

## Broken Dreams

Peter Andersson shielded his eyes from the summer sun as he exited the dreaded Registry Room at Ellis Island and gazed westward toward his new life in America. His excitement was tempered by the challenges that he faced as a nineteen-year-old Swedish immigrant, barely able to speak the English language, while being thrust into a strange world without any family and far from his native land.

The year was 1906. He had endured the grueling two-week voyage across the stormy North Atlantic on board the RMS Caronia from Liverpool, England. The inspections by the medical personnel started as he ran a slow gauntlet from the dock up to the Main Hall with its iconic barrel-vaulted ceiling. He had been told that he needed to walk swiftly without any sign of a limp to avoid scrutiny by the inspectors. Peter did not anticipate a problem in passing the physical examination. He took a deep breath and entered the Main Hall amid a sea of humanity. The air inside the Main Hall was heavy with the stench of body odor, vomit from the trans-Atlantic voyage, and fear. Peter's turn finally came, and he approached the doctor clad in a long, white laboratory coat.

The typical physical examination took approximately eight seconds. He winced in pain as the doctor used a sinister looking medical device shaped like a buttonhook to raise his eyelids covering his sparkling blue eyes as part of the examination for eye disease. During these few precious seconds, Peter's fate would be determined. He would either be waved on by the doctor, or a chalk mark with a capital letter signifying the infirmity (L for Lameness, E for Eyes, H for Heart, etc.) would be placed on his clothing, barring his entry to America. Peter's hands grew moist with sweat as he waited for what seemed like an eternity as the doctor made his decision. His heart soared as the doctor waved for him to proceed to the next station and not toward the entrance to the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital as the first stop on his return trip to Sweden.

Peter's English-speaking skills were extremely limited. As he waited on the wooden benches following his medical examination, he was unsure if he would be able to interpret and successfully respond to the infamous twenty-nine questions that new immigrants were asked before being admitted to the country. His prayers were answered when he was approached by a kindly gentleman in a gray tweed jacket and red bow tie.

"Are you Peter Andersson?" he asked in Swedish as he extended his hand with a warm greeting.

"Well, yes, that's my name," Peter nervously responded.

"I'm Johan Ericsson from the Swedish Immigrant Aid Society, and I'm here to help you communicate with the inspectors. If you're ready, let's get going so we can get you on your way."

"Thank you, Mr. Ericsson. I'm so grateful for your help," Peter replied.

They proceeded to the next open inspection station. They were greeted by a gentleman with wire rimmed glasses. He looked over the rims of his glasses down at Peter and started with the first of what seemed like an endless list of questions. Peter's answers to these questions would be the final test before his admission to America.

"What is your name?" he demanded.

"My name is Peter Andersson, and I am from the Village of Ramdala in Sweden."

"What is your occupation?" he asked.

"In Sweden I worked as a timber cutter. I plan to make my living as a timber cutter in America," Peter confidently responded.

"Do you have any family in America?"

"No, but I do intend to meet my sweetheart from my village who came earlier."

The inspector looked down at his notes and offered one final question, "How much money do you have in your possession?"

"Twenty-five US dollars, sir," Peter replied as he checked to make sure his life savings from working as a timber cutter in Sweden was still in his buttoned inside coat pocket.

The inspector banged down a stamp on the immigration form and told Peter that he was free to leave Ellis Island. Peter thanked Mr. Ericsson and pushed his way through the crowd until he emerged from the Registry Building onto the street.

Peter stared in amazement at the scene in front of him. The tall buildings across the Hudson River on Manhattan Island rose up the sky in the distance. The air was filled with a symphony of languages including German, Irish, French, and English, most of which Peter did not recognize. Many of the new arrivals were having tearful reunions with their loved ones at a wooden column just outside the Registry Room. Peter had heard that the column was commonly known as The Kissing Post, although Peter had no loved one to greet him and welcome him to America.

Peter snapped back from his daydream with the realization that he had a job to do. His long journey had included a train trip from Kalmar to Gothenburg, a ferry across the North Sea to Hull, England, another train trip from Hull to Liverpool, and finally the voyage to New York. The cost of his journey had been paid by a recruiter from an American steel mill who was seeking immigrant workers to operate the machinery of their rapidly expanding business. Peter had agreed to work for a year in a place called the National Tube Works in a city whose name he could not pronounce – McKeesport, Pennsylvania. He wasn't even sure where Pennsylvania was located.

Peter boarded the ferry that would take him from Ellis Island to the New Jersey shore and the Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal. He was told that he would be met by a representative of the company at the base of the large clock tower. He made his way to the terminal and scanned the crowd. Much to his relief, he noticed a man waving a white sign with the names “ANDERSSON”, “DABROWSKI”, and “MCGINNIS” in all capital letters. He approached the man and did his best to introduce himself.

“God morgon,” Peter offered as he extended his hand toward the stranger.

“My name is Jones, and I am here from the National Tube Works. Just wait here while I locate the other new arrivals, and we can start our journey to Pittsburgh,” his host replied.

Peter took a seat on a bench in the terminal and waited. Before long, two other young men had walked up to their host and introduced themselves. One of them seemed to be speaking Polish, and the other was speaking Irish. Jones motioned for them to follow him to the track for the train leaving for Pittsburgh. The train announced its arrival as the engineer sounded the shrill whistle, and the steam engine belched black smoke and steam from its coal fired boiler as it screeched to a halt in the station. They boarded the train, and before long it began to rumble as it exited the station.

Overcome with a combination of anticipation and sheer exhaustion, Peter leaned against the frame of the train car seat and tried to sleep as the train traveled west through the Allegheny Mountains toward Pittsburgh. The sun was just starting to set as they approached the bustling city. It hung like a fiery orb suspended in a pale gray mixture of fog and smoke from the smokestacks of the many factories that lined the banks of the rivers that defined Pittsburgh, and just like that the sun was gone. Night had descended on the city as the engineer signaled the arrival of the train at the B&O Station near downtown.

Jones motioned to his traveling companions to gather up their belongings and exit the station. They would be met by a driver from the National Tube Works to transport them to the boarding house that was home to many of the immigrant workers at the mill. Peter peered out the window at the rows of houses of the many ethnic communities that dotted the landscape of the Monongahela River valley. He could see the stark silhouettes of the towering mills and factories with their tall smokestacks belching smoke and soot into the night sky.

Their vehicle finally pulled over to the curb in front of a dingy three-story brick building with a “ROOMS FOR RENT” sign permanently affixed to a metal pole in front of the building. Jones escorted the new employees to the lobby, and the desk clerk gave Peter a key to his room on the third floor. Peter opened the door to his room complete with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room, a narrow bed with a lumpy mattress, and a wooden chest in the corner for his clothes. Peter unpacked his suitcase and collapsed onto the bed without eating dinner.

Peter was awakened around 5 a.m. as the workers moved down to the kitchen for a quick breakfast and a cup of strong coffee before being transported to the mill. As he arrived at the factory gate, he was told to meet the foreman of his work crew at the flagpole in front of the Mill Office to start work. Peter had been waiting for only a few minutes with other members of his group when they were approached by the foreman. He motioned for the group to follow him to their workstations.

The foreman gave them a brief description of the facilities as they walked.

“National Tube Works is the largest mill of its type in the world, covering over sixty-six acres with fifty acres under roof,” he exclaimed with pride in his voice.

As they entered one of the many long, grimy buildings, Peter was immediately struck by the noise, heat, and dust in the air. This was not exactly what he had imagined what his work life in America would be like. Still, he was a man of his word, and he decided that he would make the best of the situation until he fulfilled his contract with the company.

Peter was soon to learn that McKeesport was home to a large population of Swedish immigrants. He met several Swedish co-workers both at work and at the boarding house. He almost immediately began his search for his sweetheart from his village of Ramdala, Kristin Olson, who had told him that she would be working as a maid in the home of one of the wealthy mill owners in McKeesport upon her arrival in America.

As Peter continued his search, he slowly began to assimilate into the local culture of the Swedish American community. His English-speaking skills improved, and he was able to confidently travel around the city. He was invited to join members of the community at Olympia Park for the celebration of Midsummer’s Day on June 21, the date of the summer solstice, a traditional Swedish holiday. He attended the First Swedish Baptist Church. He became a member of the local Odd Fellows Lodge.

At a meeting of the Odd Fellows Lodge, Peter met a man named George Kipling who would become one of the most important people in Peter’s life. Mr. Kipling was born in New York, but he had moved to Pennsylvania where he met and married his wife, the daughter of a prominent McKeesport family. He was a timber cutter by trade, and he had made his living by cutting trees in the forests of Pennsylvania. However, he often spoke of moving to the pristine forests of old growth timber in Virginia or North Carolina to make his fortune as a timber cutting contractor for the large lumber mills in the area. He became friends with Peter, and he invited Peter to join him when the time was right.

The right time would come sooner than Peter had expected. He had been frustrated in his search for his beloved Kristin when he discovered that she had left the employment as a maid for one of the mill owners in town only a couple of days earlier. The only clue that he was given to her whereabouts was that she had taken a job as a camp cook for one of the large lumber companies in Virginia.

In spite of his attempt to live a pious life, McKeesport in the early 1900's featured more than a few temptations for a young single man like Peter. He avoided the infamous red-light district known as "Brick Alley." However, he did join some of his young Swedish American friends for an occasional pint of beer at one of the local pubs. On one raucous Saturday night, Peter and his friends were "blowing off a little steam" from another grueling week in the mill when William Malden, the arrogant son of the mill manager, entered the bar with a couple of his friends.

As they made their way up to the bar, pushing Peter and his friends out of the way in the process, he loudly announced, "Will you squareheads get out of our way and make room for some real Americans to get a beer?"

Responding to the insult, Peter and his friends got into a shoving match with William and his friends. The mass of bodies surged back and forth, and a few punches were thrown. No one was hurt until William stumbled backward and slammed his head into the brass rail at the bottom of the bar.

Peter and his friends didn't wait around for the police to arrive. It would be their word against the word of Malden and his friends, and they were sure to be blamed. Peter headed straight from the bar to Mr. Kipling's home. He saw that the light was burning in the living room. Peter walked up the steps and nervously knocked on the front door.

"Peter, what brings you out at this time of night?" Kipling asked.

"Mr. Kipling, will you be traveling down to the timber camps soon?"

"Yes, Peter, I'm leaving in the morning. You're welcome to join me," Kipling replied.

Peter was torn between fulfilling the remainder of his contract to the mill and the opportunity to pursue his dream when he came to America. With the risk that his life could be ruined if Malden didn't recover from his injuries, especially if he were to get the blame for the accident, Peter responded, "What time do we leave?"

"Be here bright and early at 6 a.m., and we'll depart. Bring all of your belongings. I don't know when we'll return to McKeesport."

Peter bumped into his friend Hans in the lobby of the boarding house and told him he was leaving for Virginia. He arose around 5 a.m. and quietly exited the boarding house for the several block walk to Kipling's home. Kipling gave him a warm greeting and told him to put his suitcase in the back seat of the Ford Model A for the journey. They began their arduous trek south through the rugged mountains of West Virginia to the thriving timber camps in Southwest Virginia.

Peter had made the right decision. Mr. Malden had a concussion and succumbed to his injuries about a week later. His father, Joseph Malden, the mill manager, immediately summoned the lead detective from the Pinkerton National Detective Agency who provided mill security and “goon squads” to intimidate union organizers to his office.

“Detective, I’m sure that you heard about my son,” Malden offered.

“Yes, sir, and you have our condolences,” the detective replied.

“Well, I need your help in tracking down the young Swedish bastards who killed him. A new immigrant, Peter Andersson, is said to be the leader of the group.”

“I’ll put two of my best men on the case, and I’ll get back to you when we apprehend him,” the detective promised as he pivoted on his heel and left the office.

Pinkerton detectives were renowned for their ability to track down some of the country’s most notorious fugitives including Jesse James, so they didn’t think that finding a young Swedish immigrant would pose much of a challenge. From interviewing Peter’s friends, they learned that he had departed McKeesport for the timber camps of Virginia, and the chase was on.

Peter and Kipling were able to quickly land their first contract to cut timber for the Currier Lumber Company in a remote region of Wise County, Virginia on the South Fork of the Pound River. One day, Peter was surprised to see Hans, his Swedish friend from McKeesport, in the timber camp.

“Hans, I didn’t think that I would be seeing you again this soon. What brings you to Virginia?” Peter asked.

“I didn’t see a future in the mill. I decided to also pursue my fortune, like you, in the timber industry,” Hans replied. A solemn look came over Hans’ face, and he turned to Peter after checking that no one was close enough to hear their conversation.

“Peter, I have some bad news. William Malden died of his injuries at the bar. They think you’re responsible, and they have hired Pinkerton detectives to hunt you down.”

The blood drained from Peter’s face. He thanked Hans for the warning and told him he would be seeing him in camp.

Peter began a nomadic lifestyle as he moved from timber camp to timber camp as the logging companies finished cutting all of the large, old growth timber and moved to the next location. To avoid easy detection, Peter used his father's last name, Nilsson, instead of his last name. He earned one to two dollars per day. He paid eight dollars per month in rent to live in very primitive "string houses" that were built on skids so they could be moved when the camp relocated. The timber companies laid narrow gauge railroad tracks into each area as the timber was harvested, and they tore up and moved the tracks when the camp relocated.

Peter continued his relentless search for his beloved Kristin. At each camp in Southwest Virginia and eastern North Carolina where Peter worked, he kept asking everyone that he met if they had heard of her while he kept looking over his shoulder for any sign of the Pinkerton agents. They were closer that he realized.

At the end of a particularly hard day in the woods, Peter was sitting down for the evening meal at the camp dining hall when he was approached by the camp manager.

"Peter, there were a couple of shady looking guys in camp today asking if we knew a young Swedish immigrant named Peter Andersson who was involved in some kind of trouble up in McKeesport. Their description sounded a lot like you. I told them that I didn't know anyone with that name, and they moved on."

"Thanks for telling me, sir. I'm glad that they weren't looking for me," Peter replied.

Peter's search for Kristin had become more hopeless with each passing year. He was well into his twenties and felt that it was time for his search to end and for him to start a family. While working in Wise County, he met and married a strong local woman, Nancy Bolling, who had spent her life in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. They had their first child six months after the wedding.

By then, over ten years had passed since the accident in the bar in McKeesport, and Peter returned to using his real name. Although he felt that he was no longer being pursued by the Pinkerton agents, he was experiencing an increasing bias against immigrants that seemed to have peaked around World War I and culminated with the passage of the American Immigration Act of 1924 that effectively ended mass migration to the United States.

Animosity toward immigrants had grown to such intensity that Peter no longer felt welcome in his new land. By the time of the 1920 US Census, Peter, Nancy, and their young children were living in a rented house with a maid due to Peter's increasing financial success in the timber industry. When the census taker visited Peter's home, his response to the census questions was very revealing.

"Where were you born?" the census taker asked.

"Pennsylvania," Peter responded.

“Where was your father born?” he continued.

“Pennsylvania”

“Where was your mother born?”

“Pennsylvania” Peter sadly replied as he bowed his head.

The story of Peter Andersson and his family and their pursuit of the American dream became a part of America’s story - the story of millions of immigrants who built the country.

Peter’s story became a story of a dream deferred by prejudice, personal tragedy, and the struggles of the Great Depression. Through the tenacity and indomitable spirit born from the challenges faced by Peter and his family, his descendents went on to become doctors, engineers, college professors, and entrepreneurs. His spirit lives on in each of them over a hundred years later.