

The Youngest Brother Becomes a World Traveler

When I first visited Degerhamn on Öland with my brother and his wife, we met many descendants of my mother's grandmother. One of these relatives, Gösta Wahlgren, was the town historian who had organized a small museum for the records, photos, and other things he had collected to preserve the history of Degerhamn. He was able to fill in the background of our grandmother who left Sweden at 16 to emigrate to America.

In telling us about our grandmother's family, Gösta mentioned that he had lost track of her younger brother, Herman, who had run away to sea as a teenager. Gösta asked us if we would try to trace him in the United States. Over the years since, I have found ship's records of Herman's various entries into the U.S. and his application for citizenship. This year I found a number of documents detailing his life as a seaman, as well as his death certificate. The following is a synopsis of his life. I feel that I've finally found Herman, the youngest and lost brother.

Herman Wilhelm Snöberg was born December 20th, 1891, the last of the six children of Anders Gustaf Snöberg and Sophia Mathilda Norberg. His oldest sibling Emma Sofie had already emigrated to Minneapolis, MN four years before he was born. His other sister Wilhelmina followed Emma when Herman was ten.

I have no information on Herman's life in Degerhamn, but I know it was not an easy one. His father, employed by the cement factory, came from a long line of miners. The mining of limestone at Degerhamn has been going on since the end of the 19th century. But the region had lime production and the mining of alum shale for many centuries before that. Limestone exports from Öland date back to the 13th century and from Degerhamn back to the 17th century.

Herman's grandfather and family migrated back and forth between Degerhamn on Öland and Tysslinge in Örebrö province. The men were originally alum miners, but when the alum mines gave out they switched to mining limestone for the cement factory. Herman would have been destined for the hard life of an open pit miner, but apparently that wasn't to his liking so he found a way to leave the country. His father had died in 1900 in an accidental drowning and his mother was reportedly extremely difficult to get along with. She probably paid a big part in pushing Herman to leave as she had with her eldest daughter, my grandmother. According to a letter Herman wrote years later, he said he had last been in Sweden in 1906, so it seems safe to assume that was the year he left Degerhamn and became a seaman.

Though I have no records of Herman's life from 1906 until 1914, I know that on April 15, 1914, Herman departed Newcastle, Australia for the United States. He landed in Aberdeen, Washington on the ship Ariel on September 20th. He was listed as a seaman, part of the crew on the ship.

There are no records of Herman's return to the states for three years. We can assume that he was signing on to various ships and traveling elsewhere in the world. On the 27th of July 1917 he landed in Newport News, Virginia having sailed from Genoa, Italy. He also had several round trips from Norfolk, Virginia and New York to Cuba on the SS Lewis K. Thurlow.

There are no further records until 1920 when on June 20th Herman arrived in New York, NY aboard the SS Bellemina. The ship had started its journey in Buenos Aires, Argentina, landed in Marseille, France on March 3rd, and landed in NYC on June 3rd. Herman is listed as an Ordinary Seaman. (An **ordinary seaman** (OS) is a member of the deck department of a ship. The position is an apprenticeship to become an able seaman, and has been for centuries.)

It must have been at this point that Herman decided to establish residence in New York and become a citizen of the U.S. When he filled out an application for naturalization, his first address in this country was 217 Mission Street, Brooklyn. A year later he moved to 25 South Street, New York City. This address is in the South Street Seaport district and was home to countless itinerant sailors. There were many social institutions and churches that catered to their needs. The exact location was probably a boarding house. Herman spent so much time at sea that, although he maintained this as his permanent address for the rest of his life, he probably didn't spend much time there until his later years.

Here is a letter Herman wrote to his sister Wilhelmina (Mina or Minnie as she was known in the U.S.):

San Francisco, the 5th of May ca. 1920)

Dear Sister:

This evening I want to write a few lines and thank you for the letter which I received in New York. It was so nice to be able to hear from you. I wrote to you four years ago, but the letter came back again because the address was too old. It would be so nice to meet again and so would I also like to meet Emma once. I hope she doesn't get as angry with people as her mother used to do sometimes.

As you can see, I am now on the west coast. I am turning around you, but it doesn't look as if I will be able to come on land, because I am afraid that I won't be able to find a way back again. But we shall see what the future brings.

Last summer I met so many people from Öland in New York. I was at the house of Hilda Thora and Oskar Norberg who are married and live on Long Island. Thora has gotten so broad around the hips that she has difficulty coming through the doors. They asked of you and Emma. Hilda and Emma are surely of approximately the same age. They remember her well.

I haven't been home for nearly fourteen years, so it has greatly changed since I was there. I get a letter from home sometimes. I remember well how we used to beat up Johann when you were home. But he paid me back when you traveled away. The only comfort I had was that you soon would come home again, but it was a bit too long a time to wait for you. So I went away myself.

(Letter from Hermann Wilhelm Snöberg given to me by Ernst Gösta Ingvar Wahlgren, July, 99. It had been in his mother's papers – Greta Viktoria Snöberg)

In 1921 Herman applied for citizenship. After that he was listed as a US citizen on the ship records for all of his journeys. By this time he achieved the rank of “A.S.” according to the ship manifests. An Able Seaman had more responsible duties and was paid more than an Ordinary Seaman.

What do we know about Herman’s appearance? Fortunately we have a photo that was attached to his “Seaman’s Protection Certificate” application of June 14, 1926. He was 34 at the time—described as 5’ 8” tall, blue eyes, brown hair and a ruddy complexion. His one distinguishing mark was a tattoo of an anchor on the back of his left hand. Most of the ships’ crew listings contain the weight of each crewman. Herman’s was very consistent at 164 or 165 pounds until 1935-1936 when his weight went up as high as 186 pounds. During these years he was making trips to South America and South Africa. He must have enjoyed the food in those more exotic places. A few years later his weight had returned to the usual 164 pounds.



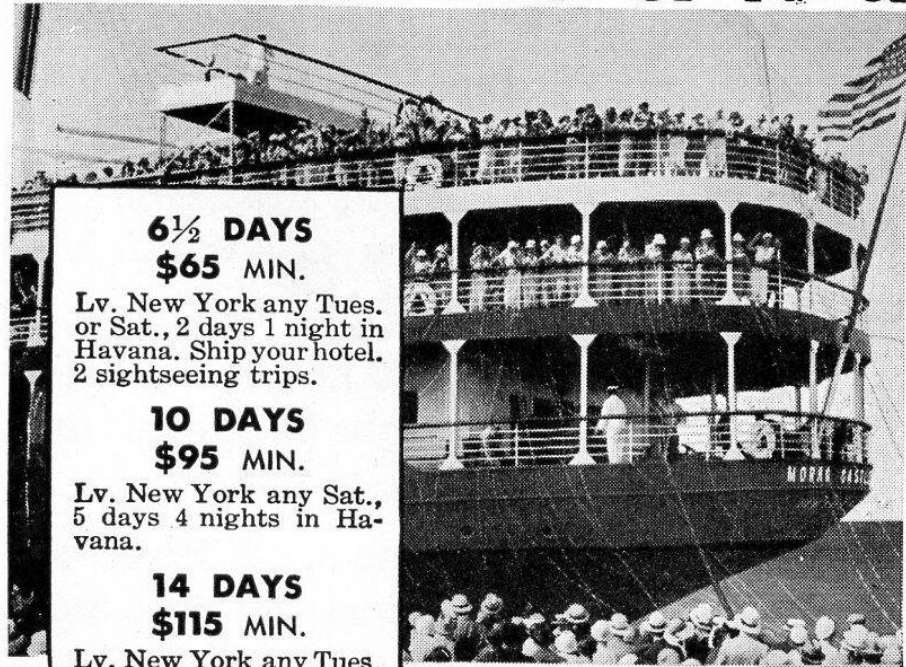
In the latter part of the 1920’s his journeys took him often to Tampico, Mexico from New Orleans and to Havana, Cuba from New York.

In 1930 he made several two-month round trips to South America from New York to Buenos Aires, Argentina and back on the SS American Legion. He also made 6 round trips from New York to Hamilton, Bermuda on the SS Pan American before signing on for their longer round trip to Buenos Aires.

Although it is not known what cargo other than passengers was carried in many of the ships on which Herman worked, we do know some were carrying fruit, others oil, and others were mail lines. Beginning in 1931 Herman signed on to do many trips with the passenger ship SS Morro Castle to Havana, Cuba and various Mexican ports from New York.

The SS Morro Castle acted as a passenger liner between Cuba and New York City beginning in 1930. She could carry a total of 532 passengers (437 first class, 95 tourist class) and 240 crew. For a round trip cost starting at \$65—about \$1,200 adjusted for inflation—and ornate staterooms going as high as \$200—about \$3,800 today—passengers could spend two and a half days getting to Havana, two days vacationing there, then two and a half days back. This week-long escape from the bleak reality of life in the midst of the Great Depression was a singles mixer in a party atmosphere, where individuals could gamble and drink alcohol. The original booze cruise, the *Morro Castle* acted as a legal way around prohibition.

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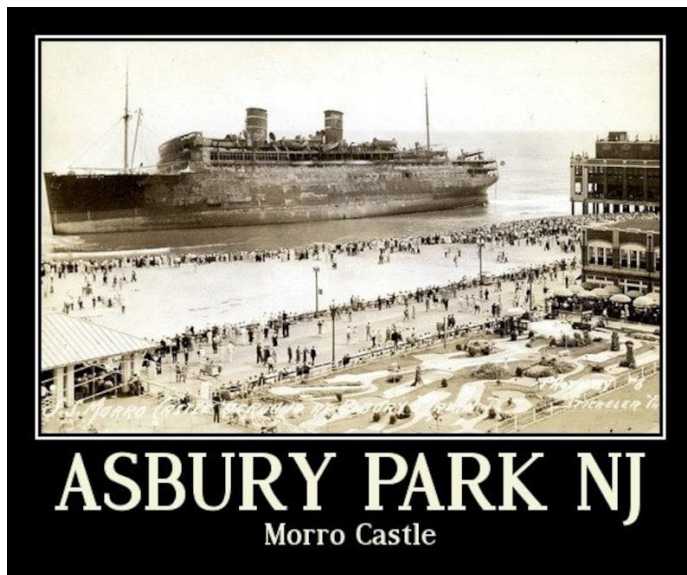
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The SS Morro Castle caught fire in the midst of a nor'easter and ran aground off Asbury Park, NJ on the morning of September 8, 1934, enroute from Havana, Cuba, to New York City, with the loss of 137 passengers and crew. Fortunately, when the ship ran aground and burned, Herman was sailing aboard the SS Paul W. Harwood from Aruba, Dutch West Indies to New York. *(If I had to guess, I'd say Herman stopped serving aboard the SS Morro Castle because the ship owners started hiring inexperienced men as crew members – paying them only with room and board in many cases. Since it was the height of the depression, they found a*

ready source of workers.)

Herman continued to make trips to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela and several longer voyages to South Africa. His last recorded journey was a trip to Tampico, Mexico on the SS Atlas. He returned to the United States on May 5, 1939. There are no further ship manifest records listing Herman and no indication of how he spent the next years. However, at the age of 50 he did register for the draft. There is no present documentation to say he served during World War II, however. It is probable that his health prevented him from being eligible.

With all the traveling Herman did, he didn't have much time for a social life. He was never married. The manifests from his many voyages always listed the country of origin of each of the seaman. When he first came to this country, it wasn't unusual to find quite a few Swedes and Norwegians on each of his trips, but as time passed there were fewer and fewer. In his final sailing years, it wasn't unusual that there were only one or two others from Scandinavia onboard with him.

Herman passed away on the 17th of June 1946 at the age of 54 at the Seton Hospital for Consumptives which had been opened in 1894 for the care of patients among the poor. His cause of death was pulmonary tuberculosis. He was buried on July 23rd, 1946 at Evergreens Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY in an unmarked plot in the area called Seaman's Ground.

Sov i Ro, Herman!

*Compiled by Karen Snowberg
18 Feb 2023*