

Om Åke Sjögren

My grandfather, Åke Sjögren, who was born in 1866, came from a family of mining engineers and geologists. His father, Anton, was Inspector of Mines (Bergmästare) at Filipstad in Bergslagen, central Sweden, a major area of mining and smelting industry from the sixteenth century onwards. Anton was a distinguished mineralogist with an international reputation, who amassed a collection of mineral specimens, to which his son Hjalmar also contributed. As the *Sjögren Mineral Collection* this is now in Riksmuseet, Stockholm.

The mining industry was at this time of primary economic importance in Sweden and in 1889, like two of his older brothers Hjalmar and Arvid, Åke graduated as an engineer from Bergskolan (School of Mines, now Tekniska Högskolan) in Stockholm. Like his brothers before him, he then travelled to America to gain experience and learn about new technology.

After a short time in Michigan, he went on to Central America and Costa Rica. It was in Costa Rica, while working as a chemist at the gold mine *Tres Hermanes* of the The Costa Rica Pacific Gold Mine Company in London, that he made friends with a Cuban refugee, Antonio Maceo. According to our family tradition, Maceo accompanied Åke as an armed guard when he carried the week's output of gold on horseback from the mine to the nearest town, Puntarenas, to be deposited in the bank. It appears that the young Swede became very attached to, and fascinated by, the much older Maceo, who was a man with a mission. When in 1895 they had to part, Maceo to return to Cuba to begin the revolution in which he would die just a

year later, he gave his gun to the young Åke as a token of friendship.

My grandfather returned to Sweden soon afterwards. His brother Hjalmar, ten years his senior, had been working at the Nobel works in Baku, where the oilfields were first developed by Ludwig and Robert Nobel. In 1889 Hjalmar came back to Sweden, became a professor at Uppsala University, and the following year married Ludwig Nobel's daughter Anna; they lived on Nynäs Gård, where his father, Anton, died in 1893. On his own return to Sweden, Åke married Mary, daughter of Professor Theodor Landzert, St Petersburg, and a widow with three young daughters of Carl Nobel, son of Ludvig Nobel. My father, Gunnar, was born in the following year.

With a home in Stockholm, on Blasieholmstorg, the family also acquired Mälsåker Slott, a baroque palace with an estate on Stallarholmen. The house was extensively restored and modernised. In running his estate, Åke's special interest was hunting and game management. His arrangements at Mälsåker and his game stocks became famous as unusual and exemplary. He became a member of the Royal Hunt Club, which came to Mälsåker on several occasions. Mälsåker was sold in 1916 on the marriage of his step-daughters.

In Costa Rica Åke had become interested in the archaeological and ethnographical remains he came across in the countryside, and had before he left secured permission to investigate and excavate there. He mounted an expedition under the leadership of Prof. C. V. Hartman which set out in the spring of 1896, and continued in Costa Rica until September 1897. Excavations were then extended into Salvador and Guatemala. In 1899 Prof. Hartman brought back a collection of 7,000 excavated objects, which were given by Åke to Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm.

Åke became an inveterate traveller and, wherever he went, he collected. The Ethnographical Museum in Stockholm acknowledges him as one of their most

important patrons and donors of that time. In recognition of his contributions he became a corresponding fellow to Vitterhets-, Historie- and Antikvitets-Academien in 1903.

He was also a dedicated big game hunter. In this capacity, in the winter of 1910-11, he joined a collecting expedition to East Africa on behalf of the Natural History Museum (Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet) under the leadership of Dr. Einar Lönnberg.

During his travels in Africa he bought land in Kenya and began to grow coffee, a crop only recently introduced in East Africa. In 1913 the farm was sold to Bror Blixen-Finecke, a Swedish baron who was about to marry Tanne Dinesen – later known as the Danish author Isak Dinesen, or Karen Blixen, of *Out of Africa* fame. The marriage took place in Mombasa in 1914, with Prins Wilhelm (second son of Gustaf V of Sweden, photographer and author) as a witness, as well as my grandfather, who acted as temporary Honorary Swedish Consul. A number of other Swedes were also present, all members of a hunting expedition, one of several to Africa led by the prince.

Åke continued to travel: in 1919 to Spitzbergen with Prins Wilhelm, and in 1920 to Central America, a journey described by the prince in *Mellan två Kontinenter* (1920). In 1922 Åke was in New York to prepare for Prins Wilhelm's lecture tour in America the following year.

After his wife Mary's death in 1928, Åke travelled almost continually, spending little time in Sweden. He died on 16th August 1931 in Stockholm. Both he and Mary are buried in Lidingö Churchyard. He chose a quotation from Kipling for his epitaph, 'Tired and smiling we leave our toys like children when play is over'.

My grandfather, Åke Sjögren, energetic and enterprising, was an amiable and sociable man and, as his friends testify, a famous storyteller.

As a hunter my grandfather had acquired a collection of guns of various kinds, some of which he donated to Kungliga Armé Museum, while others were sold.

However, he kept Maceo's rifle and it remained in the family, the story attached to it often told. I am, like my father, an only child, and by the time I inherited Antonio Maceo's rifle on my father's death in 1979 I was married and living in England. With none of Anton Sjögren's descendants left to bear the family name in Sweden, I arranged for the gun to be kept safely at *Vapenmuseet*, later to be integrated with *Eskilstuna Stadsmuseum*.

I am now delighted that Antonio Maceo's gift to my grandfather will return to Cuba.