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# Possessions of A Swedish Pioneer

Harry H. Anderson\*

In the lonely corner of a rural cemetery in Waukesha County, Wisconsin stands the neglected gravestone of one of the tragic figures of early Swedish immigration to the Midwest. The stone's inscription identifies the deceased as "K.M. Peterson/BORN Sept. 2, 1797/DIED Dec. 12, 1845." Remarkably, almost every bit of this information is either incorrect, incomplete, or at least misleading, and deserves to be corrected.

The true name of the deceased was Knut Niklas Hallström, who was born in Nyköping, Sweden on 1 September 1797. He emigrated to America in August 1840<sup>1</sup> as a fugitive from Swedish justice, accused of falsifying financial accounts for a military construction project at Karlsborg. In the United States, Hallström took the name Bengt Petterson, learned the skills of the shoemaker's trade in Cincinnati, and eventually moved to the Gustaf Unonius colony at Pine Lake, Wisconsin Territory, where he lived in near poverty.<sup>2</sup> Petterson resided as a guest in the Unonius home, making and repairing shoes in a corner of the attic. The pages of Unonius' *Memoirs* contain a melancholy portrait of the former financial administrator turned shoemaker, "crushed by reverses, disappointments and sorrows . . . with his tall stature, his long heavy matted black beard, his dark visage, and his leather shoemaker's apron."<sup>3</sup>

On 16 August, 1843 Petterson's wife Charlotte Magdalena (née Berg) and their eight children followed him to America, arriving in New York aboard the vessel *Svea* from Stockholm and Göteborg. The family was then reunited at Pine Lake, where Petterson purchased a land claim, built a log cabin home and sought to resume a normal existence in the Wisconsin wilderness. A ninth child, a daughter Hulda, was born to the household in April, 1845.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the fall of the same year, financial assistance was received in the form of a draft on a New York bank, presumably from relatives in Sweden. Then, just as brighter days were appearing on the horizon for the family (all of whom had taken the father's American identity after their arrival in Wisconsin), Bengt Petterson died after a brief illness on December 19, 1845. He was buried in what is known today as Holy Innocents Cemetery near Pine Lake four days later, on 23 December.<sup>5</sup>

Petterson's widow and family remained in the Pine Lake area much longer than did most of the original members of the Unonius colony. Their extended story is not, however, of primary importance for this study.

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Of more immediate significance, because of the contribution it makes to the social history of early Swedish settlement in the Midwest, is Charlotte Petterson's experience with the American legal system through the probating of her late husband's estate. As part of this procedure, she served as administrator of the estate, and had to submit a detailed property inventory and appraisal of all his worldly goods to the District Court of Milwaukee County. The contents of the Petterson probate file document, more complete than any other known printed source, lists the possessions of a Swedish-American pioneer household in the middle West in the mid-1840s.<sup>6</sup>

On 12 February 1846 Charlotte Petterson appeared before Clinton Walworth, Judge of the Probate Court for Milwaukee County, to begin settling matters for the estate. Of great assistance to her in this undertaking was Olaf Emanuel Dreutzer, a native of Göteborg, Sweden, who was then residing in Milwaukee and engaged in a mercantile business. Dreutzer had first come to the United States in 1832, and was familiar with the workings of the American court system. During this time period he frequently was involved in legal matters affecting Scandinavian settlers in the Milwaukee area because of his experience and fluency in the English language. Dreutzer was later admitted to the Wisconsin bar, and practiced law in the northern part of the state for many years.<sup>7</sup> In the Petterson case, he guided the relatively modest estate, valued at slightly less than \$800, through the probate process. Dreutzer also served as one of the appraisers for the estate and acted as surety for Charlotte Petterson's bond as administrator.

After about three months of activity, Judge Walworth signed an order for the final settlement of Bengt Petterson's estate and distribution of the assets. Other Swedes whose names appear on documents in the file and who played a role in the probate process included Gustaf Unonius, who was originally appointed as one of the appraisers, but did not serve; Carl Gustaf Groth, who replaced Unonius on the appraisal team, Johan Olof Liedberg, Carl Gustaf Hammarquist, and Gustaf Fredrik Leonard Bergius,<sup>8</sup> all of whom were indebted to the deceased; and George Edward Bergwall,<sup>9</sup> to whom Petterson owed a modest sum at the time of his death.

The Petterson inventory list, transcribed from Olaf E. Dreutzer's handwritten original, appears below with no changes or corrections in the writer's picturesque spelling. For some of the items, valuations are given in shillings (i.e. 3/), or in one instance, in shillings and cents, thus the 4 tablecloths listed were appraised at 37 1/2 cents each, or \$1.50 for the lot, and the 150 pounds of feathers were valued at 31 cents per pound. The inventory consists of a mixed listing of property, recorded without any systematic organization into three basic categories: real estate and farm crops, tools, equipment and livestock; household goods and furnishings; and financial assets. The latter included the New York bank draft transferring funds from Sweden after, according to Unonius, a "long and unexpected delay."<sup>10</sup> Given Petterson's poverty-stricken status prior to the arrival of his family, the household possessions listed in the inventory were probably brought to Wisconsin by his wife. If so, they offer at least a glimpse inside one "America Chest" and some hint as to what the emigrants regarded as important enough to bring with them to the New World.

\* \* \*

A true and perfect inventory of all and singular, the Goods and Chattels rights and Credits [of] Bengt Petterson late of Milwaukee County Wisconsin Territory deceased; made the 14th day of May 1846 by The undersigned Appraisers duly appointed according to law:

One Loghouse	\$60.
5 acres of winter wheat	25.
5 Do under Improvement	15.
3000 Splitt rails	30.
One Stable	10.
1 Yoke of Cattle	50.
2 Cows	28.
2 Calfs	6.
13 Shotes of Hoggs @4.00	52.
One Cooking Stove	12.
150 lb. of Feathers 2/6	46.50
5 Par. of Sheets 4/	2.50
4 Table Cloaths 3/	1.50
12 Towels 2/	3.00
1 Clock	4.00
2 Bed Covres 4/-6/	1.25
2 Blankets 8/-3/	1.37
6 Pillow Cases 1/	.75
2 Copper Kitles 8/	2.00
4 Bed Steds 8/	4.00
1 Suit of Coat and Pants	12.
5 Chests 1/	.62
3 Silfer tea spones 1 oz.	1.00
1 gold ring	1.50
1 Cros Plough	7.00
1 Harrow (Drag)	3.00
2 Axes 4/	1.00
1 Light	.75
1 Lights uath	.38
1 Iron Belle	3.00
Latt [lot] Shoemaker Tooles	5.00
One Shaving Glas	.25
3 Hows [hoes]	.75
1 Log Chain	1.00
1 Cloak	1.00
	<hr/>
	393.22

**Credits at the time of Decease**

A Certificate of Deposit on the Manufacturers Bank N. Y.	\$280.00
M Breck	30.00
T. Smith	1.00
O. Brown	3.60
A. Willson	1.86
O. Rudberg by note	3.43
Hammarquist	.50
J. Barr	4.25
Mrs. L. Tompson	.38
P. Cross	5.37
Bergius	6.42
One Claim on Canal lands	<u>50.00</u>
	\$780.07

Olaf E. Dreutzer  
Charles Brown  
C.G. Groth

**Debets**

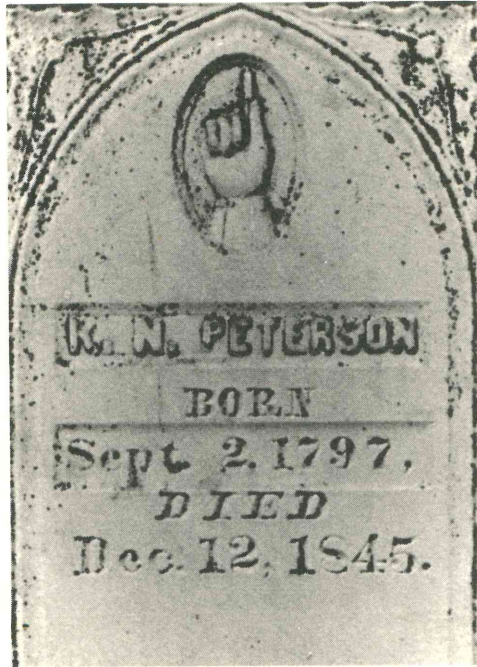
To Mr. Heuser for flour	9.00
George Skinner	.50
To one Coffin	3.00
Mr. O Poppkirk	7.77
E. Bergwall	1.50
Mr. Wenberg	1.00
Hans Rasmuson	4.00
Commission of Charges on the Draft	4.00
Do.    Do.	2.00
R. Murphey	15.00
for Digging a grave	<u>2.00</u>
	\$50.17

Olaf E. Dreutzer  
Charles Brown  
C.G. Groth



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>According to Petterson in a statement made when he filed his declaration of intention in Milwaukee 14 Sept. 1843—*Petitions for U.S. Citizenship 1837-1906*, Circuit Court of Milwaukee Co., WI.
- <sup>2</sup>For more details on Petterson/Hallström, see two invaluable studies by Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850 (SPANY)* (Chicago 1967), pp. 47, 268; and *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 (except New York)* (St. Paul, MN 1979), pp. 13, 90.
- <sup>3</sup>Gustaf Unonius, *A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858*, I-II (Minneapolis, MN 1950, 1960), I, pp. 284, 306.
- <sup>4</sup>Her name was Hildur, born 18 April 1845, according to Gustaf Unonius' *Diary*, manuscript in the Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee.
- <sup>5</sup>Olsson, *SPANY*, pp. 46-47; *Records of St. John's Lutheran Church*, Stone Bank, WI.
- <sup>6</sup>The Petterson documents are contained in File No. 122, *Records of the Register in Probate for Milwaukee Co.*, Milwaukee County Historical Society.
- <sup>7</sup>Otto Emanuel Dreutzer, "Reminiscences of a Pioneer," in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (now *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*), Vol. I, No. 3, Winter, 1951, pp. 14-24. Although this article uses Dreutzer's given name as "Otto Emanuel," he signed documents in the Petterson file (as well as for other Scandinavian records in Milwaukee) as Orloff or Olaf.
- <sup>8</sup>Gustaf Fredrik Leonard Berguis (1820-1846), m. Petterson's dau. Ebba Maria Eleonora Petterson 13 July 1845. —Unonius' *Diary*.
- <sup>9</sup>George Edward Bergwall, b. 1806, m. Ebba Petterson Bergius 25 Nov. 1847, after the demise of Bergius 1 Oct. 1846. —*St. Olof Parish Register*, Milwaukee County Historical Society.
- <sup>10</sup>Unonius, *A Pioneer in Northwest America*, II, p. 107.



**Bengt Petterson's tombstone in Holy Innocents Cemetery, Waukesha Co., WI.**