

Emma's Story



By Karen Snowberg

Emma's Story

Preface

In the great emigration from Sweden to America, a larger percentage of its population left the island of Öland than from any other area of Sweden. This is the story of my mormor, my mother's mother, who came to this country from Öland in 1882 at the age of 16. She died when I was six years old.

She would never talk about her family in Sweden or her hard life there, and it was only through her sister's letters, discovered still being kept by our Swedish relatives, that Mormor's story has been fleshed out at last...over 50 years after she passed away. We had a family reunion in Degerhamn in 2005, and an entire day was spent with a second cousin of ours who is both a family and town historian. He told us the history of our family as well as what life was like in 19th century Degerhamn. After that weekend, we finally understood the reasons that caused Mormor to feel alienated from her native land.

The following story is based on letters, conversations, memories, pictures, and knowledge of the period. In effect, it's what I imagine my grandmother may have been thinking in the autumn of her life. Picture her if you will sitting out in her backyard in Minneapolis on a warm, sunny afternoon in early autumn....



Well, I just finished cooking up some applesauce and while that's cooling I can take time to relax a bit. Actually, I'm just sitting here trying to organize my thoughts. I'm supposed to tell my life story to the young girl that lives next door. She has to interview someone old who immigrated to this country. It's for her social studies class. Well, I guess I'm old enough, so let's see..... I'll just close my eyes and think back over my life. I have so many memories, and they cover two different countries since I left my native land of Sweden when I was 16 to come to America and make a better life for myself.



Kalmar Sound (on the Baltic) at Degerhamn, Öland

Degerhamn is on the western side of Öland right on the Kalmar Sound. It also lies right next to the southern part of the Alvaret – the big limestone plateau that covers so much of Öland. We were just a ways north of the king's hunting preserve. I loved all the fields of wildflowers around Degerhamn.

My name is Emma Johnson but I was born Emma Sofie Snöberg in 1871 in the village of Tysslinge. That's near Karlskoga in Örebro län, east of Lake Vänern. My father was named Anders Gustaf Snöberg and my mother's maiden name was Sofia Matilda Norberg. When I was very young, my family left our grandparents behind and moved to Degerhamn on the island of Öland. My father was an alum miner and he and his parents had lived in both Tysslinge and Degerhamn, moving back and forth wherever the alum mines were producing and wherever they thought life might be better for them. Too bad it wasn't really very good in either place.





The Alvaret is 37km (23 miles) long and 15km (9 miles) wide. The thin soil in places gives way to bare limestone outcrops, creating the impression of a barren landscape.



The Alvaret is actually teeming with life and is, in fact, the last refuge for a number of unique plant and animal species. You'll see everything from colorful orchids to soaring skylarks in the spring, from rockroses to golden plovers in summer, from rose hips to cranes in the autumn.

When we first arrived in Degerhamn, the mining company provided us with housing. We all slept and lived in one room and shared a communal kitchen with other families for cooking our meals. I remember the long building we lived in there - lots of families, each with only one room. The unmarried men lived in a separate building across the way from ours and some of the women in our building cooked meals for them.



Shared kitchen of dormitory where families lived until they could manage to buy a house of their own. Many families had to share this small stove for cooking

Eventually we got our own little house. When I look at the big houses here in Minneapolis, it's hard to imagine that I lived in such a very small house with my 3 brothers, my sister, and my parents.



Home to Emma, 3 brothers, 1 sister, and her parents. The house has had a new roof and siding put on, but it's still the same size. Now it's used for a summer vacation house.

I was the oldest child in our family, and very early in life it became clear that my mother would have much preferred that I were another boy. Girls were useless, boys and young men could earn money. She had no patience for me and made it clear that two females could never live under the same roof with each other. She had a hard life, but everyone in town knew she was bad-tempered and stayed out of her way. Fortunately my father was more loving and always had time for me, even after his long days of working at the mines.



Emma's mother - Sofia Matilda Norberg Snöberg

From our house, if you walked up the big hill next to the old alum mines, you'd reach Södra Möckleby. That's where the school and the church were. My family went to church every Sunday since it was required of all the company workers. If our parents wanted to keep their jobs we all had to go to church, and when I was 14 years old I was confirmed there. The whole town was at the mercy of the mining company. When the workers got paid they were even paid with money that could only be used there in the company general store and bakery. We'd call that funny money nowadays.



Södra Möckleby Church

I began to work at the age of 12. Almost everyone in Degerhamn at that time worked in the open-pit limestone quarries. The boys helped with the dynamiting and moving the big stones, and the girls and unmarried women pushed the wheelbarrows in and out to move the smaller pieces of stone. There weren't too many other jobs for girls and women. Of course, you might be able to help in the company bakery, brewery, or store, but there weren't many of those jobs. I was very lucky to finally get a job taking care of the children of the mine owner, but it paid very little, so life continued to be hard. My mother worked at the dock, cleaning fish for the market. In all kinds of weather she had to be out cleaning fish. We were so poor when I was young that we couldn't afford much food. Often mother would bring home some of the fish heads from the fish she had cleaned. She would make a soup, and she and father would eat the fish heads and we children would have the broth to dip our bread in. After my brothers and I started working, we could afford a little more and even had kroppkakor on special occasions.



Open strip limestone mines south of Degerhamn where limestone was mined after the alum mines were exhausted. It was hard work, year-round, outside in all of the elements. No wonder so many moved to America. The girls would haul out the smaller pieces in wheel-barrows after the blasting was done. At one time the limestone was polished by the numerous windmills still seen all over Öland to use in place of marble for flooring. Now it is ground down and used to create some of the hardest, most durable cement in the world.



The company bakery and blacksmith shop – both used the same fireplace, but in back-to-back rooms.



The village windmill where flour was ground for the bakery and for the townspeople.

Everywhere you went, people were talking about going to America. Everyone knew people or family members that had gone. I thought it would be wonderful to be able to go there. My father's brothers, Per Oskar and Carl Johann, finally decided that life would have to be better in America than in Sweden. I remember listening while they were talking about America. It sounded like heaven compared to the hard life we had. Ja, that Per Oskar was a bit of a trouble maker though. He'd done a really dumb thing and stole a suit of clothes. He spent a year and a half in prison. As soon as he got out, he'd had enough of Sweden and decided to start life over in a new country.

The brothers left in 1883 and every time we got a letter from them, all I could think about was America. Then, when I was 16 a miracle happened. My uncle Carl sent me a ticket to come to Minneapolis. I was so excited I could hardly believe it was truly mine.

I had very little to pack to take with me, so I was soon ready to go. The day before I left I took one last walk through the village past the store, the bakery, the factory, and the old grain mill with its big windmill. I walked up the long hill to Södra Möckleby one last time and passed the school and the church. I figured God would hear me just as well if I prayed to him in Minneapolis. I walked out onto the Alvaret for the last time where some of my favorite wild flowers were just beginning to bloom. I'd miss the orchids in the springtime and the big fields of poppies and lupines in the summer, but I was going to live in the big city!



As you can well imagine, the day I left was an emotional one. I was so excited about leaving, but it was difficult to say goodbye to my family. My mother was glad to see me go, of course, but I was really sorry to leave my brothers and little Mina who was only 2 years old. However, the worst was saying goodbye to my father, for he knew if I left he would never see me again. But the boat was waiting at the dock and I had to go. Some of my friends walked with me down to the dock, and I kept waiting for my father to come and say one last farewell to me. The boat's bell rang once – twice – three times, and then the lines were cast off and the anchor pulled up and we left. I thought father had turned his heart against me because he didn't come to the dock to wave goodbye. Many years later, after he had passed away, I learned from Mina that Far took to his bed that day in grief and was unable to work for three days.



Emma Sofie Snöberg

The boat took me to Kalmar where I transferred to the train which took me to Malmö. On May 19th, 1887 I said goodbye to Sweden forever when I boarded another boat to Copenhagen. That was a rough crossing. My ticket only allowed me to travel below deck and there weren't enough seats so I had to stand. I was used to being out in a boat, fortunately, so I didn't get sick like so many did. From Copenhagen I went by boat to Liverpool and then across the Atlantic Ocean to New York. The trip took us six weeks in all.

When the boat landed in New York we got off at Castle Garden – a big building where all immigrants coming to this country were processed. This place was nothing like the castle in Kalmar, that's for sure. We were all so excited and yet frightened to come to this strange, wonderful new country, but, oh!, what a lot of people were there. And all of them speaking such strange-sounding languages. I was glad there were other Swedes on board my ship and we could go through inspection together. When it was my turn to speak to the inspectors, I gave them my travel papers, my passport, and showed them that I had enough money to get me to Minneapolis. When they stamped my papers, I found that in this new country even my last name would be different. They changed it to Snowberg.



Kalmar Castle



Castle Garden was the immigrant processing station before Ellis Island's facility was built.

After that I took the train to Minneapolis. Finally arriving there was a relief, but still quite frightening. Of course, there was nobody there to meet me at the train station as they could have no idea what day I would arrive and I didn't know how to get to my uncle's house! However, I had on my name tag with my destination listed on it, so eventually some Swedes at the train station helped me find the right streetcar to take to go to my Farbror Carl's house. Then the conductor told me where to get off and pointed me in the right direction. I was so glad to finally arrive and see some familiar faces again -- and to take a bath! Uschda! I was so dirty from the trip that I'm surprised they recognized me when I arrived.

I went out right away and started looking for work and began learning English. I knew I'd need to learn English as soon as possible to get a good job. I wanted to become a citizen too, and would need to be able to read and write in English to do that.

My life wasn't exactly easy when I first came here. Farbror Carl drank too much and then he was mean to his wife. I didn't like that. But I still felt bad the day he went to work and never returned. He was a builder, working on the new High Bridge across the Mississippi River in St. Paul. There was an accident and he fell off the bridge and was killed. His wife was left with two children and another one on the way. She was lucky to find another man to marry and then they moved to Wisconsin where he had a homestead. That left me all alone with no place to live, so I got a job in a boarding house where I did the cleaning, cooking, and laundry in exchange for a little pay and the right to sleep in the attic. I was so poor that I had to sleep on the wood floor with only a horse blanket to cover me. I caught typhoid fever and ended up in the hospital - a very poor hospital -- not the kind any wealthy person would ever go to. I was very lucky that I lived through that and was able to work again. A lot of young people died because they didn't have medication to help them get over such serious illnesses.

As soon as I was able, I was back scrubbing those floors again. I'll never forget those floors. I had to get down on my hands and knees and scrub them every night until they were white. At the end of the next day the men would come back in with their big, old, heavy, dirty boots and I'd have to start all over again.

Not long after that I met Benjamin Johnson at the boarding house where I was working. He was a very nice man who had come to America with his family when he was two. They were from the southern part of Sweden near Kristianstad. When his family moved here they had such a rough trip across the Atlantic because of bad weather, that it took them 3 months to make the trip from Sweden and Benjamin's brother Bettcher was born someplace in the Atlantic Ocean instead of here in America. They settled south of here on a farm outside of Welch. That was enough traveling for them, they never left that area after that. Only Benjamin ventured as far as the big city of Minneapolis and got a job as a fireman. I thought he was quite handsome in his uniform.



Benjamin Johnson

We were married when I was 18 years old. Benjamin worked really long hours and sometimes days at a time, but it was a very good job. We didn't suffer at all during the Depression because his salary went on the same as always because he was captain of the firehouse. I remember our children were quite impressed that he got to ride the streetcar free!

We were blessed with three children during the first eight years of our life together. Edna was first, then Harriett and Carl. They were all raised and most of them married with families of their own by the time our youngest, Helen, was born. She was really the apple of my husband's eye. He spent a lot of time with her after he retired and even taught her how to drive when she was 12 so she could drive when he was no longer able to.



Wedding photo of Emma Snowberg and Benjamin Johnson



Helen learned to drive this car when she was 12. Here she is (in the center) with her nieces and nephews.



Emma and her first child Edna



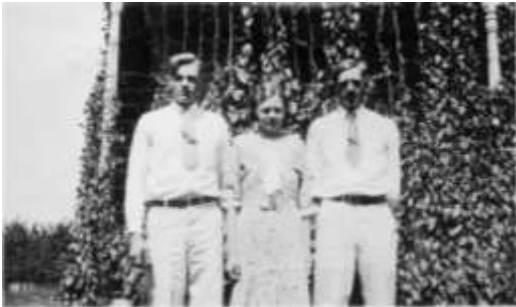
Emma's Family (Photo from 1922): Emma, Helen, Florence, John, Edna, and Harriet. This picture shows the difference in age between Emma's older daughters Florence & Edna and her youngest daughter Helen (who was younger than some of her nieces and nephews).

Benjamin had to retire when he was 62 because of ill health. His lungs were very bad from breathing in so much smoke at fires and he also had pernicious anemia. Then he developed cancer of the esophagus and died just 5 years later.

Now a curious thing happened with Helen. I took her with me several times when I went by train to visit my Snowberg cousins on their farm in Unity, Wisconsin. When she was 16 I sent her alone and it was on that trip that she finally noticed my cousin's oldest boy John. She had a great time although when she was following John into the barn, she slipped and fell in the manure. Oh, was she upset! She was wearing her brand new white slacks, which were the first slacks she ever owned. She confessed to me when she came home that she had gone in the house and changed and thrown those mucked-up slacks into the trash. Fortunately, John's sister Dorothy saw her and took them out and washed them for her. We still tease her about that.



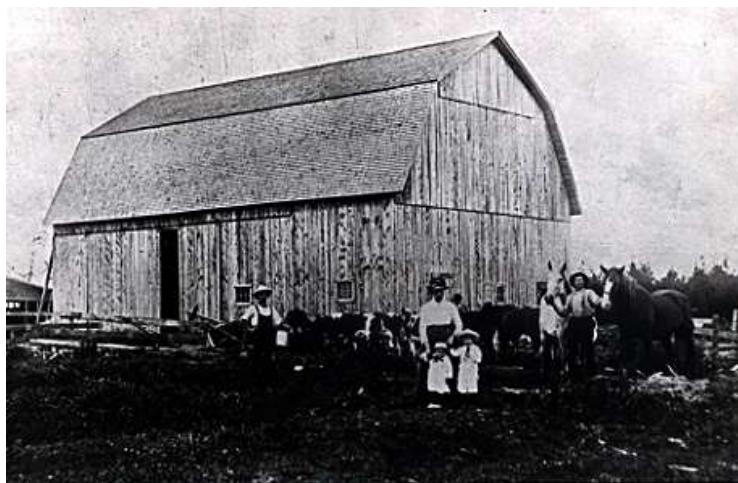
Last picture taken of Emma and Benjamin



John Edwin, Dorothy, and Raymond Snowberg (Photo taken in 1935)



Helen, growing up



A new barn was an event worthy of hiring a photographer. This picture was taken when John and Ray were quite young. They are shown here with their mother while their father is holding the two horses.

Vacations on the Snowberg farm outside Unity, Wisconsin



The "Milk Maids" - Helen (left) & Dorothy (1934)



Helen



Helen & John's wedding day

Anyway, after several years of writing letters to each other and a few other visits, on the 28th of May, 1937 when Helen was 20, she married John. So my name was Snowberg before I was married, and my daughter's name became Snowberg after she was married. Helen and John are second cousins.

I visited them several times during holidays while they were still living in Wisconsin, so I got to meet my two youngest grandchildren, Richard and Karen. Now they live much further away in southern Indiana, and I'm too old to go galavanting around the country so much. Still, it's nice to have young children in the family again to give Christmas and birthday gifts to.



Emma & her youngest granddaughter, Karen



Visits with Helen on Easter Sundays



Christmas with Richard and Karen, 1951

I don't miss my family in Sweden. Of course there are an awful lot of Swedes here in Minneapolis and I even joined a church that had services in Swedish. And then, when Mina, my baby sister, was 16 years old I sent a ticket to her to come to live here. She told me that when she was young, people would ask her what she was going to do when she was grown up and she always declared that she would travel to the United States of America. We call her Minnie in this country and she's married with her own family and lives on a farm south of here outside of Welch, Minnesota, not far from Benjamin's old family farm.

It's a bit lonely with all my children and grand-children living in different states, but a few of my old friends are living yet, and we still enjoy speaking Swedish over coffee and cake on a Sunday afternoon. In the Spring and Summer we often go over to Sunset Memorial Cemetery afterwards to see the beautiful flowers on all the graves. My Benjamin is buried there along with some other family members. I suppose it might be my turn sometime soon.



Dreams of the wildflowers on Öland

Ja, ja. So, so. I love the flowers. They remind me of Sweden. Of course, it's not the same as seeing the fields of flowers on Öland with the deep blue sky and the golden sun shining. Well, speaking of the sun, it's going down now and it's getting cooler out. I think it's time to go inside to heat the coffee and fix a little something for supper.

(Emma passed away on April 2, 1953 at the age of 81.)



Karen's Epilogue

I was so glad to be able to make the connection with our family on Öland again. I have had such a wonderful time meeting all of my relatives there, and I had such a great sense of "belonging" there, even on my first visit. My grandmother left Degerhamn and died in this country. When I die, I want my ashes to be taken to Öland and scattered on the Alvaret outside of Degerhamn as a tribute to my grandmother and my heritage.



November's Twilight in Degerhamn

Emma's Story was written to be used as a cultural presentation to the Local Lodges of the Vasa Order of America. As Cultural Leader of District Lodge New York #4 from October 2005 to October 2007, it was my pleasure to present a variety of presentations to a number of our lodges in Southern New York. Then as Grand Lodge Cultural Director for the United States and Canada from 2014-2018 I created a volume of 67 cultural presentations. The presentation of which I was most proud, however, was this story of my Mormor Emma. It doesn't seem possible that she could have traveled so far in the world to go alone from Sweden to Minneapolis, Minnesota at the tender age of 16. I don't think I could have done that at the same age. However, I've always felt it reassuring to know that I come from such strong, determined stock.

Now that you have heard ***Emma's Story***, I hope it might inspire you to collect your own family memories and put them together with pictures to give to the younger generations in your family. It is always so sad to hear people say that when their parents or grand parents died they found boxes of pictures of relatives, but they don't know who they are. Even if we did all manage to label our pictures, having a narrative to go along with the pictures will mean much, much more to the future generations of your family.

Don't lose your family history!

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