

## The Ruby Necklace

by Chris Sanders

Have you ever run across a name in your genealogical travels that catches your attention and sticks in your mind? That name for me was “Thora Swartengren.” I first encountered her name while reading the *Ikeler Hill Book*, obtained from the CCHGS.

I found that Paxton Kline and his wife gave homes to two young people, James Miller and Thora Swartengren, who worked for their keep. James’ father, John T. Miller, having died, his mother was glad when neighbors took some of her family of children to work for their board. Thora was brought to America by her mother and was later put in a Friends (Quaker) Home in Philadelphia and ended up in our area via the Orphan Train. Thora’s mother had been a lady in waiting to the Queen of Sweden. Some beautiful jewelry was shown at the Centennial at Bloomsburg in 1902. Being Friends (Quaker), Paxton Kline and his wife received her from the Philadelphia Home and kept her until she was a grown woman.

Thora married Jacob H. Gross and lived at Catawissa, where her daughters Marie and Ava were born. She died when they were small. She went to Ikeler School from the Kline farm, as did James Miller.

The *Ikeler Hill Book* continues, “The jewelry shown at the Bloomsburg Centennial included a ruby necklace. This jewelry was Thora Swartengren’s inherited from her mother.”

This piqued my interest even more. Now Thora was more than just a name. She was a real live person with a mother who was a “lady in waiting.” I wanted to know even more. But this was a few years back when Thora caught my eye and I DID do a cursory search on her, but could find nothing. I guess Thora was going to remain a mystery. Poor Thora—still forgotten.

Every now and then I would leaf through the *Ikeler Hill Book* when other mysteries called and there would be Thora’s name again, my interest still intact.

For some odd reason (maybe Thora trying to get my attention!), I was recently once again working on other projects and consulted the *Ikeler Hill Book*. Yes, Thora was still there! Okay, Thora, I will write your name down and IF I have time I will “play around” with you again to see if anything is out there.

Getting my other projects lined up, I planned a whole day of catch-up to complete them. It didn’t quite work out that way. Every time I tried to work on these other projects, Thora’s name kept leaping out at me! All right, I’ll just try a few peeks to see what I can find.

Well, as you might have expected, the other projects were (once again) laid aside! Thora took complete precedence. This is what I found: Per Ancestry.com, Thora and her mother, Marie Elizabeth Swartengren, departed from Kopenhamn on 1 Oct 1890. Their place of origin was Sverrig (Sweden) and destination was New York. Thora was about 8 years old and occupation listed was “barn” (child). Her mother was about 31 and her occupation was listed as “frue” (married woman). Since, of course, there is no 1890 census, I can only surmise that Thora and her mother took the train to Philadelphia—why Philadelphia, we’ll never know). Can you picture poor little Thora, just off the boat, on the train riding to Philly, to a completely new world and life? It was either frightful or exciting.

Sadly I found “Eliza Swartengren” in the Philadelphia Death Certificate Index, 1803-1915. She died a widowed clerk, 30 years old on 1 May 1891, only seven months after they had arrived. She was buried in the “City Burial Ground” in Philadelphia. Is this a pauper’s grave? I don’t know. This would explain how Thora ended up in a Friends (Quaker) Home in Philadelphia (probably an orphanage).

Apparently Thora had no relatives nearby and must have been devastated at her mother’s death. How long she remained in the Friends Home we’re not sure. Nor do we know exactly when she joined the Paxton Klines; however, in 1900 Thora is living with Samuel Christopher in Hemlock Township, Columbia County, PA. She is 18 and listed as a “servant.” Thora has been working hard in her short life in America. She probably dreams of her young days romping around a castle in Sweden.

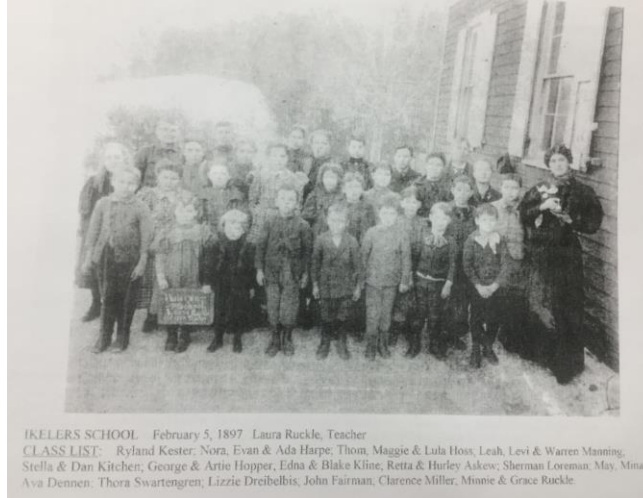
I keep digging (can’t stop now!). There is an announcement in the Bloomsburg Columbian that Thora and Jacob Gross are to be married 16 July 1902. Yeah, Thora has found love and marriage! The 1910 census shows Jacob and Thora living in Catawissa, Columbia, PA with two children, Hazel Claire, age 5, and Ava Marie, 8 months. Thora does not make it to the 1920 census. Jacob, widowed, a railroad flagman, is alone in Catawissa (S. 4<sup>th</sup> St.) with the two girls. Thora has passed away, per her death certificate, of myocarditis, Bright’s disease and inflammatory rheumatism. She died in 1914, age 32, and was buried at the Lutheran Church Cemetery at Washingtonville, Columbia, PA. She was about the same age as her mother when she passed. Her father’s birthplace is listed as France.

Findagrave.com shows that Jacob and Thora are buried side-by-side in Washingtonville, PA. Making a trip to the Washingtonville Cemetery, I got out of my car and started strolling around. My feet led me straight to Thora’s grave! Imagine that! “Hi, Thora – I found you!” A smile lit up my face.

Keep going. What about Thora’s two children? Claire married Edward Ryan and had two children. Per the 1940 census, her youngest child was named Thora after her mother. Claire died in 1961 in Philadelphia of myocardial infarction, diabetes, osteoarthritis and is buried in Bucks, PA. Ava Marie married Archibald Beeman in Philly in 1936.

Just so we can see what a plucky little girl Thora Swartengren was, here is an anecdote from the Ikeler Hill Book which sums it up:

“Thora Swartengren, the Swedish girl raised by Paxton and Alvaretta Kline, was a jolly companion but could fight her own battles when needed. Being tormented beyond endurance by Tom Hoss, a grown young man, at school one day she caught him and when his hat fell into a mud puddle, she stood him upside down into his hat to his complete discomfiture and rage.”



There is a group picture of the Ikeler Hill students (Thora one of them) gathered in front of the school, dated 5 Feb 1897. The names are all listed, however they are not matched with any particular student. I look at each face and spy a girl at the beginning of the second row with long blond curls and a little quirky smile, appearing to be the correct age for Thora. "Are you Thora?" I ask, but of course it was impossible to know. I guess I have to be satisfied with the fact that there is a picture of her.

Thora still held onto a vestige of the past. Remember the jewelry mentioned earlier? Here is an article from the 24 January 1903 Morning Press.

***"Necklace owned by Gross on Display."***

*Mrs. Jacob Gross, of town, is the owner of a necklace, which was on exhibition in the Historical Museum that undoubtedly surpasses any piece of jewelery [sic] ever seen in this part of the state.*

*Four hundred garnets of rare beauty and design were used in the four strings that went around the neck and in the locket of the necklace were fifteen rubies. The necklace is worth thousands of dollars. Jewelers who have examined it declare that the garnets and rubies to be of finer quality than any that can now be purchased, and their value is further increased by the peculiar manner in which they were cut. During the Centennial, when they were on exhibition they were considered so precious that the committee in charge refused to be responsible for them overnight. Now they have been safely placed in a vault in one of the banks.*

*Stranger than fiction is the story of how this priceless piece of jewelry fell into the possession of Mrs. Gross. It was first given to Mrs. Gross' [grand]mother on her wedding day by her husband. She was a Swede and he was a German. The marriage was solemnized in England where the bride had been, first a playmate of Queen Victoria; later one of the most loved of the Queen's friends, and a bridesmaid at her marriage.*

*The husband died when Mrs. Gross' mother was only four years old, and Mrs. Gross said yesterday, "the lawyers robbed the estate out of everything, and finally my mother came to this country. Here she was thrown on her own resources, and at the age of thirty-two she died. I knew nothing of all this until I was eighteen years of age when the lady in Philadelphia to whom my mother gave the necklace and her gold watch to keep for me, gave them to me then and letters from my grandmother and the history of my mother's life. My grandmother... (unreadable)... which I cannot understand, but which*

*have been read to me and which told of her friendship to the Queen and of her days at court.”*

*And then Mrs. Gross brought out the history of her mother’s life, written before she died, and which told of the days in England where she had every luxury, of her coming to this country and of her hard battle. The only paragraph of this marvelous history, more graphic than fiction, that Mrs. Gross permitted a reporter to read so that it might be reprinted, the remainder being of too personal a nature, was this regarding the grandmother—the playmate of England’s beloved queen, and of her grandfather: “He was truly a great man”—speaking of the grandfather—“and had his fame as such besides owning one of the largest fortunes in our country. His ancestors as well as my own, were of historic reputation. My mother is a refined and educated lady and all the famous literary men circled at our home. She can entertain any one in eight different languages and is well conversed in modern literature. When Prince Albert wedded she was one of the bridesmaids.”*

*The writing was clearly that of a woman of much refinement. Each letter, though small, was perfectly formed, and spoke more forcibly than could words of the changes of fortune.*

*Mrs. Gross says that until a year ago the aged grandmother was yet living and was making her home in Sweden. Since then she has not heard from any of her relatives. Strange, indeed, that this story of royalty and wealth should have come to Bloomsburg from the courts of England and be brought out after all these years.*

Now I don’t know about you, but I’m not sure I’d want everyone knowing I had “a valuable necklace,” but that’s just me! Wonder what ever happened to that necklace?!

Well, Thora, I tried to flesh you out. You had quite an extraordinary story. Your life was short, but exciting. I wonder if at night before you went to bed you ever thought back to your young years in Sweden and dreamed of what might have been. Did you think of queens and kings and ruby necklaces as you slept among the hills of Pennsylvania? Rest easy, dear Thora.