

My Swedish Ancestors

By Janice Mattson Gallant

Daughter of Melvin Earl Mattson (1926-2010)

When I was growing up, my father told us that his parents were Swedish and that they immigrated to the United States. I naturally assumed that meant that they came here from Sweden, though in hindsight, I don't recall Dad ever actually mentioning Sweden. Many years later, when I began researching my genealogy on-line, one of my earliest finds was my Swedish grandmother's 1910 immigration record on the Ellis Island website. As I expected, her nationality was listed as "Sweden". But I was surprised to see that her birthplace was listed as "Mallaks, Finland".



It turns out that my father's parents belonged to an ethnic group within Finland known as Swede Finns. At the present time, Swede Finns account for less than six percent of Finland's population. Many of them are clustered in a couple of areas along Finland's coast, including Ostrobothnia, highlighted in red in this map of Finland. Malax (current population about 5600, of whom 88 percent speak Swedish) is in Ostrobothnia, near the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia.

Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden from about 1150 until 1809. Between the 13th and 15th centuries, many Swedes moved to Finland and settled along the coast of Ostrobothnia. My father's parents are descended from those Swedes. My grandfather's surname in Finland was Baddar and he was from a village near Malax called Overmalax. The Baddar name dates back to at least the 18th century in that part of Finland. From a memoir by Hugo Staaf:

The Havras settlement was northwest of the large village of Overmalax...Baddars farmsteads were to the south...In the mid 1700's, Baddar and Fogde moved from the river to Havrasgrand...

My grandfather's parents -- my great grandparents -- were Mattias Baddar and Ulrike Stolpe. Their family included five sons and two daughters:

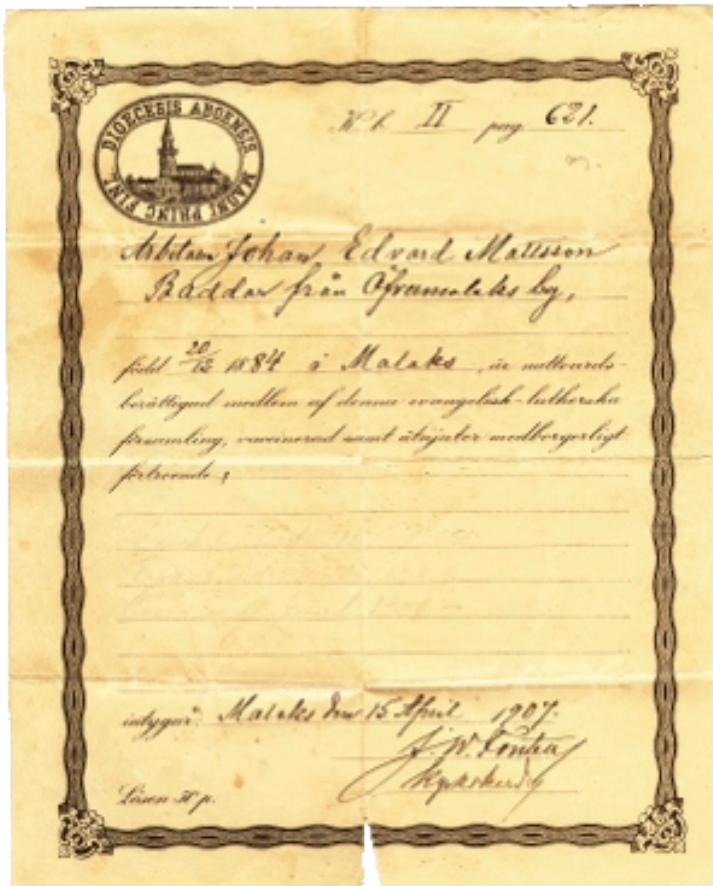
- Karl Alfred (1881-1954)
- Johan Edvard, my grandfather (1884-1947)

- Ivar
- Axel (1895-1973)
- August
- Sofia
- another daughter, name unknown

Before going any further, I need to discuss my grandfather's name. In the United States, his full name was John Edward Mattson; his friends called him Ed. In Finland, his full name was Johan Edvard Mattsson Baddar. Baddar was his surname and Mattsson was his patronymic; his father was Mattias Baddar. When Swede Finns came to the United States, they commonly used their patronymic as a surname. Hence we see surnames such as Hanson, Jacobson, Peterson, and, of course, Mattson.

The surname question is further complicated because in many parts of Finland, standard surnames were not used until 1920. So when I say that my grandfather's surname in Finland was Baddar, what I am really saying is that he lived on a Baddar farm. Baddar was a very common surname around Malax.

Russia took over control of Finland from Sweden in 1809. In 1899, Russia enacted unpopular "Russification" policies -- including conscription edicts -- which spurred a wave of emigration from Finland that continued until World War I. Many of the emigrants from Ostrobothnia were young unmarried men. In North America, they commonly settled in communities with other Swede Finns. Most of them worked as laborers.



My grandfather was probably typical. He was 22 years old and unmarried when he emigrated from Finland in 1907. At that time, emigrants from rural parishes received a birth certificate from the church with their full name. My grandfather's certificate, dated April 1907, was found among my father's papers after his death. Translated -- with lots of help from Google Translate:

Worker Johan Edvard Mattsson Baddar from Afremmalaks village born December 20, 1884 in Malaks, is a communion-eligible member of the evangelical lutheran congregation, vaccinated with their civic trust.

The details of my grandfather's trip to the United States are not known. Typically,

emigrants traveled by train to Hanko on the southern coast of Finland. Travellers usually spent a night in Hanko before embarking on a ship to Hull, England. From Hull, there was a train ride to either Liverpool or Southampton, and then another ship to cross the Atlantic to either the United States or Canada.



My grandfather arrived at Ellis Island in May 1907 on the RMS Campania out of Liverpool. The Campania had entered service 14 years earlier; at one time it was the largest and fastest passenger liner afloat. The Campania made about 250 crossings from Liverpool to New York over its lifetime, each crossing requiring about 6 days. The Campania continued to serve as a passenger liner until 1914.



My grandfather told the immigration officials that his name was Edvard Baddar and that he planned to join his friend Isak Stone in Daggett, Michigan. His Ellis Island record notes that he had \$20. To put this in perspective, most of his fellow travelers had \$10; none had over \$40.

After Ellis Island, the next record that I can find of my grandfather is the 1910 US census, which shows "Ed Matson" at a boarding house in Escanaba, Michigan. Despite the minor misspelling of his name, I am confident that this is the correct census record because all of the other information is consistent with what we know of my grandfather. Matson's age was 25 -- correct given that the census was in April 1910 and my grandfather was born in December 1884. Matson was an unmarried Swedish Finn who arrived in the US in 1907, also correct. His occupation was laborer at a railroad. According to the census record, he spoke English; was not a US citizen; and was able to read and write.

In November 1910, my grandfather's older brother, Carl Alfred Mattson, emigrated from Finland and joined my grandfather in Escanaba. Of the five sons in the family, only my grandfather and Carl Alfred came

to the United States. I am guessing that they were the two eldest brothers and most vulnerable to being drafted into the Russian army.

My grandfather's name was John Edward Mattson, but his friends always called him Ed. Similarly, his brother Carl Alfred Mattson was commonly called Fred. Ed and Fred Mattson appear together in the 1911 and 1913 Escanaba city directories, living at 807 Escanaba Avenue, a few blocks from the docks and railroad yard. In 1911, the occupation of both men was "laborer". They were still at 807 Escanaba Avenue in 1913. That year, Ed's occupation was laborer and Fred's was "secretary hand". In 1918, they registered for the draft together, providing each other's name as "closest relative". Ed and Fred Mattson were both still living on Escanaba Avenue in 1918, but now at two different addresses a couple of blocks from their original address. In 1918, Ed's occupation was "Laborer on dock, working for C&M & St. Paul". Fred's occupation was also laborer, but he was not employed at the time.

I have not found any public records of my grandfather Ed between 1918 and 1926. His brother Fred lived in Escanaba for the rest of his life, appearing regularly in the Escanaba city directory and US Census records. He married a Swedish woman Marie in about 1920. As far as I can tell, Fred and Marie never had any children. Marie disappeared -- presumably died -- shortly after 1940. Fred died in 1954.



So meanwhile, what happened to Ed Mattson after 1918? It is likely safe to assume that he continued to work as a laborer, perhaps at lumber camps. But in late 1925, he met my grandmother Amanda Strom, and that led to some big changes...

My grandmother Amanda Strom was born in Malax, Finland in 1883. Her parents were Erick Strom and Maria Gastgivers. According to my father, her people were fishermen, but little else is known about them. Amanda had at least one sister, however, because Amanda's sister died when Amanda was 17, leaving a young son Victor. Amanda took Victor in and raised him as her own son. Two years later, she married Isak Strom, 19 years her senior. Given the non-standard use of surnames in Finland as discussed previously, it was not unusual for a bride and groom to have the same surname as was the case with Amanda and Isak.

Early in their marriage, the Strom family moved to England, where they ran a boardinghouse for seamen. (According to my father, this was in Hull, England. However, when Amanda applied for her

US citizenship in 1936, she stated that her previous foreign residence was in South Shields, England.) Amanda was a strong willed woman who didn't think much of drinking and gambling. According to family legend, she once stormed into a room where Isak was drinking and playing cards with his friends at the boardinghouse. Amanda threw things aside and chased Isak's friends out of the house. She was petite but could be formidable. According to my father, Isak was an easy going guy, a seaman, gone for months at a time. One day, Amanda told him that she had decided to go to America. After Isak went to sea again, Amanda packed herself and young Victor up and went to America, traveling first to Glasgow (probably via train) and then taking the SS Furnessia to New York.



The SS Furnessia had been put into service 30 years earlier, and made many crossings from Glasgow to New York during its lifetime, each crossing taking about 10 days. It was scrapped in 1911, the year after my grandmother and Victor crossed the Atlantic. I am guessing that the Furnessia was on its last legs when Amanda and Victor crossed, and that their journey was slower and less pleasant than Ed Mattson's journey 3 years earlier on the Campania.



Amanda and Victor arrived at Ellis Island on August 24, 1910. According to the immigration record, she was a 26 year old housewife, able to read and write, with a fresh complexion, fair hair and blue eyes. She told the immigration officials that she was going to East Templeton, Massachusetts to join her sister Emma Strom. (When I shared this information with my father, he was surprised because he had never heard of Emma.)

Isak followed Amanda to America, arriving in New York on May 15, 1911. He joined her and Victor in Gardner, Massachusetts, where they stayed for a number of years. A daughter Ellen Amanda was born in 1914 and a son Isak Oren was born in 1915. Isak worked as a janitor until 1919, when he got a job as a laborer at an oil stove factory. The family lived at various addresses in Gardner over

the years, moving to 87 Church Street in 1925.

Isak died in October 1925 as a result of complications from a bad fall. Shortly after Isak's death, Amanda went to Escanaba to visit friends. While there, she met a handsome laborer originally from Malax named Ed Mattson. One thing led to another, and Amanda soon found herself pregnant. Considering that she was 41 years old, I suspect that she was surprised.

Ed and Amanda were married in Gardner on May 22, 1926. Ed moved into the house at 87 Church Street and went to work at the oil stove factory. Their son Melvin Earl Mattson was born in the Church Street house on August 6, 1926.

The 1930 US census shows the Ed Mattson household still in Gardner, with Ed still working at the oil stove factory. But he lost his job soon after that and the family moved to the Bronx in 1931. Ed got a job as a cleaning superintendent at a building in Manhattan, and took the subway to work every day. According to my father, my grandfather was a quiet man, a heavy cigarette smoker (Camels, no filter), and an expert repairman. He spoke English, but not very well. Ed and Amanda spoke Swedish at home, and my father attended Bible study classes in Swedish as a young boy.



Both Ed and Amanda were always very proud of their son Melvin. When my father was a young boy, sometimes Ed would take him into bars to show him off to his friends. It isn't clear whether Amanda was aware of these incidents but she probably would not have approved. Like many Swedes, Ed and Amanda were Lutheran. In the early 1930's, Amanda began going to a Seventh Day Adventist church. Ed definitely did not approve of that. One day he burst in during a service, and took his young son Melvin out of the church with him. No doubt Amanda had a thing or two to say to Ed afterwards. According to my father, the following week several men from the church were stationed near the doors during the service to prevent a recurrence.

The Mattson family remained in the Bronx for many years. Ed and Amanda became US citizens in 1939. In the 1940 US census, Ed gave his occupation as porter at an apartment house with an annual income of \$1100. He had

a 6th grade education, and paid a monthly rent of \$25. Amanda had a 5th grade education and her occupation was housework.

In July 1941, the following item appeared in the Escanaba Daily Press:

Edward Mattson of Bronx, N.Y., who moved from Escanaba to the east sixteen years ago, has returned from a vacation visit with his brother, Fred Mattson. This is Mr. Mattson's first visit here since he went to New York.

When Ed registered for the draft in 1942, he reported that he worked as a porter at the main office of Bing & Bing. Bing & Bing was an important apartment real estate developer in New York City during the early 20th century. They built for the luxury market and their buildings are regarded by many as among New York City's finest prewar properties.



Ed died of cancer in 1947 at the age of 62. His death notice appeared in the newspaper. A translation:

With deep sorrow we hereby let it be known my dear husband and our father JOHN EDWARD MATTSON born in Malax, Finland on the 20th of December 1884, passed away in New York on the 13th of August 1947 after a long, patient suffering. Mourned by wife, a son, three stepchildren, a brother in Escanaba, Mich., three brothers and two sisters in Finland as well as other relatives and friends. Amanda and Melvin Mattson.

The lower part of the death notice is an old Swedish psalm, roughly translated as:

The earth's disquiet yields in face of lasting peace.

Death reconciles all, heaven glorifies all.

Although storms of life may rage on land and sea

I will find a safe place in the palm of God's Hand.

He protects me, He protects me and all sorrow and distress disappear.

He protects me, He protects me in the palm of his Hand

Amanda lived for many more years, spending her later years with her daughter Ellen in Loma Linda, California. Amanda Strom died in 1973 at the age of 89.