

Genealogy and My Visit to the Tornio River Valley, July 2010

In the summer of 2010 I made a trip to the beautiful Tornio River Valley in Övertorneå, Norrbotten, Sweden which is in Northern Sweden, very near to the Arctic Circle. You may wonder how this trip came about, and for me; it still seems somewhat unbelievable. You see, it is because of my genealogy hobby. It is my passion and I spend some time every day working on it.

Back in 1997 I got my first computer and this opened up a new world for me in genealogy. It began a new phase for me in learning to use and search newgroups, list servers, ancestry.com, and email. I was able to search for places I had never been and find photos and dream of going there. I became email friends with many people from all over the world. Then there were the mystery places; the websites or emails written in a foreign language that I could not read. I despaired when I espied one of my ancestors names on one of these pages and could not decipher the smallest part of what was being discussed. What I have learned over the years is not to be afraid to respond anyway. Do it in English. Someone will understand and write back to you. If there is no response, try again.

On May 19, 1998 I did just that. I wrote a posting on “Efterlysningar via Kalixbygdens Forskarförening” (<http://goto.glocalnet.net/Kalixius/Efterlysningar.htm>) asking about my ancestors. I had no idea what any of those words meant, but did it anyway. To my surprise, a kindly gentleman named Ragnar Sannemalm responded to me; and he wrote in English! That one simple posting started the ball rolling, and over the years many have responded to me over that one posting. People have written to say they would drive me anywhere I wanted to go, if I just came. Someone offered to take me to the library in Övertorneå and help me find the records I needed and to stay with me until I was done. The kindness was overwhelming, but alas; I could see no way that a trip to Tornio would ever happen. In the meantime I developed friendship with many folks and we exchanged many emails over the years, some about genealogy and some just friendly wishes. I got some very funny emails due to the language limitations and I'm sure I sent some very funny emails back to them!! Nevertheless, this did not stop us. That is the point! Do not stop!! Ever! Don't worry about the language, someone laughing at you, feeling silly, etc. We all know about it, and don't worry about such things. The people reaching out to help have the same hobby as you and want to do everything they can to help you.

In 2009 I had the first realization that I might be able to travel to Sweden and the home of my ancestors. After much planning, organizing, and a mountain of emails my dream came true in the summer of 2010. So armed with nothing, except a few clothes, gifts, and my netbook, I set off on my trip of a lifetime. My trip was a 6 week odyssey starting in Helsinki, north to Kuusamo, west to Sweden and Matarangi, and the balance spent in southern Norway. Could any one person be so lucky?

I had met a lovely girl in Yliosjarvi who had family in Muonio and she graciously offered to drive me all the way to Matarangi. She was quite intrigued that a girl from Canada wanted to know more about her country and the places her ancestors lived and she wanted to share adventure with me and to see her country through my eyes. Evy and I became friends immediately and I miss her and hope I get to see her again one day. She dropped me off with my hosts and I took

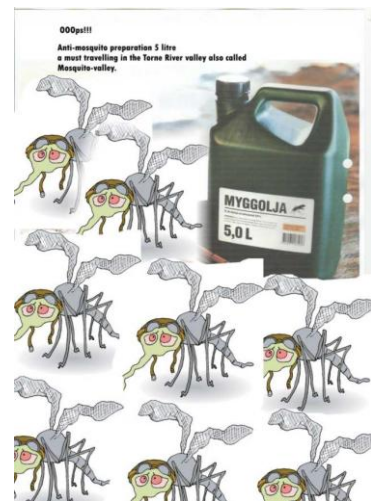
them all out for dinner at Kattilakoski Restaurant located a short distance out of town. When you are dining it feels like you are floating on the Tornio River. I can see why it has won awards for architectural design. I had the reindeer and it was delicious. A fun part of the restaurant was the depth sounder they had set up in the front. You could actually see the fish swimming in the river.



Kattilakoski Restaurant

For the next 3 days and 4 nights I stayed with Ragnar and Arra who went out of their way to show me their home, their culture, and their customs. In addition they took me to the places where my ancestors lived and were very patient in answering all my questions. I will always remember their kindness and now consider them close family even though we are actually 7th cousins. The time went far too fast and I could have stayed twice as long.

Before I start telling you about the rest, I will talk a bit about the mosquitoes, or myggolja as they are called in Tornio. They are everywhere and they would have been in my hair, my ears, my eyes, and my mouth had I not taken a few precautions. I had advance warning about the Swedish army and came prepared for the onslaught. I had read on a Finnish travel site that traveller's going to the northern areas should pack Zyrtec. I'm not sure why other antihistamines wouldn't work, but it was very specific that it be Zyrtec. The instructions were to start taking it a few days before arriving and to take it every day you are there and it would neutralize the bites. They can be very nasty, itchy, and leave scars. I did as instructed and although I was bitten, the itch was less intense than what I would have suffered at home. It works! I also packed a mosquito jacket and a Finnish cousin had given me a mosquito hat along with insect repellent. The point was to keep the myggolja from getting in my nose, mouth and other places; and the repellent (which I sprayed over the jacket and hat) was to keep them even further away. I didn't look so pretty, but sometimes necessity overcomes appearances. Even so, there were a few times I would take off running across a field to escape the onslaught but I learned they fly faster than these old legs can run! It was quite amusing to hear someone exclaim "I think they like foreign food!" So aside from being a nuisance, I suffered no long or lasting effects from the mosquitoes.



Good advice!

Day One

This day was rainy and cold and we dressed for the occasion. I didn't have any boots so Ragnar let me borrow a pair of his and was glad to have them. The first place on the agenda required us to cross back over the Tornio River into Finland. We headed for Armasaari, the home of Arendt Grape, the German brewer who came to Stockholm in 1629. He eventually found his way to Tornio where he started Sweden's first ironworks factory. I am very glad for the company of those who knew the way for I fear I would have been lost trying to find this place. There is not

much here, but there is a wonderful plaque on a large stone which was place there by family some years ago. They wanted to memorialize their ancestor and I am thankful for their thoughtfulness. It is right on the river on the Finland side but learned that it was Sweden until 1917. I also learned that Naautapoudi was not a “place” name, but more of a description of his occupation and what he did here. As Arra told me “He was a merchant and had a shop where he bought and sold meat. That is was Naautapoudi means”.



Dressed for the day ahead



Signpost marking our destination



The closest I will get to hugging my 8th great grandfather

This was a big day with many things on the agenda. We headed back over the Tornio River into Sweden. I must mention that this is the most peaceful border crossing in the entire world. There are no buildings, nor any guards. You don't have to stop or declare anything. The only way you know you have entered another country is the discreet sign on the side of the road. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all border crossings were as peaceful.

After crossing the river back into Sweden, we headed south to Ruskola where my great grandfather Edward Johannesson Rova lived. Unfortunately his house was no longer there, but I was able to see the foundation stones where it used to stand. I discovered that the house still exists and had been moved to another location. Some people found out where it was, but we were unable to contact the owner to go and see. I guess I will have to make another trip!



The beautiful tree-lined drive

The Rova farm is located right on the banks of the Tornio and Edward would have been able to hear the water flowing downstream day and night. In winter I am sure he heard the cracking of the ice, and it must have been really noisy when the ice broke in the spring. The people who live here now spent a long time speaking with Ragnar as I wandered, took pictures, and fought the myggolja . He filled me in later. It is a pretty spot with lots of trees to provide shade and has an amazing view across the river to Finland. I do believe he might have been able to see Arendt Grape's place. Edward's wife Eva Johanna Isaksdötter Grape is descended from Arendt.



The Border Crossing



The Rova Farm in Ruskola

I left the Rova farm and on the drive back to Matarengi I thought about what Edward's life might have been like. They must have been fairly self-sufficient as there are no modern conveniences nearby, even now. I would guess that they had some farm animals for milk and butter, likely planted a large garden for vegetables to eat in the winter. The river is full of fish so I think that was a large part of their diet.

The next stop was in the village of Matarengi for a little lunch at Café Kaffila. It is a lovely place in a house that is more than 100 years old. It has lovely places to sit and chat while you enjoy your coffee, sandwich, and sweets. From there we visited a charming butik called Simu Nordic AB for some locally made woollen clothing and an art gallery, both of which were nearby. All of these were located in buildings which were at least 100 years old or perhaps even older. The clothing was lovely and well-made and I even got to speak with the owner. The art gallery was very interesting to go through with much of the artwork depicting life, people, and scenery of Övertorneå. I enjoyed it very much.



Shops and Art Gallery

Just across the street was the church where my ancestors were baptized, confirmed, and married. Just as I was about to enter the church I was introduced me to a gentleman who happened to be a Rova cousin. Oh yes, he knew exactly who Edward Rova was and he knew a gentleman who apparently knew where Edward's house had been moved. He would get in touch with him and let me know. Fortune was certainly seemed to be smiling on me!

The church is beautiful, built like a cross, with an amazing wooden organ that is painted gold. There are paintings circling the gallery and a beautiful chandelier in the middle of it. There are many old artifacts in the church, the most famous being a wooden Virgin Mary and when you open the front of her robes, the Christ is exposed. This was rescued from the Särkilax Chapel with was destroyed by a flood in 1615. This Madonna reported to be dated from the 14th century.



The Bell Tower



The beautiful organ and galley



The altar and chandelier

My 6th great uncle Johannes Nicolai Tornberg was the pastor of this church and in 1717 Russian Cossacks beat him with his walking stick, which resulted in his death two days later. They were stealing the church valuables and Johannes tried to stop them. His walking stick remains safely stored in the church sacristy, although I did not get to see it. I did feel rather emotional visiting this beautiful church. I wandered through the cemetery and recognized many of the names on the stones. These people were my family, my ancestors and I had come home. I had a quiet moment to reflect of our lives. How mine had become so different from theirs and so different from my roots. Not because I had run away from it, but because I had never known it. I wanted to know more.

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1718	22	S. Petter	1	S. Petter	1
1718	24	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	26	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	28	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	30	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	32	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	34	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	36	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	38	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	40	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	42	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	44	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	46	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	48	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	50	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	52	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	54	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	56	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	58	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	60	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	62	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	64	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	66	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	68	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	70	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	72	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	74	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	76	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
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1718	84	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
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1718	90	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	92	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	94	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	96	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
1718	98	M. Petter	1	M. Petter	1
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**Edward's Baptism (2nd entry)
from microfilm reader**

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**Charts on Edward's father
Johan Pettersson Rova**

Across the street was the library and the genealogy records. I was getting a little nervous at this point and was glad to have Ragnar with me. I thought there was not a chance that I could manoeuvre and find my way around a Swedish library! We get to the door and the library is closed, but then I have a resourceful guide with me and this is after all Tornedalen; and he takes a key from his pocket and we enter the library. Hmmm, I think. A border with no guards, and residents who have keys to the library! I love it! The genealogy section of the library is so well organized that it is a dream to use. I needn't have worried about reading English at all. I knew the basics, such as born, died, and married and I only needed to select the correct microfilm

from the binder and start searching. In no time at all I had found my Edward, his siblings, Edward's father and his siblings, and even further back. It was probably the easiest search I have done in my life. It was silly of me to have worried about it. I made my copies and I headed off for a new adventure in Aunesgården.

Aunesgården is a museum located in six buildings which are set up as a typical homestead during the 1800's. I only went through the main farmhouse which was very interesting. It was full of wonderful historical items the people used and made by hand. I loved the cradles, the furniture, and the kick sleds. The distaffs for spinning flax were impressive with the intricacy of design. A young man must have spent many hours dreaming of his loved one while making these. What a disappointment it must have been if she turned him down! The most interesting thing was an item that translates as "Pulling Kids". It is an object that protected the unbaptized child but I'm not sure exactly how that worked. Outside was a well with a very large lever to pull the bucket up. I think it may have required two people to fetch the water.



Cradle & Bed



Distaffs for spinning flax



Well

Day Two



Raw reindeer?

This day started out with my host grinding the coffee beans by hand with an old coffee grinder. He did this every morning and he seemed to enjoy this ritual quite a bit. So did I! While he was doing this his lovely wife made me a "special" Swedish sandwich. She wasn't going to tell me what it was until I tasted and told her if I liked it or not. She didn't know that I was not very brave when it comes to food. Like a real champion I agreed. It was made on some flat bread on which some mayonnaise had been spread. She then placed some meat on it and rolled it up and handed it to me. I got a little nervous when she then told me to "Wait" while she got the camera.

I got a little suspicious then, and decided my teeth were not going through that special sandwich until I knew what kind of meat I was about to chew on. She told me it was reindeer, so I thought it was okay. I take a brave bite and start chewing. It wasn't bad, but I am also all about texture of food. I didn't like the texture. My lovely hostess asks me if I like it, and not wanting to hurt her feelings, I muster up the best "It's not bad" that I could. She then, with the most delightful glee in her face, shouted out "It's raw!" and snapped the photo. You can see the results, and I

just wish you could hear the peals of laughter that came from Arra. She was very mischevious and so much fun to be with. It turns out that the reindeer was technically not raw, but cold smoked.



Stormy Skies

Just as we were about to leave, a great thunder-storm came up and I was treated to a light and sound show in the far north. I was told that the lightening can be quite dangerous and does much harm at times. The words were hardly out of Arra's mouth when Ragnar, who was listening to the radio says there were some houses already on fire from

the lightening, but they were further south from us. So we set off on a very wet and stormy day. The first thing we did was to cross the beautiful Tornio River, the peaceful border line between Sweden and Finland, and head north along the Finnish side of the river. We stopped for a rest and to stretch our legs at a place that was right on the river. The water was rushing, and bubbling, and dancing and I got a feel for what it could be like if the water was high. I also wondered about flooding as the landscape was very flat and any rise in the water would result in flooding. That is how my 8th great grandfather Arendt Grape died in 1687. The floodwaters washed him away and his body was never found. I was beginning to think that life along the Tornio must have been hard, but it gave the people strength and determination. They had to have been a force to be reckoned with, just like the river that flowed through their lives.



A Memorial to Fallen Soldiers



The Tornio River



Reindeer

We drove along the Finnish side and crossed back to Sweden at Pello. Pello was known as Turtola until 1949. We continued north another 54 kilometres until we reached Pajala where we stopped and had lunch. It was a little place alongside the highway and it offered a smorgasbörd. I had a reindeer stroganoff which was pretty good. When we exited the restaurant it was nice to see that the skies were clearing and the sun was going to shine on us for the remainder of the day. Along with sun came great humidity after all that rain. I was surprised that being 50 miles north of the Polar Circle it was so warm that it was downright tropical. Yes, it does get very warm inside the Arctic Circle!

While in Pajala we stopped to see the World's Largest Sundial. It apparently measures 38.33 metres in diameter and is in the Guinness Book of World Records. I wish I knew how to tell time on one of these things.



The World's Largest Sundial



Arendt Grape's Manor House

Next stop was at Kengis where Arendt Grape lived before he moved to Armasaari and began farming. It was here that he had somehow made a channel to direct the flow of the river to turn the turbines to crush the ore that came from Kiruna. That had to have been some job back in the mid 1600's. The force of the river is so strong here and it roars and thunders as it races to the Baltic Sea. Arendt built a big house at this location and it still stands. It is the most northern mansion in all of Sweden. He was quite wealthy at one time but spent his entire fortune on the mine and on his workers. He made sure they had homes and educations. He eventually sold a 2/3 interest to the Dutch Momma brothers who took over the operations of the mine. The Momma's were later raised to the nobility. It was quite amazing to see the channel in the river, and to walk on the same land as my 8th great grandfather did over 400 years ago. The mine at Masungbyn is still operating today as LKAB.



The Tornio River at Kengis



The Rapids



The Channel

There are many descendants of Arendt Grape in the Tornio River Valley. It is not too surprising as he did have 14 children who produced many children themselves. They include astronomers, authors, politicians, linguists, merchants, and a bishop. His descendants have spread all over the

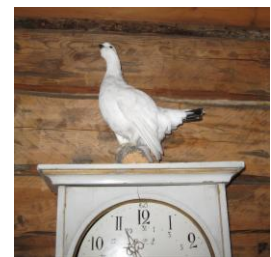
earth and almost all people in the valley can claim ancestry to him. I wonder if Arendt had any idea of the legacy and mark he would leave on this valley when he left his native Germany.

It was interesting to notice the differences on this side of the Tornio River. On the Finnish side it seems quite populated with many houses and farms. On the Swedish side it is miles of pine and fir trees, with sprinklings of birch; but few houses. I wonder why the scarcity of settlements on the Swedish side. I suppose I will have to leave this for another visit. I also learned something of the wars. One thing that surprised me was the residents burned their own homes during the war. I couldn't understand why they would do such a thing until I learned they did because they did not want the advancing enemy to have food or shelter. It made so much sense to me then. I am very glad that Arendt's house was not among the homes destroyed.

We stopped at Svanstein, a ski center; to visit and roam about the buildings and galleries at Dränglängan. There were many wonderful sculptures and items on display. There were many items for sale and I wished I had room in my luggage to bring some back home. I think my husband was glad I didn't! I also saw my first (stuffed, but not cooked!) kiiruna.



A building at Dränglängan



A cuckoo Kiiruna

My journey continued and the river was never far from sight. The fields and open spaces were ablaze with purple wildflowers. A landscape painted in beauty, the blue of the river, the green and purple of the grass, flowers and trees, and the blue and the white of the sky. It is a peaceful place, calm, serene. I only had another day to drink it all in. Before I knew it we had arrived at the Polar Circle. We did the mandatory photos and no sooner finished when the heavens opened for the second time. We made a crazy, giggling dash for cover in the car.



Where shall we go?



The Arctic Circle



A White Reindeer

Day Three

This was going to be another busy day. My hosts wanted to take me to a traditional Swedish farm and to have a picnic. There was a special Swedish picnic sandwich that they wanted to buy,

but all the stores were out. Instead, we ordered pizza to take with us to the farm. When we arrived I was introduced to everyone. There was no way that I would remember all their names. I was then informed me that the pizza was not for me. I was to eat with the lady in the other house who knew lots about my family. I should have known it was a trick!! Instead I had the great privilege of smelling one of the worst things I think I have smelled in my entire life!! And that is a lot of years. They tried very hard to get me to try Surströmming and I tried very hard not to be sick. When they realized that they could not get me to eat it, they asked if I would prefer to have some strawberries, at which point we all broke out in peals of laughter. I could not believe it when they said it would take 24 hours for the smell to go away! We then crossed the yard and to my great relief had pizza for lunch.



The Surströmming Attack!



Yes, I know, hold the reins!

After lunch I enjoyed a leisurely horseback riding session with two delightful young ladies. They chose a very gentle horse for me ride. As you can see, I wasn't holding on to the reins!



Being presented with the Tornedalen Flag

Next on our stop was visit to Herbert Wirlöf. Herbert is very involved with Tornedalen genealogy and has done an amazing amount of work tracing the emigrants. He raised the Tornedalen flag in my honour! He came out and I wasn't sure it was him, because he did not look like his photo. He very kindly invited us in a little building which had a lovely warm fire burning in an open fireplace. The warmth was very welcome. After a bit he invited us into his home and served us coffee and sweet treats. I felt like a princess! His home is very beautiful, with high ceiling and white walls. The floors are covered in colorful rugs. We talked a lot about genealogy and plans for FinnFest. I would very much like to be part of that one day. He spoke of his database of emigrants which is amazingly large. I hope that it will be of use when it comes time to invite the

Tornedalians back home in 2015. I for one plan to be there greeting them as they arrive. Do I sound like a foolish old woman? Before I left Herbert presented me with the Tornedalen flag. The three colors have special meanings for Tornedalians; blue is for the clear blue sky, white for the snow covered winter landskap, and yellow for the sun. It is a treasured keepsake. I can honestly say that I now understand their love for their home. If you have ancestors from the area

you may want to check out [Tornedalians of the World](#). A lot of work has gone into this site and I appreciate the effort put into creating it.

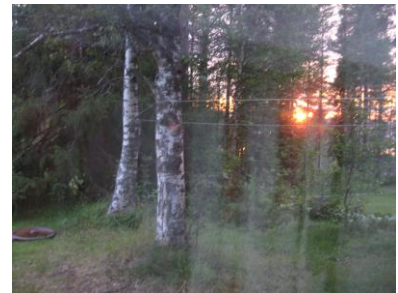
The shadows were getting longer and we had one more place to visit. Luppioberget is a granite mountain and rumor has it that Santa lives here. I hear that a troll may also make his home here but I didn't catch sight of him. At 192 metres you can see right across the Tornio River Valley to Finland. It seemed strange to be in this place when just 3 nights before I spent the night in Aavasaksa. At 242 metres, it is the high point on the Finnish side of the valley, and I climbed the tower and looked over the beautiful river valley into Sweden. I was sad to be leaving this enchanted place in the morning.



The Wild Flowers and the Torniojoki



From the top of Luppioberget



The Midnight Sun through the birch trees

Day Four

The morning was solemn as we faced the thoughts of saying our farewells, and me with a thousand thanks in my heart which were not nearly enough. Just about the time I was to start putting my luggage into the car a knock came at the door. It was a lady from Övertorneå Kommune who had come bearing gifts! There was bag with T-shirts, a bath towel in the Tornedalian flag colors, a wooden cup, and much more. What a surprise! Need I tell you again how kind everyone is in Tornedalen?



Showing off my "loot" bag



Traditional Costume

I left my heart in the Torne River Valley because the people and the land stole it from me. It's a magical, wonderful place that is filled with surprises, and mysteries. It is warm, and welcoming, and friendly. It's peaceful, and quiet, yet wild and untamed. It remains untouched by worldly things and can only be touched by the river and the sky. It's something undefinable, but it's palpable. You sense it, and feel it, and it gets under your skin. I breathed it in and found myself exhaling with a breathless "I have come home". I know I belong to this valley. I am a Tornedalian.

Vivian Gullickson White