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John Norton

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Letter by “Stenbo gubben” Jonas Olsson

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY JOHN NORTON

Introduction

Wealthy farmer “Stenbo gubben” Jonas Olsson of Stenbo Farm in Forsa, (Häls.), born 26 Apr. 1793, was married in 1816 to Cecilia Olofsdotter, b. 13 Nov. 1794 in Tövsätter, Forsa. He was close to the Erik Janssonists, and had allowed Jansson to move onto a Stenbo subfarm, Lumnäs, in the spring of 1844.

Cecilia and three of her children (Olof, Jonas, and Sigrid, who left her husband) apparently immigrated with the Janssonists to Bishop Hill in 1846, probably aboard the *Charlotte*, arriving New York 15 September 1846. Their brother Anders arrived the summer of 1847 with his wife Lovisa. Jonas Olsson’s wife Cecilia apparently died in Bishop Hill before 1850, perhaps in the 1849 cholera epidemic.

In 1850, “Stenbo gubben” Jonas decided to follow his children to America. He sold his farm at Stenbo, hired his own vessel, and filled it with a load of iron which he sold profitably after arriving in New York. After settling briefly in Moline, he became a landlord by purchase of two homes which he rented to recent immigrants, and according to local tradition, even loaned money to John Deere to help keep Deere’s fledgling farm equipment business afloat. He then moved to “Big Brick” at Bishop Hill to be with his family. On 11 May 1851 he married his second wife at Bishop Hill, Karin Jonsdotter, born in Forsa in 1819, who lived until 1914, according to family records retained by Mrs. Elvi Sandberg, Odensv. 12, SE-19145 Sollentuna, Sweden. See also Eric Norelius’s

delightful story of his 1850 encounter with Jonas Olsson in Moline, published in *Prairieblomman* 1900, Rock Island, Augustana Publishing House.

Stenbo gubben Jonas Olsson’s two sons became prominent members of the Bishop Hill Colony, under the name of Stenberg/Stoneberg. Anders and his brother Olof wrote a letter home dated Bishop Hill 9 February 1847 that they had arrived safely in Bishop Hill on 14 October 1846. It was published in the local newspaper *Hudikswalls Weckoblad* 17 July 1847.

Olof Stoneberg returned to Sweden 1849-50 together with Olof Johnsson to collect estate settlements of those Janssonists lost at sea aboard the *Betty Cathrina*. He returned aboard the *Aeolus* from Söderhamn, arriving New York 17 September 1850. (See Andersson, Birgitta, *Faces that Reflect*, Voxnabruk, Sweden, n.d.)

Jonas’s letter

North America and Bishop Hill,
8 March 1851

My dearly beloved Brother,

Since I have now arrived in that fabled land of North America, and have been here for a longer time, I wish to fulfill my promise to some within and outside our parish, to tell what I know to be true, which I have seen with my own eyes, heard with my own ears, and dealt with by my own hands.

First! I had a successful trip across the sea, though there were two sud-

den storms. But I never became seasick, and to this day have been blessed with good health, a dear gift of God. And as for the iron, I made a good profit on it in New York; and I then had a good and successful trip inland, by steamboat and canal boat. I then landed in the city of Hendry [Henry, Illinois] where I bought both horse, harness, and wagon, and then had around 6 Swedish miles¹ (64 km) to travel to Bishop Hill. From New York to Bishop Hill was around 250 Swedish miles (2,672 km), and between those points there is a multitude of steam vessels, locks, canal boats, railways, cities, planted trees, manufacturing facilities for various products, and activity with horses and people in such numbers so as to not be describable. And during the above-mentioned 6 miles, I stopped in admiration on a clear day, looked around and could see no forest, only the finest fields covered with long grass.

But when I came to Bishop Hill, there was sufficient forest, consisting of many kinds of leaf trees, as well as beautiful, rich fields, and water resources with various waterworks found with them, as well as many larger and smaller buildings, among which I fixed my greatest admiration upon one built of brick, 100 *alns* (1 *aln* = 24 inches) long, 18 *alns* wide, and 4 stories tall, plus attic, 145 pairs of windows and 72 rooms. A large steam mill is built of brick, with as many stories, which will be finished next May. The mill house and equipment are valued at \$15,000, or 40,000 Swedish *Riksdalers Banko*. A large, roomy church is built of wood.

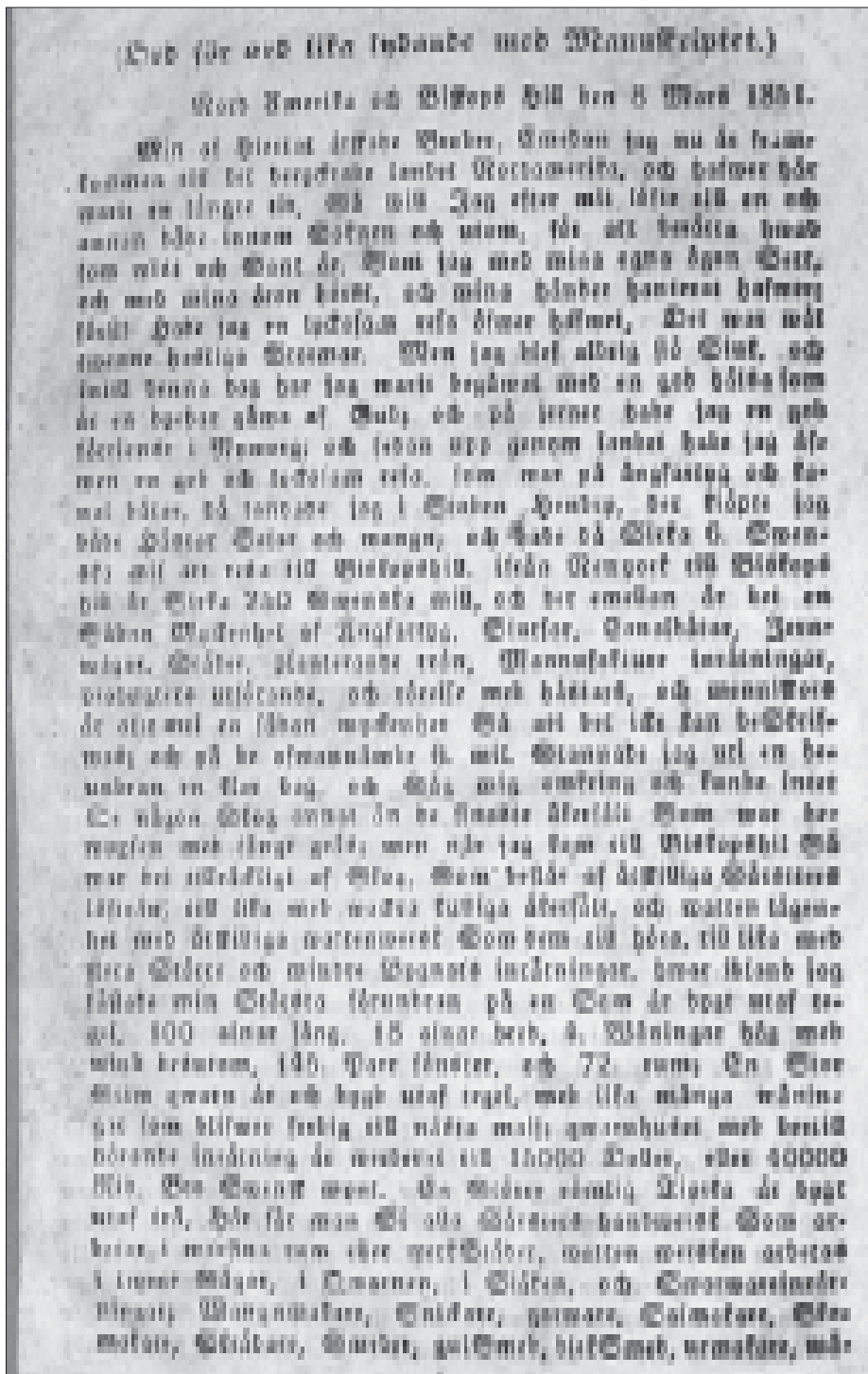
Here one can see all kinds of craftsmen who work in their own rooms or workshops. Water is used to run two sawmills, a gristmill, a scutching mill, and turning mill. There are wagon makers, carpenters, tanners, saddle makers, shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, tinsmiths, watchmakers, glaziers, bricklayers, stonecutters, builders, a school

teacher in the English language, an apothecary, and a doctor, and a spinning and weaving mill. Everything is managed well by the members of the society, from which they draw good incomes from their own products and shops, to their general benefit. This shows itself in a favorable development, and the members, men and women, of the society are

around 700 persons, and as I have heard they have purchased around 5,000 acres of land consisting of fine loam, and whenever they wish they can purchase many more thousands of acres of farmland in the same area. No houses have been burned there, there has been no embezzlement, nor liens, as I have heard was claimed in Sweden. Secondly, after I had been here around three weeks with my children, all four of which are alive and in good health, I could not reach a decision to remain here, so I decided to leave the area to look around, and came to the Mississippi River.

In the Moline area

There I saw four smaller and larger cities with about half a Swedish mile between these four cities. They had a quantity of manufacturing facilities. I stopped there in a little city called Moline, where I purchased a town lot, on which there was a brick building with 8 rooms, and one of wood with 6 rooms, both for a sum of \$800.00, and now it is primarily Swedes who rent them. There are two households from Hög, one from Hudiksvall, one from Hassela, one from Malung, and a household from Germany. And the rest of my money I placed in a bank office there, which together with room rent yields an amount of 100 *Riksdaler* 32 *Shillings* every month. From this city of Moline to Bishop Hill is around 6 Swedish miles (64 km.) and between both there is much land for sale, as there is in many other places. All this showed a much less troublesome future than what I had in Sweden. I have bought pork for 2½ *Riksdaler* a pound, and a lower quality wheat flour for 40 *shillings* a pound in Swedish money. But all this still could not satisfy the immortal needs of my soul, which, for many years, has brought me concern. Here I stopped in quiet contemplation of the only necessary thing; now I have, as mentioned, left Bishop Hill, which I left of my own free choice as to whether or not to stay. Now, I heard stories of the many different faiths and preachers in this country, and



The first page of the original print of the letter from Jon Olsson. From the collections of Elvi Sandberg, Sollentuna, Sweden.

found it necessary to attach myself to something, not as in Sweden where external laws of worldly powers required submission to some special religious form, but I was encouraged by a godly power to hear what they preached.

Views on Swedish pastors

Those who could speak Swedish were named Esbjörn and Hedström, who also was a separatist. The first was a missionary sent from the Lutheran clergy in Sweden. His presentations were as disconnected from Scriptures as they had always been, and thus could not lead me to the belief that his teaching was of God. But the latter was a Methodist, somewhat closer to the Scriptures than the former, yes, even so far that he explained many deep subjects just as Erik Jansson had done in Sweden. I then thought that he might perhaps be the true shepherd, who, standing in Christ's place, can lead the sheep to good pastures. I thus entered into conversation with him about the fruits demanded by God's words of those who should preach Christ's Scriptures. Then I noticed that he could not stand by what he had previously preached according to the word, since he could not show me anything of the fruits and actions that should have come as a result; what Jesus says shall witness that they are His true apostles. From that moment, I had opportunity to both see and hear that he was the one who had been helpful in writing many lying letters to Sweden, and otherwise done all the evil he could against the Swedes in Bishop Hill, with the intent of discomfoting them; while during all this he claimed he was doing God a service thereby, though all attempts have been in vain for him, and during all this I had opportunity to test one thing against another, but nothing could satisfy my immortality.

Back to Bishop Hill

For this reason I returned to Bishop Hill, while I searched the Scriptures and saw clearly that they had all Scriptures on their side in both works and actions, and there was spirit and life in everything preached there, for which reason I moved back in complete satisfaction, and now have my room on the third floor of the previously-mentioned brick building, and have now decided to become part of their society, and am greatly pleased that I have reached this goal, and that I have opportunity to go to church daily, to hear God's pure word preached for the rest of my remaining life, for which reason my joy has become complete.

And it is a great gift of the Lord to see so many living together in such unity and love, showing that they are followers of Christ according to Scriptures. And all appears to be progressing well. I find myself needing to respond at greater length than what has previously been mentioned, about all the various evil reports that even I had heard and seen, both in letters, newspapers, and other writings about this society in my fatherland. I have looked into all this and their source is our own countrymen who had been members of this society, and whose journey had been paid by the society in no small way to leave their fatherland. After having arrived, they, without good reason, become angered and left, and spoke all kinds of evil about these friends.

Yes, it's like the Scriptures say, and since my arrival, they have been asked about what they wrote, and some now blame others and will not admit to what they have written. And some simply deny their letters, and such was the luck of Daniel Lomberg (Londberg) from Söderala that he was able to travel to California after having been put on thin ice like the others. What he wrote on 30 October 1849 is such an apparent lie, and it was the same with the one named (Otto Wilhelm) Stenberg from Mo parish, who wrote in 1847. He and his family were helped with a large

sum of money in Sweden to pay their debts, and then got their travel paid across the sea, and when he came to New York he and his family fled without showing the humanity of at least thanking those who had helped them so much, but instead they could at a distance send such lying writings about this society. One after the other has done so, and so it was with Glug Erik of Del(s)bo [Translator's note: possibly Erik Olofsson or Erik Ersson of Delsbo], who was forced in the same way from the beginning of his arrival in this country, to send home lying letters without cause. But Erik is now living here, and he himself says that he will never leave this society, since they live according to God's word in both acts and deeds, and everyone has their own free will in everything. Yes, no one here is forced into anything, as I had heard in Sweden, or have deposited their funds with this society and then departed and suffered loss in some unjust way.

Death of Erik Jansson

And since I certainly understand that you have heard many different stories about Erik Jansson's death, I wish to briefly tell you the truth about it. Erik Jansson had some land ownership cases at the spring court session, and went there, where he was met by a man named Johan Rutt (Ruth), who had two pistols in his coat pocket, and during the noon recess in the courtroom itself, in the presence of some lawmen, Norsten from Peoria, Drure from Rock Island, Branner from Cambridge, and others, and while Erik Jansson stood speaking with some of them in the courtroom itself, John Ruth called Erik Jansson by name, to get him to turn around, after which Ruth immediately grabbed a pistol and shot Erik Jansson through the heart, and then with the second pistol shot the second shot at him. He died after 4 or 5 minutes on 13 May 1850, and Erik Jansson's friends still remember that day. Ruth was arrested and put behind bars, and remains in the Tulands (sic) [Toulon] Jail, awaiting

his sentence of death. This murderer Ruth has said he was born in Stockholm, and it is said that he is the son of a sister of Fru Gladman at Hötorget (Stockholm), and has taken another name since he came to America. He left the Mexican war in 1848 and came to this place, and asked to stay, which was not denied him. And a short time later he expressed an interest in staying permanently, and become a member of this congregation. He was given a promise of this, and later requested permission to marry a woman from Västmanland, a cousin of Erik Jansson. She promised him [marriage] with the condition that he should let her remain among her friends, if he should change his mind in the future. He assured her of this promise, and entered into marriage with her.

He lived together with her at first. Then he began wandering around here and there, then returned again and asked her if she wished to follow him, but she answered "no," upon which he showed a weapon and threatened her angrily. Then he left, and returned later, taking her by force and dragging her into a wagon, and took her here and there in the countryside, so we did not hear more of them.

In the spring of 1850, it happened that some men from this place came down to Chicago to do some errands, and when she heard that some of her friends were there, she fled the house where Ruth had left her. She was herself out that afternoon, and sought out her friends, asking to follow them to this place, so they let her go along. While they certainly knew first that she had been given permission by her husband before marriage that she should be able to live in peace among her friends, and secondly, the law states clearly here in America that if a man takes his wife from one place to another against her will, he has committed a crime, and it is 25 Swedish miles from this place to Chicago. Later, Ruth gathered a party of angry shirkers (bums), and some of them were like wild men, and came seeking his wife with threats that he

would kill her, as well as Erik Jansson and others. But it didn't work this time. He made renewed efforts, but the lying spirit he had placed upon his party, claiming that his wife wished to follow him, and that they took her by force from him, (which) was a lie, and they could no longer maintain their violent state of mind. The truth began to become evident to them, as well as for everyone, so that his party left him in shame. But, later he found another way to carry out his evil intent, and it succeeded as mentioned above, so that the Scriptures have now been accomplished, saying that they should kill some of you, and that your murderer shall claim he was thereby doing God a service, said Jesus, dearly missed by all his friends whom he had brought to freedom in both spiritual and physical ways, though this was not unexpected, since Erik Jansson, from the time he first began to preach, had always said, in accordance with Jesus' Word, that he should be killed by his own people, and right in the middle of the land of freedom he has said that his blood should flow for the sake of truth. And all this has now been realized according to Scriptures, for the hate and anger the Swedish clergy raised against Erik Jansson and his friends has even followed them here. For ever since the people came to this land from Sweden, the Swedish clergy have tried even here to hold the people imprisoned, claiming they thereby do God a service by killing he who offers himself for the people's freedom. Out of this hate, Ruth was encouraged to, like Judas, a disciple of Jesus, not only betray, but kill a servant of the Lord. ... [religious parable omitted]

Lönner from Hudiksvall stayed with a Lutheran preacher [Translator's note: actually Episcopalian] in Chicago named Unonius. He is the brother-in-law of Vicar Oldberg of Alfta, and Lönner became a member of his congregation, since it was shown and the reason was that they were so alike in their joint scoffing about those here in Bishop Hill, all without basis, and I understood, Lön-

ner since has become an appropriate sheep for that flock. Lönner was certainly an historic master of mystery on both the sea and on land, but now I could note that he became an apostle against this flock, etc.

No illnesses have been heard of here. There has been no snow here this winter, though there was a little twice, but it went away after a few days. And now it looks like the spring thaw will begin. Here it is very pleasant by reason of Nature itself, here there have been some 2,000 trees planted, and some will begin to bear fruit. Here there is no heavy work, rather it goes peacefully and in unity, while scriptures are read and preached daily.

(s) Jon Olofsson at Bishop Hill, previously of Forsa and Stenbo.

Note:

- 1) In 1851 a Swedish mile was 10,688 meters or 36,000 feet, according to *Nationalencyklopedien*.

Svensk Hyllningsfest

The biennial *Svensk Hyllningsfest* will take place 12–14 October 2007 in Lindsborg, Kansas.

Lindsborg's *Svensk Hyllningsfest* is a biennial tribute to the Swedish pioneers occurring in October of odd numbered years. The festival features art, crafts, special foods, ethnic music, folk dancing, parade, smörgåsbord, and special entertainment. The festival coincides with the Bethany College homecoming. Many of Lindsborg's residents don traditional Swedish folk costumes for the event. Swedish folk dance groups and musicians add to the Swedish flavor of the festival.

Please join us for a true Swedish experience in the heart of America! Lindsborg is located just twenty miles south of Interstate 70 at Salina, or seventy miles north of Wichita on Interstate 135.

www.svenskhyllningsfest.org/