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# Wilhelmina Westberg, born Larsdotter Orström

## The story of one of the early immigrants to Bishop Hill, and who wrote its first history

BY LARS-ÅKE WÄNGSTEDT

TRANSLATED BY ELISABETH THORSELL AND CHRIS OLSSON

In 1994 a memorial day to mark the first book burning made by Erik Jansson in Alfta, 11 June 1844, was planned in my new hometown of Edsbyn. I had no knowledge of what happened here but wanted to contribute with the historical knowledge I had about Swedish conditions in the mid-1800s, which was poorly understood by the locals.

When I studied the event I found a woman from Erik Jansson's home area with no relation to Hälsingland. But there were obvious mistakes and denials in several places in the literature that gave an incomplete story about her. I realized I had to do it. Last spring, my biography was ready. I lectured at home and at the Bishop Hill Society (in Uppland) about my discoveries and corrections.

Wilhelmina Larsdotter Orström was in her teens when Erik Jansson began to speak about the Bible and how people should live and believe in the grace of God. I see similarities between his new thoughts and what Martin Luther preached 500 years earlier. Both in German Wittenberg and in eastern Sweden many people responded to his message. But, the clergy and more conservative adults did not agree.

### Who was Mina?

(Wilhelmina called herself *Mina*, and I will also use this name.)

Mina was born 16 December 1826 at Domta 1 in Österunda, (Väst.). Her parents were the retired soldier Lars Larsson Orström and his wife Stina Ersdotter. In the 1845 clerical survey for Österunda, it says about her: "Unruly towards parents.

Blasphemes the Lutheran doctrine. Er. Jansenist. Bad conduct." *See below.*

The book burning in Alfta was about false interpretations of the Bible. One week was devoted to what happened to Erik Jansson under the name of *Den tändande gnistan* (the igniting spark), which then started the mass migration to America in 1846.

During my preparations, I realized that the knowledge about events in Hälsingland and about Erik Jansson and his followers was quite limited. I searched for literature. The Local Heritage Society (*Hembygdsföreningen*) had a book, *Erik-Jansons-ternas Historia*, which I will call "The Book." Here was the first error. A typed sheet replaced a lost page and indicated "by Mrs Westerberg," not Westberg, as was her correct name, and "Galva 1902".

The clerical survey showed that Mina was confirmed on Sunday, 30 May 1841, and received communion the first time following Monday. The subject leads to a dramatic event in Mina's life, as she reports in "The Book." The clerical survey shows that it took place on 3 March 1845.

On pages 56-57 in "The Book" she tells of the minister's interrogation before communion on the following Sunday. In the conclusion he shouts: "Out with you, you will not receive the Holy Communion of the Lord." Two older girls received the same judgment.

During the late summer, plans for emigration to America had firmed up. Farmer Olof Olsson from Kinsta in Söderala (Gäv.) traveled with his family to reconnoiter. But just a month later, more emigrants left. Why was this trip made before

winter, when Kinsta-Olof had reached only halfway across the Atlantic?

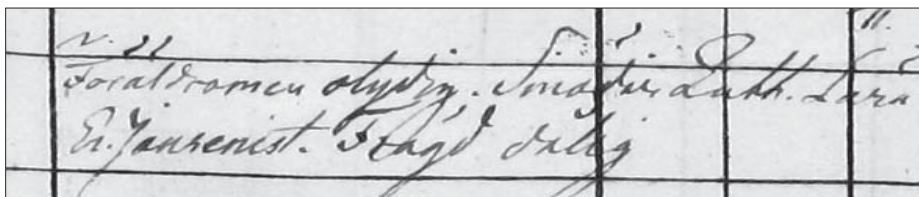
The bark *Ceres* left Söderhamn on Saturday, 25 October, and was shipwrecked on Monday outside Gräsö, near Öregrund on the Swedish coast. The event is described later by the then 20-year-old sailor Victor Witting.<sup>1</sup> He tells: "With the same ship would also come a small group of emigrants, 'called Erik Jansare,' - who would accompany us, 16 to 17 people, - - - it was crowded with people, among them 8 or 10 women."

Among the emigrants, mostly young people, there were several 15- to 17-year-old girls, - - - Among these were the sisters Lotta and Mina Orström. A historian in Gävle believes that Victor Witting's number is wrong, because he found that only seven Erik-Jansare had passports. He does not understand that the youngsters were runaways and thus without passports, and for Mina it was even noted in the clerical survey.

Both crew and passengers were taken unharmed on land the next morning. Mina and Lotta could of course not return to their home. They stayed with a fellow believer in Torstuna, as well as a family from Alfta, whose passport was later used in Christiania (Oslo) for Erik Jansson's family.

Their host Anders Andersson and the Alfta family emigrated the following summer with the brig *Patria*. Probably, the Orström sisters travelled with the same ship and arrived in New York on 27 August 1846.<sup>2</sup>

On 22 March 1848, the sisters Mina and Lotta wrote home in a letter where Anders Andersson wrote the major part. They were quite obstinate, writing: "that Orström in Domta could say that Andersson has stolen us from him, we completely deny with joy" and then, "he has only been a means in the Lord's hand to save his daughters from bodily and spiritual compulsion." "The writer is clearly critical of the father and



Österunda (C, U) AI:12 (1842-1846) Image 43. (Arkiv Digital).

supports the minister's point of view in the clerical survey about Mina.<sup>3</sup>

The spring of 1848 may not have been as fortuitous as the letter suggested. But life was improving. Erik Jansson repealed the requirement of celibacy and invited people to marry. Two English speakers who joined the colony in America were supposed to become husband and wife - sailor Hans Hammarbäck of unknown origins and Anna Sofia Pollock from Gothenburg, who came to New York in 1832. But Mrs. Pollock married Lars Gabrielsson instead, a wealthy man.

Did Mina want to marry Hans Hammarbäck? Their wedding on June 25 was one of the first four that year with at least 65 couples married during the summer. Two weeks later, sister Lotta got married to Olof Larsson Nordlund from Söderala, who had impersonated Erik Jansson in Christiania.

### The cholera comes

The cholera epidemic in 1849 was tragic for Mina. Her husband, sister, and brother-in-law died. Mina gave birth to son Elias in June, who died two years old on Tuesday 5 August 1851.

### Life goes on

In 1850 Johan Henrik Wästberg arrived in Bishop Hill. He was born on 16 April 1824 in Hanebäck, Själevad (Vnrl.). He emigrated with his parents and a brother's family on the bark *Æolus*, owned by Olof Stenberg, who fetched the colonists' inheritance in Sweden, iron to sell in America, and emigrants in Söderhamn. Johan (John) is listed on the parents' passport but is not listed in the New York arrival lists.

The background of the Wästberg family emigration was unknown to me. John E. Norton of Moline, IL, became acquainted with an article telling about the visit of two Erik Jansare in Själevad, where 'Mother Anna' was a religious freethinker. That year was no later than 1845.

On Sunday 8 June 1851 Mina and John were married by Olof Stenberg. She became Mrs. Westberg, and not Westerberg, what is incorrectly reported about her in "The Book."

John worked as a wagon manufacturer. In Bishop Hill there was one wagon maker and four wheelwrights. Nothing is found about Mina's activities in the colony. She probably did not participate in the man-



*Mina Westberg, painted by Olof Krans.*

agement of linen because she did not belong to the Hälsingland people. It is enough if she worked in the fields or in the kitchen in addition to caring for her own children.

Over 18 years she gave birth to at least seven children. A gap of 6½ years between children can mean that one or two infants died. Lillie was the youngest, but she died at age one year. The other six children survived their parents.

The colony was dissolved in 1861. John Westberg was awarded three land areas in sections 18 and 19 of Galva township near the river. The area of 168 acres is almost 68 *hectars* and had Galva's largest barn.

The railroad between Bishop Hill and Galva was built in 1871 and was a side spur. It goes diagonally over John's biggest land share. The station was located outside the northwest between the cemetery and the river.

In 1880 Captain Johnson's book *Svensk-arne i Illinois*<sup>5</sup> reveals on p. 321 that the husband John is politically "independent."

### Pastor Waldenström comes to town

The founder of the Swedish Mission Covenant Church (*Svenska Missionsförbundet*) Paul Peter Waldenström, Ph.D., from Gävle visited the Westberg family on Friday, 19 July 1889. He wrote books on his travels in the United States in 1890 and 1902. In his first book he writes "On the way to Bishop Hill we met a Swedish farm family called Westberg. The wife was one of the first Eric-Janssonist emigrants who left Sweden. She was then only a young

18- or 19-year-old girl. Even in her old age, she has a very lively temper, and her entire heart is spiritually delighted with Erik Jansson and his activities. She did admit that the Eric-Janssonists had been guilty of causing unrest at home in Sweden during the persecution to which they were exposed. But on the other hand, the church authorities had also worked in a way that was underhanded. Her judgment on the whole matter can be summarized in the following words:

"They did not understand better at home then, and we did not understand ourselves to be any better."

John Henrik Westberg died 17 May 1892 in Galva, according to his obituary in the *Galva Weekly News* 19 May 1892. Mina died 17 May 1899 in Galva, according to her obituary, published in the

### John Henrik Westberg obituary

*Galva Weekly News* 19 May 1892:

John H **Westberg**, after a long illness, departed this life at the family residence in Galva Township, on Tuesday, 17 May 1892. Deceased was born in Hannaback, Ongermanland(!), Sweden, 10 April 1834. Emigrated to America in 1850; became a member of the Bishop Hill Colony immediately upon his arrival in this country and remained a faithful member of the society until its disbanding in 1861. He was married 8 June 1851 to Wilhelmina Hammerback, who with six children, three sons and three daughters, survives him. The funeral obsequies will be held at 1 o'clock p.m. today, Thursday.

### Wilhelmina Westberg burial notice

*Galva News* 25 May 1899:

The funeral of Mrs. Wilhelmina Westberg occurred here last Friday and was attended by a large number of her old friends and neighbors. The remains were brought here from Galva where she died on Wednesday, 17 May, aged 72 yrs, 4 mos., and 29 days. The funeral services were held in the Colony church and were conducted by Rev. A. T. Weslergreen, Martin Johnson also making a few remarks.

(These notices about the Westbergs have been found in Bob Nelsons "Genealogy of the members of the Bishop Hill Colony and related families.")

*Link on p. 26)*





The Westberg headstone.

For unknown reasons the year of death for John is inscribed as 1882, and 1889 for Mina. Cheryl Dowell of Bishop Hill noticed these errors and then found the right years in the local newspaper Galva News.

Galva News 25 May 1899.

### Some ideas why Mina wrote the “The Book”:

Mina was caught up early by Erik Jansson’s religious thoughts and showed independence already as a young woman. She was involved in several dramatic events and

recognized the importance of preserving them for the aftermath and defending Erik Jansson’s much-criticized efforts. She got others to tell about their experiences, writing herself, and collecting documents from Sweden about the trials. But her ignorance of names in Hälsingland (and Dalarna), revealed a hard-to-know person. Her Sven Olsson should be Svans (farm name) Olle in Grängsbo, Alfta, (Gävl.).

Everything will be in a book about the history of the Erik-Janssonists, perhaps for publication before the anniversary. But there is opposition. She cannot even participate fully in the celebration. No one else can take over and complete “The Book.”

At her death, the children must take care of this inheritance. The documents about the history of the colony are not the most important, but should not be thrown out. It will take three years until they are edited and become the intended “Book.” Who does the work is unknown. Most likely, it was the elder daughter Josephine, with whom Mina died, along with the person that sent a copy of the “The Book” to the Uppsala University Library, which I identified as Margta Olsdotter Molin from Alfta in Hälsingland. She probably met the “Österunda girls” Mina and Anna Maria Stråle and shared the grave with the latter.

It indicates close contacts, and now she was the only one left of the trio.

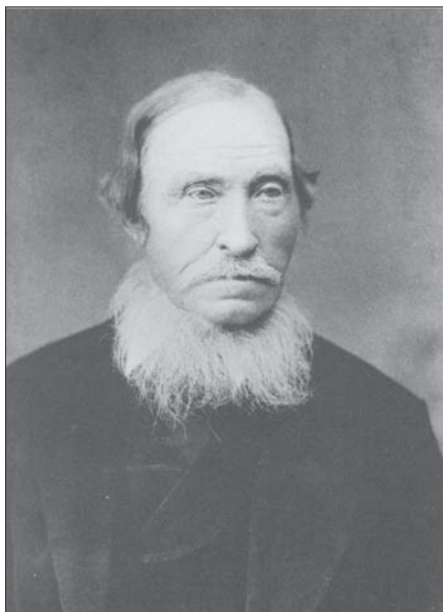
### Footnotes

- 1) *Minnen från mitt lif som sjöman, immigrat och predikant, samt en historisk afhandling af metodismens uppkomst*, by Victor Witting. Printed in Worcester, Mass. 1904.
- 2) The entire story of *Ceres* can be read in *Swedish American Genealogist (SAG)* 2008/4.
- 3) The letter is reproduced by Albin Widen in the book *När svenskamerika grundades*, page 26. Printed in 1961.
- 4) *Genom Norra Amerikas Förenta Stater*, av Paul Peter Waldenström. Printed in Stockholm 1890.
- 5) *Svenskarne i Illinois. Historiska anteckningar, samlade och utgifna af Eric Johnson och C.F. Peterson*. Printed in Chicago 1880.

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### A few faces from Bishop Hill



Jacob Jacobsson (1817–1883). One of the early leaders of the Colony.



Matilda Jansson Warner Rutherford (1842–1926). Daughter of Erik Jansson.



Olof Krans (1838–1916). Painter of Bishop Hill.

Pictures from Faces of Utopia. A Bishop Hill Family Album. By Nancy Lindberg Pinzke (1982).