

A story about a house - A tale of two immigrant families

Prelude...

Let me share a small but improbable story how two immigrant families' path through life intersects at a café in Portland, Oregon. The object for the intersection between the families is a farm located in Södra Finnskoga, Värmland, Sweden, half around the world. With this in mind, I will use the beautiful lyrics in the well known song "Ack Värmland du sköna" from the play "Värmlandsflickan" (1822). The song reflects many immigrants' sentimental views of Värmland from far, far away.

*Ack, Värmland, du sköna, du härliga land!
Du krona för Svea rikets länder!
Ja, om jag komme mitt i det förlovade land,
till Värmland jag ändå återvänder.
Ja, där vill jag leva, ja, där vill jag dö.
Om en gång ifrån Värmland jag tager mig en mö,
så vet jag att aldrig jag mig ångrar.*

The story...

This story came about by a chance conversation between two friends in Portland, Oregon. Leif, has been translating immigrant biographies for the group SRIO (Swedish Roots in Oregon) led by Lars Nordström. In November, Lars mentioned that he was going to Sweden to ski in January 2008.

"Leif asked where he was going".

"I'm going to Värmland", Lars said.

"Where in Värmland" Leif asked, as we have spent a lot of time in Värmland.

"Kindsjön in northern Värmland", Lars answered.

"I know where that is, and I've been there", Leif said.

No one could have looked more surprised than Lars did. "You are the first person I've met who has ever heard of the place", Lars said. Leif told him to talk to his wife, GunMarie, as her mother has her roots there, and GunMarie spent a lot of time there growing up in the 1950 - 1960's. GunMarie and Lars then compared information about the place and they, to their astonishment, discovered that they were talking about the same homestead, Nergården in Kindsjön, Värmland.



Location of Värmland in Sweden



Nergården, 1952
Photo: Nils Olof Engström



Nergården, 1952
Photo: Nils Olof Engström

Thus the basis for this story is the tale of the old and the new ownership of a farm in northern Värmland, Sweden. One family is tied to the old and one to the new ownership over a period of more than one hundred years and spanning across two continents.

The story of the old family...

We have been able to follow the old family back to Johan Larsson, who was a crofter in Dundern, Finnskoga Värmland.

- Johan Larsson, crofter at Dundern b.1838
- w. Anna Johansdotter b. 1838
- s. Jon, Lumberjack in Kindsjön b. 1864
- w. Anna Tomasdotter b. 1863
- s. Teodor b. 1891
- d. Alma b. 1894
- d. Signe b. 1897
- s. Alfred Jonathan b. 1899
- d. Milda b.1905
- d. Julia b. 1905
- d. Elin b. 1908

(Information: Södra Finnskoga Hembygdsförening, Tomta Skrockarberget, Värmland)



Three Generations Larsson, early 1900's

In the late 1800's, Jon decided to build his own home named Nergården in Kindsjön not far away from Dundern (only remaining known picture dates from 1952). In the early 1920's three families lived on the farm. Alfred, Teodor and Alma with their families.

Alfred is the person of interest for this story. He married Dagmar early 1924 and they had two children Ingrid (1924) and Dagny (1927). Tragedy struck the young family when Dagmar died in 1927, only 27 years old, from complications of childbirth and tuberculoses.



Alfred & Dagmar

As Alfred was working as a lumberjack, his two little girls had to be placed with relatives. Alma and Hjalmar Gunderson took care of newborn Dagny. Alfred wanted Ingrid to live with his dead wife's relatives, who were very well off and lived in a big house. He put little Ingrid on his bicycle and pedaled all the way to these relatives. Ingrid, though, cried her heart out the whole time, so poor Alfred had to bring her back home to Nergården again.

That turned out to be lucky for her, because most of the family on Dagmar's side (except one brother and one sister) died from tuberculoses. Ingrid spent time with other relatives, but returned home, after Alfred remarried. Ingrid then got three half siblings. She lived in the house in Kindsjön until she was about seven or eight years old.



Ingrid, 1924

Dagny stayed in the house with the Gunderson family until adulthood. She built a summer-residence, a log-cabin, on the same property as the main house in Kindsjön. The summer-residence is still in her ownership, thus her presence at the property preserves the link to the old family with the homestead.

GunMarie, who is Ingrid's daughter and represents the fifth generation of the old family in this story, has been visiting this homestead many times during her earlier part of life, mostly as a child with her parents and brother. In 1952 when the picture of the house was taken she was then five years old during this visit. Her father and his brother (the photographer) were on their knees to hand-plane the kitchen floor in preparation for a new carpet.

The last time she visited the house, was in 1970 with her husband Leif and their oldest son Johan (then 4 years old). In 1974, the house was sold, and the new owners were Lars Nordström and his friends.

GunMarie emigrerade till USA, with her husband Leif, in 1982.

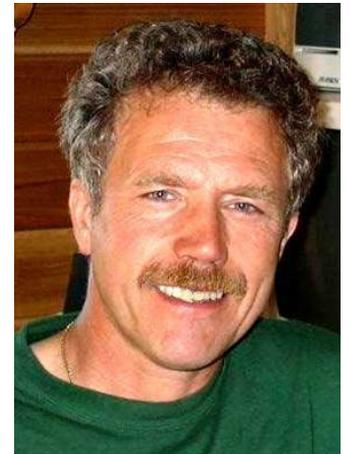


GunMarie and her brother in Kindsjön, ca 1952

The story of the new family...

Early in 2008 GunMarie told the readers of the "New Sweden Newsletter" the story of an unbelievable coincidence. At the 2007 ScanFair GunMarie and Lars discovered that her family's old farm in Northern Värmland, where her mother was born, was the same place that had come into Lars' hands in the early 1970s! What are the chances of that? That they—out of the 50,000 Swedes in the United States today—would run into each other in Portland, Oregon, and discover that they had connections to the one and same house in rural Sweden?

In her article, GunMarie told some interesting stories about her family's life there, but how had Lars become an owner of the same farm? As soon as Lars open his mouth, any Swede knows that he is not a *värmlänning*—he doesn't speak *värmländska*—but *stockholmska*, which is indeed where he was born and raised. His father came from Gävle and his mother from Västerbotten in the far north, so he doesn't have any family ties to Värmland. What brought him there was actually the boy scouts. Every few years the group of Stockholm boy scouts to which he belonged would organize a week-long summer camp in Södra Finnskoga. To city kids it was all very exotic. Supplies had to be rowed in across a lake, and the forests seemed deep and endless. They slept in tents, hiked in the woods, swam, and swapped at mosquitoes and gnats around the camp fire at night. And without knowing it, they fell in love with the place—the woods, the hills, the lakes and streams. This was in the mid 1960s, before the large scale logging of the following decade completely denuded and altered the landscape.



Lars Nordström



Nergården, a couple of years ago

But it was not the boy scouts that brought him and his old boy scout friends back to Värmland ten years later. It was the back-to-the-land movement. In the early 1970s many young people in Sweden were inspired by the notion of leaving the city for a new life in the country.

An alternative life style was part of it; music was part of it; organic agriculture was part of it; communal living was part of it. It was all very romantic, and they were all very idealistic and naïve. In northern Värmland many young people had gathered to explore these things, and in 1973, Lars, together with three friends from Stockholm started looking for a place of their own. After a year of checking out real estate listings all over Södra Finnskoga, they found Nergården, a beautifully located farm in the village of Kindsjön. The large farmhouse had been lived in continuously and was in good repair, sitting on top of a small ridge overlooking large, gently sloping meadows that stretch down to the lake. There were many useful outbuildings as well. The four friends immediately bought it, quarter shares each.

The following summer they all moved there, the second farm in the village to be owned by “outsiders.” (Prior to us, a German family had bought the old school house and used it for a summer vacation place.) However, it did not take very long before reality began to intrude: the only one who was able to find a job was the girlfriend of Kalle Jansson, Lars’ boy scout buddy. She had started working as a grade school teacher in Bograngen, a slightly larger village 10 km north of Kindsjön and close to the Norwegian border. Of the original friends, the two of them are the only ones who have managed to live continuously in the old farmhouse since 1975. They have raised four children there, none of which live in the village now. Lars’ money ran out after six months, and ever since it has been a place for him to visit, but not to live in. The other friends could not find work there either, and over the years two of the others have sold their shares, so now it is just Lars and Kalle Jansson and his wife left as owners.



Bograngen in early 1940's

In the early 1980s, when Cynthia and Lars lived in Uppsala, they decided that it would be nice to have their own house, so we bought an old log cabin and had it moved to the property. During the next three summers, Lars and his father, with the help of Kalle Jansson and many friends, rebuilt the old log cabin. Then in 1984, Lars emigrated to Oregon, and ever since the cabin has waited patiently for his sporadic visits. Like all houses, they are never quite done, and lately he has added a bathroom and remodeled the kitchen. The main house has seen some changes as well. It has been painted twice. The balcony has also been rebuilt twice, and beautiful new floors have been installed in all the downstairs rooms. The kitchen has also recently been entirely remodeled.



Repainting the house

During the more than 30 years Lars has had ownership in this farm, the village has seen many changes. When they came in 1974, there were few outsiders. The locals were all from that area, or from Norway, since the border is only 10 miles away and marrying across the border is very common. Today the village is much more international, with perhaps half of all the houses owned by Germans. In 1974 the population consisted of retirees, locals who had worked in Södra Finnskoga all their lives. Today, fewer and fewer houses are occupied year-round. They have become vacation homes, places people come to in summer or winter.

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