

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 17 | Number 1

Article 3

3-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Lindell, Lisa (1997) "Searching for Sissa," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol17/iss1/3>

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Searching for Sissa

Lisa Lindell*

“Nothing is certain but uncertainty.” This old proverb aptly sums up my experiences in searching for the ancestry of my great great grandmother Sissa. Confronted with frustrating obstacles and apparent dead ends, I have considered abandoning the search. And yet, the trail lures me on. At the outset, I knew only a few stark facts. Sissa, born in Sweden, had emigrated to America, eventually settling in central Kansas. Here, she died in 1887, at the age of 41, leaving her husband and ten children, ranging in age from two weeks to seventeen years. This information came from family recollections and from gravestones in the Salemsborg Lutheran Church Cemetery in Saline County, Kansas, where Sissa, her husband Nels, and six children are buried.¹

I began my search several years ago by gathering relevant materials saved by various descendants of Sissa and Nels. Most valuable were obituaries for Nels (who died in 1935, 48 years after Sissa) and family Bibles originally owned by two of Sissa’s daughters, Jennie and Ida. One of the obituaries gave me a seemingly important clue about Sissa’s ancestry - her maiden name was Bengtson. The obituaries and the Bibles further revealed that Nels, emigrating from Gammalstorp in Blekinge, Sweden in 1869, had married Sissa in Galesburg, Illinois. Three years later, after a brief sojourn in Lewiston, Illinois, and the birth of two daughters, the family pioneered in Saline County, Kansas.

Tracing Nels’ line of ancestry presented few difficulties. My uncle, working with the district archives in Lund, Sweden, had tracked several generations of Nels’ family. Using the microfilmed records of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, I continued the search. Nels was born in the village of Bjäraryd, Gammalstorp Parish in the county (*län*) of Blekinge, Sweden, on 10 October 1841.² From the Gammalstorp emigration records, I discovered that Nels had set out (alone) for America at the age of 26 on 29 May 1868 (*not* 1869 as stated in Nels’ obituary).³

Nels’ emigration story, I learned, was representative of the experiences of many Swedes. Sweden in the late 1860s was suffering from three years of successive crop failures. A population boom, the decreasing death rates, and the news

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of economic prosperity in America, all contributed to a major wave of emigration in 1868 and 1869.⁴ Here, then, was a natural motive for Nels' departure for America. But what might have brought him to Galesburg, Illinois? Again, I discovered that Nels was following a route common to many early Swedish immigrants. Galesburg had become a social and cultural center for Swedish Americans.⁵ *Hemlandet*, the first major Swedish language newspaper in the United States, had been founded here in 1855. It was in Galesburg where Sissa presumably joined Nels in 1869.

Upon writing to the Knox County Court House in Galesburg for Nels' and Sissa's marriage record, I was informed that no such record existed. However, while researching at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, I found an index to Knox County, Illinois marriage records covering the years 1830-1878, which listed the marriage of a Nels Johnson and Celia Johnson in 1869. A second letter to the Knox County Court House yielded more favorable results. I received a copy of the Nels and Celia Johnson marriage record. Could this be my Sissa? The record contained no information beyond the couple's names and the marriage date of 12 October 1869.

I knew from the family Bible that Nels' and Sissa's oldest child, Jennie (my great grandmother), had been born 11 February 1870, presumably in Galesburg. But, regrettably, no birth record existed (birth records not having been required in Knox County until 1916 and none having been kept until 1878). I next decided, with high hopes, to write to the First Lutheran Church of Galesburg (the only Swedish Lutheran church in that city in the 1860s and 1870s). Perhaps I would find a reference to Sissa and Nels in the parish register. But this was not to be the case. The church's marriage and baptismal records extend back only until 1874, by which time my ancestors had settled in Kansas. Although some Johnsons and Bengtsons are mentioned in the church records, they appear to bear no relationship to Nels and Sissa. Letters to the historical and genealogical societies in Knox County yielded no new information. To my delight, however, the Fulton County Historical and Genealogical Society presented me with a record that might just be relevant. In the 1870 Federal census record of Lewiston, Fulton County, Illinois, a Nelson (age 28) and Sarah (age 24) Johnson of Sweden are listed with their three-month-old, unnamed baby daughter. Here, indeed, was an excellent lead. The names were somewhat similar and the ages matched exactly those of Nels and Sissa and their daughter Jennie. But, unfortunately, the census did not contain enough information for me to pursue or draw any definite conclusions.

Having no more Illinois leads, I turned my attention to Kansas. I learned that Nels' and Sissa's arrival in Kansas in 1872 was coincident with a major influx

of immigrant settlers. Sadly, yet unavoidably, I recognize that Nels' and Sissa's settlement experience rested upon a history of conquest. In the 1820s, the tribes native to Kansas, including the Kansa and the Pawnee, were dispossessed in order to make room for thousands of Native Americans deported from the East. Then, in 1854, with the establishment of Kansas Territory, these eastern tribes, likewise, were evicted.⁶ With no threat from the Indians and with the end of the Civil War in 1865, Kansas consequently began to attract great numbers of white settlers. James R. Shortridge, in his *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas*, asserts that "between 1865 and 1880, Kansas attracted immigrants at a pace unmatched anywhere else in the country."⁷

Wondering what had brought my ancestors specifically to the Smoky Valley region of Kansas, I found that four years prior to Nels' and Sissa's arrival, this area of Kansas had begun to be settled by Swedish immigrants who were members of one of two cooperative land companies. The First Swedish Agricultural Company had been organized in Chicago in April 1868; and the Galesburg Colonization Company had been founded in the fall of that same year at the instigation of Anders Wilhelm Dahlsten, pastor of the Swedish Lutheran Church in Galesburg. Historian Alfred Bergin ascribes the major credit for Swedish settlement in central Kansas to these two land companies.⁸ In choosing the community of Salemsborg, an area settled by the Galesburg Colonization Company, for their destination, Nels and Sissa had, once again, followed a natural route of Swedish immigration.

My Kansas genealogical research began with an exciting discovery: I located Sissa's obituary in the 30 July 1887 issue of *Salina Republican*. But, as was typical of that time, the record was brief, containing nothing beyond Sissa's married name, age, place and date of death, and the number of children she left. A search of the 1887 newspapers of Saline County at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka disappointingly produced no other obituaries for Sissa.

Then, unexpectedly, I made a breakthrough. Writing to Salemsborg Lutheran Church, I received the most valuable clues thus far. The parish records listed the place of Sissa's birth and baptism as Hoby, Sweden, and gave her name as Sissa Johnson. This last piece of information may not seem significant, but the women in these church records were consistently identified by their maiden names rather than by their husbands' surnames. The name Johnson corresponded to the maiden name on the Galesburg marriage record, but why would Nels' obituary have given Sissa's unmarried name as Bengtson?

The Salemsborg parish records corroborated the birth date for Sissa which

I had found in the family Bible - 12 January 1846. Armed with this information, I began my quest for Hoby, Sweden. An examination of maps and microfilmed parish records provided me with several Hobys, the most likely being Bräkne-Hoby Parish in the county (*län*) of Blekinge. Consulting the register of births for that parish, I was thrilled to find a Sissa born in Fogdakärr, Bräkne-Hoby 12 January 1846.⁹ Her father was Jöns Pettersson, which conformed to my Johnson (or Jons-dotter) theory. Could this really be my Sissa? The Bengtson reference in Nels' obituary still troubled me. Where had that name come from?¹⁰

Following the path of this Sissa and her family through successive *husförhörslängder* (household examination rolls), I learned that Sissa had experienced tragic loss early in her life. Her parents having died in June 1855, Sissa, along with her sister Carin, went to the village of Klemmen in the neighboring parish of Backaryd, also in Blekinge, in order to live with their older sister Hanna, Hanna's husband, Jöns Jönsson, and their children. Then, in 1862, Sissa left Klemmen for Gammalstorp Parish.¹¹ This latter information indeed bolstered my theory that I was on the track of the right Sissa. Nels, having been born and raised in Gammalstorp, could have met Sissa here before going to America. When I found that this Sissa had emigrated to America in April 1869, I became tentatively persuaded that this was my Sissa.¹²

The frustration of not knowing for sure, however, has impelled me to continue my search. This past year, sifting through family materials retrieved from my grandparents' attic in Denver, Colorado, and from the farm of my great aunt and uncles in Kansas, I discovered a diary kept sporadically by my grandmother Stella (the daughter of Nels' and Sissa's daughter Jennie) from 1914 to 1917 and then again in 1922. As I read carefully through the brief records of the day-to-day happenings, the entry for 24 April 1922 arrested my attention: "Great-Uncle Olof in Ill. died today." Here was an intriguing clue! My father, upon hearing of this reference to Illinois, reached back in his memory to a 1942 family trip that included a stop in Monmouth, Illinois, when he was a boy of ten. He vaguely recalled that they had visited someone named Rosie, whom he thought might be a relative. Acting upon his recollections (which are seldom in error!), I wrote to the Monmouth Public Library asking for the obituary of an Olof, who had died in Monmouth in April 1922.

I was in luck. My letter was received by a genealogist who promptly found the death notice for Olof Johnson, born in Gammalstorp 24 October 1851 and dying in Monmouth 24 April 1922. I realized that there were several possibilities for Olof's relationship to Sissa: he could be Sissa's brother, Sissa's brother-in-law, Nels' brother, or Nels' brother-in-law. I knew I could rule out his

being Nels' brother, since I had a complete list of Nels' siblings. My hopes that Olof might be related to Sissa were soon dashed, however. I discovered a *husförhørs-längd* for Bengta and Olof Johnson, who were living in the village of Möllebjörke in Gammalstorp from 1871 to 1876. Bengta had an identical birth date to that of Nels' sister Bengta. By following successive *husförhörslängder*, I gathered conclusive evidence that Nels' sister Bengta was indeed the wife of Olof.¹³ Another false lead.

Contributing to my genealogical frustration is the awareness that even if I do accept Sissa Jonsdotter of Fogdakärr as my great great grandmother, I doubt I can trace her lineage back more than a couple of generations. Sissa's ancestors on her father's side came from Jämshög Parish in Blekinge, and her mother's family came from Näsrum Parish in the county (*län*) of Kristianstad. And, as I have learned to my discouragement while working on other Swedish lines, some of the early church records from these two parishes, records which are essential to my genealogical research, have burned. So, again I find myself at a probable dead end.

For me, perhaps the most important consequence of genealogical pursuit has been coming to terms with uncertainties and open endedness. As a seeker after certainty and concrete evidence, I have been forced, through genealogy, to learn something about the necessity of living with ambiguity. In particular, my search for the ancestry of Sissa, filled with probabilities and conjectures, but no certainties, has compelled me to recognize and accept that there is much in life that is, ultimately, unknowable. Nevertheless, I intend to continue my search.

Notes

¹ During my search, I have encountered several variations in the spelling of Sissa's name. It appears, for example, as Cecelia on her gravestone and as Selia on the Kansas Census records of 1875, 1880, and 1885.

² Gammalstorp Parish (Blek.) Birth Records 1815-1857, Family History Library (hereafter FHL). Salt Lake City, UT, microfilm # 86134.

³ Gammalstorp Parish (Blek.) Exit Records 1868, FHL microfilm # 198302.

⁴ Lars Ljungmark, *Swedish Exodus*, translated by Kermit B. Westerberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1979); Florence E. Janson, *The Background of Swedish Immigration, 1840-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1931).

⁵ Helge Nelson, *The Swedes and the Swedish Settlements in North America*, I-II (Lund: C.W.K.Gleerup 1943; reprint, New York: Arno Press 1979), p. 168.

⁶ For information about the eviction of Native Americans from Kansas, see H. Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-1871* (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas 1978).

⁷ James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas 1995), p. 72.

⁸ Alfred Bergin, "The Swedish Settlements in Central Kansas," in *Collections of the Kansas Historical Society, 1909-1910* (Topeka, KS: State Printing Office 1910), p. 19. For additional sources on Swedish immigrant settlements in central Kansas, see Emory Kempton Lindquist, *Smoky Valley People: A History of Lindsborg, Kansas* (Lindsborg, KS: Bethany College 1953) as well as Lindquist's essay, "The Swedish Immigrant and Life in Kansas" in *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 29.1 (1963), pp. 1-24.

⁹ Bräkne-Hoby Parish (Blek.) Birth Records 1820-1851, p. 256, FHL microfilm # 85955.

¹⁰ This remains an unanswered question. While searching other family lines, however, I have encountered similar instances of children or spouses providing inaccurate information for obituaries or death records of a deceased relative. In each case, I would be interested to learn how they came to believe this incorrect data.

¹¹ See the following Household Examination Rolls for Bräkne-Hoby Parish (Blek.) - 1831-1835, FHL microfilm # 85949; 1836-1840, p. 441, FHL microfilm # 85950; 1841-1845, p. 451, FHL microfilm # 85951; 1846-1850, p. 470, FHL microfilm # 85952; 1851-1856, p. 213, FHL microfilm # 198246; for Backaryd Parish (Blek.) - 1830-1845, FHL microfilm # 86145; 1845-1855, p. 87, FHL microfilm # 86146; 1856-1861, p. 82, FHL microfilm # 86147; 1861-1865, p. 127, FHL microfilm # 198314 and for Gammalstorp Parish (Blek.) - 1866-1871, p. 30, FHL microfilm # 198298.

¹² Gammalstorp Parish (Blek.) Exit Records 1869, FHL microfilm # 198302.

¹³ Gammalstorp Parish (Blek.) Household Examination Roll 1871-1876, p. 458, FHL microfilm # 198299.

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