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John E. Norton

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From Bishop Hill to Pleasant Hill: The Swedish Shaker Experience

By John E. Norton

On 30 March 1848, a Pleasant Hill Shaker family journal reported, “Two strangers professing to be ministers of the gospel arrived here from Illinois on a visit. They are from a society calling themselves Christians, but known by the world as the Sweedish [*sic*] Church of Johnsonites [*sic*], having come from Sweden about 18 months ago, and their leader or founder’s name being Johnson [*sic*] they withdrew from the Lutheran Church and fled from persecution in Sweeden [*sic*] to America, where they have formed themselves into a social community, having a united interest etc. Their number is about 600. They confess their sins [and] reject the flesh only in part.”¹

The two “strangers” were Janssonist apostles Anders Blomberg, who later became a Shaker elder, and Olof Stoneberg. Blomberg played a major role in relations between Pleasant Hill and Swedes on both sides of the Atlantic, while Stoneberg became a Bishop Hill colony leader. Their 1848 visit marked the beginning of a unique and sometimes troubled relationship between the Swedish Janssonist perfectionists of Bishop Hill, Illinois, the Shakers of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, and later groups of Swedish Shakers who emigrated from the Dalarna region of north central Sweden. This paper will explore how this relationship developed over time, and its impact on the Bishop Hill perfectionists.

Blomberg and Stoneberg had journeyed south from Illinois via New Harmony, Indiana, as part of an organized effort to study American utopias and establish relationships where possible. They wrote back to their leader Erik Jansson on 3 April 1848, saying, in part:

And now we are among a colony they call Shakers. They are about 300 men and women, and they have all things in common, and work as they are able. It is forty years since they began to settle here, and they are very fine people in nature, well-meaning and friendly. They have both land and fine buildings and keep everything in fine

order, and they do everything for themselves. They believe the second coming of Christ is manifested in them, and they believe the whole world is in darkness, but only they have the true light and shall build the New Jerusalem, and can forgive sins in Christ's place.... And that they shall live perfectly holy, like Christ Jesus, for he that is born of God cannot sin, and all other denominations in the world they call "antichrist," and they say that from the time the followers of the apostles took part in darkness, the darkness has remained, and they receive us like brothers.... They told us to look upon their fruits, and when we consider their fruits, they live so fine, but still, when we came to their books, we find first where they received their light, and that it was by vision and revelation, and when we ask them to show us, according to the Bible, how the second coming should be, it [became] a very great tribulation, but they could not, but we say we can show you according to the Bible, and even so about some other things. It was sometimes very hot fighting against one another, but in all things they believe they shall become one people with us, for they say that people of God must be perfect in one.... They have said in this colony that they shall come to our colony and test whether we have spoken truthfully. They believe us but would still like to go there."²

On 5 April 1848, the Pleasant Hill family journal reported: "The two Sweedes [*sic*] above mentioned pursued their Journey towards North Carolina,³ having been sent by their leader to preach the Gospel to a lost world. They say that 13 [*i.e.* 12] were commissioned at the same time, and sent out two by two together in imitation of the Disciples of Christ."⁴

The Perfectionistic Swedish Janssonists⁵

Who were these Swedish Janssonists and why did they choose to make a preaching and study visit to Pleasant Hill little more than a year after having established their own pioneering utopian colony in Illinois? They were the product of a wave of religious revival that swept northern Europe during the late 1700s and early 1800s, not unlike that which created the first Shakers in England. In their region of north central Sweden, this revival

first took the form of pietistic home Bible reading, giving the movement the name of *läsare* (devotionalist readers). It was rooted within Sweden's Lutheran state church, but soon came under the influence of outside missionaries, such as English Methodist George Scott, based in Stockholm, and the American Presbyterian temperance preacher Robert Baird. Baird's travels in the early 1840s brought him into close—and approving—contact with the “readers” in the very areas of north central Sweden soon to be impacted by Erik Jansson and his perfectionistic teachings. His travels also gave Baird opportunity to report on religious and economic freedom in America.

Sect founder Erik Jansson was born in 1808 at Biskopskulla (Bishop Hill) in the province of Uppland, Sweden. His rural upbringing was traditional, and close to the church. As a young man, he apparently suffered from rheumatic pain, and at the age of twenty-two, after being struck down while plowing, he prayed for and received relief. He interpreted this as a sign from God, remembering “what Christ did when he was on earth among people. So I prayed to Him to be made whole, and was at once freed from my pains. At the same time, I awakened, believing firmly that God had taken away my sins and made me free from all sin.”⁶ Thus was his perfectionism born. He undertook serious Bible study, helped by a local Österunda parish curate, J. J. Risberg, himself a pietist. He began to view the Bible as the only true word of God, and soon came to doubt all other religious tracts, including the writings of Martin Luther. By 1843, he was bringing his thoughts to others in household meetings and public gatherings, coming into increasingly sharp conflict with the Lutheran church.

Household prayer meetings or “conventicles” were technically forbidden by Sweden's Conventicle Law of 1726, but had been tolerated for the most part when supervised by the local parish vicar and led by the head of household. But as Jansson's perfectionistic preachings and those of recruited lay preachers began to win supporters throughout the region of Hälsingland-Gästrikland and Dalarna, the clergy turned against him. As representatives of the state church, they called on the police powers of the Crown, who began arresting and trying Janssonist leaders. Tensions grew, and heated exchanges occurred. The Janssonists accused Lutheran clergy of being “the Devil's lot,” while the “sinless” Janssonists were barred from communion for their failure to confess their sins.

Radicalization and complete alienation from the state church came with the sect's book burnings, when religious tracts other than the Bible were burned. The first was at Alfta parish, in June of 1844, on the farm of Anders Olsson at Tranberg, where works by reformer Martin Luther, German devotionalist theologian Johan Arndt (1555-1621) and the Lutheran pietist Anders Nohrborg, (1725-1621) were burned. More burnings took place at Lynäs farm at Söderala in October 1844, then at Stenbo farm of Forsa in December. The press reported the burnings, and the Crown arrested Jansson and many of his followers. He was first imprisoned at Gävle, then Västerås, then released. He was re-arrested after the Lynäs bookburning, and given a psychiatric evaluation. Court records read, in part, "Erik Jansson, 35 years old, lean and of good stature, gifted with a lively imagination and infatuated by religious speculation, is in an ecstatic state of mind, bordering on partial insanity, with otherwise unimpaired mental faculties, and without signs of physical defects. The collection of passages memorized from the Bible, their combinations and interpretations based on, as it seems, his own unshakeable opinions, reveal more than ordinary powers of comprehension in an otherwise crude and uneducated person."⁷

Public and governmental antagonism finally convinced the Janssonists to flee rather than fight. Their dreams of America were expressed first in print in early 1845, when a Falun newspaper, *Tidning för Falu Län och Stad*, nr. 6, reported on their "promised land, where they would eat figs, wheat bread and pork.... The heathens would build walls and towns for them.... All would be like one big family." On 2 September 1845 *Norrlands posten* reported Janssonist "apostles" Olof and Jonas Olsson of Söderala had sold their substantial farms and were headed for America. *Hudikswalls Veckoblad* of 22 November 1845 told of Janssonist plans to locate near the Mississippi River, on the "fertile plains" where "nature is very generous and mild." Olof arrived in New York in December 1845, as scout for the proposed colony.

Olof Olsson's report home, dated New York, late December 1845, stated:

As I told you at home, you will be able to sing a triumph song on the other shore, as happened to me on 15 December, when we had not had our feet upon land during three months and three days. When I, in Jesus' name went ashore upon the New Land, you'll understand it was a

great Joy to me.... The Communion Table is spread for you upon the New Earth. Everything is ready, so it can be said truthfully to each other when you set foot upon the Blessed Land, “come, let us go up to Zion.”

His letter was published in *Stora Kopparbergs läns tidning* on 9 April 1846.⁸

Their first group migration began inauspiciously in October 1845. Just a few miles into its journey, the *Ceres* of Söderhamn was wrecked, with no loss of life.⁹ In 1846-47, some nine ships set sail, carrying from nineteen to 160 Janssonists each. It is estimated that about twelve hundred arrived in New York from 1846 to 1850, of which about 990 reached Bishop Hill, including their leader Erik Jansson. The disaffected Janssonists who abandoned the colony enterprise en route helped found substantial Swedish communities in Chicago, Galesburg, and Moline, Illinois. Most survived the first hard winter in dugouts. Faced with serious manpower shortages in



The 1857 Blacksmith Shop at Bishop Hill.
Photograph taken in late 1870s to 1880s
(Courtesy of Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archive)

1847, Jansson briefly instituted celibacy to reduce the birth rate in Bishop Hill and keep women at work, but the following year, he officiated over a mass wedding of some twenty-four couples!

Despite desertions, cholera epidemics, disputes and disappointments, the colony grew, prospered, and then stabilized at about seven hundred persons. It was shaken on 13 May 1850 by the murder of founder Erik Jansson. His murderer, disaffected colonist John Root, had been denied the privilege of taking his wife, Charlotta (Erik Jansson's cousin), from the colony when he left. Jansson's death left a leadership vacuum, which finally led to the 1853 incorporation of Bishop Hill as a communal settlement, led by seven trustees, and headed by Jonas Olson of Söderala. Five of the trustees came from the same village in Sweden.

In the summer of 1853, a visiting Swedish clergyman, Anders Wiberg, reported home to the liberal Stockholm newspaper *Aftonbladet* that about seven hundred were living communally in Bishop Hill on some 6400 acres, of which 2,000 were cultivated, plus 600 acres of maple and oak forest. From 1847 to 1857 they still practiced a traditional Hälsingland industry—the growing of flax for linen—but by 1852 were also cultivating a new cash crop—broomcorn—which yielded a return of \$6,000 that year. A nearby eighty-acre coal mine, a steam mill, workshops, plus a lime quarry and ovens, provided raw materials for brick making. An orchard of sixty acres included 1000 peach trees, 2500 apple and other fruit trees, many already bearing fruit. Their livestock included 400 cattle, 25 teams of oxen, 50 horses, 600-700 hogs and about 1000 fowl. The total value of their properties was about \$300,000, with debts of about \$6,000. A new rail line was being laid to nearby Galva, where in 1854 the colony also owned fifty lots and a railhead warehouse.¹⁰

Janssonist Contacts with Pleasant Hill and Other American Utopias

Janssonists, unlike some other immigrant groups, appear to have worked hard at becoming Americans, gathering new ideas from other utopian communities, including Pleasant Hill. They quickly adopted American farming methods and crops. The “cradle” replaced the Swedish scythe after the first year, and new harvesting equipment, such as a home-built reaper, quickly followed. English language studies had begun immediately, even during their first hard winter in twelve large dugouts. Jansson's twelve

“apostles” had the task not only of spreading their perfectionist gospel, but also of learning about practices in similar communities. Apostle Nils Hedin, for example, visited several communal settlements, including the Rappites in Pennsylvania and the Oneida perfectionists, and even won converts from the Hopedale community of Massachusetts, although their stay in Bishop Hill was brief.¹¹ In April 1855, a Pleasant Hill journal entry reported that Hedin had “tarried with us over the Sabbath, attended Church meeting and was permitted to speak with great feeling.” He evidently also brought Shaker ideas on celibacy back to Bishop Hill, which led to a short-lived experiment that caused major upheavals within the colony, and resulted in to the flight to nearby communities of several younger couples.¹² The experiment was a policy of allowing married couples to remain together but discouraging sexual relations between them. Future marriages were forbidden. This was a unique and unenforceable variation on the Shakers’ strict separation of the sexes. On 7 May 1855 a Bishop Hill colony meeting voted to exclude eleven persons over issues of celibacy and communal order.¹³ There was trouble in paradise!

On 18 June 1855 Anders Blomberg, by then the self-taught colony “doctor,” left Bishop Hill, settling in Pleasant Hill with his wife and two of their daughters, because of his own dissatisfaction with the policies of colony trustees on celibacy and governance. He was quickly followed on 27 July 1855 by six other new settlers from Bishop Hill, including the four-times widowed Anna Sophia Pollock Jansson, last wife of colony founder Erik Jansson, and her family.

These arrivals evidently encouraged Pleasant Hill elder George Runyon and brother B. B. Dunlavy, who left by rail for Bishop Hill on 15 October 1855. Their eleven-day visit was successful in strengthening the Bishop Hill trustees’ resolve to continue their policy of celibacy. Runyon and Dunlavy “arrived home in fine spirits, having been received kindly by the people at Bishop Hill.” They brought with them three more Swedish settlers, Maria Sophia Bovin, a spinster from Falun, Catharine Donaldson (Carin Danielsdotter from Ockelbo?) and Helena Sophia Bloomberg (Anders Blomberg’s daughter).

On 27 May 1856 Shaker elder George Runyon and B. B. Dunlavy again set out for Bishop Hill, this time accompanied by Anders Blomberg. The party returned to Pleasant Hill on 12 June. The purpose of their visit was in all probability to support the trustees in their efforts to maintain the celibacy policy.

On 27 August 1856, Nils Hedin returned to Pleasant Hill, asking that Anders Blomberg and Anna Sophia Pollock Jansson travel back to Illinois as witnesses for the Bishop Hill colony in a lawsuit brought by dissident members against the colony trustees over management issues and celibacy. Accompanied by Eldress Prudence Carnahan, they returned to Pleasant Hill on 18 September.

Dissention and desertions from Bishop Hill continued to mount over enforced celibacy and dictatorial trustee management. A Bishop Hill colony meeting was finally called on 31 October 1856, resulting in several key resolutions, and bringing an abrupt end to the celibacy experiment. Paragraph 9 of resolution 2 confirmed that Bishop Hill's communal life was to be continued. Resolution 4 stated that women had the same right as men to vote on questions concerning their spiritual well-being. The issue of celibacy was addressed in Resolution 12 by references to Mark 10:29, I Peter 3 (duties of husbands and wives), and Ephesians 5 (adoption of



Looking east on Main St., Bishop Hill, at the Bjorkland Hotel, built in stages from 1852-1860. Photograph taken in the 1890s.

(Courtesy of Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archive)

children); to Erik Jansson's own hymn 30 v. 3 (of 27!) supporting marriage but damning fleshly desires, and to Matthew 19:12, I Corinthians 7:1,2,3, and I Corinthians 8 with its famous admonition that "it is better to marry than to burn." Marriages were again approved, with permission of parents or colony trustees.

On 15 June 1857, Anders Blomberg and George Runyon journeyed again to Bishop Hill. Blomberg returned home on 26 June bringing two more Swedes, Eric Peterson and Nels Nelson (Nils Nilsson). On 19 August, Nils Hedin also stopped by Pleasant Hill while en route home to Bishop Hill from a trip to New York, New Lebanon, Philadelphia and Pittsburg. Cattle business must have been transacted at Pleasant Hill during that visit, since on 1 September 1857, Brother Benjamin Byram and Eric Swanson (Erik Swensson)¹⁶ headed for Bishop Hill "with a drove of Cattle to sell." These cattle were later listed with great pride among Bishop Hill's registered Durham livestock and became the basis of a successful colony breeding program,¹⁷ and they appear in several of Bishop Hill artist Olof Krans' unique paintings depicting its communal agriculture.

A month later, on 4 October 1857, Benjamin Byram and Eric Swanson returned from Bishop Hill, bringing a Swede named Daniel Carlson from Louisville, Kentucky, plus a new carriage built at Bishop Hill for Byram.

The year 1858 saw a decided cooling of relations, probably over the celibacy controversy in Bishop Hill. On 18 January 1858, Anna Sophia Pollock Johnson and her son from her first marriage, Isac Gabrielson, decided to leave Pleasant Hill and return to Bishop Hill. Her departure was recorded with the following journal entry: "O! Traitor! Swedish blood is as much opposed to the cross as any other." Others, like Jonas Youngstrum and his wife Sofia, and Catharine Donaldson also left Pleasant Hill. Jonas and Sofia settled at Altona, Illinois, where they joined some fourteen other colonists who had fled Bishop Hill in 1855 over the issue of celibacy.¹⁸

Elder Anders Blomberg headed for Bishop Hill on business on 6 December 1858, returning on 23 December. On 12 February 1859 Bishop Hill leader Jonas Olsson arrived at Pleasant Hill with his daughter Catharine (Carin), who remained there for three or four months. By this time, the Bishop Hill colony was suffering from severe economic hardship brought on by the Crimean depression plus serious internal strife over trustee policies and management style. This led finally to a decision of the remaining 415 members, now split into two factions—the Jonas Olson party of 265, and the Olof Johnson party of 150—to dissolve the colony

on 14 February 1860. Colony assets then included some 10,000 acres, with buildings and properties valued totally at \$592,793.¹⁹ More than ten years of claims, counterclaims and court litigation followed. While Bishop Hill ceased to exist as a communal society, many of its original settlers remained in the village and surrounding communities. Today, Bishop Hill remains largely unchanged. It is now an Illinois State Historic Site and National Historic Landmark.

Desertion of Pleasant Hill Swedes to “the world”

Despite desertions from Bishop Hill and the ultimate failure of the colony, exchange between the communities continued. On 18 July 1864, a Pleasant Hill journal entry noted that “Mary Jacobs moved from the North to the West Family, and Louisa Hoard (Lovisa Hård af Segerstad) left the North Family to Bishop Hill, Illinois, from whence she came.” A 28 July entry notes, “The remainder of the Swede Lindeleaf (Lindelöv?) family went to the world, Anna and Louisa from the Center Family, and their mother Charlotte—from the West Lot. The Swedes, with few honorable exceptions, have proved failures.” Most apparently later deserted the Shakers, many returning to Bishop Hill or surrounding Illinois communities.

Of the one hundred eight Swedes registered as having settled in Pleasant Hill between 1855 and 1880, only a few—Elder Anders Blomberg and perhaps a dozen others, like Knif Per Jansson’s wife Kerstin (Christina Johnson?), and Skogs Olof’s wife Katrin Marit—stayed, as the “honorable exceptions.”²⁰ Blomberg made at least one more trip to Bishop Hill, where the *Galva News* of 17 February 1881 reported he had preached at the Old Colony Church the previous Sunday, as a guest of former colonist Jonas Malmgren.

Summary

The earliest Swedish settlers in Pleasant Hill were Janssonist perfectionists from Bishop Hill, arriving in the mid-1850s as a result of Bishop Hill colonist Anders Blomberg’s 1848 visit and later conversion to Shakerism. The larger immigration of the 1860s and 1870s was from the Dalarna-Älvdalen area, which had earlier contributed substantial numbers to Bishop Hill. It was often family groups who came directly from Sweden, motivated by crop failures, imminent starvation, and “dreams of America”

encouraged by Anders Blomberg and his fellow recruiters.

Initial contacts between Bishop Hill and other utopian communities such as Shaker Pleasant Hill brought a sharing of both valuable agricultural and industrial technology plus exchange of ideas on the nature of perfectionism and the real or supposed benefits of celibacy.

Bishop Hill's brief experiment with modified celibacy—allowing already-married couples to cohabit but not engage in sex, while forbidding future marriages—was forced upon the colonists by trustee edict, apparently led by Jonas Olsson. It led to dissatisfaction on the part of proponents of strict celibacy, like Blomberg, as well as among those younger Janssonists who wished to marry and those couples already enjoying married life. Despite its repeal in 1856, the policy was disastrous to colony unity, and led to a large flight from Bishop Hill to other communities. Some members of the pro-celibacy camp went directly to Pleasant Hill, others of the anti-celibacy camp deserted to nearby Illinois communities, where they were free to marry. But the issue of celibacy became secondary to increasingly strident accusations of trustee financial mismanagement. This brought calls in Bishop Hill for a final reckoning with the trustees, and resulted in eventual dissolution of the colony in 1860. Personal and commercial exchanges with Pleasant Hill continued, however, even after Bishop Hill's dissolution.²¹

The major wave of Swedish immigration to Pleasant Hill, recruited from the Dalarna-Älvdalen region of north central Sweden came during the famine years of the mid-1860s. It was encouraged by severe economic pressures in Sweden and well-established emigrant “dreams of America,” coupled perhaps with Pleasant Hill's need for recruiting new manpower. Many of those immigrant dreams were realized, but not always at Pleasant Hill, as witnessed by the number who “went to the world.” But their experiences helped encourage the emigration to the United States of some 1.2 million Swedes through 1930. Disappointed immigrants perhaps as many as one-third returned to Sweden to share their American experiences (and dollars) with a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing Swedish economy.

Notes

1. Shaker Pleasant Hill Museum director L. S. Curry's transcription of Pleasant Hill journal references relating to both Bishop Hill and Dalarna, Sweden. Copy on file at the Bishop Hill Heritage Association Archives, Bishop Hill, Illinois [hereafter referred to as BHHA].
2. Letter, A. Bloomberg and O. Stoneberg to Erik Janson, 3 April 1848. Translated transcription on file at BHHA. Letter is marked "original in Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, IL."
3. They probably went to visit the Moravians at Winston-Salem.
4. Pleasant Hill journal transcription by L. S. Curry.
5. The best modern English-language summary of relations between the Bishop Hill Janssonists and American utopias is found in Olov Isaksson, *Bishop Hill, a Utopia on the Prairie* (Stockholm: LT Publishing House, 1969).
6. Isaksson, 38
7. Isaksson, 47-48.
8. Isaksson, 56-57
9. Pioneering Swedish Methodist preacher Victor Witting was aboard as seaman, with "16 or 17 emigrants." He wrote of the shipwreck and his time at Bishop Hill in *Minnen från mitt lif som Sjöman Immigrant och Predikant* (Worcester, Mass., 1904), 55-59, 85-108.
10. John E. Norton, "Anders Wiberg's Account of a Trip to The United States in 1852-1853," *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, April 1978.
11. E. W. Olsson, *History of the Swedes In Illinois* (Chicago, 1908), 250.
12. L. S. Curry's transcription of Pleasant Hill journal entries relating to Swedes. Copies on file at Pleasant Hill Archive [hereafter referred to as PHA] and BHHA. Capt. Eric Johnson believed it was Hedin who brought Shaker celibacy to Bishop Hill as early as 1854. See Erik Johnson and C. F. Peterson, *Svenskarne i Illinois* (Chicago 1880), 46-49. Copies of the translated manuscript held at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois; BHHA; and Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Springfield, Illinois. Johnson, son of Bishop Hill founder Erik Jansson, authored this first history of Swedish settlement in Illinois. This is perhaps the finest contemporary report on Bishop Hill colony history, including its connections with Shaker Pleasant Hill.
13. See Emil Herlenius' translated *History of Eric Janssonism (Erik-Jansismens historia)* (Jönköping, 1900), 90-91. On file in the BHHA. Herlenius also cites a 9 December 1856 appeal by colonists to the Illinois legislature, signed by forty-one colonists and fifty-three Americans, and delivered by the Swedish-Norwegian consul in Chicago, Gustaf Unonius. It stated that preachers in Bishop Hill claimed their reasoning against marriage was "that natural generation was only the will of the Devil, to multiply the fallen human race."
14. Erik Ulrik Nor(d)berg was born in Västergötland in 1813, married into the Bishop Hill colony in 1847, and is credited with having opened Minnesota to Swedish immigration in 1850. He was a strong critic of Bishop Hill's trustees and celibacy policies. He was later deeply involved in colony dissolution litigation.
15. The report of that meeting is filed as B00016.F21, Colony Meeting Announcement, Resolution of 31 October 1856, BHHA.

16. Swensson's wife Brita had been convinced by Bishop Hill colony leaders to divorce her husband on 12 May 1856, and had been given custody of their children.
17. See "Pedigrees of Durham Cattle at Bishop Hill, Taken from the English and American Herd Books, July 1st 1861," BHHAA.
18. Johnson, 151.
19. Johnson, 29-30.
20. See roster of Swedish immigrants to Pleasant Hill, compiled from Shaker records by archivist L. Curry. Copies filed at PHA and BHHAA.
21. On 22 April 1861, Shaker Elder G. K. Runyon wrote Olof Johnson and S. Swanson, concerning recovery of notes from his last visit to Bishop Hill, and asking Johnson to "tell something about your visit among the eastern Shakers." Runyon also noted that "times out this way are extremely 'squally' [unstable]."