Oskar Wilhelm Alrik Forssman (1822 to 1889)
Entrepreneur, Pioneer, Farmer, Consul and Father of Swedish immigration to South Africa

1. Early days & Emigration

Like his younger better-known relative, Raoul Wallenberg, Oskar Wilhelm Alrik Forssman, a famous immigrant to South Africa, is descended from Elisabet Sabelskjöld and Magnus Stråle av Ekna.

OWA (Alrik) Forssman was born in Sweden in June 1822 but, after completing his education as an engineer, immigrated to South Africa in 1844. His father had died in 1835 when he was 13 and his father’s farms near Kalmar had apparently been sold cheaply during the winding up of his estate. In 1844 business opportunities in Sweden were limited.

Alrik originally worked in the sugar cane industry in the British Colony of Natal before moving to Potchefstroom the new capital of the Boer Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). At that time South Africa consisted of four geographic areas – the independent Boer republics of the Orange Free State and, just north of it, the Transvaal or Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, both landlocked, and, further south with access from the sea, the British ruled Cape and Port Natal Colonies.

2. Emigration Scheme to “Scandinavia” South Africa

By 1852 Alrik had moved to Potchefstroom, the then capital of the Boer ZAR. In Potchefstroom he owned a large general dealers store and set up an import/export business trading in products such as ivory, skins, ostrich feathers and wool, and soon had branches in Nylstroom and Rickertsdam in the Marico district. In the early 1850s he began acquiring land and eventually became the largest landowner in South Africa. He owned a total of 343 220 acres scattered in various parts of the Transvaal, including his farms along the Vaal River, 28 kilometres from Potchefstroom, which he called “Scandinavia”.

From this entrepreneur and businessman with many talents, the ZAR government procured both goods and services but, having little cash flow, it paid him with farms. However, as his grandson, also named Alric, points out “Although he owned these vast stretches of land, they meant very little to him as the white population was scarce and far spread out resulting in a poor market for his produce”.

To put a vast area under irrigation, Alric Forssman decided to return to Sweden to look for young men who in return for free passage to South Africa would be willing to sign a 2 year contract to work and manage his many farms.

So, at the end of 1862, he set sail for Kalmar, Sweden, with his wife, Emelia Enrita Amalie von Landsberg, whom he had married in South Africa, and his children.

“On the voyage to Sweden Forssman had also taken two African girls from Potchefstroom, Dina Maria and Sara Makatemele, 17 and 18 years old. When the girls crossed the gangway and stepped onto the quay in Kalmar they created a great commotion in the City. The people here had never before seen black people from Africa. In Kalmar, Sara gave birth to a daughter. The child was christened Cecilia, but was
always called Millan. In later years she became a very well known piano teacher in Kalmar and both Millan and her mother Sara are today a part of the local history of Kalmar where they lived for the rest of their lives. Both Sara Makatemele and Millan are buried in Kalmar in the old graveyard right next to the ancient castle” (per article by Christer Blomstrand in Famnea [Newsletter of the Genealogy Association of the North West] Issue 1 February 2008).

On 12 August 1863, the 1 700 ton frigate, Octavia (pictured below at Cape Town, South Africa), which he had hired for 18 000 riksdaler, departed on its return voyage from Kalmar for Port Natal (Durban) loaded with cargo including wooden planks, iron and iron implements (ploughs, iron stoves, hardware) limestone, tar, beer from a Kalmar brewery, wagons, carts, anchovies (60 kegs), salted herring and cheese. The ship also carried 35 Swedes plus its Captain, AE Palander, a second lieutenant of the Swedish navy. The passengers included 15 single men, including Carl Olen, 5 single women and the AA Hellstrom and Carl Lonngren families. On 17 November 1863 the Swedish party arrived safely in Port Natal.

Alric Forssman dreamed of a profitable trade between Sweden and South Africa and, in a letter of 26 December 1863, he wrote “Both at Durban and Port Elizabeth there will be much to do for Swedish ships within a few years, as cultivation of sugar and wool is growing considerably, and a thousand bales of wool is awaiting shipment, thus ships can at any time be sure of cargo...”.

Unfortunately, in 1865 a devastating drought struck the Transvaal (ZAR) and the Vaal River stopped flowing. Forssman’s scheme was ruined. Those Swedes who had remained on the “Scandinavia” farms now dispersed to other parts of the Transvaal, many having married the daughters of local Dutch “Boer” farmers.

Alrik Forssman also brought his brother, Magnus Forsmann, his wife and 4 daughters to South Africa on the ship. Magnus was a surveyor in Sweden and Alrik introduced him to the President of the ZAR, MW Pretorius, with the suggestion that he create a new government post – that of Surveyor General of the ZAR. The President obliged and Magnus Forsmann became the first Surveyor - General (S.G.) of the ZAR.

3. Consul-General at Potchefstroom ZAR

In 1862 Alrik was appointed Portuguese Consul-General in South Africa by the Portuguese government who needed someone who could speak a number of European languages and keep contact with the Boer Republics to the south of their African colony of Mozambique, aka Portuguese East Africa. He retained this office until 1880. In 1872 he was knighted by the Portuguese for his services and was known as “Chevalier” OWA Forssman. In his capacity as Consul-General he wore a naval uniform on
In 1874 Alric Forssman founded the “Transvaal and Goldfields Extension Transport Company” to carry post and goods between the Kimberley diamond fields and Pilgrims Rest, where gold had been discovered. The company used light four-wheel, covered, spring wagons drawn by 6 to 8 horses in frequent relays and averaged 10 miles per hour. The transport company was liquidated in 1880 as it struggled to maintain a tight schedule due to bad roads causing breakages, flooded rivers and horse-sickness.

JPR Wallis in his book on Thomas Baines, the celebrated self-taught British artist, who took part in Dr. David Livingstone’s expedition to the Zambezi, entitled “His Life and Explorations in SA, Rhodesia and Australia” says of Baines’s second visit to Potchefstroom in 1867 that “Potchefstroom, a hamlet of fourteen houses when Baines had known it in 1850, had now four or five hundred inhabitants, five churches and a proportionate number of shops and other buildings.” He also records that Baines’s “journals reveal how he enjoyed his stay in this last white outpost on his road to the wilds … and he came to know OWA Forsmann FRGS, Magnus’s brother and the Portuguese Consul. Apparently everyone who visited the town found his way to the house of this hospitable and cultured merchant and was sure of a welcome.” (At pages 168 & 169)

Alric Forssman’s home was the only double-storey building in town. A distinguished visitor to Potchefstroom in the early 1880’s records:

“My host’s reminiscences increased my admiration for his own character. He lived in a house filled with good furniture, age - old silver and , there was no attempt, as so often happens, to claim a noble origin, as he had every right to do, or surround himself with heraldic coats of arms, which assails one with such abundance in the homes of the pretentious rich, so one begins to wonder whether only the noble families of Europe emigrated.”

[Incidentally, apart from recording its Sabelskjöld heritage, the Forssman family tree confirms that OWA (Alric) Forssman was the son of Jonas Samuel Forsmann, Councilor of War (senior legal counsel) to the Swedish government and his wife, Anna Katarina, who is descended from the earliest Kings of Sweden, starting with Kings Erik Waderhatt (850 to 882), Bjorn Eriksson (882 to 920), Erik Segersall (to 972) Olof Skotkonung (to 1022) and Edmund Gamal (to 1060) etc.

The tree also reflects descent from Harald Blaland (Bluetooth) (King of Denmark from 956 to 975) and Sven Tveskägg (or double-beard), King of Denmark and Norway (1000 to 1014). All these Kings were the ancestors of the “Swedish royal house of Bjalbo”. Other direct ancestors are Charles I of the
Franks (Middle Europe) (742 to 814) also known as “Charlemagne”, crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope, and last but not least, Alfred the Great, King of Wessex, through his granddaughter, Edgina, who married Charles III (872 to 929), King of the Franks, a descendant of Charlemagne.

The Forssman girls were considered the most charming in Potchefstroom and the family entertained regularly – the girls enjoying dancing and their father, a scion of Sweden’s most ancient nobility and a great conversationalist, was a congenial host to his visitors – often foreigners, explorers and missionaries. Alric was very fond of music and gave a very good account of himself on the violin, a Stradivarius, he had brought out from Sweden.

4. First Boer War & Siege of Potchefstroom & Final Days

In 1877 the government of the ZAR was disbanded after the country was annexed by Sir Theophilus Shepstone. Shepstone’s soldiers raised the British flag in Pretoria without a shot of protest being fired by the Boers. Alric Forssman simply continued as Portuguese Consul General and became a member of Shepstone’s governing council. It seems that some Boers never forgave him for apparently siding with the British, although even the Boers reluctantly accepted British control in the ZAR which, at that time, was experiencing financial difficulties – gold had not yet been discovered on the Witwatersrand.

In mid-December 1880 the Boer leaders, who had failed on various visits to England to convince Queen Victoria’s government to restore their independence to them, began a rebellion against annexation striking hard at a British column marching from Lydenburg to Pretoria. Colonel Anstruther and 60 other members of this British force died in the onslaught. Thus commenced the first Boer War of 1880/1881. Meanwhile, a Boer force under General Piet Cronje, who had threatened to kill Alric Forssman for co-operating with the British, advanced on Potchefstroom. The British commander, Colonel Winslow, built a small “fort” 23 yards square on an open piece of land on the western outskirts of Potchefstroom.

He invited Alrik Forssman and his large family and a few other civilians to join his troops in the “fort” until the threat posed by the advancing Boer commando had passed. Unfortunately, Alric, thinking the danger would pass in a few days, accepted this offer, not knowing that the Boers would take the town and turn his home into their headquarters, despite the fact that he had raised the Portuguese flag there and claimed diplomatic immunity. The siege lasted from 16 December 1880 to 21 March 1881, with devastating consequences for the family. Alrik Forssman lost 2 children, his daughter, Emily, married to
the army surgeon, Dr Sketchley, and his 9 year old son, both of whom died from dysentery during the siege. The family suffered many privations during the 95 day siege as there was soon a total lack of food and clean drinking water; it was a particularly wet rainy season and troops and civilians did not have any spare dry clothes; bullets, including the occasional cannon ball, fired from a home-made ordnance landed in the fort and, it is told, that one, about the size of an orange, landed in the fort but fortunately fell harmlessly at Alric Forssman’s feet.

When the siege ended Forsmann found his house an empty ruin. He immediately left Potchefstroom and moved to his farm “Rickertsdam” near Zeerust, Transvaal. The siege had damaged his health and the deaths of 2 of his children weighed heavily on him for the rest of his life – he died in 1889 and is buried in the Forssman family grave in Pretoria.

After the war he put in a large claim of hundreds of thousands of pounds for losses sustained in the siege, hoping that the British government would compensate him. However, it seems that Lord Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, when debating the claim in the House of Commons, was not inclined to do so.

Nevertheless, despite material losses of much trading stock and other valuables, most of his farms were still in his name and, shortly before his death, he floated a company in London, the Transvaal Lands Company, with a fully paid up capital of 125 000 pounds to which he sold his farms. The proceeds enabled him to leave a large estate to his widow, Emelia, who had supported him and their children in ill health and through the siege. After his death his widow, Emelia, travelled to Sweden where she purchased a large wooden Swedish house and had it shipped to Cape Town and erected in the suburb of Kenilworth where she spent the rest of her days.

5. OWA Forssman’s Legacy

Alric Forssman played an important role in developing the economy of the fledgling Transvaal and he also played a positive role in alerting the politicians, overseas investors and his fellow citizens to the many business opportunities available in his adopted land. Aside from being an entrepreneur he can also be regarded as the progenitor of the Swedish emigration to South Africa and persons with Swedish ancestral roots continue, to this day, to play a leading part in the professional and business life of South Africa.

His older brother Magnus Johan Frederick Forssman (1820 to 1874), who had been a government land surveyor in Sweden, and formed part of the migration engineered by Alric, became the first Surveyor General of the ZAR - one of his tasks being to draw up a map delineating the border of the ZAR with Portuguese Mozambique.
In evaluating Alrik Forssman’s contribution to South Africa’s development, Sir JG Kotze, an eminent judge in his “Biographic Memoirs and Reminiscences” wrote:

“The Chevalier (Forssman) was an educated and well-bred Swede....He was a great conversationalist, one of the most interesting I have known. He had also abundant faith in the future of the country, and had done....his best to bring its healthy climate and its mineral and farming prospects to the notice of the outside world. He had a grain farm at Rickerts Dam...where he grew excellent maize, which in the early seventies gained a first prize at an international exhibition held....in Paris....He also exhibited there ...numerous specimens of gold nugget and other minerals and various kinds of wood, suitable for the furniture trade, from the forests of the country. He was a man full of energy and enterprise ....and more than anyone of his time, deserves to be remembered as the first enlightened pioneer who attracted the attention and capital of the outside world to the Transvaal.”

South Africa itself has now, in 2013, as the largest and most advanced economy in Africa, become a springboard for development in the emerging economies of post -colonial Africa and its educated classes, including many of Swedish descent living in South Africa, will, hopefully, for many years to come, continue to make their contribution in many diverse fields to the development and improvement of living conditions on this continent.

These achievements would not have happened had Oskar Wilhelm Alrik Forssman, a cultured man of vision, courage and initiative not left Sweden at the age of 22 to settle in the southern part of Africa and spent his life to help realise the potential of this untamed land - not only for himself but for many others as well.

Written by Brian Musto (retired attorney) a direct descendant of Oscar Wilhelm Alrik Forssman.