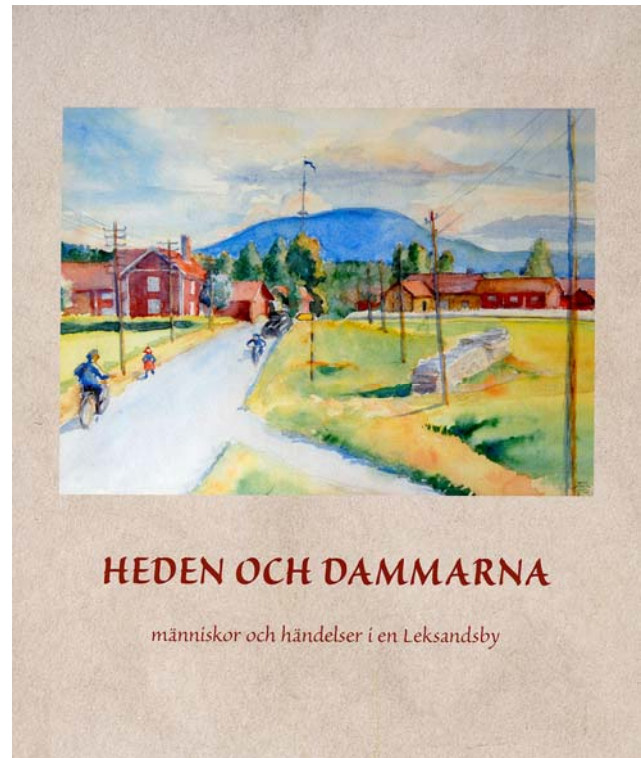


## Joint action in local history

A documentary project, intended to record life and history of a small Swedish village, is giving me as a family therapist, unexpected glimpses of a culture of sharing resources and dealing with decisions from above.

Through centuries this place has been a stage for countless initiatives of managing difficult situations. Whether the troubles came from meagre soil or repressive authorities the villagers have formed a culture of sharing resources. Some of the events that I have been told, or have found in writing, have been very different from the official written history.



Heden, one of the ninety villages of Leksand in Dalarna, the village where I live, and where my father was born, is situated less than four hours' drive Northwest of Stockholm and today contains about 100 households including holiday houses.

Together with two other villagers I decided to compile a book about the village, now and in the past. I thought that it would be nice for my own family to read. I had no idea how much I was going to learn by limiting myself to whatever mattered for the people who had lived right here. By tracing changes through several generations we could follow life in the village from an almost medieval way of living to a late modern society. A couple of years ago the book was published.

### Micro history

The work is inspired from a micro history approach, a way of doing historical research on a particular local place on particular individuals and often particular artefacts or documents that trigger an interest. It is sometimes done in collaboration between scholars and people who just have an interest in that time and place, or in a theme, that they hope to illuminate by looking right there.

What can we learn from a micro-historical close up view on the people of my little village? I will start with going back to the first time when I noticed that there might be different views of that place.

### My own first reflection on life in the village

I was about ten years of age, on a birthday party with relatives on my mother's side at a farm in Närke, a flatland county with big fields. Her brother-in-law, the farmer, was talking to my father, born in Dalarna, the county of hills and mountains further North. My uncle who was an enthusiastic supporter of the farmer's alliance turned to my father talking about "These freedom loving men of Dalarna". I saw my dad frown, murmuring

“merely rebels”. And I, who knew how much he loved his village, I was puzzled at his reaction. How could he despise what he was so attached to? Little did I know of the tensions between tradition and progress that my father’s generation struggled with around World War I, and even less about how ideas about the “Nordic race” were colonized by the Nazis. With all the limitations that surround an effort to capture mindsets of people in the past, I am surprised that so many aspects of their life were there for me to marvel at, and for me to share surprising notions and revising of many things I “knew” with colleagues and friends.

## Signs of a relational way of being in the world

### Few first names

Going more than a century back, there are few first names, and we know that days with names that were particularly common, such as Per or Anna, tended to be celebrated around the village, I heard people say ‘We went for ‘Anna – coffee’. Often, when a child died early, the next child of the same sex got the same name.

The few and recurrent names took me some time to get used to. Once I wrote to Harlene Anderson and sent an old photo with the text:

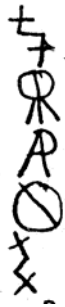
*The man on the picture never learnt to write, yet he exported butter to England.*  
Well, that was not true. It was his *father* who exported the butter. They had farm name, first name and last name in common; just different days of birth and death. The man on the picture had no trouble writing. Instead he had some trouble with his eleven children. “Coming home”, he said, “is like emptying a bucket of crawfish”.

### Dependency on oral tradition

The most frequent book in the homes was the hymn book, sometimes there was also a Bible. An expression that my father heard in his childhood here in this village was old ladies talking about ”gussordspapper” – ‘Godswordspaper’; the expression was used for any piece of paper with printed letters. Those days, when bible and hymnbook were the only printed items many people were familiar with, are not very far back. There must a lot of things, both within us and around us, that is not yet touched by the modern project with all its abstractions and gadgets. When John Shotter talks about “words in their speaking” I try to listen to those words from a time long gone, in a way that let them speak to me.

## Owner's marks

The marks have been in use in similar ways for a thousand years or so. The same symbols are seen on wooden sticks that were used as calendars. The farm marks were still in use until a hundred years ago. The



Redu:  
 Bräus Erik Larsson.  
 Målar Anders Audertson.  
 Bräus Lars Nilsson.  
 Målar Jacob Audertson.  
 Bräus Per Larsson.

signs are not arbitrary, they are connected both with Roman Catholic tradition, and some of them with Viking runes and have also had a function to keep evil away. Lots of other things had the function to protect people and cattle from the Evil One as well as from wolves and bears. One of the conditions that is said to have contributed to the witch trials is this culture of protection from spiritual evil, that during the catholic times integrated a lot of the lore about trolls and other creatures under the ground or in the bushes and the priests had a lot of rituals to establish a sense of safety haven when needed. In the 16:th century when the priests turned Lutheran and the monasteries were closed by order of the king, these means of protection were gone, but the lore and the fear was still there.

We are eager to question language as just representational, neutral packages of information that can be transferred from A to B. The language of the villagers was not just representational, it had power. For a farmer who put his mark on the handle of his spade it was not just information to whoever would look at it in the field. Both curses and blessings were realities with far reaching effects.

## The ways of inheritance

Parts of Sweden had a tradition of *birthright*, the oldest son was to keep the property, and the others had to look elsewhere for a living. Here they had what was called *real inheritance*, the property was divided among the children, (although a son got twice of the share of a daughter). So the property of one farm could change considerably within some decades, and most everyone had access to land to grow seed and feed cattle, at least a couple of goats.

They also inherited and divided the timbered houses, sometimes literally, that half of the house was disassembled and brought to an heir at another place and there the logs were built to a new house or added to a house that was already there.

## Organization of soldiers for the Swedish army

The soldier's rote was formed by a group of farmers and was built on the barter economy from the Middle Ages. Taxes were collected in butter, grain or sheepskin and were assigned to



specific purposes that could not be exchanged. In the Middle Ages the foot soldiers were obliged to come to the enrollment with weapons of their own. The state representatives negotiated with the farmers at the court about how many soldiers that should be enlisted. King Gustaf Wasa (1523-1560) demanded a certain number of soldiers and his son Johan III decided that there would be one soldier from every rote relating to the number of inhabitants, in order to increase the number of soldiers. The farmers had much less influence on the matter. In 1621 the people of Dalarna suggested an alternative to the arbitrary enlistments. They promised 1400 men recruited from the local rote organization. This turned out well and was later reduced to 1200 men.

In other parts of the country the “rote” was solely an organization of recruiting and supporting soldiers. In Dalarna they kept a number of other tasks that demanded a joint venture. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the rote organization was utilized to the task of collecting the land taxes. The head of the tunnlag, that is to say the unit of eight ‘rote’ had to be able to read and calculate, to do the taxes. Later the tunnlag got other assignments as elect representatives to the vestry and electors for the choice of peasant members of the parliament members and to give a barrel of grain for the parish midwife. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the tunnlag also was responsible for keeping order after church and to keep track of the poor, so that the distribution among them was fair between the villages.

This elaborate system, that served both survival of the local people, and the dealings with society at large, did not prevent disasters as the witch trials (40 deaths in Mora in 1669 and 8 in Leksand in 1671) and farmers marching to Stockholm in 1743 to intervene in the national affairs with death penalties and diseases as a result. Yet I think that the relative freedom and the traditions of cooperation in and between the villages were important factors in the development of arts and crafts in the region. People went to Stockholm and yet further away, got inspiration and developed their own versions in music, painting, weaving and carpentry. A visitor from the south of Sweden a hundred years ago commented that these people had a poorer food but yet good houses and more colorful clothing compared to the wealthier counties in the south.

### The company of Orsa: The history of a quote

Where the two rivers East and West of the river Dalälven meet, in the old days there was the exercise place for the regiment of Dalarna. The 13:th of September in 1894 the exercise was over, but the soldiers could not go home until the next day. The officer in charge saw a clear risk that many of them would take the opportunity to go to the local tavern and get in trouble. At the last formation he gave the order: “OK. we all agree that everybody stays sober tonight”. There was silence in the rows, but corporal Gifting from Orsa took a step forward and spoke “The company of Orsa does not promise for sure” [Orsa kompani lovar ingenting bestämt].

With those words the story has been handed over and the expression “The company of Orsa does not promise for sure” often abbreviated to “Orsa kompani” usually indicates an unwillingness to make a promise. Also, the implicit context of the quote is that the people of Dalarna were not easy to rule. However, I remembered from my childhood, that when my father said the quote, it was with a twist “Orsa kompani lovar ingenting med

bestämmdhet”. I thought it was his usual way of adding color to a story. Lately I came across a tale about the original event that used exactly the wording that my dad had used. What the corporal had said was rather “The company of Orsa makes no promise, and that’s for sure”. He was taking authority on behalf of his company, not just indicating that we don’t obey, but rather that *we have decided* not to obey.

In the context of the subtle sharing of power between the state and the local people, even the story of the change of meaning of this anecdote seems to fit into a new picture. The relational quality of the struggle between the people in the villages and the official representatives had been lost in the handing over of the story, turning it into a static picture of power versus disobedience.

### The relevance of history

Before I have seen history as a recollection of events in the past. The history I learnt in school and later has highlighted conflict and hierarchy. These more mundane but also more creative processes that will surface in the local perspective have stayed unnoticed or even invisible. In this micro-history work I came across a definition by the Swedish professor in classical languages and Jesuit father, Anders Piltz:

“History is the sum of events in the past that do not seem to be a result of necessity.”

This means that human history is a history of choices. The people I met in searching for the history of my little village have made choices that mattered, enabling survival, human dignity and creativity. In a world with an increasing awareness of limits of our shared resources we might benefit from experiences from other people who dealt with difficult conditions and limited means in creative ways.

How do we make choices that matter, that enable processes of survival, human dignity and freedom of choice?

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