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Miss Bremer goes to Minnesota

The famous Swedish writer travels in America 1849–1851. Part 3.

BY FREDRIKA BREMER

TRANSLATED BY MARY HOWITT IN 1853

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

On the Mississippi, October 15th.
After a night at the "American-House" in Galena, I continued my travels on the steamboat *Menomonie*. Toward sunset on the most lovely and glorious evening, we came out of the narrow little winding Five River, and entered the grand Mississippi, which flowed broad and clear as a mirror between hills which extended into the distance, and now looked blue beneath the mild, clear blue heavens, in which the new moon and the evening star ascended, becoming brighter as the sun sank lower behind the hills. The pure misty veil of the Indian summer was thrown over the landscape; one might have believed that it was the earth's smoke of sacrifice which arose in the evening toward the gentle heavens. Not a breath of air moved, everything was silent and still in that grand spectacle; it was indescribably beautiful. Just then a shot was fired; a smoke issued from one of the small green islands, and flocks of ducks and wild geese flew up round about, escaping from the concealed sportsman, who I hope this evening returned without game. All was again silent and still, and the *Menomonie* advanced with a quiet, steady course up the glorious river.

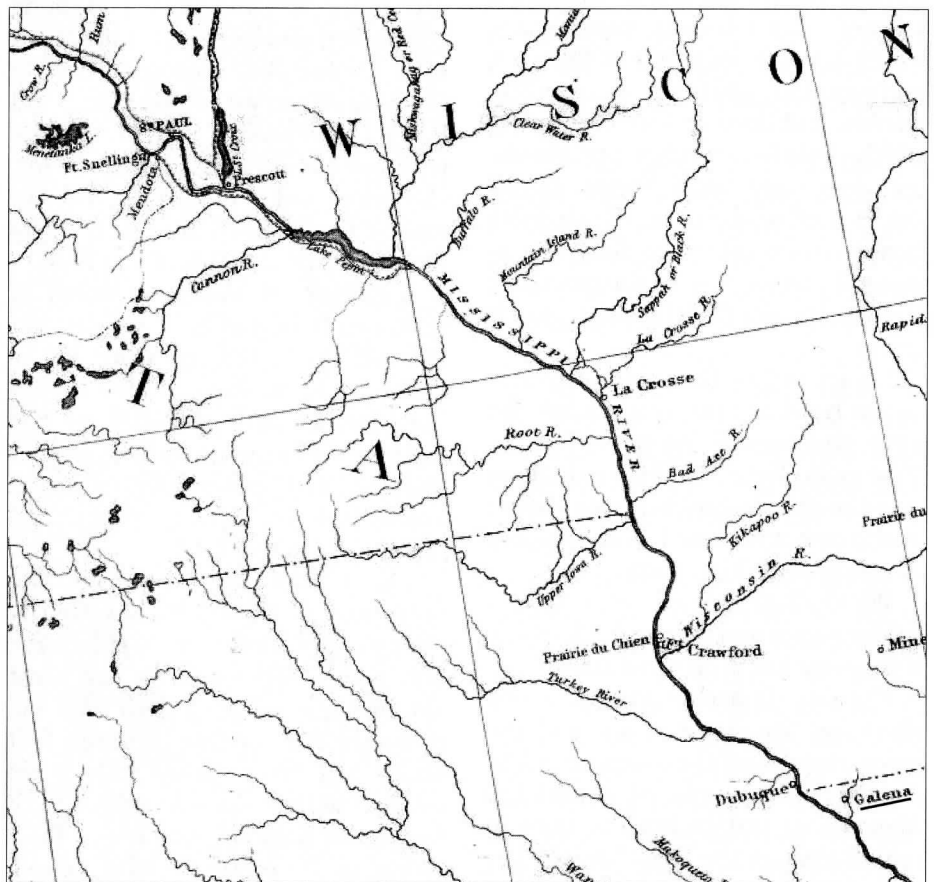
I stood on the upper deck with the captain, Mr. Smith, and the representative from Minnesota, Mr. Sib-

ley,¹ who, with his wife and child, were returning home from Washington.

Was this, then, indeed, the Mississippi, that wild giant of nature, which I had imagined would be so powerful, so divine, so terrible? Here its waters were clear, of a fresh, light-green color, and within their beautiful frame of distant violet-blue mountains, they lay like a heavenly mirror, bearing on their bosom verdant, vine-covered islands, like islands of

the blessed. The Mississippi was here in its youth, in its state of innocence as yet. It has not as yet advanced very far from its fountains; no crowd of steamboats muddy its waters. The *Menomonie* and one other, a still smaller boat, are the only ones which ascend the river above Galena; no cities cast into it their pollution; pure rivers only flow into its waters, and aborigines and primeval forests still surround it.

Afterward, far below and toward



David Rumsey Map Collection. Part of an 1861 Mississippi River map.

the world's sea, where the Mississippi comes into the life of the states and becomes a statesman, he has his twelve hundred steamers, and I know not how many thousand sailing-boats, gives himself up to cities and the population of cities, and is married to the Missouri: then it is quite different; then is it all over with the beauty and innocence of the Mississippi.

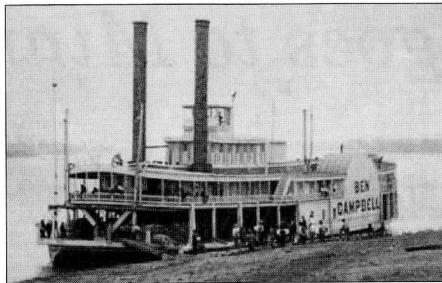
Mississippi, October 16th.

Cold and chilly; but those stately hills, which rise higher and higher on each side the river, covered with forests of oak now brilliant in their golden-brown array beneath the autumnal heaven, and those prairies with their infinite stretches of view, afford a spectacle forever changing and forever beautiful. And then all is so young, so new, all as yet virgin soil! Here and there, at the foot of the hills, on the banks of the river, has the settler built his little log house, plowed up a little field in which he has now just reaped his maize. The air is gray, but altogether calm. We proceed very leisurely, because the water is low at this time of the year, and has many shallows; at times it is narrow, and then again it is of great width, dotted over with many islands, both large and small. These islands are full of wild vines, which have thrown themselves in festoons among the trees, now for the most part leafless, though the wild vines are yet green.

We are sailing between Wisconsin on the right and Iowa on the left. We have just passed the mouth of the Wisconsin River. The Wisconsin flows into the Mississippi between shores overgrown with wood, and presents a beautiful idyllic scene.

We shall tomorrow enter upon a wilder region and among the Indians; if the weather is only not too cold!

Evening. It seems as if it would clear up; the sun has set and the moon risen, and the moon seems to dissipate the clouds. At sunset the *Menomonic* put to land to take in fuel. It was on the Iowa bank of the river. I went on shore with Mr. Sibley.



A typical 1850s steamboat.

A newly-erected log house stood at the foot of the hill, about fifty paces from the river; we went into the house, and were met by a handsome young wife, with a nice little plump lad, a baby, in her arms; her husband was out in the forest. They had been at the place merely a few months, but were satisfied, and hopeful of doing well there. Two fat cows with bells were grazing in the meadow, without any tether. Everything within the house was neat and in order, and indicated a degree of comfort. I saw some books on a shelf; these were the Bible, prayer-books, and American reading-books, containing selections from English and American literature, both verse and prose. The young wife talked sensibly and calmly about their life and condition as settlers in the West. When we left the house, and I saw her standing in the doorway with her beautiful child in her arms, she presented a picture in the soft glow of the Western heaven, a lovely picture of the new life of the West.

A glorious morning, as warm as summer! It rained in the night, but cleared up in the morning; those dense, dark masses of cloud were penetrated, rent asunder by the flashing sunbeams; and bold, abrupt shadows, and heavenly lights played among the yet bolder, craggy, and more picturesque hills.

The further we advanced, the more strangely and fantastically were the cliffs on the shore splintered and riven, representing the most astonishing imagery. Half way up, probably four or five hundred feet above the river, these hills were covered with wood now golden with the hue of autumn, and above that, rising, as if directly out of it, naked, ruin-like crags of rich red brown,

representing fortifications, towers, half-demolished walls, as of ancient, magnificent strongholds and castles. The castle ruins of the Rhine are small things in comparison with these gigantic remains of primeval ages; when men were not, but the Titans of primeval nature, Megatheriums, Mastodons, and Ichthyosaurs rose up from the waters, and wandered alone over the earth.

It was difficult to persuade one's self that many of these bold pyramids and broken temple façades had not really been the work of human hands, so symmetrical, so architectural were these colossal erections. I saw in two places human dwellings, built upon a height; they looked like birds' nests upon a lofty roof; but I was glad to see them, because they predicted that this magnificent region will soon have inhabitants, and this temple of nature worshipers in thankful and intelligent human hearts. The country on the other side of these precipitous crags is highland, glorious country, bordering the prairie land – land for many millions of human beings! Americans will build upon these hills beautiful, hospitable homes, and will here labor, pray, love, and enjoy.

Last evening, just at sunset, I saw the first trace of the Indians in an Indian grave. It was a chest of bark laid upon a couple of planks supported by four posts, standing underneath a tree golden with autumnal tints. It is thus that the Indians dispose of their dead, till the flesh is dried off the bones, when these are interred either in the earth or in caves, with funeral rites, dances, and songs.

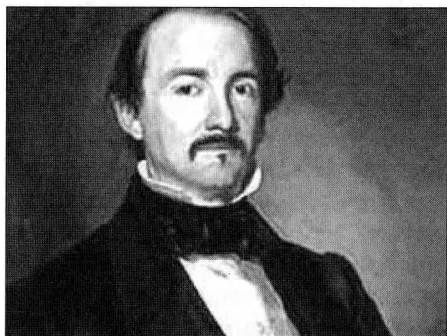
Soon after we saw Indian huts on the banks of the river. They are called by themselves "tepees" (dwellings), and by the English "lodges"; they resemble a tent in form, and are covered with buffalo hides, which are wrapped round long stakes, planted in the ground in a circle, and united at the top, where the smoke passes out through an opening something like our Laplander's huts, only on a larger scale. There is a low opening



in the form of a door to each hut, and over which a piece of buffalo hide can be let down at pleasure. I saw through the open doors the fire burning on the floor in many of the huts; it had a pleasant, kindly appearance. Little savage children were leaping about the shore. It was the most beautiful moonlit evening.

Mississippi, October 17th.

Sunshiny, but cold. We have Indian territory through the whole of our course on the left; it is the territory of Minnesota, and we now see Indians encamped on the banks in larger or smaller numbers. The Indians we see here are of the Sioux or Dacotah nation, still one of the most powerful tribes in the country, and who, together with the Chippewas, inhabit the district around the springs of the Mississippi (Minnesota). Each nation is said to amount to twenty-five thousand souls. The two tribes live in hostility with each other; but have lately held, after some bloody encounters, a peace congress at Fort Snelling, where the American authorities compelled these vengeful people, although unwillingly, to offer each other the hand of reconciliation.



Henry Hastings Sibley.

Mr. Sibley, who has lived many years among the Sioux, participating in their hunting and their daily life, has related to me many characteristic traits of this people's life and disposition. There is a certain grandeur about them, but it is founded on immense pride; and their passion for revenge is carried to a savage and cruel extreme. Mr. Sibley is also very fond of the Indians, and is said to be a very great favorite with them. Sometimes, when we sail past Indian villages, he utters a kind of wild cry, which receives an exulting response from the shore.

We have now also some Indians on board, a family of the Winnebagoes, husband, wife, and daughter, a young girl of seventeen, and two young warriors of the Sioux tribe, adorned with fine feathers, and painted with red and yellow, and all colors, I fancy, so that they are splendid. They remain on the upper deck, where I also remain, on account of the view being so much more extensive. The Winnebago man is also painted, and lies on deck, generally on his stomach, propped on his elbows, and wrapped in his blanket. The wife looks old and worn out, but is cheerful and talkative. The girl is tall and good-looking, but has heavy features, and broad, round shoulders; she is very shy, and turns away if anyone looks at her.

Last night we passed through Lake Pepin² in the moonlight. It is an extension of the Mississippi, large enough to constitute a lake, surrounded by magnificent hills, which seem to enclose it with their almost perpendicular cliffs.

In the afternoon we shall reach St. Paul, the goal of our journey, and the most northern town on the Mississippi. I am sorry to reach it so soon; I should have liked this voyage up the Mississippi to have lasted eight days at least. It amuses and interests me indescribably. These new shores, so new in every way, with their perpetually varying scenes; that wild people, with their camps, their fires, boats, their peculiar manners and cries – it is a continual refreshment to me.

Excellent steamboats

And to this must be added that I am able to enjoy it in peace and freedom, from the excellent arrangement of the American steamboats for their passengers. They are commonly three-decked – the middle deck being principally occupied by the passengers who like to be comfortable. Round this deck runs a broad gallery or piazza, roofed in by the upper deck, within which are ranged the passengers' cabins, side by side, all round the vessel. Each cabin has a door in which is a window opening into the gallery. The saloon aft is always appropriated to the ladies, and around this are their cabins; the second great saloon also, used for meals, is the assembling place of the gentlemen. Each little apartment, called a state-room, has commonly two berths in it, the one above the other; but if the steamer is not much crowded, one can easily obtain a cabin entirely to one's self. These apartments are always painted white, and are neat, light, and charming; one could remain in them for days with the utmost pleasure. The table is generally well and amply supplied; and the fares, comparatively speaking, are low.

Thus, for instance, I pay for the voyage from Galena to St. Paul only six dollars, which seems to me quite too little in comparison with all the good things that I enjoy. I have a charming little "stateroom" to myself, and the few upper class passengers are not of the catechising order. One of them, Mr. Sibley, is a clever, kind man, and extremely interesting to me from his knowledge of the people of this region, and their circumstances.

There are also some emigrant families who are on their way to settle on the banks of the River St. Croix and Stillwater, who do not belong to what are called the "better class," although they rank with such – a couple of ladies who smoke meerschaum-pipes now and then – and, in particular, there are two half-grown girls, who are considerably in my way sometimes. Ah! people may

come to this hemisphere as democratic as they will, but when they have travelled about a little they will become aristocratic to a certain extent. To a certain extent – but beyond that I shall never go. The captain of the steamer, Mr. Smith, is a very agreeable and polite man, who is my cavalier on board, and in whose vessel the utmost order prevails.

We see no longer any traces of European cultivation on shore, nothing but Indian huts and encampments. The shores have become flatter since we left Lake Pepin, and the scenery tamer.

At St. Paul

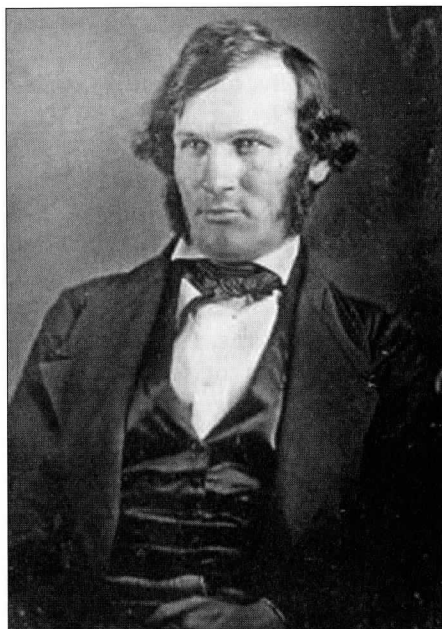
October. 25th.

At about three miles from St. Paul we saw a large Indian village, consisting of about twenty hide-covered wigwams, with their ascending columns of smoke. In the midst of these stood a neat log house. This was the home which a Christian missionary had built for himself among the savages, and here he had established a school for the children. The village, which is called Kaposia, and is one of the established Indian villages, looked animated from its women, children, and dogs.

We sped rapidly past it, for the Mississippi was here as clear and deep as our own *Götaälv*, and the next moment, taking an abrupt turn to the left, St. Paul was before us, standing upon a high bluff on the eastern bank of the Mississippi; behind it the blue arch of heaven, and far below it the Great River, and before it, extending right and left, beautiful valleys, with their verdant hill sides scattered with wood – a really grand and commanding situation – affording the most beautiful views.

We lay to at the lower part of the town, whence the upper is reached by successive flights of steps, exactly as with us on the *Söders höjder* by *Mosebacke* in Stockholm. Indians were sitting or walking along the street which runs by the shore.

Scarcely had we touched the shore when the governor of Minnesota, Mr. Alexander Ramsay,³ and his pretty



Alexander Ramsay in 1848.

young wife came on board, and invited me to take up my quarters at their house. And there I am now; happy with these kind people, and with them I make excursions into the neighborhood.

The town is one of the youngest infants of the Great West, scarcely eighteen months old, and yet it has in this short time increased to a population of two thousand persons, and in a very few years it will certainly be possessed of twenty-two thousand, for its situation is as remarkable for beauty and healthiness as it is advantageous for trade. Here the Indians come with their furs from that immense country lying between the Mississippi and the Missouri, the western boundary of Minnesota, and the forests still undespoiled of their primeval wealth, and the rivers and lakes abounding in fish, offer their inexhaustible resources, while the great Mississippi affords the means of their conveyance to the commercial markets of the world, flowing, as it does, through the whole of central America down to New Orleans.

As yet, however, the town is but in its infancy, and people manage with such dwellings as they can get. The drawing room at Governor Ramsay's house is also his office, and Indians and work people, and ladies and gentlemen, are all alike admitted.

The city is thronged with Indians. The men, for the most part, go about grandly ornamented, and with naked hatchets, the shafts of which serve them as pipes. They paint themselves so utterly without any taste that it is incredible. Nearly all the Indians which I have seen are of the Sioux tribe.

Governor Ramsay drove me yesterday to the Falls of St. Anthony. They are some miles from St. Paul. These falls close the Mississippi to steamboats and other vessels. From these falls to New Orleans the distance is two thousand two hundred miles. A little above the falls the river is again navigable for two hundred miles, but merely for small vessels, and that not without danger.

The Falls of St. Anthony have no considerable height, and strike me merely as the cascade of a great mill-dam. The Mississippi is a river of a joyful temperament.

Immediately above the falls, it runs so shallow over a vast level surface of rock that people may cross it in carriages, as we did to my astonishment. At no great distance below the falls the river becomes again navigable, and steamers go up as far as Mendota, a village at the outlet of the St. Peter River into the Mississippi, somewhat above St. Paul.

As to describing how we traveled about, how we walked over the river on broken trunks of trees which were jammed together by the stream in chaotic masses. I considered many a passage wholly and altogether impracticable, until my conductors, both gentlemen and ladies, convinced me that it was to them a simple and everyday path. Ugh!

On all sides the grass waved over hills and fields, tall and of an autumnal yellow. There are not hands enough here to mow it. The soil is a rich black mold, which is superb for the growth of potatoes and grain, but not so agreeable for pedestrians in white stockings and petticoats. A fine black dust soils everything.

The eastern shore of the Mississippi, within Minnesota only, belongs to the whites, and their number here

does not as yet amount to more than seven thousand souls. The whole western portion of Minnesota is still Indian territory, inhabited principally by two great nations, Sioux or Dacotahs, and Chippewas, who live in a continual state of hostility, as well as by some of the lesser Indian tribes.

October 26th.

I went yesterday with my kind entertainers into the Indian territory, by Fort Snelling, a fortress built by the Americans here, and where military are stationed, both infantry and cavalry, to keep the Indians in check. The Indians are terribly afraid of the Americans, whom they call "the Long Knives," and now the white settlers are no longer in danger.

Fort Snelling lies on the western bank of the Mississippi, where the St. Peter flows into that river; and at this point the view is glorious over the broad St. Peter River, called by the Indians the Minnesota, and of the beautiful valley through which it runs. Further up it flows through a highland district, and amid magnificent scenery inland five hundred miles westward.

The meadows looked most pleasant, most fertile and inviting. We met a milkmaid also coming with her milkpails; she was handsome, but had artificial curls, and did not look like a regular milkmaid, not as a true milkmaid in a pastoral ought to look.

But this Minnesota is a glorious country, and just the country for Northern emigrants – just the country for a new Scandinavia. It is four times as large as England; its soil is of the richest description, with extensive wooded tracts; great numbers of rivers and lakes abounding in fish, and a healthy, invigorating climate. The winters are cold and clear; the summers not so hot as in the states lying lower on the Mississippi. The frosts seldom commence before the middle of September.

The whole of Minnesota is hilly. Minnesota is bounded on the east by Lake Superior and is brought by this into connection with the states in the east, with the St. Lawrence, and the Hudson, and the Atlantic Ocean. It

has Canada on the north, on the west the wild Missouri, navigable through almost the whole of its extent, and flowing at the feet of the Rocky Mountains, rich in metals and precious stones, and with prairies where graze wild herds of buffaloes, elks, and antelopes. On the other side of Missouri lies that mystical Indian Nebraska, where, beyond the Rocky Mountains, and for the most part still unknown, lies Oregon, an immense territory, with immense resources in natural productions, vast stretches of valley and vast rivers, the Columbus and the Oregon, which empty themselves into the Pacific Ocean.

What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become! Here would the Swede find again his clear, romantic lakes, the plains of Scania rich in corn, and the valleys of Norrland; here would the Norwegian find his rapid rivers, his lofty mountains, for I include the Rocky Mountains and Oregon in the new kingdom; and both nations their hunting fields and their fisheries. The Danes might here pasture their flocks and herds, and lay out their farms on richer and less misty coasts than those of Denmark.

But seriously, Scandinavians who are well-off in the Old Country ought not to leave it. But such as are too much contracted at home, and who desire to emigrate, should come to Minnesota. The climate, the situation, the character of the scenery agrees with our people better than that of any other of the many American states, and none of them appear to me to have a greater or a more beautiful future before them than Minnesota.

Add to this that the rich soil of Minnesota is not yet bought up by speculators, but may everywhere be purchased at government prices, one dollar and a quarter per acre.

A young Norwegian woman lives as cook with Governor Ramsay; she is not above twenty, and is not remarkably clever as a cook, and yet she receives eleven dollars per month wages. This is an excellent country for young servants.

Jenny Lind

The newspapers of the West are making 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.

One of the inhabitants of St. Paul's, who had been at New York, returned there before I left. He had some business with Governor Ramsay, but his first words to this gentlemen were, "Governor! I have heard Jenny Lind!"

Goodbye, Minnesota!

I shall tomorrow commence my voyage down the Mississippi as far as Galena; thence to St. Louis, at which place I shall proceed up the Ohio to Cincinnati, and thence to New Orleans, and, advancing onward, shall proceed from some one of the southern seaport towns to Cuba, where I intend to winter.

Endnotes:

- 1) *Henry Hastings Sibley*, b. 1811 in Detroit, MI, moved as a young man to the Minnesota Territory, where first was a representative for it 1849–1853, and after statehood became the first governor 1858–1860. He died 1891 in St. Paul.
- 2) *Lake Pepin* was in 1854 the place where the village of Stockholm was founded by immigrants from Karlskoga, Sweden.
- 3) *Alexander Ramsey*, b. 1815 in PA, was governor of the Minnesota Territory 1849–1853, and in 1860–63 succeeded Sibley as governor of the state. He died in St. Paul in 1903.

For a link to the whole book by Miss Bremer, see page 30.