

The Mystery of a Gravestone

when a not-so-young-girl discovers her Swedish roots...



Immigrants

The background...

Everyone deserves to be remembered for a life well-lived, but my great grandfather, Per Gustaf Svensson, who died many years ago in Årnäs, Västergötland, Sweden, had no such permanent honor.



Per Gustaf Svensson

No headstone existed, and his grave lay unmarked for over 90 years. Years later I have my answers.

The beginning...

This is the story of the Per Gustaf Svensson family and their journey to America that forever changed their lives, and mine, as I'm in the later part of the family lineage. I'm Kristi Johnson-James, third generation from the immigrant family that came to America in early 1900. I'm still not exactly sure what sets Swedish-Americans apart from main-stream Americans, but I had an experience that made that part of me much more real.



Vedbladstorp, Årnäs, Sweden

From a local historical booklet "Det kommer mera från Kulturföreningen i Årnäs," published in 1996 (More from the cultural association in Årnäs), we know that my great grandfather was Per Gustaf Svensson, born in Forshem, Sweden, June 6, 1869. My great grandmother was Anna Kristina Persdotter, born in Forshem, Sweden on August 12, 1863. They had nine children born in Forshem.



Booklet

My great grandfather had worked as a "torpare" (crofter). A crofter is someone who rents and works a very small farm like the one where they lived at Vedbladstorp in Årnäs. The soil was filled with rocks, and clawing a living from the land was an enormous task, but their hearts said "This is the land, your dream is here...".

The journey back to the old country...

When we discovered the mystery of the missing gravestone in 2006, I decided to be the relative that would right this wrong. As a child, I had wondered why he left behind my great grandmother, Anna Kristina and nine children. Did he abandon the family? How was I to know the truth? It was not a topic of discussion amongst my taciturn Swedish relatives.



Per and Anna Kristina

So, at age 55, I decided it was time for me to make my own inquiries. As I prepared to journey to my great grandmother's house in the woods in the spring of 2006, many emotions were welling up inside me. Why did we never talk of my great grandfather? Why did my great grandmother abruptly leave Sweden, her children in tow? Maybe if I touched the soil, the answer would be revealed. Whatever it was, I was ready to accept the truth.



My great grandmother and four of her children the summer before they emigrated to America on Sept. 10, 1919 . Please note the empty space they left where my great grandfather would have stood.

My husband, Denver, and I booked a room in Lidköping, and opened the phonebook. We found my cousin Erik's name, and dialed the phone. Oh yes, he would be right over to fetch us! He took us immediately to meet his father, Ingmar, who possessed a wealth of information. It turns out that Ingmar is the family historian in Sweden, and he was delighted to meet his counterpart in America, Denver.

Denver, the Swede by marriage, was invaluable. Ingmar speaks no English, but this was no barrier to Denver. By the end of the day, we were standing precisely over the spot where my grandfather was buried. Ingmar, speaking on the cell phone to Erik, proved to be more reliable than a GPS!

This led to a wonderful meeting with another cousin, Roland, and his wife, Annika. She also is an amateur genealogist keen to link the Svensson family in Sweden to relatives in America. We married well on both sides of the Atlantic, as you see!

The house stood in the woods, sadly neglected. But somehow, it beckoned me. I boldly queried my cousin. Why did my great grandmother leave? Where was my great grandfather? Had he deserted his wife and nine children?

My cousin looked at me with soft, gentle love. He reached down, and picked up a handful of rocky soil. "Kristi, this is what stole your great grandfather. He worked himself to death." No more, no less. It all came to me in a flood of emotion. He loved his family, but he had been stolen away. He was barely 48 years old when he died. His widow Anna Kristina and her children subsequently emigrated to America.

Making it right...

No gravestone! They were too poor to afford such a luxury. Per Gustaf Svensson, my great grandfather, was buried within the churchyard walls at Forshem Church, but his resting place was unmarked. This would not stand! I returned in 2007, hoping to remedy this situation. With the help of my cousins, and the church's blessings, the grave will be marked. The exact spot was located, verified by records. Then, I asked my relatives to help me commemorate his gentle life.

A stone, ironically culled from the soil of the harsh land where he toiled, will finally honor a man who loved his family, and gave them his all. I hope my life will honor his. No more, no less.



Rocky soil



Forshem Church



Gravestone for Per Gustaf Svensson

So five years later I have my answers. Everyone pitched in; a stone was ordered and engraved with the proper dates. We were given the exact position of the grave by the church, which was right where Ingmar had told us it was. The Swedes had accurate records, and for this, we thank them. During our visit this summer we wrapped up the last minute details and the gravestone was laid shortly after we returned home.

Conclusion...

When a not-so-young-girl discovers her Swedish roots and, along the way, reconnects with caring relatives, she knows it's never too late to honor the ones who came before her. It is very important that we don't allow the faces from earlier generations fade into the shadows of lost memories.



Vedbladstorp today



The family at Vedbladstorp



The Per Gustaf Svensson family about 1914

Story written by Leif Rosqvist, the editor of New Sweden Heritage Society and SRIO newsletters. The story is based on information by the family here represented by Kristi Johnson-James.

More reading:

The booklet "Det Kommer Mera Från Kulturföreningen i Årnäs 1996". This booklet list all of the emigrants from this community and also documented the farms in this community. The owner of the book said that this booklet was available on the internet.

Information about the "Forshems Kyrka" is available on internet by typing The Church of Forshem into the search section of Google.

Swedish Roots In Oregon literatures about Swedish immigration into Oregon
(www.swedishrootsinoregon.org)