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Miss Bremer travels down the Mississippi

The famous Swedish writer travels in America 1849–1851. Part 4.

BY FREDRIKA BREMER

TRANSLATED BY MARY HOWITT IN 1853

[Editor's note: For more on Fredrika Bremer, see SAG 2014/1, 2014/3, and 2015/1. The following are excerpts from her text.]

On the Mississippi, Oct. 24, 1850. Floating down the Great River, "the Father of Rivers," between Indian camps, fires, boats, Indians standing or leaping and shouting, or rather yelling, upon the shores; funeral erections on the heights; between vine-clad islands, and Indian canoes paddling among them! I would yet retain these strange foreign scenes; but I proceed onward, passing them by. We leave this poetical wilderness, the region of the youthful Mississippi, and advance toward that of civilization. The weather is mild, the sun and the shade sport among the mountains – a poetical, romantic life!

Oct. 25th.

Sun bright, but cold. The Indians have vanished. We have passed the "Prairie du Chien," the idol-stone of the red Indian; the Indian graves under the autumnally yellow trees. The hills shine out of a splendid yellow-brown. The ruins and the pyramids of primeval ages stand forth gloomy and magnificent amid the brilliant forests. With every bend of the river new and astonishing prospects present themselves. I contemplate them, read Emerson's essays, and live as at a festival. We approach the commencement of two towns on the shore.

Oct. 27th.

Again at Galena, among the lead mines, for a couple of days. It is Sun-

day, and I am returned from church, where I have heard a young Presbyterian minister, of the Presbyterian Church, Mr. Magoon. A true disciple of the Great West! No narrow evangelical views. No, an evangelical consciousness as wide as the Western prairies, as vast as the arch of heaven which spans them, and with breathing-room for the fresh winds of infinity.

An earnest prayer, full of purport, on the prayer "Thy Kingdom Come," completed the whole service; one of the most liberal and comprehensive, one of the freshest and most refreshing which I have heard from the pulpit of any country.

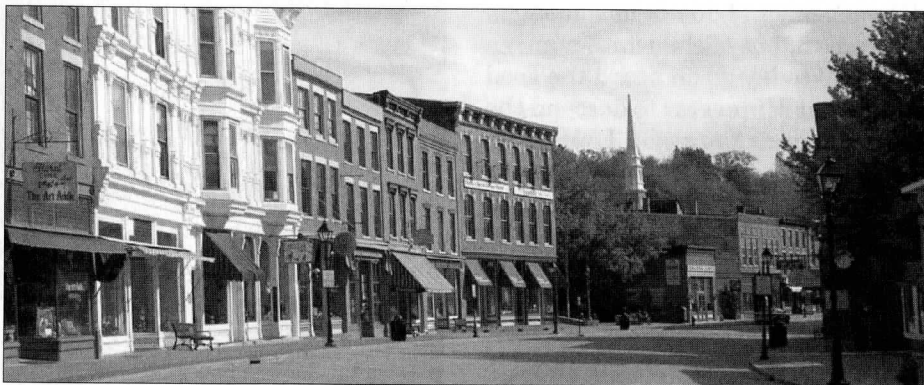
The old Pilgrim Church seems to me now to be the one which exhibits most indwelling life, which grows and expands itself to embrace the whole of human life, and to baptize it to the kingdom of God.

Oct. 29th.

I have established myself excellently at the American Hotel, and I do not intend, during the few days that I shall remain here, to accept the kind invitation which I have received to a

beautiful private home. I have here my nice little Irish maid, Margaret, and have every thing exactly as I wish – among the best potatoes, morning, noon, and night, quite as good as our Årsta potatoes. I enjoy my freedom and my solitary rambles over the hills round the town during these fine days.

Yesterday, the agreeable, liberal-minded young minister, Mr. Magoon, drove me and a lady, a friend of his, to a height – Pilot Knob, I think it is called by the Mississippi, from which we were to see the sun set. Arriving there, we clambered up among bushes, and long grass, and stones – difficult enough; and obtained, when we had gained the summit, one of those ocean-like land views which the Great West only presents. Through that infinite billowy plain rolled the Mississippi, like a vein of silver, far, far away into the immeasurable distance; and over land and river reposed the misty veil of the Indian summer, and its inexpressible, gentle peace. The sun had just set; but a roseate glow lay like a joyful benediction over that vast fertile region.



Galena Main Street.



It was indescribably grand and pleasant.

On our return to Galena, the carriage broke down. The young clergyman sprang out, pulled forth some rope and a knife, and began to work in good earnest, as he said, merrily, "You must know, Miss Bremer, that coach-building belongs, here in the West, to our theology."

The emigrants to the West must, to a certain degree, experience the trouble and the renunciation of the early Pilgrim Fathers. And in order to succeed, they require their courage and perseverance.

But people pass through these necessary stages much more quickly now than they did then. The beautiful, excellent American homes, with verandas, and trees, and gardens, which begin to adorn the hills round Five River, prove this. The good home, and the church, and the labors of Christian love, encroach daily more and more upon the fields and the life of heathenism. I do not now mean of the Indian, but of the white man.

I shall today go on board the good steamboat *Minnesota* to descend the Mississippi as far as St. Louis. Perhaps I may make a pause by the way, at the town of Rock Island, to visit the Swedish settlement of Eric Jansson, at Bishop Hill, a few miles from the town.

Jenny Lind!

The newspapers of the West are mak-

ing themselves merry over the rapturous reception which the people of New York have given Jenny Lind. In one newspaper article I read:

"Our correspondent has been fortunate enough to hear Jenny Lind – sneeze. The first sneezing was a mezzotinto soprano, &c., &c.;" here follow many absurd musical and art terms; "the second was, &c., &c.;" here follow the same; "the third he did not hear, as he fainted."

I can promise the good Western people that they will become as insane with rapture as their brethren of the East, if Jenny Lind should come hither. They now talk like the fox about the grapes, but with better temper.

Jenny Lind, the new Slave Bill, and the protests against it in the North, Eastern, and Western States, are, as well as the spiritual rappings or knockings, the standing topics of the newspapers.

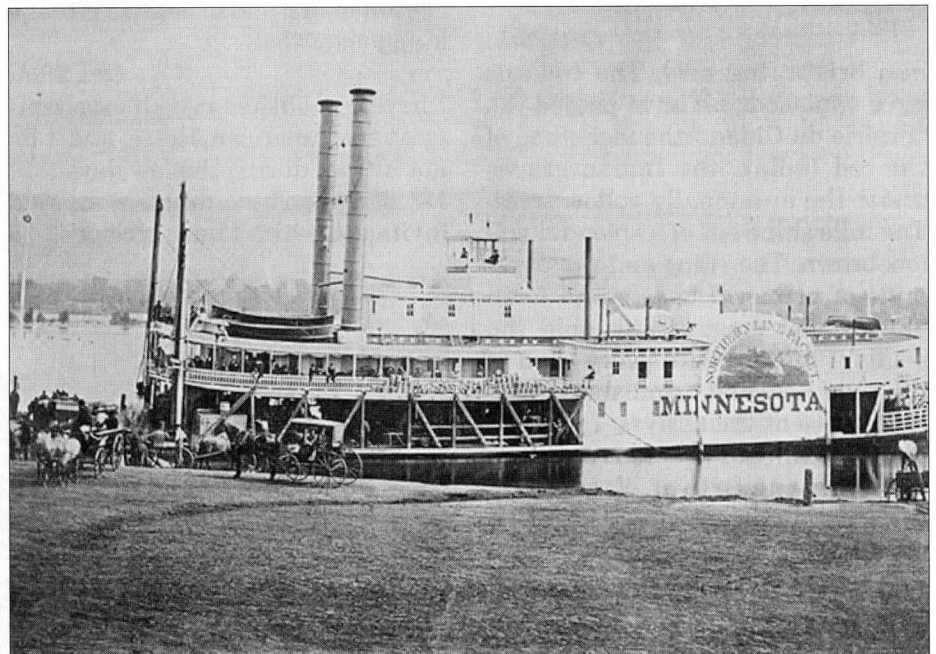
While the people in the Northern States hold meetings and agitate against this bill, which allows the recapture of fugitive slaves in the free states, various of the Southern States, especially the Palmetto State [South Carolina] and Mississippi, raise an indignant cry against the infringement of the rights of the South, and threaten to dissolve the

Union. And the states compliment each other in their newspapers in any thing but a polite manner.

On the Mississippi, November 2d. Views on the Bishop Hill colony

We are lying before Rock Island. Some kind and agreeable gentlemen have just been on board with a proposal to convey me to the Swedish settlement. I can not be other than grateful to them for their kindness and goodwill; but the nights are becoming cold; I am not quite well, and – what should I do there? We, my countrymen and myself, should not understand one another, although we might speak the same language. But I was well pleased to gain intelligence from these gentlemen, merchants of Rock Island, regarding the present condition of the Swedes in the colony.

Since the death of the bishop, as they called Eric Jansson, they have gone on more prosperously. He, however, by his bad management, left them burdened by a large debt of ten or eleven thousand dollars, and some of them are now gone to California to get gold, to endeavor by that means to liquidate it. Some of the Swedes at Bishop Hill have unremit-

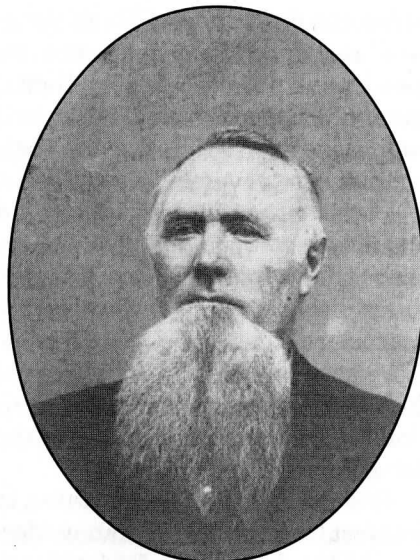


The steamship Minnesota, built in 1849.

tingly proved themselves to be honest, pious, and industrious people, and as such they have the confidence of the inhabitants of the town (Rock Island), and obtain on credit the goods for which they are at present unable to pay. They have built several handsome brick houses for themselves, and manage their land well. They have begun to grow and to spin flax, and they derive an income from the linen thread they have thus to sell. They continue steadfast in their religious usages, their prayers, and their faith in Eric Jansson, who seems to have had almost a demoniacal power over their minds. When they were ill and did not recover by the remedies and prayers of Eric Jansson, he told them that it was owing to their want of faith in him, and because they were reprobate sinners. Many died victims to the diseases of the climate, and for want of proper care.

The respectable and agreeable man, who was well acquainted with the Swedish colony, would not say any thing decidedly against Eric Jansson, nevertheless he doubted him; on the contrary, he praised Eric Jansson's wife as being very excellent and agreeable. She also had died of one of those fevers which raged in the colony. Four days afterward, Eric Jansson stood up during divine service in the church and declared that "the Spirit had commanded him to take a new wife!" And a woman present stood up also and said, that "the Spirit had made known to her that she must become his wife!" This was four days after the death of the first excellent wife. Such a proceeding elucidates the spirit which guided Eric Jansson.

His murderer, the Swede Rooth, will be tried in the morning. It is believed that he will be acquitted, as the occasion of the deed was such as might well drive a man mad. Rooth had married a girl in the Swedish colony, contrary to the wishes of Eric Jansson. Persecuted by the enmity of Jansson, it was Rooth's intention to leave the place, and accordingly he had privately sent off his wife and child, a little boy, in the night. They



Olof Olsson, one of the Bishop Hill men that Fredrika did not meet.

were pursued by order of Jansson, captured, and conveyed in a boat down the Mississippi, no one knew where; it is said to St. Louis. Captain Schneidau saw Rooth on the very morning when the intelligence of this reached him. He was pale and scarcely in his right senses. In this excited state of mind he hastened to Eric Jansson, whom he met just setting off to church in the midst of his followers. He thus addressed him:

"You have had my wife and child carried off, I know not where. They are perhaps dead, and I may never see them more! I do not care to live any longer myself, but you shall die first!" And, so saying, he drew forth a pistol and shot him in the breast. Eric Jansson died almost in a moment. Rooth made no attempt to flee, but allowed himself to be seized by the exasperated people.

The little colony amounts to between seven and eight hundred persons, and is now under the government of two men whom they have selected, and they continue to hold the same religious faith in freedom from sin as during the life of their first leader. Taken abstractedly, their faith is not erroneous. The new man does not sin; but then they overlook the fact that sin is never perfectly eradicated from the human heart here on earth, and that, therefore, we must always remain sinful creatures till the time of our conversion arrives.

The principal error of the Swedish emigrants consists in their faith in the sinner Eric Jansson, and in such sinners as themselves.

The river journey continues

The weather is wet and chilly. The scenery of the banks is still of a highland character, but decreases in magnificence and beauty. The hills are broken up, as it were, and lie scattered over the prairies, which terminate with the river. White towns and churches shine out here and there along the shores. We are here on the shore of Illinois. Rock Island is situated at the outlet of the Illinois into the Mississippi. On the opposite side lies the state of Iowa, and there shines out white and lovely the little city of Davenport, which derives its name from its founder, and its celebrity from a horrible murder committed there on the person of an old man, one Sunday morning, by four young men, for his money. It is not long since. Bloody deeds have happened and still happen on the banks of the Mississippi.

November 3rd.

We steam down the Mississippi but slowly. The steamer drags along with her two huge barks or flatboats, laden probably with lead from Galena, one on each side of the vessel. They say that these are a means of safety in case any accident should befall the steamer, and her passengers thus be in danger; they might then save themselves in the flatboats. But they make the voyage very slow, and in the night I hear such extraordinary noises, thunderings and grindings in the vessel, as if it were panting, bellowing, and groaning under its heavy labor, and were ready to give up the ghost. These are probably occasioned by its hard work with the flatboats. But it is not agreeable, and the sound is so dreadful at night that I always lie down dressed, ready to show myself in public in case of an explosion. Such misadventures are of everyday occurrence on the Mississippi, and one hears frequently

of such also on other rivers and on the lakes of this country. I have here neither an intimate acquaintance nor friend, who would put forth his hand to me in a moment of danger. But I know not how it is; I feel as if there were no need for fear. Only I am always prepared for a nocturnal "start."

No milk!

The captain of the steamer is evidently a prudent general, and all goes on calmly and well. The table is abundant and excellent. The only thing that I feel the want of is milk for coffee and tea; cream is a thing not to be thought of, and is seldom met with anywhere in this country. One must learn to dispense with milk on one's river voyages in the West and South. I can manage to swallow coffee without milk; but it is almost impossible for me to take tea without it. I made a little complaint about it at tea last evening.

"Well!" said a Colonel Baxter, an excellent man, opposite to me, "we frequently did not taste milk for many weeks together during the Mexican war!"

"Oh!" said I, "but then you had glory to console yourselves with. What can not people dispense with when they have that! But here in a steamboat, without glory and without milk! It is too much!"

They laughed, and this morning we had plenty of milk to breakfast.

The greater number of the attendants are negroes. The stewardess is a mulatto, neither agreeable nor good tempered. There are not many passengers in the better part of the vessel, and by no means disagreeable. The gentlemen's side is rather full; two thirds of these have a somewhat common appearance; they are "businessmen" from head to foot.

I spend most of my time in my pleasant little stateroom, or in walking backward and forward under the piazza in front of it, where I amuse myself by the spectacle of the river and its shores. Three-decked steamers, large and small, with their pair of chimneys, puffing out vehemently

under the influence of "high pressure" as they advance up the stream, speed past us; vast timber-floats, upon which people both build and cook, row down the stream with gigantic oars; covered barks, vessels, and boats of every description and size are seen upon the river. It becomes more animated and broader, but still continues to flow on with a majestic calmness.

We are now in the corn regions of the Mississippi Valley; rich in all kinds of grain, but principally in the rich golden-yellow maize.

Beyond the Mississippi states, to the west, extends the Indian wilderness, Nebraska, and the Rocky Mountains. With Tennessee on the east, and Arkansas on the west, we enter the region of cotton; with Louisiana, the region of sugar, the south, and summer life.

Illinois and Iowa are free states; south of these lie the slave states. In Illinois and Iowa there are Swedish and Norwegian settlements, but further south they have not yet advanced. Those central Mississippi states are occupied more by Germans and Irish; and more southern still, by French and Spaniards. All these are governed by the laws and manners of the Anglo-Norman race. It is the same with the Jews, who are very numerous in America, especially in the West. But they also enjoy all civil rights like natives of the country, and are much less distinguished from the European population here than they are in Europe; so little, indeed, that I have scarcely ever thought "that is a Jew," it being hardly possible to distinguish a Jew in this country from a dark-complexioned American.

Nauvoo

We are now within sight of Nauvoo, formerly the capital of the Mormon district, and the magnificent ruin of their former temple is seen standing on its elevated site. One of my friends, who some years ago was traveling on the Mississippi, went on shore at Nauvoo, a few days after the Mormon prophet, Joe Smith, was killed by the people of Illinois. He saw the people

of the town and the district, a population of about twenty thousand, come forth from their dwellings to the singing of psalms; saw them advance westward into the wilderness to seek there for that promised land which their prophet had foretold to them. After a wandering of three thousand miles through wildernesses, amid manifold dangers and difficulties, and the endurance of much suffering, they arrived at the Great Salt Lake and its fertile shores. There they have within a few years so greatly increased and multiplied, that they are now in a fair way to become a powerful state. Faith can, even in these days, remove mountains – nay, more, can remove great cities.

Yes, in this Great West, on the shores of the Great River, exist very various scenes and peoples. There are Indians; there are squatters; there are Scandinavians with gentle manners and cheerful songs; there are Mormons, Christian in manners, but fanatics in their faith in one man (and Eric Janssonists are in this respect similar to the Mormons). Imagine how it can be calmer. The bed of the Mississippi has not been cleared, and it is a sign that the government of the United States has its deficiencies and its shallows, when they can tolerate such impediments on a great river where there is such constant traffic. But it is not agreed as to whether the government or the people ought to do the work, and therefore it remains undone, to the great detriment of the traffic of the river.

I have made two agreeable acquaintances on board, in two gentlemen from Connecticut, strong, down-right Yankees; and the young daughter of one, a most charming girl of twenty – a fresh flower, both body and soul – a splendid specimen of the daughters of New England. We have also now a pair of giant women on board, such as belong to the old mythological population of Utgård; and I have been particularly amused by the conflict between the wild and the cultivated races in the persons of one of these ladies and my lovely flower of New England. The former, in a

steel-gray dress, with a gray, fierce countenance, stiff and middle-aged, sat smoking her pipe in the ladies' saloon when we entered it from the dining hall in the afternoon. She sat in the middle of the room and puffed out the smoke vehemently, and looked as if she would set the whole world at defiance. The ladies looked at her, looked at each other, were silent, and endured it for a while; the smoke, however, became at length intolerable, and one whispered to another that something must be done to put a stop to this unallowed smoking.

Miss S. called the stewardess: "You must tell that lady that it is not permitted to smoke in this room."

"I have told her so, Missis, but she takes no notice. It is of no use talking to her."

Again they waited a while to see whether the smoking lady would not pay attention to silent, but very evident, signs of displeasure. But no, she sat as unmoved as ever, and filled the room with smoke.

The lovely young Miss S. now summoned courage, advanced toward the smoker, and said, in a very polite, but, at the same time, firm and dignified manner, "I don't know whether you have observed that your cabin has a door which opens on the piazza, and – it would be much more agreeable for you, and for all of us, if you would smoke your pipe there."

"No. I prefer smoking here in this room."

"But it is forbidden to smoke here."

"It is forbidden for gentlemen, but not for ladies."

"*It is forbidden to smoke here*, as well for you as for any one else; and I must beg of you, in the name of all the ladies present, that you will desist from so doing."

This was said with so much earnestness, and so much grace at the same time, that the giant woman was struck by it.

"No, well! wait a bit!" said she, angrily; and, after she had vehemently blown out a great puff of tobacco-smoke by way of a parting token, she rose up and went into her own apartment. The power of cultivation had

gained the victory over rudeness; the gods had conquered the giants.

We shall now proceed on our way, but by land, and not by water. Our heavily-laden vessel cannot pass the shallows. It must be unloaded here. The passengers must proceed by carriages about fifteen or sixteen miles along the Iowa shore to a little city where they may take a fresh steamer, and where there are no longer any impediments in the river. My new friends from Connecticut will take me under their wing.

St. Louis, November 8th.

I am now at St. Louis, on the western bank of the river. I am now at an hotel, but shall remove, either tomorrow or the day after, to the house of Senator Allen, a little way out of the city.

I came here yesterday with my friends from Connecticut. The journey across the Iowa prairie in a half-covered wagon was very pleasant. The weather was as warm as a summer's day, and the sun shone above a fertile, billowy plain, which extended far, far into the distance. Three fourths of the land of Iowa are said to be of this billowy prairie land. The country did not appear to be cultivated, but looked extremely beautiful and home-like, an immense pasture-meadow. The scenery of the Mississippi is of a bright, cheerful character.

In the afternoon we reached the little town of Keokuk, on a high bank by the river. It was not till late in the evening that the vessel came, by which we were to continue our journey, and in the meantime I set off alone on a journey of discovery. I followed a path which led up the hill along the riverside.

Small houses, at short distances from each other, studded this hill by the riverside; they were neatly built of wood, of good proportions, and with that appropriateness and cleverness which distinguishes the work of the Americans. They were each one like the other, and seemed to be the habitations of working people. Most of the doors stood open, probably to admit the mild evening air. I availed myself

of this circumstance to gain a sight of the interior, and fell into discourse with two of the good women of the houses. They were, as I had imagined, the dwellings of artisans who had work in the town. There was no luxury in these small habitations, but everything was so neat and orderly, so ornamental, and there was such a holiday calm over every thing, from the mistress of the family down to the very furniture, that it did one good to see it. It was also Sunday evening, and the peace of the Sabbath rested within the home as well as over the country.

When I returned to my hotel in the town it was quite dusk; but it had, in the mean time, been noised abroad that some sort of Scandinavian animal [Fredrika] was to be seen at the inn, and it was now requested to come and show itself.

I went down, accordingly, into the large saloon, and found a great number of people there, principally of the male sex, who increased more and more until I had to shake hands with many most extraordinary figures. But one often sees such here in the West. The men work hard, and are careless regarding their toilet; they do not give themselves time to attend to it; but their unkempt outsides are no type of that which is within, as I frequently observed this evening.

We went on board between ten and eleven at night, and the next morning were in the waters of the Missouri, which rush into those of the Mississippi, about eighteen miles north of St. Louis, with such vehemence, and with such a volume of water, that it altogether changes the character of the Mississippi. There is an end now to its calmness and its bright tint.

When we reached St. Louis it was as warm as the middle of summer, and many of the trees in the streets yet bore verdant foliage. I recognized the beautiful acacia, acanthus, and sycamore.

Here we leave Fredrika who is to spend the winter in the south and in Cuba.

A link to the whole book will be found on page 30.