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## Sophia Carolina Schön: her life in America

Lars-Åke Wångstedt

Elisabeth Thorsell

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# Sophia Carolina Schön - prior to her return to Sweden in 1863

## A Bishop Hill pioneer

BY LARS-ÅKE WÄNGSTEDT

TRANSLATION AND SOME ADDENDA  
BY ELISABETH THORSELL

Sophia was born 20 May 1821 in Österunda (Väsm)<sup>1</sup> daughter of the *klockare* Carl Albin Schön and his wife Anna Stina Olsdotter. During her life as a maid she heard Erik Jansson preach. In 1843 she worked at Domta in Österunda, and two of her work mates were adherents of the Erik Jansson's teachings. Ulrika Andersdotter had burnt religious books, and Wilhelmina Larsdotter got this recorded about her in the clerical survey; "Disobedient to her parents, defaming the teachings of Luther, Erik Jansonist, bad conduct."<sup>2</sup> Sophia then became one of Erik Jansson's most powerful disciples and the foremost candidate to be one of the three female prophets who are named in a letter from Hälsingland that was published in *Kopparbergs Läns Tidning* on Thursday 7 August 1845.

I have not really studied her history, and thus cannot tell much about her life before 1844. That year Erik Jansson bought a small farm at Lumnäs in Forsa parish in Hälsingland, and thus Sophia became a maid (*piga*) at Stenbo in Forsa. She is then 23 years old. She took part in the third big bookburning, which took place on a Saturday, the 7th of December 1845. Researcher Paul Elmen wrote "*Sophia Schön, servant of Jon Olsson, and later a prominent figure at Bishop Hill, was an enthusiastic participant.*"<sup>3</sup>

At the trial in Forsa on Monday 24 February 1845, fifteen individuals were each fined 16 *Riksdaler*, 32 *Skilling Banco*, which in today's money would be around 2,000 SEK. Writer Emil Herlenius wrote that Sophia was especially frank when she gave her defence speech.<sup>4</sup>

The next dramatic and well-

known incident in Sophia's story happened the following late summer. She is in Österunda parish to – among other chores – help the Stenbo-son Olof Jonsson (later called Stenberg) with the harvest at the farm Klockargården, which he had acquired from Erik Jansson. There she and everyone in the house are awakened on 16 August by the clergyman Nils Abraham Arenander and several other men who entered the house to look for Olof Jonsson and Erik Jansson whom they do not like. Sophia is charged with living illegally (not having a domestic passport) in Österunda, and is forced to walk half naked 5 kilometers to be reported to the local bailiff, but he lets her go. The story of Sophia then suing the intruders is told by the bailiff Ekholm<sup>5</sup> in the court minutes from Torstuna legal district (*häradsrätt*), and in a pamphlet from Galva, and

referred to in the writings of Herlenius, Elmen, and Wejryd.<sup>6</sup> Here she is shown to be a most spirited and knowledgeable woman who is not letting herself be bullied by old-fashioned attitudes and false statements.

Sophia returns to Stenbo at the end of August, and by that time the emigration has begun. The farmer Olof Olsson from Kinsta in Söderala parish has been visiting with friends and relatives in western and northern Hälsingland before his and his family's exploratory journey to America. On Friday 12 September the brig *Neptunus* leaves Gävle<sup>7</sup> and arrives at New York on 16 December. Olof Olsson receives positive oral information that is reported back home in letters. It thus takes about three-four months before his brother Jonas and all other followers of Erik Jansson hear the first news from this trip. But by then they had already decided on



The Steeple building in Bishop Hill. (Photo by E. Thorsell 2007).

launching phase two, and that involves Sophia.

The bark *Ceres* is recorded as having left Gävle on Thursday 2 October 1845, loaded with pig iron and other items.<sup>8</sup> Included are probably not the 16 people who will emigrate. They will have to board in Söderhamn. One of them is Sophia who received her passport in Gävle on 23 October. The ship is wrecked outside the little town of Öregrund in northern Uppland, but the passengers seem to have all survived.<sup>9</sup>

Sophia came to America the next year on the brig *Agder* in the company of 34 other followers of Erik Jansson, mainly from Nora in Västmanland county. They left Sweden on Friday 26 June 1846 and arrived in New York on Monday 28 September.<sup>10</sup> This is where Sophia's life in America begins, something which has been, surprisingly, little written about in reports on Bishop Hill. Still, Paul Elmen wrote “- to visitors who have never heard of Sophia Schön or Jonas Olsson, Bishop Hill has become an interesting historical site.”<sup>11</sup> He obviously places her first among the women of Bishop Hill.

Birgitta Andersson of Voxna has studied Bishop Hill for an unpublished work which I have had access to. In this she says that Sophia was the only woman in a group that arrived in Bishop Hill in January-February 1847.<sup>12</sup>

Through the material success of the colony, marriages are not only allowed, but also promoted. One of five marriage ceremonies performed on 16 July 1848 is for Sophia and Jan Erik Olsson Silén, who was also called Lomiss in a handwritten list of early marriages. The original marriage certificate is not found in the Henry County courthouse.

## Sophia's husband #1

Jan Erik Silén was born 3 April 1825 at Syllby 1 in Österunda. He was one of the twelve apostles Erik Jansson designated when he himself had to stay away from enemies and the authorities. Jan Erik leaves Bishop Hill in 1849 and first lives in Gales-

burg, before he in 1851 moves to Victoria, Knox Co., Ill., and buys a farm there and becomes a farmer. He also left the Erik Jansson congregation and is not recorded in the membership roster of 1850. In this Sophia is recorded as the widow Silén, but her husband is still alive.

In 26 July 1856 he is married in Victoria to the widow Catharina Petronella Wilhelmina Skoglund from Kinsta in Söderala. He acquires two stepchildren, but also has four of his own. His wife died in 1876, and he remarried on 19 June 1878 in Knox County, IL, to Matilda Rodin<sup>13</sup> from Västra Ryd, possibly from Östergötland. John E. Silen died 31 July 1919 in Galesburg, Knox Co., Ill.<sup>14</sup>

Sophia probably did not stay long as a “widow” and seems to have remarried a Peterson. Why else would Olof Krans have named her portrait “Mrs. Sophia Skön (Peterson)”?<sup>15</sup> The portrait must have been painted after Olof Krans left his military career in 1862, and definitely before she left to go back to Sweden in the spring of 1863.<sup>16</sup>

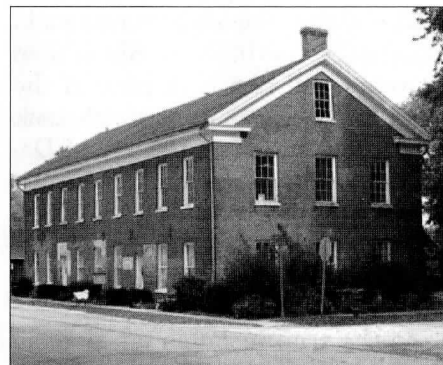
Her husband Peterson has not yet been identified. He ought to have worked and lived in Bishop Hill. There is no information that Sophia lived elsewhere. The lack of information might point to a late and short marriage, when the colony was dissolving, and the old routines did not work anymore. That would mean the early 1860s.

## Endnotes:

- 1) Österunda birth records (Österunda C:2 [1815-1861] *Bild 18, Arkiv Digital*). Her father died in 1831, and as a young girl she had to go into service as a maid. She went to her first communion in Österunda in 21 Jan. 1838 (Österunda AI:11 [1837-1841] *Bild 92 / sid 82, Arkiv Digital*).
- 2) Österunda AI:12 [1842-1846] *Bild 43, Arkiv Digital*.
- 3) *Wheat Flour Messiah*, by Paul Elmen (1976).
- 4) *Erik Jansismens historia*, by Emil Herlenius (1900, reprint 2000).
- 5) *Läseriet i Österunda*, by Johan

Erik Ekholm (1843-1846).

- 6) Article in *Bulletinen* (Bishop Hillsällskapet), by Cecilia Wejryd (2001:1).
- 7) *Norrlandsposten* #71, 16 September 1845.
- 8) *Norrlandsposten* #76 3 October 1845.
- 9) *Who were the Janssonist immigrants onboard the Ceres?*, by Lars-Åke Wångstedt (*Swedish American Genealogist* 2008/4).
- 10) SPAUS [#1587] *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850*, by Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén (1995).
- 11) *Wheat Flour Messiah*, by Paul Elmen (1976).
- 12) *Ansikten Som Speglar / Faces that reflect*, by Birgitta Andersson (unpublished manuscript).
- 13) Her origins have not yet been found. In the *Illinois Marriages 1815-1935* (Family Search.org) her father is mentioned as being Gustaf Svensson and her mother Sara Greta Jansdotter. According to the U.S. Census of 1900 she was born in Sweden Jan. 1842.
- 14) *Illinois Deaths and Stillbirth, 1916-1947* (FamilySearch.org).
- 15) *Wheat Flour Messiah*, by Paul Elmen (1976).
- 16) *Sophia Carolina Schön, companion to Erik Jansson, returned to Sweden - what happened next*, by Lars-Åke Wångstedt (*Swedish American Genealogist* 2012:4).



Main Street, Bishop Hill 2007.

Lars-Åke Wångstedt lives in Edsbyn, Sweden,  
His e-mail is  
<lars-ake@wangstedt.net>