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Who Was John Root?

Börje Östberg*

It was noon on the 13th of May when the two mortal enemies faced each other in the court house of Henry County, Cambridge, IL—the “prophet” Erik Jansson and the man who called himself John Root.

“Return my wife to me,” said Root.

“I’ll give you a sow, that will do for a wife for you.” answered Jansson. A few seconds later he lay dying on the floor, shot through the heart. This exchange of words has been taken from Root’s testimony during his court appearance. But we only have his word that the verbal exchange was as he testified. The only witness was the clerk of court, Brainard, who did not understand Swedish.

Jansson’s answer to Root does not seem plausible. “The prophet” feared Root but at the same time he held him in respect.

It was in Root’s interest to convince the court that he had been severely provoked in carrying out the murder.

The Colony on the Prairie

The year was 1850. Four years earlier Erik Jansson and 1,200 of his followers had fled religious intolerance in Sweden. Of the more than a dozen sailing vessels that brought the Swedes to the New World, three were lost. About 100 Janssonists perished; others died from disease and yet others died from the vicissitudes which they encountered. There were also those who deserted from the leader soon after having come ashore in New York.

Those who arrived at the goal—a prairie area in Illinois, roughly 120 miles southwest of Chicago—founded Bishop Hill, a society which believed in a communalistic way of life, based on the life of the early Christians. In the beginning the colonists lived in tents and dugout shelters and suffered grievously from all sorts of illness. Fresh boatloads of Janssonists arrived from the homeland and yet more died or deserted the colony. In the beginning of the summer of 1849, the colony consisted of approximately 500 people. That was less than half of those who had arrived in the colony. Dominating this shrunken group with promises of eternal bliss and threats of hell were Erik Jansson and his twelve assistants, the so-called “apostles.” The prophet considered himself the equal of Jesus.

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John Root Appears

Gradually the colony began to thrive. The Janssonists worked hard and the society was well organized. The soil was productive and from the very beginning gave good harvests of corn, wheat, flax and fruit. There was an abundance of pasturage and also woods. The year of 1847 was the year of much construction. In a swift and steady tempo a church was constructed and many brick homes were built along the village streets.

During the autumn of 1848 a stranger appeared in this burgeoning community, who called himself John Root. He was a handsome man, conducted himself in an exemplary manner, seemed to be a cultivated individual and had a pleasing way about him.²

Root claimed to have been involved in the War with Mexico, which recently had ended with an American victory.³ He arrived in Bishop Hill in the company of Karl Zimmerman, a former army captain and chief of the Rättvik Company of the Dal Regiment, who had been granted a discharge in 1840 and after unknown adventures in various parts of the world had volunteered in the United States Army in its war with Mexico. Thus during the late summer of 1848 he had received his discharge and was now taking a rest in Bishop Hill before going on to California to prospect for gold.

Root, on the other hand, stayed in the colony, with the aim of finding employment there. Shortly thereafter he married Erik Jansson's cousin and devoted follower—Lotta Jansson. It was now January of 1849 and at the end of October of that year a son was born to the couple, who was given the name of John at his baptism.

A Life of Freedom

Love seems to have played a minor role in the relationship between Root and his wife. When Lotta later on was forced to make a choice between the prophet and her husband, she chose the former. Gustaf Unonius, a Swedish clergyman in Chicago, who early in 1850 met the couple, writes in his *Memoirs* that Root's love for his wife was minimal compared to his hatred toward the prophet.⁴

But during the time of the wedding there seems to have been a spirit of trust and good feeling. Root was welcomed to settle in the colony and was allowed to marry into the family of the mighty man. Yet, he had no practical training, neither in farming, nor in any kind of crafts. He seems not to have partaken in the chores but was still allowed to draw down clothing from the communal supplies and to participate in the common meals.⁵

Root was not the only one in the colony who was allowed to move about freely. This privilege was also given Erik Ulrik Norberg, who had arrived in Bishop Hill shortly before Root and who also had married a member of the colony.⁶

Norberg had been a sheriff in the province of Västergötland but had been suspected of some kind of financial skulduggery and had absconded to America.

Perhaps he served a useful function in the colony since Erik Jansson needed a man acquainted with the points of law in order to conduct the colony's business as well as to be a contact person with the American authorities.

Did Root curry favor with Jansson by demonstrating similar useful abilities?

A Veterinary Becomes a Physician

Now we witness a third newcomer to the colony who was to play a role in the drama which ended in the murder of the prophet, an applicant for the job of physician, a new position within the colony.

Erik Jansson had always preached that the misery that beset people was God's punishment for their sins in general and specifically the lack of faith in Jansson himself. No medical help was needed. Those that believed would remain healthy and the others only had themselves to blame.

The prophet, however, felt pressures from the outside and finally had to give in and make it known that there was to be a position open in Bishop Hill for a physician. His choice fell on Robert D. Foster, a veterinarian, who owned a farm in the neighborhood of the colony.⁷

One should not be too harsh in judging Erik Jansson for employing a veterinarian. Presumably there was no one else available who had the medical training necessary. In the face of the tragedy that soon was to be visited upon Bishop Hill, it did not really matter whether there was a veterinarian on hand or a real physician. At this juncture in time no one knew how cholera spread, and the methods used to cure the disease were at best not harmful—such as applying mustard plasters to the stomach, bloodletting and forbidding the victim to drink water.

Charlatan

Foster was, however, a charlatan, who knew how to gain access to Erik Jansson and once having gained his confidence was able to victimize him by engaging him in economic adventures. It ended by Foster presenting such demands on the colony that the society was on the brink of financial ruin.⁸

At the same time as an outbreak of cholera hit Bishop Hill in the summer of 1849 and carried away ca. 150 lives, the results of the prophet's financial peccadillos began to surface. Dissatisfaction grew. A couple of the "apostles" approached Norberg, convincing him that he ought to criticize Erik Jansson for his arrogance and dictatorial fashions, but the result of this was that Norberg thought better of it and left the colony.⁹

A more dangerous opponent to the prophet's absolute power was John Root. This is illustrated by a remarkable episode which Emil Herlenius refers to in his dissertation on the Janssonists. A fight broke out between Foster and Root, according to Herlenius, the result being that Erik Jansson let it be known that the people should vote if Foster was to stay or be fired. The voting was held and the colonists decided that Foster should leave, much to the displeasure of Jansson. The

latter, however, employed Foster as his personal physician with the privilege of treating other members of the colony for a certain stipulated fee.¹⁰

So far Herlenius. He does not explain what the balloting was all about. Did the colonists vote for being without a physician rather than keeping Foster? Or did they vote that Foster should be replaced by another doctor?

The End of the Drama

Root decided to leave Bishop Hill for good, together with his wife and child, but Lotta refused to desert the prophet. In March of 1850 Root failed in an attempt to take her and his son. He then brought suit in court to regain his family and finally he succeeded during the suit to bring Lotta and John, Jr. to Lotta's sister in Chicago. But it did not take long before Erik Jansson had dispatched his lieutenants to Chicago, where they found mother and child and brought them back to Bishop Hill.

Root's threats now became so violent that the prophet with his family and Lotta fled to St. Louis. According to a letter from Jansson to the colony, dated April 1850, we sense the fear which Jansson felt toward Root but also coupled with a certain respect. He likens Root to Absalom, the handsome son of King David, who conducted a palace revolt in Jerusalem and forced his father to flee to Transjordan in order to prepare for regaining his power.

But Erik Jansson's return to Bishop Hill was quite brief. A few days later he met his fate in the Cambridge court house.

Root was incarcerated for two years and was then sentenced in the fall of 1852 to two years of prison. The sentence was later commuted to one year. A couple of years after leaving prison Root died in Chicago, "sometimes blaspheming God, sometimes in despair crying to Him for mercy," according to Unonius. All of Chicago's Swedes accompanied Root to his final resting place.¹¹

Who was John Root? Many persons, since the dramatic episode in Cambridge, have attempted to find out where he came from and what was his real name? Without finding the answer, almost every family in Sweden named Roth or Ruth has been investigated with all of the variant spellings. This failure points to the possibility that his real name was different from that which he used in America.

Let us therefore examine the story of a Swede who arrived in America about six months before Root appeared in the Bishop Hill colony.

A Former Clergyman Deserts in New York

When the three-masted bark, *James Boorman* from Stockholm, arrived in New York in March 1848 seven of the Swedish crew deserted the vessel.¹² This was quite typical of the times. Some deserters were bona fide sailors who wished to transfer to other ships and have a look around in New York during the interval. Other deserters were emigrants who did not have money for the ocean ticket.

Among the seven crew members from *James Boorman* was a defrocked clergyman, one of the many emigrants who seemingly disappeared in the new country without leaving a trace.

He was Carl Johan Reutermark, born in Kumla Parish (Väst.) 31 Jan. 1807, the son of a clergyman, Jonas Reutermark, who later had a charge in Kungsåra Parish near Västerås. After Carl Johan's ordination 1830, he had a string of appointments. He had, however, problems with alcohol. The beginning of the end of his clerical career came during the spring of 1845 in Stora Tuna Parish (Kopp.) where he, like the famous character in Selma Lagerlöf's story, Gösta Berling, fell, without the romantic overtones of the Lagerlöf story. The dean, Fabian Wilhelm Ekenstam, a highly cultured and respected clergyman, saw no other way out but to report to the Consistory that Reutermark had been so drunk that when he was about to preach in the parish church for the first time he had fallen down among the parishioners.¹³

After this accusation Reutermark went to the city physician in Falun, deciding to "take the cure." This consisted of lacing everything Reutermark ate and drank with aquavit, so that the patient thus would develop an abhorrence of alcohol.¹⁴ This method failed miserably so far as Reutermark was concerned. After the "cure," Reutermark appeared before the Consistory. At first he denied everything, but when confronted with the evidence and that he would be tried before a civil court, he admitted his guilt.

He was given a suspension of three months, but when he was sent to Söderbärke (Kopp.) as an assistant pastor, new complaints were heard. In August of 1847 he speedily sought to thwart another suspension by resigning "because of illness." In October he returned his letter of ordination from Söderbärke to the Consistory and three weeks later he appeared in the Stockholm Hiring Hall to gain a berth aboard a vessel.

Care for the Sick

This drama was played out in Sweden at a time when all over the country the distilling of liquor was going on apace in most Swedish homes and before the temperance movement had developed. Even among the clergy there were many with alcohol problems, the term used nowadays. There were so many that almost every parish in Värmland could produce the prototype for Gösta Berling of the story. Someone has done a study of all of these cases and in Värmland alone during the first half of the 19th century a total of 28 names of clergymen can be documented as being alcoholics.

Many of these unfortunate servants of the Lord carried on an existence without losing their letters of ordination. Reutermark, on the other hand, spoiled it for himself by bragging before the members of the Consistory that he "could handle it" and thus caused the worthy members to prick up their ears.

But if we study the minutes of the Consistory we find another Reutermark than the coarse drunkard. In a letter written by the dean of Linde Parish (Öre.), Samuel Christopher Rathsmann, he speaks of the years that Reutermark worked in Linde 1831-1840, that even if there were many in the parish who wished to get rid of

Reutermark, there was even a greater number who loved him and appreciated him for his selflessness and concern for the members of the parish. In Linde he had, according to the dean, been fully occupied by caring for the sick, ministering to the less fortunate, all of this having taken much of his time and had exposed him to risk-filled incidents as well as impoverished him.

As was the case with all candidates for the clergy, Reutermark had received instruction in ministering to the sick. Maybe he should have studied medicine instead of theology?

In the parish archives of the Linde church¹⁵ is a note that Reutermark "by means of proper use of techniques" had brought to life a 25-year old girl, who seemingly had died. This took place just before she was to have been placed in a coffin, after having been found in an attic, where she had been missing for two weeks.

Reutermark - Root

In the register of enrolled students of the Västmanland-Dala Nation at the University of Uppsala the Reutermark entry is amended by the following note—"left the ministry in August of 1847, went to America and is supposed to have been killed in a skirmish with the Indians." A later entry, written in another hand has this notation—"went to sea (according to Åmark); is supposed to have enrolled in the U.S. Army and have been killed in the war between Mexico and the U.S."¹⁶

The Åmark referred to above is probably Carl Petter Åmark or his younger brother Fredrik, who like Carl Johan Reutermark and his younger brother Lars August, had attended the high school in Västerås and later became clergymen.

It is probably correct that Carl Johan Reutermark, after his desertion in New York, volunteered for service in the War with Mexico, but under a different name. That he died in battle is probably not correct since very few skirmishes took place after the Americans had captured Mexico City in Sept. 1847. The peace negotiations were under way when Reutermark arrived in New York in March of the following year. The United States Army enrolled soldiers for this war almost up to the time that Mexico ratified the peace treaty at the end of May; witness the enrollment of Carl P. Liljedahl, a Swede, as late as 10 May 1848.¹⁷

Much speaks for the fact that Reutermark took the name of Root, such as the time periods for Reutermark's disappearance and Root's appearance, the stories of both of them participating in the War with Mexico, Reutermark's interest in the care of the sick and Root's hatred of "doctor" Foster.

Is there another piece of evidence we can muster? Yes. Carl Johan Reutermark had a name which was quite difficult for Americans to pronounce. Shortened to Johan Reut would give us the English version John Root, since "reut" is pronounced as "root."

Finally, I wish to state that the above account represents an attempt to penetrate the John Root mystery. There are many unanswered questions which must be solved. For the time being and until more plausible answers can be advanced, I have advanced this theory as a contribution to clearing up the enigma of John Root's identity.

Notes

¹Root's account before the County Court of Henry County, IL on 14 May 1850. —Records of the County Clerk, Henry County, Cambridge, IL.

²Paul H. Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah* (Carbondale, IL and Edwardsville, IL 1976), pp. 149-151; *En skånsk banbrytare i Amerika. Trued Granville Pearsons självbiografi* (Oskarshamn 1937), p. 49. Pearson, who spent a day at the trial, writes: "Roth was still in his best years and looked fine, where he sat on a chair next to his lawyer."

³Nels Hokanson mentions in his book, *Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time* (New York 1979) that 22 Swedes participated in the War with Mexico, among them John Root. Unfortunately Hokanson does not name his source.

⁴Gustaf Unonius, *A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858*, I-II (Chicago 1950-1960), II, p. 211.

⁵Elmen, op. cit., pp. 151-152.

⁶Ulf Beijbom, *Utvandrarna och Svensk-Amerika* (Borås 1986), p. 65.

⁷Karin Ankarberg, "Några avsnitt ur Bishop Hill koloniens historia" in *Historiska studier tillägnade Folke Lindberg* (Stockholm 1963), p. 129.

⁸Unonius, op. cit., p. 208.

⁹Op.cit.

¹⁰Emil Herlenius, *Erik-Janssens historia* (Jönköping 1900), p.75.

¹¹When Root was aware that his death was near, he called upon the Methodist clergyman, Erik Shogren (Sjögren) and asked him to commit his body to the grave. According to a letter from Shogren published in Victor Witting's *Minnen från mitt lifsom sjöman* (Worcester, MA 1904), p. 242, Root is quoted as saying: "I believe that you fear God. There are other ministers but I don't like the way they live. Follow me to the grave." Root died 18 March 1856 according to information from Dale Peterson of Moline, IL who quotes the late Edla Warner, archivist at the Bishop Hill Heritage Association.

¹²Nils William Olsson, "Swedish Seamen Who Deserted in U.S. Ports 1841-1858" in *Swedish American Genealogist*, Vol. III, No.4, p. 151. The reference to the ship in question has been taken from the archives of the Stockholm Hiring Hall, kindly researched by Peeter Mark, archivist in the City of Stockholm Archives (*Stadsarkivet*).

¹³The information concerning Reutermark's various movements in the Västerås Diocese and his case before the Consistory of Västerås has been furnished by the Committee in Västerås writing the definite history of the clergy of the Västerås Diocese (*Herdamneskommittén*).

¹⁴Johan Didrik af Wingård, *Minnen af händelser och förhållanden under en lång lifstid*. Fascicles I-XII (Stockholm and Uppsala 1846-1850), fascicle XII, p.32.

¹⁵Parish Records of Linde (Öre.), F 1:5, notes 71-72.

¹⁶*Westmanland-Dahla nations album 1761-1833* in the Carolina Rediva Library of the University of Uppsala.

¹⁷Nils William Olsson, "Swedish Enlistments in the U.S. Army Before 1851" in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (now *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*), Vol. I, No. 3, p. 23.