Vol. XI, p. 640.

¹⁰Gustaf Palmquist (1812-1867) was b. in Solberga Parish (Jön.) and arr. in America 1851. He was ordained a Baptist minister in Galesburg, IL in 1852 and served Baptist congregations in Rock Island, IL, Chicago and New York. After six years in the U.S. he returned to Sweden, where he became active in the training of Baptist preachers. —Sam Rönnegård, *Lars Paul Esbjörn och Augustana-Synodens uppkomst* (Stockholm 1949), p. 226; Allan Kastrup, *The Swedish Heritage in America* (Minneapolis 1975), pp. 239-240.