But Where's Albert…

January 15, 2007 Kingston Fletcher

The year was 1972. My sister and mother had just returned from a visit to our third generation country cousins at the original farm where our immigrant Swedish ancestors had first settled in Minnesota. It was located some ninety miles west of Minneapolis.

They had leafed through the official historical records of the county and many bits of memorabilia that were still guarded on the farm. They were on the trail of our grandfather, the son of the original settler from Sweden. My sister had made copious notes and was back in Minneapolis going over the facts. She was particularly interested in running down the names of all the brothers and sisters of Albert, our grandfather, locating where he fit in among the children who grew up during the mid nineteenth century. Family lore indicated there were ten. And she carefully registered their names in order of birth. There was Mary, Louisa, Sven, Fredericka, and Emma — all five born in Sweden before emigrating to America. Then there was Christopher, Charles, Anna, and Emily — born in the USA. That made nine. There was no record of Albert, who was reputedly the next to last of the brood.

Puzzled, my sister picked up the phone and dialed the farm. She explained that she had somehow missed any mention of our grandfather. "But where's Albert?" she exclaimed. "There were ten children of our immigrant great grandfather, but I can find only nine."
There was a pause at the other end of the line. Finally, the voice spoke slowly, "Don't you know about Albert?" "Know, what's there to know?" "Well, I guess you should have the facts after all these years." And then the story came out.

I had never paid much attention to my forebearers. Like most young people, I was concerned primarily with my own problems, needs, and desires. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. occupied a very small space for my attention span. I was dimly aware of my Swedish ancestry through my mother. There were lots of kids in that original family, but the reputed star of the lot was Albert G. (G for Gustave, a good Swedish name), who was my mother's father. For some unexplained reason, the story went, he had run away from home at an early age and eventually made his way to St. Paul. It was the capital city and the largest town in the area. Minneapolis had just been founded.

Those were the warm and hazy outlines of a part of my pedigree. But I was not very aware or interested in my background even into middle age. All this changed after that revealing phone call.

My sister pursued the mystery and unearthed through correspondence enough information to pique my interest. So when my labors of selling detergents, diapers, and dentifrice in foreign countries came to an end, I began to dig deeper.
Along the way, I stumbled onto an Indian War that engulfed our family and remains a key part of Minnesota lore. And there were raw emotions that erupted in one venomous letter in the old files written ninety-three years ago. So as I looked again at the stem, unsmiling faces in the old pictures on the wall and the faded no nonsense photos in the albums, I realized that these original settlers were just as human as you and I, with feelings of elation, sadness, love, resignation and even lust, which leavened the drudgery of their early pioneer lives.

So where to begin! By coincidence most of my forebearers who came to the New World were born in Europe in the early nineteenth century. The family we know the least about gave me the surname of Fletcher. Probing turned up the fact they came from Northumberland, the northernmost county in England. It was with some regret that I learned this, as one of my initial overseas assignments had been a two-year stay in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, the metropolis of the region. Many of my long lost cousins may have passed me by without either of us being aware of our kinship.

But the name was of some interest. A Fletcher was thought to be an arrow maker, and variations of the name can be found in Italian (freccia), Spanish (flecha), and French (fleche). However, the real profession (a flecheur) was to provide the right angle and balance of the feathers in the arrows used in hunting and warfare to ensure a straight and true projectory. Bluntly, they were in the munitions industry, forerunners for the guided missiles of today.

More data were available on my father's side of the family. His maternal grandmother came from the Kingston clan, who prospered in southwestern Ireland in an area with the lilting name of Bantry Bay. Although they had lived there for almost two centuries, they seemed to have a culture that was half Irish and half English. They probably arrived in the wake of the invading army of Oliver Cromwell. They seemed to occupy a reasonable position in society and were staunch members of the Church of England.

On a broader basis the Kingston's were mentioned off and on in English history. As early as the thirteenth century there was a Lady Kingston, noted for her remarkable beauty and for being involved in a case of bigamy, having married both husbands to increase her wealth. A Sir William Kingston was a lieutenant in the Tower of London at the time of the arrest of Queen Anne Boleyn in 1536 and her later execution. He helped console her during her last hours, listening to her protests of innocence. Another mention is made of a Sir Anthony Kingston, who delighted in

hanging rebels, even going so far as to practice his trade on the mayor of the town. My wife and I also stumbled upon a macabre linking of our two families. In April 1746, the ill-starred Bonnie Prince Charlie saw his hopes of regaining the English throne for the Stuart's destroyed at the Battle of Culloden on the north coast of Scotland. While touring the reconstructed battlefield some twenty years ago, we noted that the Cameron Clan, of which my wife is a descendant, had sided with the rebels and occupied a key position in their battle line. But they were trampled and routed by Kingston's Horse, an aggressive cavalry unit of the opposing Hanoverian forces.

The depressing effects of the potato famine and the urge for a better life set two Kingston brothers off together from Ireland to the New World in 1848. They had married sisters of a neighboring family, and the group moved en masse, first to upstate New York and then on to Wisconsin. From one of those families came a Mary Kingston. She met and married a William Fletcher. Their first farm home was in a little town named Seymour, some ten miles west of Green Bay. Recorded vital statistics at that time were rough and ready, as my uncle discovered some years later when he sought his birth certificate and found he was registered as a girl. A move to better farmland brought the family to Waukesha, now a suburb of Milwaukee, and in that area most of the descendants have stayed. The family historian of that branch produced for me an eye-popping list of my second, third, and fourth cousins. I never need be lonely for family connections in that part of the country. My father came from that marriage.

On the maternal side of my family, there were Swiss Germans, m 1849 the Schneider family left for America with two sons and five daughters plus an apprentice carpenter. This young carpenter, Frederick Ischer, built the trunks for the voyage.

The father of the girls evidently had something more in mind than an extra pair of nimble hands when he signed on Ischer to accompany them. And sure enough, carpenter Ischer became son-in-law Ischer two years after the group arrived in the New World.

It also appears that Ischer, who like all the others spoke only German, was befuddled when the government officials registered his name upon landing. There is strong reason to believe it was really Fischer, but through a slip of the tongue he became Ischer. And Ischer it has remained to this day.

The group first spent several years in Dover, Ohio, and then traveled by boat down the Ohio and up the Mississippi to Iowa.

Husband Frederick used his hands-on skills to obtain employment with the Illinois Central Railroad, and the family settled in Waterloo.

Like the Germans of Cincinnati, they enjoyed singing societies. And it was through such a

society that their eldest daughter met and married a young German musician from Waverly, Iowa. Two years later they moved to St. Paul. The growing population of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area was and still is a magnet for people in the smaller towns of what is known as the Upper Midwest. Its only real competitor is Chicago to the east. And there's nothing else to the west until you reach Seattle, some 1,800 miles away. Other family members followed the young couple, and the younger sister of the bride married the mysterious Albert G. Johnson and became my maternal grandmother.

And so we have come full circle, back to Albert G. and the query of my sister, "But where's Albert". The response was halting with long, embarrassed pauses. It turns out he was not the ninth child of the original Swedish immigrant, but rather the son of the second daughter of that same immigrant. The mother was named Louisa. And what had happened to her? The reply was that she later married and went to live in the Dakota Territory. All signs of her seemed to have been lost.

And the father of Albert? The mystery was complete. His identity had been forgotten or concealed.

The news of the bastard birth of our revered grandfather caused consternation in the family when unearthed 109 years after his delivery.

It seems we were the only ones who were in the dark all that time. The country cousins were all in the know, but never saw fit to reveal the story to Albert's descendants. When my mother became aware of the facts, she put on a brave Presbyterian face and swore all of us to secrecy. Her two brothers were paragons of Republican rectitude, and she felt that they could not handle the news. So mum was the word, and they passed on some years later without ever knowing the true parentage of their father.

This incongruous scenario set me on a trail to dig out the family secret. I started with Peter Magnus Johnson, the original Swedish immigrant. He was born in 1825 in the poorest part of Sweden (Smaland), from where Swedes in droves came later to America. The scanty evidence is that he was lower middleclass with an urge to improve his status and financial well-being.

And his timing could not have been better when he set off for America in May 1857. For up to that time the Swedish government had actively discouraged emigration.

In 1840 the debates of the Swedish riksdag (or parliament) started to break down the restrictive emigration policy of the country. The reasons were a combination of enlightenment ("rights of the individual to decide over himself and his property") and real politik. This latter deemed that "freedom of emigration would be in accordance with national economic development and would furthermore eliminate the dangers of over population unable to support itself."

Thomas Malthus, the English economist, had published his treatise *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. It posited that the food supply was growing arithmetically while population was increasing geometrically - a formula for disaster! By the mid-nineteenth century his ideas had caught hold throughout Europe, and governments were seeking solutions. Calamities like the potato famine in Ireland provided support for Malthus' theories. Up till then emigration had been discouraged. It had been hard to get a passport and to facilitate transportation. Rapidly, the conditions changed, and the flood was on.

The 1850 census in the Minnesota Territory numbered just over 6,000 white persons, of whom only four were Swedes. Ten years later, there were some 172,000 settlers and the Swedish population had increased to almost 3,200. On May 24, 1858, Minnesota, ""Pearl of the Western States", as she was called by the pioneers, became the 32nd state of the Union. Its entry came with that of Kansas - one free state paired with what the southern hierarchy believed would be another slave state, as was the custom leading up to the Civil War.

The influx of Swedish immigrants began in 1850-51. Many of them came from the northern part of Sweden and from the province of Smaland. The new land, with its lakes, its pine, birch, and maple forests, the winter snows and silvery stars, reminded them of their homeland.

Our original forebearer carried a lot of family baggage with five children in tow (ages four to fifteen) plus a wife who was two months pregnant. They departed from Europe in May 1857 and took ten weeks to cross the ocean. It was a slow boat. By contrast, the Pilgrims were able to do it in 8 weeks in 1620, and Columbus managed the trip in 9. Steam power was just starting to be used for ships, so it must be assumed they came by sail.

In any case, they landed in Boston the first week of July 1857 and then had another long journey by canal boat to the Mid-west. Family lore tells of con men that had to be avoided on the final lap up the Mississippi to their destination of Polk County, Wisconsin. Today this is a rural backwater on the Wisconsin/Minnesota border. But this was where big money was being made by the early lumber barons. There were extensive forests on either side of the border that were being rapidly cut down, with the logs floated downstream to be cut to size for sale in the fast growing area. There was always a low level Job for a willing immigrant Swede. This was the first industry in the area to create substantial wealth, and the names of present-day distinguished Minnesota families like Winton, Fullerton, Staples, and Walker earned their fortunes from those forests they cut down and leveled in three decades.

But something special must have happened to our immigrant Swede in those surroundings. Thanks to the reformation and the influence of Martin Luther, most Swedes were, and remain

today, Lutherans. But our man now somehow fell under the spell of Methodism. He adopted his new faith eagerly and then pulled up stakes in 1859 to seek a better life as a landowner in the newly minted state of Minnesota.

The United States has always been generous to those who have served in its wars. A veteran from the War of 1812 from Vermont had obtained one hundred sixty acres from the government for little or no cost for his services in an area some one hundred miles west of the Mississippi River. He must have been an old veteran, as he came to take over his land 45 years after the end of hostilities. Or perhaps it was his son. Or maybe he had served during the more recent Mexican War. The story is not clear. Reaching it was not easy. A formidable barrier known as The Great Forest one hundred miles long from north to south and thirty miles wide from east to west lay between the soldier's plot of land and the river where early pioneer life was starting to flourish. It's this same forest that the lumbermen were eagerly cutting down.

The veteran found his way west, looked over the new property, and returned disillusioned to St. Paul. His verdict was that the place was good for two things - buffalo and Indians. Somehow he and the immigrant Swede met and a deal was struck. Peter Magnus Johnson, his wife, and children (now six in number) moved west in the spring of 1860 to their new holding where this story began. Like so many Europeans, the Swedes practiced primogeniture, which means that land passes to the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son. And that's where it is today, owned by an ailing third generation son and ready to pass to his heir in the not too distant future. Upon arrival, our Swede's first priority was to find shelter for his family. The only immediate practical solution was to dig out space in the ground, raise sod walls, and cover it over with whatever wood or material he could find. And so they survived that first Minnesota Winter.

I have seen with my own eyes that three-foot dip in the ground that has been preserved to this day. It brought home the short span of U.S. history in that area and how far and fast we have come as a country in the last century and a half.

The Summer of 1861 a solid wood house was built by our Swedish immigrant, who was one of the first settlers in *the* county. But by now he had lost interest in farming and turned his attention to saving souls. Let me quote from the History of Methodism in Minnesota:

> "Movement toward the fertile prairies of Western Minnesota caught the interest of Swedes whose roots were in the soil. Advertisements in Sweden painted glowing pictures of the opportunities available to farmers and captured the imagination of land-hungry peasants. The earliest Swedish settlers came to Kandiyohi County in 1858, the same year Minnesota became a state. A local preacher, Peter Magnus Johnson, visited

these early settlers, preaching in their humble homes ....."

But the Civil War and the culture clash of whites/Indians were soon to overturn this world. Feeling the need to prove themselves as true Americans, Minnesota settlers were the fast to respond to Lincoln's call, stripping the area of many of its young boys.

At the same time, the Indians were increasingly resentful of their treatment by the government. They were known as the Dakota, which means "friends or allies". But they were more commonly referred to as Sioux, a pejorative given to the Dakota tribes by their sworn enemies the Chippewa. It is a contraction of “nadouessioux” that means snake. If widely known, that fact alone would give the forces of political correctness today even greater fervor in their efforts to abolish Indian references for sports teams.

The Sioux had agreed to cede most of their lands in the southern and western areas of the state in exchange for a form of perpetual government dole. It's questionable whether the Indians truly understood the terms of the treaty. By the Summer of '62 youthful warriors saw only one way to express their frustration, so began what is known in Minnesota as the *Great Sioux Uprising.* And it started only a few miles from the farm of my forebearers. The standard story in the history books is that four braves armed with rifles came to the farm of a pioneer. One of them spotted some eggs and told his companion he would steal them. He was admonished that they belonged to a white man. At that the thief smashed the eggs to the ground and said in effect that he would not steal them since the white man had stolen everything from the Indians. Shortly thereafter, the farmer and his family and a neighbor became aware of the Indians, who then challenged them to a shooting contest. This seemed to go smoothly but was only a pretence. The contest over, the Indians reloaded their guns, and then coldly shot and killed all the whites. The date was August 17,1862.

The braves quickly returned to their reservation, and a Council of War was held. Chief Little Crow became their reluctant leader in seeking to drive out the pioneers from their ancient lands. He saw little chance of stopping the wave of immigrants, but he proved a tough and resourceful leader nevertheless. The conflict raged for five weeks before the government could muster both enough troops from the depleted manpower and proper leadership to put it down. Over five hundred settlers (men/women/children) perished. The survivors fled by foot, horse, or wagon to the safety of the settlements on the Mississippi River one hundred miles away and the comfort of the Federal fort there. For almost two years thereafter, a swathe of land 200 miles long and 50 miles wide lay abandoned before new settlers reclaimed it. By a very narrow margin my bloodline escaped extinction, while neighboring farm families were wiped out.

The impact on society should have been akin to 9/11 today. The numbers tell the story. The

U.S. population in the Union was twenty-two million. But this loss of life on the frontier was minor when compared to the bloody casualties of the Civil War and so was not particularly newsworthy to the rest of the country. Yet the Minnesota populace was outraged by this sudden stab in the back from bloodthirsty savages, leaving them fearful, angry, and vengeful. By the time the Indians (3,000 in all - men, women and children) surrendered, the Minnesota governor, the leader of the local militia, and General John Pope (sent by Lincoln) were of accord to hold speedy tribunals and then hang three hundred of the braves. But then the governor and the General felt they needed some official sanction before taking such drastic action. So the matter was put to President Lincoln by telegraph. By this time the Army of the Potomac had barely stopped Lee's forces at Antietam. The North was holding on, but with difficulty. In short, the President had a lot on his mind besides an Indian uprising on the Frontier.

But when the issue came to him, he responded with prudence and care. It would have been easy to say, "I'll just leave it to your judgment," and wash his hands of the affair. Instead, he requested case-by-case facts on the guilty murder verdicts. And he accepted only thirty-eight where he felt the evidence beyond doubt. One can see his inked notations on the documents in the history books of Minnesota.

The doomed thirty-eight were taken to Mankato, a town in the rich farmland of southern Minnesota, and hung in a mass execution the day after Christmas 1862. The pioneers rejoiced, and the politicians took steps to drive from the state all Indians, peaceful or otherwise, in short order.

Of historical note one of the Indian bodies was dug up from the common grave by Dr. William Mayo, who used it for teaching his medical students. His two sons later founded the famous Clinic in nearby Rochester.

And what does this digression have to do with my story? Quite a bit! The oral history of the origins of the uprising passed down from generation to generation in my family tells a different tale than the history books. There always seemed something theatrical about the smashed eggs and the random killings. On one of my visits to the old farmstead, my third and fourth generation cousins put me straight. Their version is that the farmer the Indians first killed was an ex-government trader from the reservation who had systematically cheated the Indians when they bought needed supplies. He had been reprimanded by the authorities and then forced to give up his trading post. He had returned to his farm, but the Indians had neither forgiven nor forgotten. Furthermore, on the day they initiated the uprising, the braves had stopped first at our farmstead, where they were given something to eat. They stated they meant no harm to my forebearer and his family, since they had evidently treated them fairly in the past. But before leaving for their deadly encounter with the ex-

trader, they had warned of trouble and told them to seek safety.

Whichever story is correct, the uprising was the final act in the culture clash in Minnesota between white settlers with their values of land ownership, farming, and permanent settlements versus the Indians and their communal feeling for the land, their nomadic existence dependent upon the buffalo for food and clothing, and their belief in warfare as a noble art. In hindsight, the Minnesota uprising was a continuance of the struggle that ended in 1890 with the Battle of Wounded Knee in western South Dakota and the official closing of the American frontier.

But back to our story. While my paterfamilias and his group fled to safety, another life was beginning. For Louisa, his second child, was by then some six weeks pregnant with my grandfather Albert. And where had the deed been done? Living in close quarters with eight brothers and sisters (yes, two more had been born since the move to Minnesota) plus father and mother left little opportunity for dalliance.

Farming on the frontier was a hard and demanding life - no radio, no movies, no TV, no club, no electric lights, no nothing! But there was an activity where people congregated during the warm months, possibly one or two times per year. These were the religious "tentings" designed to give the faithful a chance to pray and hear the good word. They also served as social settings. The oral history of the family pinpoints such a meeting as the time the minister's daughter tasted carnal delights and the subsequent repercussion. My country cousins pointed out the spot adjacent to an attractive lake where such "tentings" took place.

Once Louisa and the family reached St. Paul, she remained there until the birth of Albert in March 1863. There was evidently no return for her to the homestead. Her father was now being called to his first of many ministries, moving from one Swedish speaking pioneer community to another. The list is long and counted seven towns in Minnesota, one in Iowa, two in Illinois, and one in Kansas before he retired at age 67. But even then, there was no rest, as he was called back to serve two more locations in Michigan before his second and final retirement at age seventy.

So until he was seven years old, Albert joined his mother with the traveling family and was passed off as the ninth child of Peter Magnus to outsiders. At that point his mother was twenty-five years old, and both their lives changed abruptly.

Sturdy young women inured to the hardship of the frontier were in short supply, so when another Swedish immigrant came looking for a wife, Louisa was in demand. She and her new husband spent three years in St. Paul before departing for what was then known as Dakota Territory. They arrived just as George Custer met some unfriendly Sioux at Little Big Horn and about fifteen years before the area was split in two to form the new states of North and South

Dakota. Louisa left little Albert and his secret behind. For all purposes, she vanished from family knowledge and history.

With the departure of Louisa young Albert was at times sent off to live with the family of her older sister. It was not a happy solution. The facts of his birth, kept from the outside world, were known by the family. And their feelings toward him were harsh and unforgiving. You may recall that Nathaniel Hawthorne had just published his classic "The Scarlet Letter", which at once fascinated and titillated America. While it is doubtful any of my forebearers ever read it (their lives were too driven to include literature), the attitudes of the book were reflected in frontier society.

So Albert was saddled with the ignominy of his birth and treated with disdain, given the hard chores and often reminded of his sinful origins. And here our story grows hazy. We know little of his education but have to assume it was sketchy. We do know that he rebelled at his life and ran away at age fifteen. He worked as a drover for three years, then in a clothing store, and finally found his calling as an auctioneer and eventual owner of a furniture store in St. Paul. He evidently had a flair for business and merchandising, for by the time he was twenty-five he felt sure enough of himself to wed the Ischer daughter from Waterloo, Iowa mentioned earlier. Four children were born of the union, including my mother. Like many a bright but ignorant man of his times, he sought to overcome his lack of formal education by voracious reading of the classics. I can still remember him in his old age entertaining family gatherings by reciting from memory long passages from Shakespeare - often too long from my callow teenage viewpoint.

He also saw to it that his children would have the education he coveted, sending the two boys to college at Kenyon, and my mother and her sister to the University of Minnesota. How their lives developed is not germane to this paper except to say they were each representative of the upward mobility of American society in the Twentieth Century.

Albert's business and auctioneering ventures thrived for years. A fading picture shows him proudly standing in front of his store in downtown St. Paul. But the Depression and advancing age did him in. Despite it all, he lived to the age of 95 and took the secret of his birth to the grave. And so the matter would have rested except for that trip to the old farmstead in 1972 that elicited the cry, "But where's Albert?"

Some key questions then arose. What happened to Louisa, who disappeared into Dakota Territory in 1875? And who was the mystery lover who impregnated her — my true great grandfather! My visits to the old farm drew a blank. As far as my country cousins were concerned, it was best to forget Louisa. But out of the blue a letter arrived in March 1977 from a descendant of Louisa who was seeking her own roots. The letter had been triggered by publicity about my sister.

As background, she was in the forefront of politics as women started to break into that field in the mid Twentieth Century. She was the only female to serve in the Minnesota State Legislature from 1951 to 1961. This position and her outgoing personality provided local prominence, including mention in a feature story in the old *Life* Magazine. Through a roundabout contact these facts and a possible family connection had come to the attention of one of the key missing relatives in North Dakota. She then tracked down my sister's address through the archivist of the legislature.

The ensuing correspondence revealed the fact that Louisa, like so many women of her time, gave birth to many children, twelve in all in addition to Albert. The survivors and their progeny have spent their lives in North Dakota, Montana, and Washington. She, herself, lived to the age of seventy-seven.

Another bizarre finding was that a friend of mine who hails from Williston and sits across the poker table in our monthly games is a shirttail relative.

Louisa's descendants were as taken aback as we were when they learned of Albert's origins. Their family records had also been falsified to hide the truth. The facts clarified an old mystery. One of the North Dakota family explained that his great grandmother always kept an old portrait of Albert but none of her other nine siblings. That seemed strange until they realized Albert was really her oldest son that she never saw again after the age of seven.

And now to the juicy part. Who was the hidden swain? I sought some evidence from Albert's birth certificate in the old files of Ramsey County, where St. Paul is located. But the recording of births, deaths, and marriages was haphazard at the time. The Bureau of Vital Statistics was not established until 1870, seven years after Albert's birth. So it must have been easy to bring him into the world unnoticed. The errant father has left no obvious tracks. But one can surmise. He was probably of medium stature like Albert. It's likely he was also good looking, since old photos of Albert and his two sons depict very handsome men. Finally, he might have sported a shock of red hair. Genetically, red is a recessive gene that appears only when both father and mother carry it. Three of my four cousins had bright red hair. In any case, most of my family has fair skin and sandy hair. Finally, we're almost certain he was a Methodist.

But why weren't he and Louisa married in haste? Shotgun weddings were certainly a practical solution in those days before Planned Parenthood. One can only suspect there was an overriding reason against their nuptials.

The family could have objected to his status, occupation, etc. This seems unlikely, as my forebearers did not seem in a position to disapprove of anyone in their community. A more probable explanation is that he was constrained in some way. Perhaps he was already married. The

thought comes to mind of an Elmer Gantry or a Jimmy Swaggert. Back to "The Scarlet Letter" and Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. The possibilities are delicious.

And then there's one final issue. Since all those pioneers were very prolific, I can only imagine I have a lot of unknown third and fourth generation relatives from that side of the bed who are alive and well to this day. So if you see a stocky, good looking, fair haired or red headed man with roots in the North Central part of the country, please keep me advised. I have some questions for him.