

TORPARMINNEN

"MEMORIES OF TORP LIFE"

by

Elsa Adolfsson (Anna Severinsson Forsbergs daughter)



translated by

Elaine Severson Messier

September 1983

Updated 29 December 2005

From "I Halland", no. 3, vol. 6, 1982

## PREFACE

The following story was published in a small Swedish historical publication entitled "I Halland", volume 3, issue 6, 1982. It was written by Elsa Adolfsson about the Severin Antonsson descendants, with the last name Severinsson or Severson in America. Elsa Adolfsson is the eldest cousin of approximately 75 first cousins, all grandchildren of Severin and Severina Mathilda Antonsson. There were 11 children born to them: (Gustav)Adolf, Karl, Anders, Anna, Hulda, Axel, (Elizabeth)Tekla, Frida, Hjalmer, (Johan)Teodor, and Oskar (from eldest to youngest). Adolf, Axel and Hjalmer emigrated to the United States – Adolf in 1911, Axel in 1912 and Hjalmer, in 1916. To date, all sisters and brothers are deceased; Elsa Adolfsson is deceased also.

My father, mother and I traveled to Sweden in July 1983 where we met and learned more about the Severinsson family. When we met Elsa, she told my father, Arvid (eldest son of Adolf), that he was born in Goteborg, and he lived with his mother, Charlotte and sister, Svea in Falkenberg until his father sent for them to come to America. Elsa's mother Anna (Adolf's sister) took care of them until they left. I will be forever grateful to Elsa for telling father where he was born. (However, the ship's manifest from the Hellig Olav states that Svea was born in Varberg and Arvid in Sundsvall, where Adolf had been in the military police.)

In 1999, I traveled with my friend, Trella, to Sweden to visit with relatives and met even more of Tekla's family -- her son John and his 6 children, one of whom has 11 children and 34 grandchildren!!

Remarks and names in parentheses are mine.

Elaine A. Messier



*Severina Mathilda and Severin Antonsson*

## MEMORIES OF TORP LIFE

by

Elsa Adolfsson

I was not born on a torp<sup>1</sup>, but during my childhood I was often at my mother's (Anna) parents' house (Severin and Severina Antonsson), which was a torp under Lindhov farm outside of Varberg. I have a glorious memory of that time, in spite of the poverty. Now I am old, but what happened when I was little remains a vivid memory.

How did my grandparents have the strength for all of this? They had eleven children. But, nevertheless they accepted the grandchildren and all of us were very dear to them. I was the oldest grandchild. The oldest of their own children (Adolf) had flown from the nest, when I was born. But I had an uncle, who was barely 1 1/2 years older than I (Oskar) and we

played together. No one had any toys, but we made our own. We made horses and cows out of pine cones and sticks. We made fine dolls out of turnips that we found. Oftentimes we made rag dolls out of little old rags we always found. One could make a very fine doll out of a turnip. We made a playhouse by laying stones to form a square. We took hold of a piece of sackcloth and it became a rug; we found a bit of porcelain and glass and we were overjoyed.

In my grandparents' cottage there was a large room with built-in iron stove. The beds and sofas stood all around the walls and in the middle there was a large gate-legged table with a kerosene lamp over it. There was also a cupboard where the sugar, coffee and china were kept. Along the wall there was a place where grandmother and grandfather set their spoons when they ate and enjoyed licking their spoons. The whole floor was covered with rag rugs to alleviate the draft along the floor. Grandfather had a spittoon with juniper twigs inside, which he changed from time to time. We lay on the beds and sofas made out of straw that was plentiful. First and foremost, it was needed for the cattle. We lay 3 or 4 abreast "head to foot" on the sofas to keep warm and so that everyone would have a place to sleep. To be sure there were often fleas and little bites here and there, but nothing noticeable.



From left, Greta, Hulda (Severins daughter), Anna, Severina Mathilda, Gunnar, Severin, and Otto (in Varberg, Sverige)



The three brothers with their families: Front row from left; Hjalmar, Arvid (Adolfs son), Lisa (Axels wife), Axel with sons Lennart and Einar. Back row from left, a friend, Margaret (Hjalmars wife), a friend, Adolf and Charlotte (Adolfs wife). (in Naugatuck, Connecticut)

Of the boys there were three who emigrated to the USA. I was beside myself when the third (Hjalmer or Elmer) decided to go on his way. Then the friends at Lindov arranged a celebration for him with a barn dance. That was fun! The dance went on with the accordion playing. The girls were lifted high in the air by their partners.

In the house, there was a bed chamber, but no fireplace. In the bed chamber there was a finely-made bed, a bureau with a mirror, a table and two large chests which grandmother kept the bread in. She baked a lot in an "oven", as it was called in the kitchen. She lit a fire with ream and branches, which were piled up. In the kitchen there was an earthen floor which was as cold as could be. On a firmly nailed bench there stood milk separators. Before they bought these, grandmother had to pour out the milk in large clay bowls and then skim off the cream. Then she churned

butter. I often helped her. There was a round tub and we pulled a stick with a flat bottom up and down. In the beginning, it was light in color, and then it got darker, and thick like butter. In the kitchen there was also a shelf where baskets for cheese were placed, when grandmother made it. She did that when she had milk that was just right. She placed a large pot in position with 3 bones and set fire under it. It was like a fire from the oven. There she also took care of the live coals which she raked out from the oven when she had a fire going. I can still remember how good it was to have grandmother's home-baked bread from her own rye and the home-churned butter and cheese.

The dinner consisted of the best from a slice of bacon if there was any or some salt syll. We made cream or milk into a sauce and lingonberry jam. We baked wheat bread sometimes and tried to save it until Christmas. This grandmother safeguarded in a large basket with a lock on it, which she hung up in the ceiling in the bed chamber. Perhaps it was so that we children should not reach the cakes.

The doorstep was a large flat rock and the door was a split door (Dutch door). Only part of it exceeded the opening and it rattled. The visitors were welcomed also in the opening of the lower half. Grandfather had a horse, 3 cows, pigs and hens. So however many there were for dinner there was always food. As for the coffee, it was a little bad sometimes but in those days we burned the rye. Grandfather would surely have a day's work in his own yard and grandmother would milk and still attend to her own work inside the house.

I had an aunt who came home with a child and was unmarried. It was shocking at that time, but my grandparents accepted them with warm greetings. My aunt took over the milking in the yard. And grandmother made a place suited for a little child. Milking in the yard began at 4 o'clock in the morning. It was a little better on our torp because for as many farm laborers as there were, each one had a little house for themselves; but many families lived in the same house when the state houses (statena<sup>2</sup>) were in force.

(Here is an excerpt which was left out of the book. "The Tenant Farmer in Halland") -- Elsa Adolfsson.

It often happened that grandmother, when she set down to rest with knitting needles on her knee and glasses on her nose, fell asleep. Grandfather came in and saw her and said "you don't need glasses when you sleep". And so it happened that they took turns with the glasses. Grandfather could read the newspaper but could not write. Grandmother had taught him to write his name. It was a forced signature, so he could



handle business and sometimes he wrote crosswise. It was grandmother who attended to letter-writing with her sons in the USA and with my mother. We lived in Falkenberg. We often rode (by train) to grandmother's house. Often I rode alone there and it was the most fun. I met grandfather with the horse and wagon by the station. Sometimes I rode a bicycle with him and sat on the frame because there were no luggage carriers at that time.

We children tried to help as much as we could on the torp. We dug up and thinned out the turnips and looked for eggs which the hens chose to lay here and there when they were let loose. And so one could find a nest of almost 15 eggs and then we might have pancakes. Otherwise most of the eggs had to be sold. "One time a hen came tripping along with 11 chickens. That "little hen", who was most cheerful, was grandmother" -- Elsa Adolfsson

I don't understand how grandmother and grandfather coped with everything they did on the torp. The rocks were picked up from the cultivated land and piled up into a mound for a fence. Grandfather threshed with strong, hard blows (cuts) and some of the boys used to give him help. "Thump, thump" one heard in rhythmic beat. It sounded like music from the barn on a winter evening.

In the summer there grew all along the cultivated borders the finest wild flowers. We picked forget-me-nots and many other flowers and made small, fine bouquets which grandmother took to sell at Varberg's marketplace. Grandmother and grandfather always drove into town and sold eggs, butter and flowers. Then they bought coffee, sugar, kerosene, snuff and perhaps a candy cone.

Already there were the bathing guests in Varberg (famous for mineral baths), but they were merely proper, fine people, whom we saw. Although we were poor, grandmother was afraid of the labor movement, when it began to break out. She warned me that I should be on guard against them. They were dangerous, because they wanted to do away with religion. No, it was more important to go to church and be good and content.

Grandmother and grandfather were almost always happy, although they must have had strong anxieties with so many children. That which I keep separate in my mind is their constant smiling and also -- their dialect. Today it would be unintelligible to most people, but we didn't have any problem understanding them.

## SPECIAL MOMENTS

I remember that when guests came, we had a welcoming dinner. Then the glasses were filled, as well as the pitchers, before someone went away and it began again. Once I had a cousin, who went out when the glasses had been filled. After a moment he came back to eat and saw that the glasses were still filled. So he turned to someone standing next to him and said:

"Have the glasses been filled again?"

"No," said the other, "they haven't started yet."

One time an aunt wanted to go to a barn dance but had no shoes. So she borrowed some from a friend. The day after, her friend came and asked her if she enjoyed the dance.

"Yes," said the aunt, "certainly I had a good time. The shoes felt fine. They had no straps to pinch me".

Yes, memories come and go. I think that it is cheerful to write about them and perhaps it is something pleasant to know about. My children and grandchildren wish often that I would tell stories about the old times. My own childhood was perhaps not so good: we had it pretty hard sometimes.

But, that is another story!





October 1945, Severin Antonsson's funeral.

Back row from left: Henry (Karl's son): Anna (Teodors wife): Magnus (Frida's husband): Sven (Anna's husband): Sigge (Anders' son).

Front row from left: Oskar: Lily (Oskar's wife): Teodor: Frida: Anna: Greta (Hulda's daughter): Malin (Anders' wife): Tekla

---

<sup>1</sup> Torp – prior to 1743, it had the meaning of a holding or piece of land belonging to the state or public domain. (statena or row house) The tenant farmer who lived there was called a torpare. After 1743, the word "torp" took on a new meaning. The torp was owned by a private owner and the torpare became the tenant of the subdivision of land on the farm. He paid his rent to the landowner partly in money and partly in labor. The torpare's character of tenant is also shown by the fact that later it became common for him to purchase his torp outright. To the torpare, this meant a chance to obtain a more rapid independence, with the possibility of starting a family.

(The statena (row houses) were converted to torps at Lindhov farm, near Lindberg. Severin Antonsson worked 3 days for the landowner and later on when the sons came along, they all worked 6 days to obtain a larger house.)

<sup>2</sup> Statane -- a class of peasants that began in the 1800's and their status falls between the torpare and the servant classes. They do not have as much independence as the torpare: all their time is at the disposal of

---

the landowner. They live in a dwelling provided by the landowner and it partly paid in kind (housing and food) and partly in cash. It also made it possible to start a family.

(Severin and Severina Antonsson began their family on the statena and it was there that Adolf was born. There were four houses and they each had names: Pain, Agony (where Severin lived), Hell, and Death. It was from here that Severin and sons worked their way to the torp.)

3 Bengtsson, Frithiof; Person, Bengt-Arne; Samuelsson, Carl-Olof; "Torpare I Halland", Bokförlaget Spektra, Halmstad, c1983