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Travels to Pine Lake 1850

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Miss Bremer visits the Swedish settlement at Pine Lake, WI

Famous Swedish writer travels in America 1849-1851

BY FREDRIKA BREMER

TRANSLATED BY MARY HOWITT 1853

Introduction

Fredrika Bremer was born in Åbo, Finland, in 1801 in a well-to-do family. In 1804 the Bremer family moved to Stockholm, and in 1805 bought the manor of Årsta, in Österhaninge parish southeast of Stockholm, which was the family home for decades. Here she lived with her siblings and was educated at home. She stayed unmarried, and in the 1820s started a career as a writer. Her first published work was *Teckningar utur hvardagslifvet* (Sketches from everyday life) in 1828, then she published more novels and became very popular in Sweden. In the 1840s her works were also translated into other languages, including English. Politically, she was a liberal who felt sympathy for social issues and for the working class movement, and, of course, for women's rights.

In 1849 she left for a study tour of the U.S. and stayed until 1851, travelling to many parts of the country, always eager to learn about the questions of the time: abolition, social problems, and women's right to education, and much more. As a celebrity she was also able to meet with Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and other famous persons.

After her return to Sweden she published her American experiences in *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America* in 1853. She continued to work for better conditions for people and was one of the founders of a school for deaf people, and also worked for the right of women to vote, etc. Fredrika Bremer died at Årsta in 1865.

Elisabeth Thorsell

The Pine Lake settlement

Pine Lake Settlement (New Upsala) in Waukesha County, Wisconsin, was founded in 1841 by Gustaf Unonius and friends, but by 1849 most of them had left for other places, as the farming land was not good, and the Swedes were scholars, not farmers. Mr. Unonius entered the Episcopalian church, and later in 1849, he founded the Swedish Episcopal Church of St. Ansgarius in Chicago, Illinois. In 1858 he returned to Sweden, hoping to get a post in the Church of Sweden, but that failed and he became a customs officer, and died in 1902.

Fredrika comes to Pine Lake

On the morning of the 29th of September 1850 I arrived at this, the first Swedish colony of the West. Herr Lange¹ drove me there in a little carriage, along a road which was anything but good, through a solitary region, a distance of somewhat above twenty miles from Milwaukee. It was on a Sunday morning, a beautiful sunshiny morning.

There remain still of the little Swedish colony of Pine Lake about half a dozen families, who live as farmers in the neighborhood. It is lake scenery, and as lovely and romantic as any may be imagined – regular Swedish lake scenery; and one can understand how those first Swedish emigrants were enchanted, so that, without first examining the



Fredrika Bremer in the 1840s.

quality of the soil, they determined to found here a New Sweden, and to build a New Upsala! I spent the forenoon in visiting the various Swedish families. Nearly all live in log-houses, and seem to be in somewhat low circumstances. The most prosperous seemed to be that of the smith; he, I fancy, had been a smith in Sweden, and had built himself a pretty frame house in the forest; he was a really good fellow, and had a nice young Norwegian for his wife: also a Mr. Bergman,² who had been a gentleman in Sweden, but who was here a clever, hard-working peasant farmer; had some acres of good land, which he cultivated ably, and was getting on well. He was of a remarkably cheerful, good-tempered, and vigorous Swedish temperament; he had fine cattle, which he himself attended to, and a good harvest of maize, which now stood cut in the field to dry in the sun. He had enlarged his log house by a little frame

house which he had built up to it; and in the log house he had the very prettiest, kindest, most charming young Swedish wife,³ with cheeks as fresh as red roses, such as one seldom sees in America, and that spite of her having a four-weeks' old little boy, her first child, and having, with the assistance only of her young sister, to do all the work of the house herself. It was a joyous and happy home, a good Swedish home, in the midst of an American wilderness. And the dinner which I had there was, with all its simplicity, exquisitely good, better than many a one which I have eaten in the great and magnificent hotels of America. We were ten Swedes at dinner; most of the number young men, one of whom was betrothed to the handsome young sister of the mistress of the house. Good milk, excellent bread and butter, the most savory waterfowl and delicious tarts, cordial hospitality, cheerfulness, and good feeling, crowning the board; and, besides all the rest, that beautiful Swedish language spoken by every one – these altogether made that meal a regular festival to me.

Our young and handsome hostess attended to the table, sometimes went out into the kitchen – the adjoining room – to look after the cooking, or to attend to her little baby in the cradle, which cried aloud for its dinner, then came back again to us, and still the roses bloomed freshly on her cheeks, and still the kind smile was on her lips, spite of an anxious look in those clear blue eyes. Both sisters were blonde, with round countenances, blue eyes, light hair, fair complexions, regular white teeth, lovely and slender figures – some true Swedes, especially the young wife, a lovely specimen of the young Swedish woman.

In the afternoon she took me by a little path through the wood, down to the wonderfully beautiful Pine Lake, on the banks of which, but deeper still in the woods, her home was situated, and near to which the other Swedish houses also stood. On our way I asked her about her life, and thus came to hear, but without the least complaint on her part, of its

many difficulties. The difficulty of obtaining the help of servants, male and female, is one of the inconveniences and difficulties which the colonists of the West have to encounter. They must either pay for labor at an enormously high rate – and often it is not to be had on any terms – or they must do without it; and if their own powers of labor fail, either through sickness or any other misfortune, then is want the inevitable consequence. There is need of much affection and firm reliance for any one, under such circumstances, to venture on settling down here; but these both lived in the heart of the young Swede, and her eyes sparkled as she spoke of her husband, his kind, good heart, and his vigor both of mind and body. While we were standing beside that quiet lake, garlanded by thick branching trees and underwood, splendid with the coloring of autumn, we heard the husband's voice as he drove the oxen down to water, and soon we saw their huge horns pushing a way through the thick foliage. Our cheerful, well-bred host was now a brisk ox-driver.

Next visit

After this we betook ourselves to the oldest house of the colony on Pine Lake, where lived Mrs. Bergvall's mother, the Widow Petterson,⁴ and who expected us to coffee; and thither we drove, Mr. Lange and I, in our little open carriage, the other Swedish families driving there also, but with oxen. A young Swede, who had married a fat, elderly American widow, was of the company. I saw them going on through the wood, she sitting with her parasol on the carriage, while her young husband drove the oxen. One of Mrs. Petterson's sons, a young man of about twenty, rode before us as a guide through the labyrinths of the wood. Thus we arrived at a log house, resembling one of the peasant cottages around Årsta, standing upon a green hill, commanding the most beautiful view over the lake, which was here seen in nearly its whole extent.

Mrs. Petterson, a large woman, who in her youth must have been

handsome, came out to receive me, bent double and supported on a crutch-stick, but her open countenance beaming with kindness. She is not yet fifty, but is aged and broken down before her time by severe labor and trouble. I saw in her a true type of the Swedish woman of the middle class, with that overflowing heart which finds vent in tears, in kind looks and words, and who does not measure by any niggard rule either what the hand gives or the tongue speaks; a regularly magnificent, warm-hearted gossip, who loves to entertain her friends with good cheer as much as she loves her life. She regaled us with the most delicious coffee, and flavored that warm beverage with warm, kind looks, and words.

Her husband began here as a farmer, but neither he nor his wife were accustomed to hard work; their land was poor (with the exception of Bergvall's farm, all the land around Pine Lake appears to be of a poor quality), they could not get help, and they were without the conveniences of life; they had a large family, which kept increasing; they endured incredible hardships. Mrs. Petterson, while suckling her children, was compelled to do the most laborious work; bent double with rheumatism, she was often obliged to wash for the whole family on her knees. Her husband was at last obliged to give up farming; he then took to shoemaking, and at this trade succeeded in making a livelihood for himself and his family. He had now been dead a few years, and his widow was preparing to leave the little house and garden, which she could no longer look after, and remove to her son-in-law, Bergvall's. She felt herself worn out, old, and finished before her time, as she said; but still did not regret having come to America, because, as regarded her children and their future, she saw a new world opened to them, richer and happier than that which the mother country could have offered them, and she would have been glad to have purchased this future for them at the sacrifice of her own life; she would be well contented to go

down to the grave, even before her time, and there to have done with her crutch. Their children, four sons and four daughters – the two youngest born here, and still children – were all of them agreeable, and some of them remarkably handsome, in particular the two youngest boys – Knut and Sten. Sten rowed me in a little boat along the shores of the charming lake; he was a beautiful, slender youth of seventeen; and as he sat there in his white shirt-sleeves, with his blue silk waistcoat, with his clear, dark-blue eyes, and a pure, good expression in that lovely, fresh, youthful countenance, he was the perfect idea of a shepherd in some beautiful idyll. The sisters, when we were alone, praised Knut and Sten as sincerely kind and good lads, who would do anything for their sisters and their home.

The site of New Upsala

We rowed along the wooded lake-shores, which, brilliant in their autumnal coloring, were reflected in the mirror-like waters. And here, upon a lofty promontory covered with splendid masses of wood, was New Upsala to stand – such was the intention of Unonius and his friends when they first came to this wild region, and were enchanted with its beauty. Ah! that wild district will not maintain Upsala's sons. I saw the desolate houses where he, Unonius, and von Schneidau⁵ struggled in vain to live.

But the place itself was delightful and lovely – characterized by a Swedish beauty, for dark pines towered up among the trees, and the wood grew down to the very edge of the lake, as is the case in our Scandinavian lakes, where the Neck sits in the moonlight, and plays upon the harp, and sings beneath the overarching verdure. The sun set; but even here, again, all wore a Northern aspect; it was cold, and without that splendid glow of coloring which is so general in American sunsets.

An evening party

Returning to the log house, we spent



*A cabin by the Pine Lake shore.
(From *Swedes in Wisconsin* by Frederick Hale [2002].)*

the evening – altogether one-and-twenty Swedes – in games, songs, and dancing, exactly as if in Sweden. I had, during the whole time of my journey to the West, been conning over in my mind a speech which I would make to my countrymen in the West; I thought how I would bear to them a salutation from their mother country, and exhort them to create a new Sweden in that new land! I thought that I would remind them of all that the Old Country had of great and beautiful, in memory, in thought, in manners and customs; I wished to awaken in their souls the inspiration of a New Scandinavia. I had often myself been deeply affected by the thoughts and the words which I intended to make use of. But now, when I was at the very place where I longed to be, and thought about my speech, I could not make it. Nor did I make it at all. I felt myself happy in being with my countrymen, happy to find them so agreeable and so Swedish still in the midst of a foreign land. But I felt more disposed for merriment than solemnity. I therefore, instead of making my speech, read to the company that little story by Hans Christian Andersen called “The Pine-tree,” and then incited my countrymen to sing Swedish songs. Neither were those beautiful Swedish voices lost here in the New World, and I was both affected and im-

pressed with a deep solemnity when the men, led by Bergvall, sang, with their fresh, clear voices,

“Up, Swedes! for king and fatherland,” and after that many other old national songs. Swedish hospitality, cheerfulness, and song live here as vigorously as ever they did in the Old Country.

The old lady, Petterson, had got ready a capital entertainment; incomparably excellent coffee, and tea especially; good venison, fruit, tarts, and many good things, all as nicely and as delicately set out as if on a prince's table. The young sons of the house waited upon us. At home, in Sweden, it would have been the daughters. All were cordial and joyous. When the meal was over we had again songs, and after that dancing. Mrs. Petterson joined in every song with a strong and clear, but somewhat shrill voice, which she said was “so not by art, but by nature, since the beginning of the world!” The good old lady would have joined us too, in the dances and the polkas, if she had not been prevented by her rheumatic lameness. I asked the respectable smith to be my partner, and we two led the *Nigar Polka*, which carried along with it young and old, and electrified all, so that the young gentlemen sprang up aloft, and the fat American lady tumbled down upon a bench overpowered by

laughter; we danced, finally, round the house.

After that we went in the beautiful evening down to the shore of the lake, and the star-song of Tegnér was sung beneath the bright, starry heavens. Somewhat later, when we were about to separate, I asked Mrs. Petterson to sing a Swedish evening hymn, and we all joined in as she sang,

“Now all the earth repositeth.”

We then parted with cordial shaking of hands and mutual good wishes, and all and each returned to their homes in the star-bright night.

Staying the night

I was to remain at Mrs. Petterson's, but not without some uneasiness on my part as to the prospect of rest; for, however sumptuous had been the entertainment of the evening, yet still the state of the house testified of the greatest lack of the common conveniences of life; and I had to sleep in the sister's bed with Mrs. Petterson, and six children and grandchildren lay in the adjoining room, which was the kitchen. Among these was young Mrs. Bergvall, with her little baby and her little stepson; for, when she was about to return home with Herr Lange, his horses became frightened by the pitch darkness of the night and would not go on, and she herself was becoming frightened too, would not venture with her little children. Bergvall, therefore, set off alone through the forest, and I heard his wife calling after him: “Dear Bergvall, mind and milk the white cow well again tonight.” (N.B.—It is the men in this country who milk the cows, as well as attend to all kinds of out-of-door business.) He replied to her with a cheerful “Yes.” And Mrs. Bergvall and her mother prayed me to excuse there being so many of them in the house that night, etc. — me, the stranger, and who was the cause of this throng! It was I who ought to have asked for excuse; and I would rather have slept outside the house than not have appeared satisfied and pleased with every thing within it. And when Mrs. Petterson had lain



Mrs. Pettersson, Charlotta Magdalena Berg (1803-187?). (From Swedes in Wisconsin, by Frederick Hale [2002].)

down, she said, “Ah, Miss Bremer, how much more people can bear than can be believed possible!” I sighed, and said, “Yes, indeed!” gave up the search for an extinguisher, which could not be found, put out the candle, therefore, with a piece of paper, and crept into my portion of the bed, where, though my sleep was nothing to speak of, I yet rested comfortably. I was glad the next morning to feel well, and to rise with the sun, which, however, shone somewhat dimly through the mist above the beautiful lake. It was a cool, moist morning; but these warmhearted people, the warm and good coffee, and the hospitable entertainment, warmed both soul and body.

Leaving Pine Lake

It was with heartfelt emotion and gratitude that I, after breakfast, took leave of my Swedish friends. Mrs. Petterson would have given me the only valuable which she now possessed — a great, big gold ring; but I could not consent to it. How richly had she gifted me already! We parted, not without tears. That amiable young mother, her cheeks blooming like wild roses, accompanied me through the wood, walking beside the carriage silently and kindly, and silently we parted with a cordial pressure of the hand and a glance. That lovely young Swede was the most beautiful flower of that American wilderness. She will beautify and ennoble it.

Heartfelt kindness and hospitality, seriousness and mirth in pure family life — these characteristics of Swedish life, where it is good — should be transplanted into the Western wilderness by the Swedish colonists, as they are in this instance. That day among the Swedes by Pine Lake; that splendid old lady; those handsome, warmhearted men; those lovely, modest, and kind young women; that affectionate domestic life; that rich hospitality in poor cottagers — all are to me a pledge of it. The Swedes must continue to be Swedes, even in the New World; and their national life and temperament, their dances and games, their star-songs and hymns, must give to the western land a new element of life and beauty. They must continue to be such a people in this country that earnestness and mirth may prosper among them, and that they may be pious and joyful at the same time, as well on Sundays as on all other days. And they must learn from the American people that regularity and perseverance, that systematizing in life, in which they are yet deficient. A new Scandinavia shall one day bloom in the valley of the Mississippi in the great assembly of peoples there, with men and women, games, and songs, and dances, with days as gay and as innocent as this day at Pine Lake!

Advice from Pine Lake

During this day I put some questions to all the Swedes whom I met regarding the circumstances and the prospects of the Swedes in this new country, as compared with those of the old, and their answers were very nearly similar, and might be comprised in the following:

“If we were to work as hard in Sweden as we do here, we should be as well off there, and often better.

“None who are not accustomed to hard, agricultural labor ought to become farmers in this country.

“No one who is in any other way well off in his native land ought to come hither, unless, having a large family, he may do so on account of his children; because children have

a better prospect here for their future than at home. They are admitted into schools for nothing; receive good education, and easily have an opportunity of maintaining themselves.

“But the old, who are not accustomed to hard labor, and the absence of all conveniences of life, can not long resist the effects of the climate, sickness, and other hardships.

“Young unmarried people may come hither advantageously, if they will begin by taking service with others. As servants in American families they will be well-fed and clothed, and have good wages, so that they may soon lay by a good deal. For young and healthy people it is not difficult to get on well here; but they must be prepared to work really hard, and in the beginning to suffer from the climate and from the diseases prevalent in this country.

“The Norwegians get on better in a general way than the Swedes, because they apply themselves more to work and housewifery, and think less of amusement than we do. They also emigrate in larger companies, and thus can help one another in their work and settling down.”

The same evening that I spent at Mrs. Petterson's, I saw a peasant from Norrland, who had come with his son to look at her little farm, having some thought of purchasing it. He had lately come hither from Sweden, but merely, as he said, to look about him. He was, however, so well pleased with what he saw, that he was going back to fetch his wife, his children, and his movables, and they return here to settle. The man was one of the most beautiful specimens of the Swedish peasant, tall, strong-limbed, with fine, regular features, large, dark blue eyes, his hair parted above his forehead, and falling straight down both sides of his face – a strong, honest, good, and noble countenance, such as it does one good to look upon. The son was quite young, but promised to resemble his father in manly beauty. It grieved me to think that such men should leave Sweden. Yet the new Sweden will be all the better for them.

With that ascending September sun, Mr. Lange and I advanced along the winding paths of the wood till we reached the great high road, where we were to meet the diligence by which I was to proceed to Madison, while Mr. Lange returned to Milwaukee. Many incomparably lovely lakes, with romantic shores, are scattered through this district, and human habitations are springing up along them daily. I heard the names of some of these lakes – Silver Lake, Nobbmaddin Lake, as well as Lake Naschota, a most beautiful lake, on the borders of which I awaited the diligence. Here stood a beautiful newly-built country house, where the grounds were beginning to be laid out. Openings had been made here and there in the thick wild forest, to give fine views of that romantic lake.

The diligence came. It was full of gentlemen; but they made room. I squeezed myself in among the strangers, and, supported by both hands upon my umbrella, as by a stick, I was shaken, or rather hurled, unmercifully hither and thither upon the new-born roads of Wisconsin, which are no roads at all, but a succession of hills, and holes, and water-pools, in which first one wheel sank and then the other, while the opposite one stood high up in the air. Sometimes the carriage came to a sudden stand-still, half overturned in a hole, and it was some time before it could be dragged out again, only to be thrown into the same position on the other side. To me that mode of traveling seemed really incredible, nor could I comprehend how, at that rate, we should ever get along at all. Sometimes we drove for a considerable distance in the water, so deep that I expected to see the whole equipage either swim or sink altogether. And when we reached dry land, it was only to take the most extraordinary leaps over stocks and stones. They comforted me by telling me that the diligence was not in the habit of being upset very often! And, to my astonishment, I really did arrive at Watertown without being overturned, but was not able to proceed without a night's rest.

Endnotes:

- 1) Oscar Lange, a business man, born in Sweden in 1812, and residing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Married to Catharine, born in Ireland around 1822. (U.S. Federal Census 1850, Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Milwaukee Ward 3.)
- 2) Probably identical with George Edvard Bergvall, born 8 April 1806 in Göteborg Domkyrkoparish, as no suitable Bergman has been found in SPANY. Mr. Bergvall (#672 in SPANY) was a customs official, and after been involved in a scrutiny of his work, he left Sweden in 1842, and settled in Pine Lake. After having been widowed in 1846 he married again. He and his family are listed in the 1850 U.S. Federal Census under the name of Bargwell. (U.S. Federal Census 1850, Wisconsin, Waukesha County, Merton).
- 3) She was Ebba Maria Eleonora Pettersson, (#749 in SPANY) and was born 10 Sep. 1828 in Mölltorp (Vägö.). She came in 1843 to Pine Lake with her mother and siblings. After being widowed in 1846, she soon remarried to Geoge Edvard Bergvall. According to the Census the Bergwalls had a daughter Agnes age 4, and a son Canute (Knut) aged 2 in 1850.
- 4) The Widow Pettersson was born Charlotta Magdalena Berg, 16 June 1803 in Söderhamn (Häls.) (#744 in SPANY). She was married to Knut Hallström, a Swedish civil servant with the postal services, who had fled Sweden in 1842 after being suspected of falsifying his accounts, and altered his name to Bengt Pettersson. In SPANY he is recorded as being a shoemaker in Wisconsin, and died in Pine Lake in 1845. Widow Pettersson died between 1870 and 1880. She was two years younger than Fredrika, who still calls her “Old lady Pettersson.”
- 5) Polycarpus von Schneidau, (# 689 in SPANY, born 29 Feb. 1812 in Stockholm, immigrated in 1842 with his wife, who was a Jewess, and not proper for an officer's wife. They settled in Pine Lake, but moved in 1844 to Chicago, where he became a successful daguerrotypist. He died there in 1859.

SPANY = *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820–1850*, by Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén (1995).

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