Searching for My Ancestors

Pauline Harrington

Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol15/iss2/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
SEARCHING FOR MY ANCESTORS

Six months ago I decided to go in search of my Swedish ancestors. Not sledding over frozen tundra to some far corner of Sweden but to archives to find out who they were and where they came from. Although it would be fun to visit small villages, go to stave churches where they had been christened, married and buried, and discover the life these early relatives had lived centuries ago, I had to settle for long hours in libraries trying to find that crucial clue to my past. Maybe from them I have inherited my interest in livestock and Scandinavian knitting.

At first I had all sorts of romanticized ideas of searching for my past and where it might lead me. Well, the reality has been quite different. This article is the story of my search which is still far from being complete. There have been times of frustration and downright boredom but also moments of excitement and a feeling of achievement. Most of my time has been spent looking at microfilms in large government buildings or in small family history centers, not the picturesque visits to tranquil cemeteries and family farms. The steps I have taken in this quest are unique to my particular set of circumstances, so I do not intend to supply the definitive way to do an ancestor search, but only to give some basic information on resources available and above all, to encourage others to do the same.

The only things I knew about my Swedish ancestry were that my father’s parents emigrated from Sweden as children and somewhere in the United States met and then married. Family history and ancestry were not topics of conversation at home. My paternal grandparents had been proud to become Americans. As I was to later learn, they had worked hard to become homeowners and send their children to college, thus seemingly to make a choice to concentrate on integrating into American society rather than preserving ties with the past.

In order to start my search, however, I needed some names and dates. I knew that my father, Charles Olson, was born in 1900 in Cleveland, Ohio, and that he had an uncle, Carl Fiske, who settled in Barrington, Rhode Island, some time after World War II. These two facts were all I had but they have proved to be good enough.

I first went to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the Archives is to collect all documents which relate to an individual and his/her contact with the Federal government. Thus within this typically large government office building covering the block on Pennsylvania Avenue between 7th and 9th Avenues is a wealth of information. The Federal census has been compiled every ten years since 1790 and the records, with some notable gaps, are available on microfilm. Federal legislation requires that 72 years pass before the release of census data to the public so that data after 1920 is not available. Our westward expansion is documented with copies of all Federal land transfers and homestead applications. The latter can be useful in genealogical work as they often contain the nationality of the immigrant applicant and sometimes the date of arrival and port of arrival. Other useful information ranges from naturalization records of Federal courts, military personnel records and pension information beginning with revolutionary war veterans and passenger arrival lists since 1820 at most major ports.

I was told by the very helpful and patient archivists to begin with the census data for 1920 because it is the most recent and might have the most information. Since the census is organized by county or town, the big question is how to find a person amid all the data. I was assured that there were going to be a lot of Olsons in Ohio in 1920. Fortunately the Archives is a part of the Federal government which seems to be well organized. The first thing to do is to “Soundex” a name. This is a process by which certain letters of the alphabet are given numerical values so that every name is reduced to a code beginning with the first letter and followed by three numbers. The code for Olson is 0425, so I went to roll 0425 for Ohio and started looking. The Soundex lists families by head of household. Since minor children are listed under their parent, I had to find my grandfather. Not knowing his name, I began the
tedious process of scrolling through the microfilm looking for a family card which listed a Charles Olson born in 1900. Naturally, I had to get to almost the very end of the listings before I got lucky. (I have found that my family members are usually at the end of any list they are on!) The soundex card listed Charles Olson as the son of Carl G. Olson, age 49, born in Sweden, a naturalized citizen who owned his own home in Cleveland. The card also listed his wife, Alma, and mother-in-law, Sophie Fiske, both from Sweden. I knew I had the right family.

Soundex cards contain references to the volume, sheet and line of the town where the family lives. Therefore I got the microfilm for the Cleveland census and found the data for my father's family.

Census data told me that my grandfather had emigrated in 1889 from Sweden, became a naturalized citizen in 1891, owned his own home, worked in a mill, married his wife in 1898 and had two children, Irene, born in 1899, and Charles, born in 1900. My grandmother and her mother emigrated from Sweden in 1882 and also became citizens in 1891. While the place of birth for my grandparents was listed as Sweden, it was no more specific than that. I had acquired more information on my family but not what I wanted, where did they come from in Sweden.

The archivists suggested that I look at the passenger lists for the years of emigration. If I could find the part of Sweden from which my family came or even the port from which they left, I might be able to trace back to find their home by using the information available through the Mormon church, which has gathered world-wide material relating to family history. Thus started one of the most frustrating yet interesting parts of this whole project.

The National Archives has passenger lists of vessels entering the major American ports from 1800 to the mid 1950's. The lists are not complete and are not necessarily inclusive for the periods which they cover. If you are lucky, your ancestors will have emigrated at a time when an index was compiled for the lists. I was not lucky. I assumed that Carl Olson entered the country from the port of New York. This was purely a guess but I was told by the archivists that it was a good one since he probably went to the mid-west, thus eliminating the southern and Pacific ports. New York has an index for country, last residence, intended destination, the location of the compartment occupied on board and date and cause of death if the individual died on route.

After looking at the manifests of over a thousand boats, there are some general observations to be made. A significant number of the lists are illegible due to poor copying and damaged originals, both of which are often combined with impossible handwriting. (If they had only had a computer, or at least a typewriter!) After a while I got to recognize the different handwriting of the clerks and was relieved when I got a good one. Every ship's list had to be examined name by name. Some boats contained passengers from mostly one country, but even though they were Irish or Italian, it was possible that they contained an emigrating deck hand from another country.

Passengers who traveled in first class cabins received more detailed and favorable description. The men were mostly listed by their profession as a doctor, lawyer, businessman, while women, married and unmarried, were described as 'lady'. If, however, they were not in first class but in the lower berths a man was most often just a 'laborer' regardless of whether he was a carpenter or bricklayer. A woman who had the misfortune to be unmarried was generally classified as 'spinster'.

Looking for a Carl Olson from Sweden is like looking for a John Smith in the United States. Swedes generally follow a 'patronymic' naming system whereby a child's last name identifies him or her as the son or daughter of the father, using the latter's first name. Hence, I was looking for a Carl who was the son of Olaf, two of the more common Swedish names. (A daughter would have the name Oldotter - daughter of Olaf.)

I started looking at the microfilm lists of the ships arriving on January 1, 1888 and so far have covered those arriving on August 10, 1888. A passenger list might contain the name of the individual, his/her age, sex, 'calling' or occupation, relation to traveling companions, his/her 1820-46 and 1897-1948. I was looking for someone who came in 1888. Now the fun started.

I started looking at the microfilm lists of the ships arriving on January 1, 1888 and so far have covered those arriving on August 10, 1888. A passenger list might contain the name of the individual, his/her age, sex, 'calling' or occupation, relation to traveling companions, his/her
As the microfilm rolled on, I came across dozens of Carl Olsons but not the right one. Some were too old, others too young, some going to Montana or other places where I did not think my grandfather had ever been. It was not terribly comforting to be told that the lists were not always accurate, ages could be approximate and destination was often not exact as the individual might not really know or never get to where he or she intended. I did find one Carl Olson of the right age and going to Minnesota where there is some family connection but, alas, he died before the ship docked. This line of inquiry is obviously incomplete and I may have to keep going through the lists until December 31, 1888 unless I can get information in another manner.

The search for information on my grandmother has been more successful. Rather that look through passenger lists again, I decided to find out what I could about her brother, Uncle Carl who lived in Barrington. I spent a day in the town library looking through almost ten years of the Barrington Journal. At last I found his obituary, which contained useful information, describing his place of birth as Varmland, Sweden where he had emigrated in 1882.

I thought I had finally found what I wanted. Sadly, I had not. Speaking to a Swedish friend, I found that Varmland is a province of Sweden, so saying one comes from Varmland is similar to saying one comes from New England.

At that point I decided to investigate the information contained in the Mormon Family History Library. The Mormon Church has spent large sums of money to establish what is reputed to be the largest collection of family history data in the world. The impetus for this collection is founded in the Mormon theology. When I first went to a Family History Library, I found a booklet entitled Why Family History? With a belief in the unity of the family and "that we are all spirit children of God, the Eternal Father" the Church has utilized its resources to enable all to locate their family, both past and present. The identification of the extended family will enable those living to work to join those now dead through vicarious baptism and thus be united in resurrection. As the Mormons state, "if through the sealing power of the holy priesthood of God it is possible to have husbands, wives, and children sealed together, would we not also desire to be sealed to our fathers and mothers and so continue until all members of our families have been sealed? Since we eventually come to a point of common ancestry, we must have great concern for all persons. All men and women who are or ever were born on this earth may receive such blessings if they are willing to accept them."

It is thanks to this resource that I have been able to locate the birthplace of my grandmother. The amount of material available through the Family History Library is massive and it seems to enlarge every time I try a new line of investigation. At the time I was working at the Archives, I was talking to one of the researchers who was tracing his family and I asked him if he had used the Mormon materials. He said that he had not as it just seemed too overwhelming; there was so much information available. I found it hard to believe that any place would have a larger collection of paperwork than the government and that it could intimidate a Federal bureaucrat. But he was right, they do have more; but I view it as exciting rather than intimidating.

The Mormon church has collected records around the world relating to individuals and their family life. The material is truly international and each country presents its unique problems. Once collected, the original documents are transferred to microfilm or microfiche which are stored at the main center in Salt Lake City, Utah. A computer data base is also being established for recently researched families. Throughout the world there are smaller Family History Libraries. At most of these the public
may have access to the microfiche indices and thus order the microfilms for viewing at the local library. I used the library located in Foxboro as it was the most convenient.

As the Mormon collection is vast and is constantly growing, the libraries sell booklets, for a very small fee, detailing the information that is available for each state in the United States and each foreign country and instructions on how to access it. Also listed is a bibliography of other sources of information, which are available but not contained in the Mormon collection, such as books on genealogy. I bought the material on Sweden and Ohio, studied it and decided how to proceed.

For Sweden there is a wide range of material available, much of it going back to the seventeenth century and some even earlier. Among the materials collected are records of school attendance, the probate of estates giving information on heirs and the location of property, military and pension lists, guild lists of occupations, vital statistics collected by the government including emigration and passenger lists, and parish church records. As the government in most cases did not begin to collect vital records until the middle of the nineteenth century, parish records may be the only ones available. The Lutheran Church was recognized as the state church of Sweden in the early sixteenth century and started records of parish activities soon after. In the eighteenth century the local parish also collected records for the 'dissenter' faiths such as Catholics, Jews and other Protestant religions, a practice which lasted until 1920 when they were allowed to keep their own records.

In addition to records of births, marriages, baptisms and deaths, the church also aided the government in keeping records of a civil nature. Thus each parish compiled a yearly list of those within the parish who moved to another country, the emigration lists. These were the records that helped me locate my grandmother's family.

Emigration lists are compiled by parishes within a province. Since I knew that my great uncle came from Varmland, I sent to Salt Lake City for the microfilm of the Varmland emigration lists for 1882. Each parish lists every individual who emigrated during the year. Line by line I looked to see if there was a family named Fiske with two children named Carl and Alma and a mother named Sophie. I do not read Swedish but that turned out to not be a problem as there was another woman at the library who had been working on her Swedish project for over a year and was most helpful. The Library also has booklets with useful genealogical terminology in a variety of languages.

At the end of the Varmland list is the report of the parish of Svanskog. In 1882 Jan Frederick and Sophie Fiske emigrated to the United States with their children Carl, Anna and Alma. They were also accompanied by Jan's parents, Andars and Kristina. I had finally come to the end of my search for my grandmother.

I still have my grandfather to work on. I am currently going through the material in the Mormon library which has been collected from Ohio to see if somewhere there is a document that lists the parish or province of Carl Olson. The Ohio documents include cemetery records, federal and state census records, state compiled vital statistics, church records, many court records, property records, military records, naturalization and citizenship records and even some newspaper obituaries. So far I have gone through the naturalization petitions for Cleveland in 1891. No luck. Not only did I not find him but the petitions only give the country of emigration. I am currently waiting to get the records of marriages in the Cleveland area for 1898. I hope my grandparents were married in Cleveland and that these records are more complete. If they are not I will keep looking and maybe go back to those long and tedious passenger lists.

I have had fun with this project and have developed a real mission to see it to a successful conclusion. As soon as this occurs, I am looking forward to going to Sweden and visiting the homes of my grandparents.

If I were to start over again, I would begin with the Mormon Family History Library. The information is all available through them; the only disadvantage is that it must be ordered and this takes time and a modest amount of money. Contrary to the fears of the researcher in the Archives, it is not intimidating. There is an abundance of material that is well organized, there are many books to guide you and above all there is a friendly staff, knowledgeable and very patient with beginners!

Pauline Harrington is Associate Professor of Political Science