

More About My Ancestral Roots in Billinge, Skåne, Sweden

By Burks Oakley II
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My mother was Grace Florence Brorström (1916-2000). All four of her grandparents were Swedish immigrants, meaning that her ethnicity was 100% Swedish. In turn, that makes me 50% Swedish. In the past few years, I have become very interested in learning more about my Swedish heritage. I have worked to expand my knowledge of my Swedish family tree, and through this work, I have been fortunate to connect with a number of my distant Swedish relatives. I visited Sweden annually from 2016 to 2019. Unfortunately, my trip for 2020 had to be cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

During the past year, I have been taking Swedish lessons online through *Coffee Break Swedish*. After twenty online lessons, I now am comfortable saying “Jag pratar pyttelite Svenska.”, which means “I speak very little Swedish.”

To practice listening to spoken Swedish, I have been viewing YouTube videos that are in Swedish – primarily cooking shows – for example, *Kökets middag* with chef Zeina Mourtada:

<https://youtu.be/qdnphN9cXw4>

I also enjoy YouTube videos that showcase the Swedish culture – for example, the National Anthem of Sweden with Crown Princess Victoria at the Nobel Prize Concert in 2009:

<https://youtu.be/u-85yQaHglE>

A few evenings ago, I was looking for a YouTube video that I had seen previously with the famous Swedish drinking song *Helan går* (“drink the whole thing”, or “bottoms up”) – I finally found it at:

https://youtu.be/ffHziD7m_Xs

As I was viewing this video, YouTube displayed links to other videos that it thought I might be interested in – most of these suggested videos included Swedish music. And one was entitled:

20180527 Spelmansgudstjänst i Billinge kyrka

<https://youtu.be/WeZx6Dd1ilg>

I saw that this title ends with “i Billinge kyrka”, and armed with my rudimentary knowledge of Swedish, I knew that this translates to “in Billinge Church”. Oh my! The small village of Billinge (in central Skåne) is where my Billing ancestors came from. I believe that they took their family name from the name of the village. My 3rd-great grandfather was Paulus Laurentius Billing (1788-1837). I wrote about all this earlier:

As an aside, when I was first looking into my Swedish roots, my Swedish cousin Göran Grotting wrote “Paulus Laurentius is a Latinised name and he must for sure be a priest.” In fact, I found an entry on Ancestry.com stating that he was the “Prost och kyrkoherde i Simrishamn”, which translates into English as “Prost and vicar in Simrishamn”.

Paulus Laurentius Billing had a daughter Mathilda Augusta Billing (1826-1862), who married Malte Joachim August Brorström (1816-1877). Mathilda and Malte are buried next to the church in Borrby. Their son Paulus Brorström immigrated to America on his honeymoon in 1882 – he was my mother’s paternal grandfather.



Grave marker of Mathilda Augusta Brorström föd (born) Billing.
Photographed by Burks in May 2018 in Borrby.
The last two lines read “i en ålder af 35 år 8 måneder”,
which translates as “at the age of 35 years 8 months”.

I have been able to trace the Billing line back to Pål Johansson Billing (1660-1732), who was Paulus Laurentius’s great-grandfather. Pål Johansson Billing was born in Billinge¹, Eslöv Municipality, Skåne County, Sweden.

Since my Billing ancestors were priests in the church, and they were from Billinge, it was pretty cool to find a YouTube video shot at “Billinge kyrka” – Billinge Church.

I should add that “kyrka” is one of those words in Swedish that start with “kyr”, which is pronounced “shur”, so “kyrka” is pronounced “shur-ka”, with the accent on the first syllable. [Or at least that is the way it sounds to my untrained ear.]

The complete title of the video shot in the Billinge Church was “20180527 Spelmansgudstjänst i Billinge kyrka”. The first set of numbers is the date – 2018 May 27. The next word, “Spelmansgudstjänst”, translates as “fiddlers service”. So in all, the title is:

2018 May 27 Fiddlers’ Service in Billinge Church

¹ In Swedish, an “e” at the end of a word is almost always pronounced, so I believe that Billinge is pronounced “Bill-inga”, with the accent on the first syllable.

Here is a view of the church from the introduction to the video:



20180527 Spelmansgudstjänst i Billinge kyrka

470 views • May 30, 2018

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This sure doesn't look like other churches in rural villages in Skåne that I have visited in the past!

It turns out that the church service in the video was the kick-off to a fiddlers' conclave at the Gamlegård historic farm in Billinge. This particular group of musicians is named *Harpolirarna*, and they play traditional music from Skåne on hand-made instruments. At that time this video was shot (May 2018), Gamlegård was celebrating its 100th anniversary as a homestead. Here is a photo of Gamlegård from the web:



I believe that “Gamlegård” translates as “Old Farm”. The word for “old” is “Gamle” and the word for farm is “gård”.

The *Harpolirarna* group has a YouTube channel at:

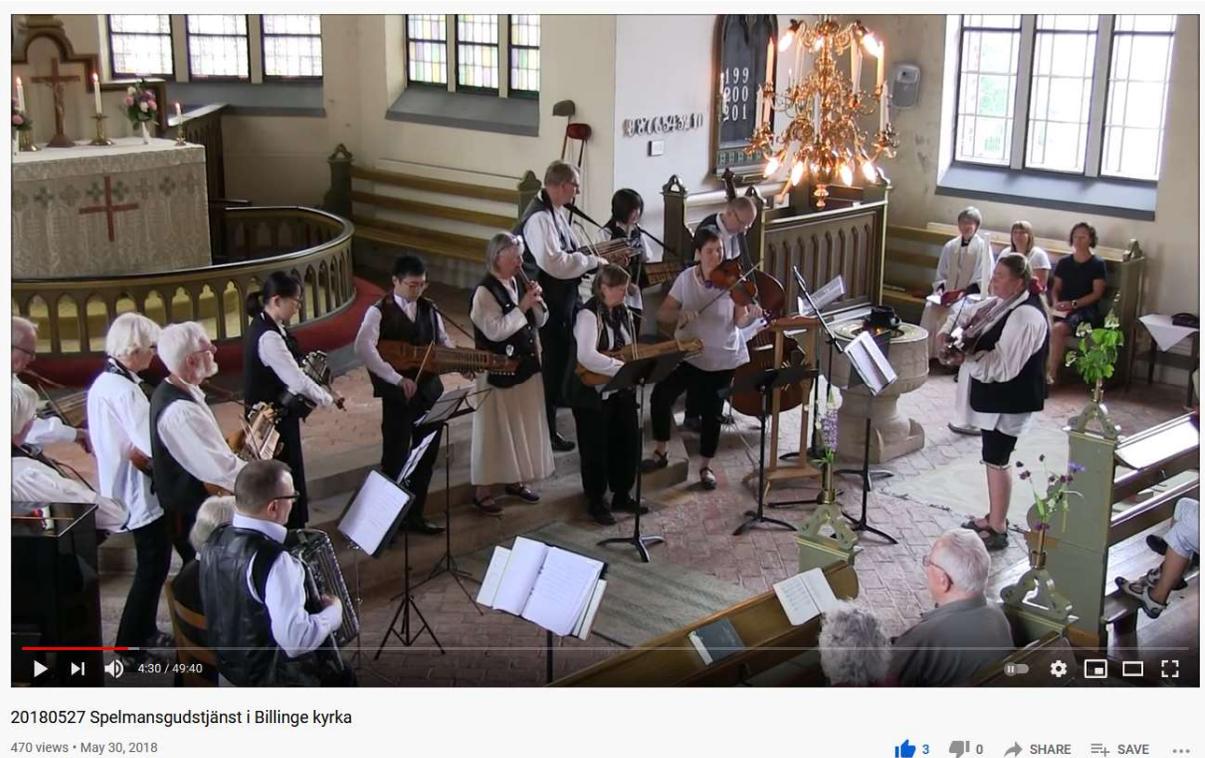
<https://www.youtube.com/user/Harpolirarna>

Their website is at:

<https://www.harpolirarna.se/>

According to their website, "*Harpolirarna* is a fiddle band in southern Skåne that plays for dance, in churches, weddings, meetings, lectures, folk dance performances and in many other contexts."

Here is a screenshot from the YouTube video in the church in Billinge:



Here is the procession out of the sanctuary at the end of the service:



Note that the priest (white robe at the back) has joined the group and is playing her flute.

A number of the people in the group are playing a traditional Swedish instrument called a “nyckelharpa”, which literally translates as “key harp”.



Here is an excerpt from the Wikipedia entry for Nyckelharpa:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyckelharpa>

A nyckelharpa (Swedish: [ˈnʏkːɛlˌharːpa], “keyed fiddle”, or literally “key harp”, plural nyckelharpor) is a traditional Swedish musical instrument. It is a string instrument or chordophone. Its keys are attached to tangents which, when a key is depressed, serve as frets to change the pitch of the string.

A depiction of two instruments, possibly but not confirmed nyckelharpor, can be found in a relief dating from c. 1350 on one of the gates of Källunge church in Gotland. Early church paintings are found in Siena, Italy, dating to 1408 and in different churches in Denmark and Sweden, such as Tolfta church, Sweden, which dates to c. 1460–1525.

Here is part of the history of the *Harpolirarna* musical group (automatically translated by Google from Swedish to English)

<https://www.harpolirarna.se/historik/>

It started with Jan-Erik Wideberg, Leo Sydborn and Tuve Wällstedt, who played Scanian folk music in the late 70’s. It became the core of a small group that called itself “Let Go”. Both violin and clog violin were treated and then came the harp. Jan-Erik who is a handicraft teacher could show how to build. The larger group of Harpoliers grew out of the knack of building key harps and other instruments. More and more people built and more and more people wanted to play.

The website for the *Harpolirarna* group includes this graphic:



According to Google Translate, “the gondoliers” translates into Swedish as “gondolierna”. So I am pretty sure that “Harpolirarna” translates as “the Harpoliers”. And it appears that the nyckelharpa is indeed integral to the *Harpolirarna* group.

I sent the first draft of this narrative to my Swedish cousin Cecilia Carlsson; she also is descended from Paulus Laurentius Billing. She replied in an e-mail:

I’m sure you know this, but “lira” translates into “spela” (play) in Swedish, consequently “lirarna” means “the players of”.² The ‘o’ in ‘harpo’ is an old genitive I guess. Despite all this I find your translation “The Harpoliers” being the best and most catchy one.

Just a few more things. Here are two photos of the church in Billinge:



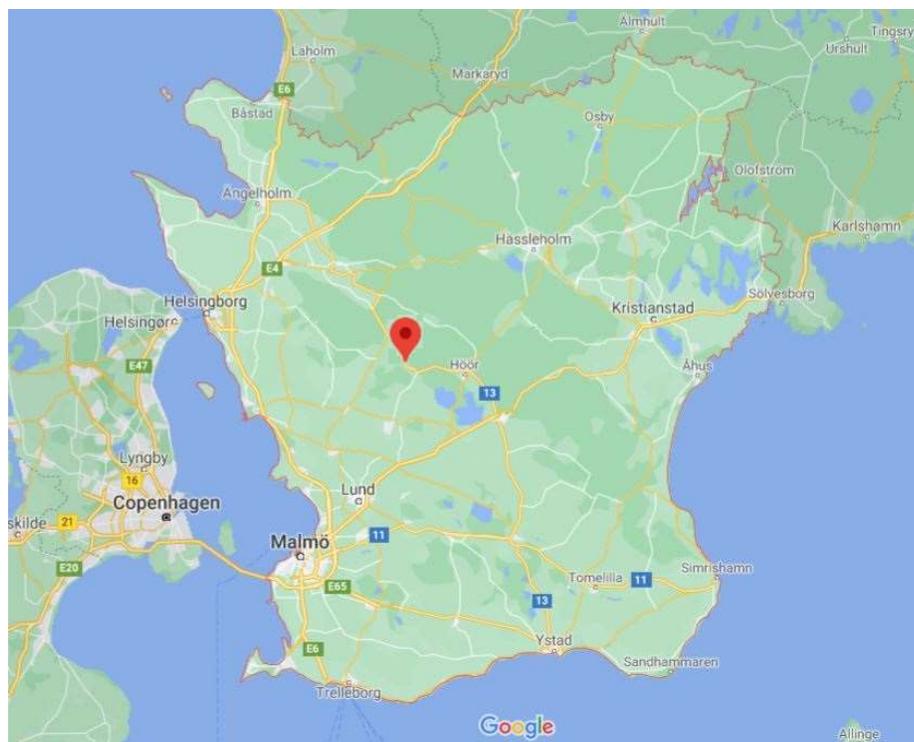
Billinge Kyrka

² Google Translate of “spelarna” gives “the players”.



The sanctuary of the Billinge Kyrka

Here is a Google Map showing the location of Billinge, in central Skåne:



I apologize to the reader for going on and on about this, but I sure was pleased to find the video about the church in Billinge. I'll conclude by saying that the fiddle band, with the historic instruments and traditional clothing, certainly reminds me of my family's roots in Skåne.