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In America He Took the Name “Charles Harris”

Lila H. Kirkwood and Wendy R. Kirkwood*

Charles Harris was a crotchety, seventy-two-year-old man when he died in Oakland, California, on 20 May 1920.¹ He was survived by his forty-five-year-old Irish-born wife, Mary Ann, and three unmarried sons in their twenties. Working as a cabinet-maker and upholsterer, who was in great demand in this growing community,² Charles had been a good provider for his family. At the time of his death, he owned his own home. Charles and Mary Ann had come to California from Brooklyn, New York, after their marriage in January 1891, supposedly to escape the crowded household of an extended family.³ His sister Mary and her husband Nels G. Andersson, a leather worker, had arrived from Sweden in 1887.⁴ Upon Charles's departure to California, his brother-in-law took over both the household and upholstery business that Charles left behind.⁵

Charles had been a sailor and was a spinner of tales of his youth, many of which he seemed to believe. He told the following story of his early days in Sweden, all the time stressing that he was the Carl of the tale (perhaps adding bits and pieces as they supported the theme):

The island of Gotland, along the coast of Sweden, was once the feudal estate of a very rich and influential man of Sweden. His parents had passed their lives on this pleasant island. Yet, his station in life was apparently due to his own efforts, for his brother, who also lived on Gotland, was quite definitely a poor man. Their sister, early left a widow by a man named Hendrickson, and her two children, Mary and Carl, were somewhat under the care of this brother who owned the island. Another brother became a sailor and in time accumulated quite a fortune, which he willed to Carl, the younger of the two children of his sister.

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¹ Certificate of Death of Charles Arryant Harris, 20 May 1920, No. 1305, Alameda County, CA.

² Oakland, California, City Directories, 1894-97; 1902-04; 1917-18.

³ Family history told to wife, Mary Ann, and recorded by Ruthello Russell Harris.

⁴ Brooklyn, New York, City Directories, 1887-1891.

⁵ 1900 U.S. Census, New York, Kings County, City of New York, Brooklyn Borough, ED 324, p. 142A, Nos. 6 and 7. In this record, his name is listed as Neil and hers as Maria.

During the summer, the men of Gotland spent much time in the forests felling trees and cutting and splitting the logs for their winter fuel. When the snow blanketed the ground and made a path for their sleighs, the villagers made a gala occasion of bringing home the logs. Little Carl used to watch them wistfully peering through the palings of the fence around his mother's yard.

His rich uncle often came by with a load of fuel for them and made over little Carl. One Christmas he brought Carl a pair of red boots, a gift that was so stupendous that it became a life-long memory. He told Carl that he was only a half-brother of Mary; that his father was a French nobleman, the Count d'Arryant, who had to leave France because of the political turmoil and who exiled himself for a time on Gotland.

When only nine years of age, Carl went to sea as cabin boy on a ship. Thereafter, he roamed. Eventually, he joined the American Navy; and, among the sailors, the name Carl soon assumed the English pronunciation of Charles. And why bother with a difficult name like Hendrickson? Harry or Harris was so much simpler. So gradually he became known as Charles Harris and seldom recalled that he had ever owned another name.⁶

His wife Mary Ann passed the story along to Ruthello Russell Harris,⁷ who wrote it down. Through years of research, we⁸ had found little evidence to support the yarn. In the mid-1800s, Gotland had a large population. There are 60,000 permanent residents on Gotland today. There were few islands around its borders that could be "owned" by a single, rich man.⁹ Since Carl was born a year before the French Revolution of 1848, it also seemed unlikely that his father was a political exile from France. We have found no listing for d'Arryant in French nobility. We also had few leads to connect us to families with the name of Hendricksson or Henriksson.

However, a certificate hangs on a relative's wall showing Charles's "Honorable Discharge from the United States Navy."¹⁰ His service record, obtained from the National Archives, informed us that Charles Harris had enlisted 4 January 1867; served on the ships *Pawnee*, *Kansas*, and *Guerriere*; and was discharged 30 July 1869.¹¹ His "Certificate of Naturalization," dated 12

⁶ Family history told to Charles Harris's wife, Mary Ann, and recorded by Ruthello Russell Harris.

⁷ Ruthello Russell Harris is Lila H. Kirkwood's mother.

⁸ Three generations of researchers—Ruthello Russell Harris, Lila H. Kirkwood, and Wendy R. Kirkwood.

⁹ Ingrid Morris, *Visitor's Guide: Sweden* (Moorland Publ. Co.: Derbyshire, England, 1994), 114-15.

¹⁰ The framed document is in the possession of Mary Ferrari, granddaughter of Charles Harris.

¹¹ National Archives, letter to author, 24 November 1995. Additional information, abstracted from the returns and muster rolls, included the following physical description of Charles Harris: 5' 8 1/2" tall, blue eyes, light hair, light complexion, and no permanent marks or scars.

August 1880, was located in the court records of Kings County, New York.¹² Brooklyn City directories revealed his presence in Brooklyn from 1887 until after 1891, the assumed date of his marriage.¹³ But we have found no church or state record of his marriage to Mary Ann McBride. The 1900 U.S. Census for Oakland, California, indicated that he had immigrated in 1865, that his father was French, and that his mother was Swedish. In the 1910 U.S. Census for Oakland, his year of immigration was reported as 1871.¹⁴ Neither date proved to be correct. Charles's death record gave his mother's name as Anna. Each census record did confirm his birth date of 15 July 1847.



Olof Henrik Johansson, alias Charles Harris

¹² Certificate of Naturalization of Charles Harris, 12 August 1880, County Court, Kings County, NY.

¹³ Brooklyn, New York, City Directories, 1887-1891.

¹⁴ 1900 U.S. Census, California, Oakland, ED 324, l. 89; 1920; ED 47, L 72.

One day, while reviewing our family archives, we discovered an old photograph showing a grave plot with an old, ornate headstone. On the back were the names Lagergren and Wisby. Looking at maps, we located the town Visby in Gotland, Sweden, and suddenly realized that the picture had come from Charles's family. A helpful researcher in Visby, Sigvard Henriksson, whom I had contacted because of his query in *Swedish American Genealogist*, offered to track down the ownership of the plot. He sent me pictures and documents to prove that the plot and stone were in the Östra Cemetery and that C. O. Lindbom (1833-1907) and Carolina Lindbom (1833-1915) were buried there. The records also stated that the grave plot had been posted in 1964 because it was no longer maintained and then leased to a new family in 1980.¹⁵ Lagergren was the photographer. We have not yet found a relationship to the Lindbom family.

I wrote to the Landsarkivet in Visby for help. The librarian there located a man with the correct name (Carl Henriksson), who was born at nearly the correct date, and who had left his home in Visby at the appropriate time as a cook in the navy. But this man had not been born on Gotland, he was not an illegitimate child, his mother was not named Anna, and he had no sister named Mary. The direct search for information on Charles had once again proved fruitless.

Last summer, our family visited Visby and explored these two leads.¹⁶ We were pleased to meet Sigvard and two friends who helped with translation. We talked of his success. Sigvard set up an interview with a reporter, Lena Gustafsson, from *Gotlands Tidningar*. Her article and a picture of us at the gravesite appeared in the next morning's paper.¹⁷ At the cemetery, we reviewed the entire record and discovered that the owner of the plot had been Nils G. Andersson, the husband of Charles Harris' sister.¹⁸ That one, documented fact concerning the family in Sweden eventually helped us unravel our mystery.

We immediately decided to focus our attention on Nils G. and Mary Andersson. First, we located them in the 1900 U.S. Census in Brooklyn, New York, which gave their immigration date as 1887.¹⁹ Then, using microfilm obtained from an LDS Family History Center, we located the 1887 emigration record for Nils Gustaf and Anna Maria Olivia Johansson Andersson.²⁰ This record gave us the years of their births as well as the fact that they had been

¹⁵ Cemetery Record, Östra Cemetery, Visby, Gotland [Kv.: 13; Nr.: 12—3, 6].

¹⁶ Lila and her husband David.

¹⁷ "Sökte sin släkt från Amerika till Gotland," *Gotlands Tidningar*, 13 August 1998, 5.

¹⁸ Cemetery Record, Östra Cemetery, Visby, Gotland [Kv.: 13; Nr.: 12--3,6; Kyrkogård: Östra; Gravväg.: Andersson, N. G.; Yrke: Läderhandtänder; Graven appläten: 12/1 1882].

¹⁹ 1900 U.S. Census, New York, Kings County, City of New York, Brooklyn Borough, ED 324.

²⁰ Annual Extract of Parish Registers, Visby Stads Parish (Gotl.), 1887.

living in Visby at the time of their emigration. We then turned to the Household Examination Rolls for Visby for that time period and located them. Their exact birth dates and birthplaces were recorded.²¹ Anna Maria Olivia was born 21 June 1842 in Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.). Gammelgarn, which literally means “old wool,” is a small parish on the east coast of Gotland, east (and south) of the west coast city of Visby.



Grave plot in Östra Cemetery, Visby, Gotland, once owned by Nils G. Andersson.

We then sent for some of the parish records of Gammelgarn Parish. After first locating the birth record of Anna Maria Olivia,²² daughter of Anna Greta Henricsdotter, we finally located the birth record of Charles Harris, who was born Olof Henrik Johansson!²³ Information from additional Gammelgarn records enabled us to construct the following family history.

In 1842 Anna Greta Henricsdotter gave birth to an illegitimate child, whom she named Anna Maria Olivia.²⁴ She married Adam Johansson on 13 November

²¹ Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörslängd*), Visby Stads Parish (Gotl.), 1872-1882, 12.

²² Birth Record (*Födelselängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), 21 June 1842, No. 5.

²³ Birth Record (*Födelselängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), 15 July 1847, No. 5.

²⁴ Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörslängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), Fridé, AI:4, 65.

1845²⁵ and had two additional children—Helena Elisabeth, b. 11 August 1846 (d. 2 September 1846), and Olof Henrik, b. 15 July 1847. Adam died 22 June 1848, a victim of drowning.²⁶ Although Olof Henrik's name was not Carl Henriksson (as expected), we knew from the exact birth date, the location of the parish, and the names of his mother and sister that he was *our* man. In addition we found that Anna Greta was born 22 July 1814 in Östergarn Parish (Gotl.) the daughter of Hindrik Hindriksson and Anna Stina Jacobsdotter.²⁷ Östergarn is next to Gammelgarn and includes an island called Östergarnsholm!

Using household examination rolls and various parish records, the complete *maternal* history began to unfold. We were able to trace it back five generations. Adam Johansson was born in 1816 on the island of Dagö (now Hiiumaa, Estonia).²⁸ He may not turn into the "French Count" of the story, but Olof (or Carl) did have two uncles—Hinrik and Olof. Hinrik was married and may be the rich uncle; Olof was an unmarried sailor. We have yet to determine if he left his nephew money in a will (as the family legend indicated) and if Charles offered the money left to him by his uncle to his sister Mary as passage for her and her husband to come to the United States.

We were also able to document additional aspects of Olof Henrik's life as a young man. Although we already knew that he had left Sweden, joined the U.S. Navy on 4 January 1867, and served until 30 July 1869, we now also realized that he had married a woman named Sarah Mesgill on 14 August 1871 in New York (i.e., he had been married prior to marrying Mary Ann McBride, our grandmother and great-grandmother!). On the marriage record, Charles is listed as a twenty-five-year-old seaman from Sweden, with a residence in Brooklyn. His father's name is given as Henry; his mother's as Annie. Sarah Mesgill is listed as a twenty-four-year-old from Ireland, whose residence is 129 Liberty, New York City. Her father's name is given as Thomas; her mother's as Johanna Duffee.²⁹

At some time prior to 1873, the newlyweds came to Sweden. Above Olof Henrik Johansson's entry in the Household Examination Roll for Gammelgarn Parish for 1863-75 (see accompanying diagram) were the following words: "The name taken in America: 'Charles Harris.'"³⁰ What a thrill; we felt as though we had come home!

²⁵ Marriage Record (*Vigsellängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), 13 November 1845.

²⁶ Death Record (*Dödslängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), 22 June 1848.

²⁷ Birth Record (*Födelselängd*), Östergarn (Gotl.), 22 July 1815.

²⁸ Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörslängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), Fride, AI:5, n.p.

²⁹ Register of Marriages, City of New York, Vol. 15, July/Dec 1871, A-Z, 139.

³⁰ Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörslängd*), Gammelgarn Parish (Gotl.), Fride, AI:8, 158.

<i>egen Trosings & Amnå</i>				
<i>Johansson, Olof Gustaf Sjöman</i>	1842	<i>22/4</i>	<i>Trosings</i>	<i>63 2/3</i> <i>1/9</i>
<i>Anna Maria Olivia Heris</i>	1842	<i>2/6</i>	<i>Gammalg.</i>	<i>63 2/3</i> <i>1/9</i>
<i>Det i Amerika antagna namnet "Charles Heris"</i>				
<i>Johansson Olof Henrik Sjöman</i>	1847	<i>15/7</i>	<i>Gammalg.</i>	<i>19.</i> <i>1871</i> <i>14/9</i>
<i>Sarah Heris</i>	1850	<i>7/9</i>	<i>Stadsk.</i>	

Household Examination Roll (Husförhörslängd, AI:8, p. 158) for the village of Fride, Gammalgarn Parish (Gotl.). Note the line written above the second entry from the bottom, i.e., Johansson, Olof Henrik, Sjöman, which states: "Det i Amerika antagna namnet 'Charles Heris.'" (Translation: "The name taken in America: 'Charles Harris'").

On 13 June 1873, Olof Henrik, alias Charles, and Sarah left Fride in Gammalgarn Parish, with "Amerika" listed as their destination.³¹ Accompanying them was Charles's mother, the widow (*enkan*) Anna Greta Johansson, who had left her home at Trosings on the same day.³² Two weeks later, the three of them left Göteborg, with New York as their destination.³³ Charles and Sarah Harris have been located in the 1870 and 1880 U.S. Census for Brooklyn. No children are listed in either census.

A number of questions remain to be answered, including the following: Who was Adam Johansson? Did Charles and Sarah have any children? When and where did Sarah die? What happened to Anna Greta Johansson when she came to the U.S.? When and where did she die? Where were Charles and Mary Ann married? And how much more of this sailor's yarn will prove true in the days ahead?

³¹ Ibid.

³² Household Examination Roll (*Husförhörslängd*), Gammalgarn Parish (Gotl.), Trosings, AI:8, 145.

³³ Data from CD-Emigranten: Charles (age 26) and Sarah (age 22) Heris [*sic*] from Gammalgarn (I) and Anna Heris (age 48), also from Gammalgarn, left Göteborg for New York on 1873-06-27; Contract Numbers 7:415:9402 and 7:415:9403, respectively.