

Swedish American Genealogist

Volume 13 | Number 1

Article 2

3-1-1993

Eric Wester - A Mystery Solved

Börje Östberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Östberg, Börje (1993) "Eric Wester - A Mystery Solved," *Swedish American Genealogist*. Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol13/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Eric Wester - A Mystery Solved

Börje Östberg*

A number of commentators on the early Swedish American scene have referred to a mysterious Swede, by the name of Eric Wester, who operated in the Middle West half-way through the last century. All agree that Wester was a rascal, a mountebank and a charlatan, who made his way duping not only his countrymen, but also others with whom he came in contact.¹

Eric Wester in America

All writers aver that Wester was not his real name, but instead Westergren (sic!), and that he had held a job as a clerk at the head office of the Swedish National Bank (*Sveriges Riksbank*) in Stockholm. Furthermore the writers relate that according to a circulating rumor, Wester had, sometime in the 1840s, absconded to America, taking with him the money entrusted to him by the Bank to buy up rags for the paper mill in Tumba, just south of Stockholm. Tumba processed the special paper used to print the Swedish currency at the time.

From these writers, three of whom personally had met Wester - Esbjörn, Johnson and Unonius - we get a pretty good idea of Wester's life and career in the United States. One of the fullest accounts is that of Gustaf Unonius, who admits in his memoirs that Wester had been a guest in his home in Pine Lake, WI. Unonius describes Wester as follows:

"I cannot refrain from speaking of another Swede, Wester by name, one of the many who for a time were our guests in New Upsala. I was later to meet him several times in the course of his eventful life, which is not without its own interest. He had been a rag collector in Sweden, but the first time he visited our colony he was planning on becoming a minister, and had already begun to preach in private homes in the Norwegian settlements."²

Unonius then speaks of Wester's arrival in New York, how he had come under the influence of a converted Swedish shipwright, presumably Olof Gustaf Hedström, and after listening to Hedström's religious conversion, he had himself

*Börje Östberg resides at Herrhagsvägen 9 A, III, Falun, SWEDEN.

become a convert to Methodism. In Pine Lake Wester treated Unonius and his family to one of the sermons he had written, concerning which Unonius says the following:

“As we listened, we had all we could do to maintain our seriousness. It was of the kind of which it is hard to decide whether the writing of it or the listening to it is a greater misuse of God’s name. Let it be enough that the only impression made on us was to deepen our conviction that Wester was better suited to pick rags than to preach the gospel.”³

Unonius then relates how Wester left for New Orleans, where he became a barber, with the motto: “How sharp is the steel of Sweden, come let us test its edge. From New Orleans Wester proceeded to Bishop Hill, IL, where he became Erik Jansson’s personal barber. Then followed short stints in Peru, IL and Galesburg, IL, before Wester finally settled in Princeton,IL, where he not only practiced the barber’s trade, but also tried his hand at various mercantile endeavors, failing in each of them.

Eric Johnson, the son of Erik Jansson, the sect leader, was another writer who had met Wester. He relates that Wester arrived in Princeton in 1850 and that his real name was Westergren. Johnson admits to not knowing too much of Wester’s murky background but quotes the rumors at the time, that Wester had absconded with the money given him by the bank in Stockholm to buy up rags in Denmark. Johnson also relates how Wester in Princeton failed in trying to realize several commercial schemes, including the failure of The Western Exchange, a banking business which Johnson termed a “wild cat enterprise.” Johnson ends his description of Wester by saying that having failed again in 1859, he skipped town with “\$1,700:00 and a trunk-ful of revolvers, saying that he was going to Chicago, but instead traveled to Dallas,TX, where he was residing in poverty in 1880.”⁴

Johnson’s final assessment of Wester is as follows:

“Had he (i.e.Wester) been honest, everything would have gone well for him, since with his unusual energy and abilities he could have turned everything that fell into his hands into success and good fortune, aided by an assumed piety; but he, like so many other rascals, lacked the ability to be satisfied with normal success, but always had to ‘shoot over the mark’.”⁵

One primary source which has not been noted by any of the above authors, but has been observed by George M. Stephenson,⁶ is his reference to a letter written by Anders Larsson of Chicago to J.E. Ekblom, the bailiff of Öster-

unda Parish (Väst.), and dated Chicago 1 Oct. 1848, in which Anders Larsson, in referring to Wester's sojourn in Bishop Hill, says the following:

"Westerlund (sic!), former clerk at the Royal Bank in Stockholm, now calling himself Wester, whose activities in Sweden are well enough known through the press, and which are no better here since he arrived in America."⁷

So much for the contemporary sources dealing with the Wester identity. In order to try to solve the hundred year-old mystery I determined to see what sources were available in Sweden, which perhaps could give us some clue as to Wester's background and settle once and for all the enigma which has bothered emigration scholars dealing with the early Swedish presence in America.

Eric Wester/Westerlund in Sweden

Eric Wester's original name was Eric Olsson, born in the village of Sterte in Östervåla Parish (Väst.) 16 April 1811, the son of Olof Jansson, a farmer, and Cajsa Larsdotter. There were five other children in the marriage - two sons and three daughters.⁸

Eric was but three years old, when his father died, at the age of 43 years. When he reached his teens he began to train himself as a woodturner and in 1833 moved to Uppsala, the largest city near his home parish. Here he met his wife-to-be, Anna Söderlind, a farmer's daughter, seven years older than Eric. She came from Grävsta in Skuttunge Parish (Upps.), and had arrived in Uppsala a few years before Eric.⁹

The following year, in 1834, the two of them moved to Stockholm, where they were married. On 27 May 1835 they had a son, Johan Adolf. Eric doubtless continued his trade as a woodturner, since Stockholm provided a good market for all types of turned items, such as chair and table legs, wooden boxes, mortars, tool handles, fire extinguishers made of wood, and all types of sailing gear such as blocks and tackle. In the meanwhile Anna Söderlind procured employment as janitress in a house on Kungsholmen, which housed the city and county institution for persons afflicted with venereal diseases. The family also resided in the same house.

In April 1839 Eric, who now used his new surname, that of Westerlund, *not* Westergren, was employed by the Tumba Paper Mill, assigned to Stockholm as a clerk. His duties consisted mainly of procuring the essential materials in Stockholm for the production at the plant in Tumba, as well as its maintenance.

These items varied, but could be anything the mill needed, such as cast iron pipe, machinery parts, slaked lime for concrete, heavy paper for wrapping small bank notes, stitching needles for the binding operation at the plant, as well as silver wire, used in the watermarking of the paper.¹⁰

Much of this goods could be procured in Stockholm, but some wares had to be ordered and brought into the capital from other parts of Sweden. Westerlund received these shipments in Stockholm and then saw to it that the items were shipped to Tumba. Additionally his duties consisted of transporting the currency paper from Tumba to the printing plant belonging to Sweden's National Bank (*Riksbanken*) in Stockholm.

Westerlund carried out several assignments for the director of the Tumba Paper Mill, Professor Jonas Bagge. These services were performed in addition to his ordinary duties. When Bagge, during the autumn of 1840, was to visit Stockholm, Westerlund arranged lodgings for him at the home of "Mr. Billmansson, who lives directly across from the Iron and Steel Institute (*Järnkottoret*), on the second floor," as it is stated in a letter to Bagge from Westerlund. Gustaf Olof Billmansson was a notary clerk in the Trade and Economy Office, a part of the Stockholm city administration.

On another occasion Westerlund informed Bagge in a letter that a keg of Norwegian herring had arrived in Stockholm from Falun, as a gift to "Mr. Professor". Bagge had earlier been a teacher in the School of Mines in Falun.

Westerlund had a knack for seeing to it that he was well liked by the officials at the paper plant. During the summer of 1841 his salary was raised from 62 1/2 to 70 *Riksdaler* every three months, in addition to "shoe money" amounting to 15 *Riksdaler* every six months,

But Westerlund perceived other possibilities of earning more money by conducting business in products, which he knew that the paper mill was interested in procuring. In order to obtain suitable paper for the production of currency paper, it was necessary to purchase textile rags. Often the demand for this raw material was so great that the need could not be met. This was true, despite the fact that Tumba had agents operating in various parts of the country, who often were enticed by the management with the gift of a sterling silver tumbler if the agent had been very successful.

Soon after his employment by the Tumba mill Westerlund began buying up rags for delivery to the plant. His activity increased as time went on. In September 1841 alone, he delivered rags for a total of 760 *Riksdaler*, which he received for the material. Obviously he had to pay for the rags before delivery to the mill, but he now began to plan his coup.

Westerlund convinced the management of the paper mill to advance him and his two colleagues in Stockholm the sum of 1,000 *Riksdaler* in order to buy up rags. The three individuals signed the promissory note in May of 1841, but Westerlund alone drew the money. Then he continued his work as usual until the month of September. He then disappeared without lifting his pay for the second quarter of 1841. But the advance he had received, which amounted to almost four years' annual salary, was not an insignificant amount of capital to begin a new career on the other side of the ocean.

Westerlund's colleagues, who had signed the promissory note, were now the direct victims of the coup. They were Jan Lindgren, clerk in the Stockholm city administration and J. Berglind, a clerk in the city's auction house. The loan was to be paid before the end of 1841. Both of the signatories on 1 December asked for additional time to raise the funds, and were given an extra month's time. The debt was paid, Tumba had lost nothing, but two well-heeled Stockholm citizens were out 500 *Riksdaler* each.

No evidence has been discovered so far which can document Westerlund's flight from Sweden. He does not appear on any passport lists, which is understandable. Perhaps the American sources come closer to the truth when they published the rumor that Westerlund was to go to Helsingør. If he did, he could have traveled from Denmark to America, either via England or one of the continental ports.

Additional material concerning Westerlund/Wester's later life in the U.S. has been furnished by Nils William Olsson, who found Eric Wester as having acted as a witness in the Bureau County, IL Court's naturalization proceedings in Princeton, IL, where he appears a half dozen times, on behalf of his Swedish friends, the last time 4 Jan. 1858.¹¹ Mr. Olsson has also found Eric Wester as a barber, residing in Dallas, TX in 1860, according to the Federal Census of that year.¹² Nothing has been found as to what happened to Eric Wester's wife and son.

Despite the fact that both Norelius and Olson categorically state that Westerlund/Wester was a charter member of the Swedish Lutheran Church in Princeton in 1854, he cannot be found in the existing Princeton records. His entry in these records, which would have given us a notation of his birth data, would constitute positive proof that Westerlund and Wester were the same person.. That Wester was indeed a charter member, despite the omission of his name on the membership roster, is proved by the fact that he signed the resolution, dated Princeton 16 June 1853 (sic!), which became the basis for the organization of "The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church in Princeton, Bureau County, Illinois."¹³

A comparison of Eric Westerlund's signature on the promissory note executed in Stockholm 29 May 1841 and that of Eric Wester on the Princeton church resolution, dated 16 June 1853, shows that these signatures demonstrate

certain similarities, despite the fact that twelve years separate the episodes. Even though we lack birth data for Wester in the U.S., all other evidence tends to show that Eric Westerlund and Eric Wester were one and the same person.

Notes

¹ Lars Paul Esbjörn, "Diary of a Journey to the East Coast" in *Augustana Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, p. 336; Eric Johnson and Carl Fredrik Peterson, *Svenskarne i Illinois* (Chicago 1880), pp. 184-185; Eric Norelius, *De svenska luterska församlingarnas och svenskarne historia i Amerika*, I-II (Rock Island, IL 1890, 1916), I, p. 478; Ernst W. Olson, *History of the Swedes of Illinois*, I-III (Chicago 1908), I, pp. 190,295-297,496,498-499; Gustaf Unonius, *A Pioneer in Northwest America*. The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius, I-II (Chicago 1950, 1960) I, pp. 318-322.

² *Unonius*, I, p. 318.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319.

⁴ *Svenskarne i Illinois*, pp. 184-185.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.185.

⁶ George M. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration* (Minneapolis, MN 1932), p. 67, n.42.

⁷ This letter, from the *Anna Lindevall Collection* in the District Archives of Uppsala (*Landsarkivet*), is remarkable in that Larsson asked a number of leading Swedes in Chicago to sign his letter in order to vouch for the accuracy of the statements made. These Swedes were - J. Holm from Kalmar, J.C. Jonsson, former sergeant in the Royal Second Life Guard Regiment in Stockholm, Frans A. Jansson from Stockholm, N.F. Åström from Skåne, C. Hofgren from Köping, C.E. Ramstedt from Köping, J.F. Björkman from Småland, M. Schönbeck from Skåne, Carl Johan Börjesson from Gävle, C.F. Fredricsson from Västerås, Petter Olsson from Skåne and Pehr Ersson, A. Thorsell and J.P. Källman, all from Västmanland.

⁸ *Östervåla Parish Records*, District Archives of Uppsala.

⁹ *Skuttunge Parish Records*, District Archives of Uppsala.

¹⁰ *Official documents of Tumba Paper Mill 1839-1841* in The Swedish National Archives (*Riksarkivet*), Stockholm.

¹¹ *Naturalization Records*, Bureau County Court, Princeton, IL.

¹² *Federal Census*, Dallas County, TX for 1860.

¹³ A facsimile of the resolution appears in *Fourscore Years of Grace*. Anniversary Album Eightieth Anniversary First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Princeton, IL (Princeton, IL 1934), p. 6.

Stockholm den 29 May 1841.

E. Westerlund

E. P. Lagerantz
E. M. Carter
A. G. Jansson
L. J. Sjöström

Anders P. Lagerantz
Jacob Nyman
Lars Andersson

Eric Westerlund's signature in Stockholm 1841 compared to Eric Wester's signature in Princeton, IL 1853.