

9-1-2014

Miss Bremer goes to Chicago

Fredrika Bremer

Mary Howitt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bremer, Fredrika and Howitt, Mary (2014) "Miss Bremer goes to Chicago," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 34 : No. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol34/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Miss Bremer goes to Chicago

Famous Swedish writer travels in America 1849–1851. Part 2.

BY FREDRIKA BREMER

TRANSLATED BY MARY HOWITT 1853

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

Chicago, Illinois, Sept. 15th, 1850. Here, upon the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, sits your sister, my little Agatha,¹ not, however, upon the sandy shore, but in a pretty villa, built in the Italian style, with Corinthian pillars, surrounded by beautiful trees and flowers.

At the hotel at Buffalo I was again tormented by some new acquaintance with the old, tiresome questions, "How do you like America?" "How do you like the States?" "Does Buffalo look according to your expectations?" To which latter question I replied that I had not expected anything from Buffalo; but yet, that I must say it struck me as being one of the least excellent cities which I had seen in America. Business! business! appeared to me to be the principal life and character there. But the truth is that I did not see much of Buffalo.

Toward evening I went on board *The Ocean*, a magnificent three-decked steamboat, which conveyed me across Lake Erie, frequently a very stormy and dangerous lake; its billows, however, now resembled naiads sporting in the sunshine.

For me, however, the sail across Lake Erie was like a sunbright festival, in that magnificent steamer where even a piano was heard in the crowded saloon, and where a polite and most agreeable captain took charge of me in the kindest manner.

At four o'clock in the afternoon – that is to say, of the day after we went on board – we reached Detroit, a city

first founded by the French upon that narrow strait between the lakes Erie and St. Clair, which separates Michigan from Canada. The shores, as seen from the vessel, appeared to be laid out in small farms consisting of regular allotments, surrounded by plantations. The land seemed to me low but fertile, undulating hill and valley. Detroit is, like Buffalo, a city where business life preponderates, yet still it looked to me pleasanter and more friendly than Buffalo. The people of Detroit were, for the rest, pleased with their city and their way of life there, pleased with themselves, and with each other. And this seems to me to be the case in most of the places that I have been to here in the West.

The following evening we were at Ann Arbor, a pretty little rural city. Here also I received visitors, and was examined as usual. In Ann Arbor, also, the people were much pleased with themselves, their city, its situation, and way of life. And with its neat houses and gardens upon the green hills and slopes the little city looked, indeed, like a peaceful retreat from the unquiet of the world.

We remained overnight at Ann Arbor. The following morning we set off by railroad and travelled directly across the state of Michigan. Through the whole distance I saw small farms, with their well-built houses, surrounded by well-cultivated land; fields of wheat and maize, and orchards full of apple and peach trees. In the wilder districts the fields were brilliant with some beautiful kind of violet and blue flowers, which the rapidity of our journey prevented me from examining more closely, and with tall sunflowers, the heads of

which were as large as young trees. It was splendid and beautiful. Michigan is one of the youngest states of the Union, but has a rich soil, particularly calculated for the growth of wheat, and is greatly on the increase. The legislation is of the most liberal description, and it has abolished capital punishment in its penal code.

Nevertheless, I heard of crime having been committed in this state which deserved death, or at least imprisonment for life, if any crime does deserve it. A young man of a respectable family in Detroit, during a hunt, had shot clandestinely and repeatedly at another young man, his close friend, merely to rob him of his pocket-book. He had been condemned for an attempt to murder, which he acknowledged, only to twenty years imprisonment. And in prison he was visited by young ladies, who went to teach him French and to play on the guitar! One of these traveled with me on the railroad. She spoke of the young prisoner's "agreeable demeanor!" There is a leniency toward crime and the criminal which is disgusting, and which proves laxity of moral feeling.

The country, through the whole extent, was lowland, and monotonous. Here and there wound along a lovely little wooded stream. Here and there in the woods were small frame houses, and beside one and another of them wooden sheds, upon which a board was fastened, whereon might be read in white letters, half a yard high, the word "Grocery." The cultivated districts were in all cases divided regularly, scattered over with farmhouses resembling those of our better class of peasant farmers. The

settlers in the West purchase allotments of from eighty to one hundred and sixty or two hundred acres, seldom less and seldom more. The land costs, in the first instance, what is called "government price," one dollar and a quarter per acre; and will, if well cultivated, produce abundant harvests within a few years. The farmers here work hard, live frugally but well, and bring up strong, able families. The children, however, seldom follow the occupation of their fathers'. They are sent to schools, and after that, endeavor to raise themselves by political or public life. These small farms are the nurseries from which the Northwest States obtain their best officials and teachers, both male and female. A vigorous, pious, laborious race grows up here.

Across Lake Michigan

In company with an agreeable gentleman, Mr. H., and his agreeable sister-in-law, I went on board the steamer which crosses Lake Michi-

gan. The sun had now sunk; but the evening sky glowed with the brightest crimson above the sea-like lake. We departed amid its splendor and in the light of the new moon. The water was calm as a mirror.

On the morning of the 13th of September, I saw the sun shine over Chicago. I expected to have been met at Chicago by some friends who were to take me to their house. But none came; and on inquiring, I learned that they were not now there. Nor was this to be wondered at, as I was two months after the appointed time. I now, therefore, found myself quite alone in that great unknown West. And two little misadventures occurring just now with my luggage made it still less agreeable. But precisely at the moment when I stood quite alone on the deck – for my kind new acquaintance had left the steamer somewhat earlier – my gladness returned to me, and I felt that I was not alone; I felt vigorous, both body and mind. The sun was there too; and

such a heartfelt rejoicing filled my whole being, in its Lord and in my Father, and the Father of all, that I esteemed myself fortunate that I could shut myself up in a little solitary room at a hotel in the city, and thus be still more alone with my joy.

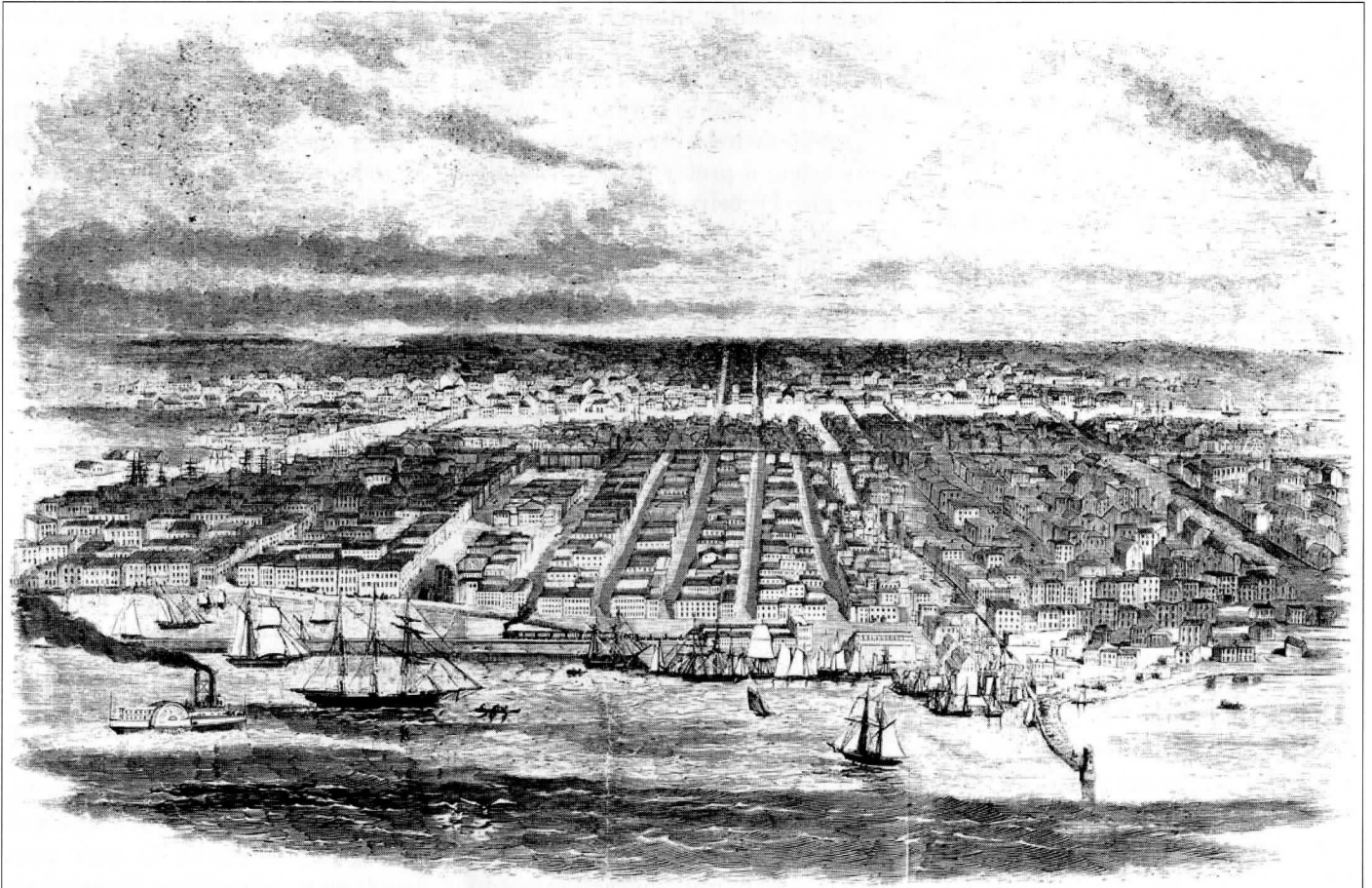
But my solitude was not of long continuance. Handsome, kind people gathered round me, offered me house, and home, and friendship, and every good thing, and all in Chicago became sunshine to me.

In the evening I found myself in that pretty villa, where I am now writing to you, and in the beautiful night a serenade was given in the moonlit gardens, in which was heard the familiar

Einsam bin ich nicht allein [Alone I am, but not lonely].

It was a salutation from the Germans of the city.

September 17th
Prairies! A sight which I shall never forget.



Chicago in 1860. Picture from Harper's Weekly Magazine (Library of Congress).

Chicago is situated on the edge of the prairie land.

The whole state of Illinois is one vast rolling prairie (that is to say, a plain of low, wave-like hills); but the prairie proper does not commence until about eighteen miles from the city. My new friends wished me to pass a day of prairie life. We drove out early in the morning, three families in four carriages. Our pioneer, a dark, handsome hunter, drove first with his dogs, and shot, when we halted by the way, now and then, a prairie hen (grouse) on the wing. The day was glorious; the sky of the brightest blue, the sun of the purest gold, and the air full of vitality, but calm; and there, in that brilliant light, stretched itself far, far out into the infinite, as far as the eye could discern, an ocean-like extent, the waves of which were sunflowers, asters, and gentians. The plain was splendid with them, especially with the sunflowers, which were frequently four yards high, and stood far above the head of our tallest gentleman.

We ate our dinner in a little wood, which lay like a green shrub upon that treeless, flowery plain. It was an elevation, and from this point the prairie stretched onward its softly waving extent to the horizon. Here and there, amid this vast stretch, arose small log houses, which resembled little birds' nests floating upon the ocean. Here and there, also, were people making hay; it looked like some child's attempt, like child's play. The sun-bright soil remained here still in its primeval greatness and magnificence, unchecked by human hands, covered with its flowers, protected and watched alone by the eye of the sun. And the bright sunflowers nodded and beckoned in the wind, as if inviting millions of beings to the festival set out on the rich table of the earth. To me it was a festival of light. It was a really great and glorious sight; to my feeling less common and grander even than Niagara itself.

I wandered about in the wood and gathered flowers. The asters grew above my head. Nearly all the flowers which now cover the prairies are of

the class *Syngenesia*, and of these the *Solidago* and *Helianthus* predominate. The prairies are covered each different month with a different class of flowers; in spring white, then blue, then purple, and now mostly of a golden yellow.

In the course of the day we visited one of the log houses on the plain. A nice old woman was at home. The men were out getting in the hay. The house was one year old, and tolerably open to the weather, but clean and orderly within, as are houses generally in which live American women. I asked the good woman how the solitude of this great prairie agreed with her. She was tired of it, "it was so monotonous," she said. Yes, yes, there is a difference between seeing this sight of heaven and earth for one day and for a whole year! Nevertheless, I would try it for a year.

We did not see a cloud during the whole of this day, nor yet perceive a breath of air; yet still the atmosphere was as fresh as it was delicious. The Indian summer will soon begin. The whole of that little prairie festival was cloudless, excepting that the hunter's gun went off and shot one of our horses in the ear, and that a carriage broke down; but it was near the end of the journey and was taken all in good part, and thus was of no consequence.

Chicago, September 27th

I have heard a great deal about the Indians from Mr. and Mrs. K., in whose extremely agreeable family I have now my home. Mr. K. is the government agent in all transactions with the Indian tribes in these Northwestern States, and he and his family were among the earliest settlers in the wilderness there. Mrs. K., who writes with facility and extremely well, has preserved in manuscript many incidents in the lives of the first colonists, and of their contests with the Indians, and among these many which occurred in her own family. The reading of these narratives is one of the greatest pleasures of the evenings; some are interesting in a high degree; some are full of cruel and horrible scenes, others also

touchingly beautiful, and others, again, very comic.

The wooing of my noble and gentlemanly host by the Indian chief Fourlegs for his daughter, and the arrival of the fat Miss Fourlegs on her buffalo hides in the city, where she met with a refusal, belong to the comic portion of the chronicle, and very much amused me. For the rest, the gentle and refined Mr. K., like many others who have lived much among the Indians, has a real attachment to them, and seems to have an eye rather for the virtues than the failings which are peculiar to this remarkable people. The K.'s resided long in Minnesota, and only within the last few years at Chicago (Illinois), where they have a handsome house with a large garden.

Chicago is one of the most miserable and ugly cities which I have yet seen in America, and is very little deserving of its name, "Queen of the Lake;" for, sitting there on the shore of the lake in wretched dishabille, she resembles rather a huckstress than a queen. Certainly, the city seems for the most part to consist of shops. One sees scarcely any pretty country houses, with their gardens, either within or without the city – which is so generally the case in American towns – and in the streets the houses are principally of wood, the streets formed with wood, or, if without, broad and sandy. And it seems as if, on all hands, people came here merely to trade, to make money, and not to live. Nevertheless, I have, here in Chicago, become acquainted with some of the most agreeable and delightful people that I ever met with anywhere; good people, handsome and intellectual; people to live with, people to talk with, people to like and to grow fond of, both men and women; people who do not ask the stranger a hundred questions, but who give him an opportunity of seeing and learning in the most agreeable manner which he can desire; rare people! And besides that, people who are not horribly pleased with themselves and their world, and their city, and their country, as is so often the case in small towns, but who see deficiencies

and can speak of them properly, and can bear to hear others speak of them also.

Today and last evening also, a hot wind has been blowing here, which I imagine must be like the Italian sirocco. One becomes quite enervated by it; and the air of Chicago is a cloud of dust.

September 23rd

But in the evening, when the sun descends, and the wind subsides, I go to some higher part of the city, to see the sun set over the prairie land, for it is very beautiful; and, beholding this magnificent spectacle, melancholy thoughts arise. I see in this sun-bright western land thousands of shops and thousands of traders, but no Temple of the Sun, and only few worshipers of the sun and of eternal beauty. Were the Peruvians of a nobler intellectual culture than this people? Had they a loftier turn of mind? Were they the children of the light in a higher degree than the present race who colonize the western land of the New World?

September 24th

I must now tell you of some agreeable Swedes who reside here. They are Captain Schneidau and his wife, and Mr. Unonius, now the minister of the Swedish congregation of this district, and his wife. They were among the earliest Swedish immigrants who established themselves on the banks of the beautiful lake, Pine Lake,² in Wisconsin, and where they hoped to lead an Arcadian, pastoral life. The country was beautiful, but the land for the most part was sterile.

These Swedish gentry, who thought of becoming here the cultivators and colonizers of the wilderness, had miscalculated their fitness and their powers of labor. Besides this, they had taken with them the Swedish inclination for hospitality and a merry life, without sufficiently considering how long it could last. Each family built for itself a necessary abode, and then invited their neighbors to a feast. They had Christmas festivities and also Midsummer

dances. But the first year's harvest fell short. The poorly tilled soil could not produce rich harvests. Then succeeded a severe winter, with snow and tempests, and the ill-built houses afforded but inadequate shelter; on this followed sickness, misfortunes, want of labor, want of money, want of all kinds. It is almost incredible what an amount of suffering some of these colonists must have gone through. Nearly all were unsuccessful as farmers; some of them, however, supported themselves and their families by taking to handicraft trades, and as shoemakers or tailors earned those wages which they would have been unable to earn by agriculture. To their honor it must be told that they, amid severe want, labored earnestly and endured a great deal with patient courage without complaining, and that they successfully raised themselves again by their labor. Neither were they left without aid from the people of the country when their condition became known.

In time a complete change was wrought in their circumstances. They removed from that solitary farm in the forest to Chicago. Schneidau obtained adequate surgical aid; recovered, and is at this moment the most skillful daguerreotypist, probably, in the whole state, and, as such, has made considerable gains. He is just now returned from New York, where he has taken a large and excellent daguerreotype of Jenny Lind. He is universally liked here. His lively, pretty wife³ now relates, laughing and crying at the same time, the occurrences of their life in the wilderness in a kind of medley of Swedish and English, which is charming. Unonius and his wife removed hither also, but in better circumstances than the former.

Unonius is just now at New York; he is gone to see Mademoiselle Lind, and obtain from her money for the completion of the Lutheran church at Chicago. I spent an evening with his wife⁴. That gay, high-spirited girl, of whom I heard when she was married at Upsala to accompany her husband to the New World, had gone

through severe trials of sickness, want, and sorrow. She had laid four children to rest in foreign soil. She had one boy remaining. She was still pretty, still young, but her cheerfulness – that was gone; and her fresh, courageous spirit was changed into quiet patience. She had now a small, new-built house, in a more healthy situation than where they had formerly lived, and very near to the little Lutheran church. The church is very ornamental, but as yet unfinished internally. Here I saw somewhat above thirty children, Swedish and Norwegian, assembled to hear a lecture – a little company of kindly-looking, fair-complexioned, blue-eyed children! They were for the most part children of persons in low circumstances, who lived about the neighborhood on small farms. They learn in the school to read and write, as well in English as in their mother tongue. There are very few Swedes resident here. At Milwaukee, and in that part of Wisconsin, there are a great many.

I heard a good deal from Mr. Schneidau and his wife respecting Eric Jansen [Erik Jansson⁵], and the circumstances which occasioned his death, but shall defer speaking of them till we meet. The man seems to have been of an enigmatical character, half a deceiver and half deceived (either by himself or his demon).

There are a great number of Germans in Chicago, especially among the tradespeople and handcraftsmen. The city is only twenty years old, and it has increased in that time to a population of twenty-five thousand souls. A genuine "baby" of the Great West! but, as I have already said, somewhat unkempt as yet. There is, however, here a street, or, a row of houses or small villas along the shore of the lake, standing on elevated ground, which has in its situation a character of high life, and which will possess it in all respects some day, for there are already people here from different parts of the globe who will constitute the sound kernel of a healthy aristocracy.

Chicago bears on its arms the name of "the City in the Garden;" and when the prairie land around it becomes garden there will be reason for its poetical appellation.

I have seen here, also, light and lofty schoolrooms, and have heard the scholars in them, under the direction of an excellent master, sing quartettes in such a manner as affected me to tears. And the children, how eager, how glad to learn they were! Hurra! The West builds light schoolrooms where the young may learn joyfully, and sing correctly and sweetly! The West must progress nobly. The building of the Temple of the Sun has already commenced.

My friends here deplored the chaotic state, and the want of integrity which prevails in political affairs, and which may be principally attributed to the vast immigration of the rudest class of the European population, and the facility with which every civil right is obtained in the state. A year's residence in the state gives the immigrant the right of a citizen, and he has a vote in the election of the governors both of the city and the state. Unprincipled political agitators avail themselves of the ignorance of immigrants, and inveigle them by fine speeches to vote for the candidate whom they laud, and who sometimes betrays them. The better and more noble-minded men of the state are unable to compete with these schemers, and therefore do not offer themselves; hence it most frequently happens that they are not the best men who govern the state. Bold and ambitious fortune hunters most easily get into office; and once in office, they endeavor to maintain their place by every kind of scheme and trick, as well as by flattering the masses of the people to preserve their popularity. The ignorant people of Europe, who believe that kings and great lords are the cause of *all* the evils in the world, vote for that man who speaks loudest against the powerful, and who declares himself to be a true friend of the people.

I also heard it lamented that the Scandinavian immigrants not often come hither with the belief that the

state church and religion are one and the same thing, and when they have left behind them the former, they will have nothing to do with the latter. Long compulsion of mind has destroyed, to that degree, their powers of mind; and they come into the West very frequently, in the first instance, as rejectors of all church communion and every higher law. And this is natural enough for people not accustomed to think greatly, but it is a moment of transition which can not last very long in any sound mind, and in a hemisphere where the glance is so clear and alive to every thing which contributes to the higher life of man or of society.

Illinois is a youthful state, with a million inhabitants, but is able, with her rich soil, to support at least ten millions. The climate, however, is not favorable to immigrants from Europe, who during the first few years suffer from fever and other climatic diseases.

Farewell, ye charming people in that ugly city! Receive my thanks, warm hearts of Chicago!

P.S. – Jenny Lind is in New York, and has been received with American furor – the maddest of all madness. The sale by auction of the tickets for her first concert is said to



Jenny Lind in 1850. Daugerrottype by Polycarpus von Schneidau.

have made forty thousand dollars. She has presented the whole of her share of profit from that first concert to benevolent institutions of New York. Three hundred ladies are said to besiege her daily, and thousands of people of all classes follow her steps. Hundreds of letters are sent to her each day. Ah! poor girl! Hercules himself would not be equal to that.

Endnotes:

- 1) Fredrika's sister Agatha Bremer was born 24 April 1808 at Årsta, Östergötland (Södm.), where she died 30 Sep. 1851, just days before sister Fredrika again came home.
- 2) For more on Pine Lake see SAG 2014:1, p. 1.
- 3) She was Carolina Elisabeth Jacobson, born 27 Apr. 1810 in Stockholm, daughter of the Jewish merchant Abraham Moses Jacobsson and his wife Regina von Halle. She married in Hamburg to the officer Polycarpus von Schneidau, as it was not proper in Sweden for an officer to marry a Jewish girl. Mrs. von Schneidau passed away in Chicago in 1855, before 31 Aug, when an obituary was published in a Norwegian-American newspaper, *Emigranten* (SPANY #690).
- 4) She was Charlotta Margareta Öhrströmer, b. 1821, died 1903 in Hacksta, Sweden. (SPANY #641).
- 5) This Erik Jansson was the famous prophet who immigrated with his followers in 1846 to Henry County, in western Illinois, where they founded Bishop Hill.

- 0-0-0-0-0-

This article consists of excerpts from the book "The homes of the New World; Impressions of America" by Fredrika Bremer, published in English in 1853.

The book can be downloaded from the library of the University of Wisconsin, see [link on page 30](#).



Årsta, Fredrika's home.