

Fredrika Bremer's *New Scandinavia*

MINNESOTA IN 1850

PERHAPS NO REPORTER of the Minnesota scene in the territorial era has been quoted as frequently as Fredrika Bremer. The celebrated Swedish novelist was discerning enough to realize that the future North Star State was "just the country for Northern emigrants," an observation that caused her to exclaim, "What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become!"

Miss Bremer's St. Paul visit in October, 1850, represented the farthest west of a long-contemplated American tour. She had such a journey strongly in mind in October, 1846, when she wrote from Sweden to a friend in the United States: "It has long been a wish of my heart to visit America and to see with my own eyes that new, rising world." She went on to tell her correspondent—probably Andrew J. Downing of Newburgh on the Hudson, who was her first host when she crossed the Atlantic three years later—that "There is no foreign land in the world that I wish to know out of North America and that especially for the peculiar turn of mind of its people and its manag[e]ment of life in public as in private life, in the state, the home, in society and in Nature." Idealist that she was, Miss Bremer looked forward to seeing in America "the sun of intellectual life—clearing up, making its way to earthly reality, and transforming chaos into harmony and beauty." Her letter, in a fine, feminine hand, is now among the treasured possessions of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Aside from Miss Bremer's oft-quoted remark, few Minnesotans know what she had to say about their state. Rare indeed are those who have read her sentimental narrative of travel in America a century ago. On the centennial anniversary of her Minnesota visit, it seems appropriate to present the following extracts from her letters about the upper Mississippi. They are reprinted from the first English edition of her *Homes of the New World*, which in a translation by Mary Howitt was published in London in 1853.¹ Ed.

¹The complete account of Miss Bremer's Minnesota visit appears in *Homes of the New World*, 2:260–321. Most of the material here omitted relates to exploration and to the Indians of the Minnesota country.

ON THE MISSISSIPPI, *Oct. 15th* [1850].

TOWARDS SUNSET on the most lovely and glorious evening, we came out of the narrow little winding Five-*[Fever]*river, and entered the grand Mississippi, which flowed broad and clear as a mirror between hills which extended into the distance. . . .

I stood on the upper deck with the captain, Mr. [Orrin] Smith and the representative from Minnesota, Mr. [Henry H.] Sibley, 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 colour, 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 muddies its waters. Menomonie [*Nominee*] 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. Afterwards, far below and towards 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 Missouri: then it is quite different; then it is all over with the beauty and innocence of the Mississippi.

But now, now it was beautiful, and the whole of that evening on the Mississippi was to me like an enchantment. . . .

MISSISSIPPI, *Oct. 16th* [1850].

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 for ever changing and for ever 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, ploughed up a little field in which he has now just reaped his maize. The air is grey 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, by which Father Marquette entered the Mississippi. How well I understand his feelings on the discovery of the great river! I feel myself here two hundred years later, almost as happy as he was, because I too am alone, and am on a journey of discovery, although of another kind. . . .

The farther 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. . . .

. . . 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, worshippers 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 labour, pray, love and enjoy. An ennobled humanity will live upon these heights. . . .

17th — Sunshiny, but cold. We have Indian territory through the whole of our course on the right; it is the territory of Minnesota, and we now see Indians encamped on the banks in larger or smaller numbers. The men, standing or walking, wrapped in their red or yellow-grey blankets; the women, busied at the fires either within or without the tents, or carrying their children on their backs in the yellow blankets in which they themselves are wrapped. All are bare-headed, with their black locks hanging down, like horses' tails, or sometimes plaited. A great number of children, boys especially, leap about shouting on the shores. We proceeded very slowly, and stuck fast on the shallows continually, as we wound among the islands. . . .

The Indians we see here are of the Sioux or Dakotah 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.

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 favourite 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 colours 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 any one looks at her. . . . I offered them cakes and fruit, which I had with me; the wife laughed and almost snatched them from me. They were well pleased to receive them, but expressed no thanks. The young Sioux warriors look like some kind of great cock. They strut about now and then, and look proud, and then they squat themselves down on their hams, like apes, and chatter away as volubly as any two old gossips ever did. . . . There is an immense difference between their eyes and those of the negroes. The former are a cold day, the latter a warm night.

Last night we passed through Lake Pepin 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, one among which is particularly prominent, and is called Wenonas cliff [*Maiden Rock*], from a young Indian girl who here sang her death-song and then threw herself into the waters below, preferring death to marriage with a young man whom she did not love. . . .

At another place, during the day, we saw a large, pale red stone standing on a plain near the river [*Red Rock*]. I was told that this

stone and all large stones of this kind are regarded as sacred by the Indians, who swear by them, and around which they hold their councils, believing that they are the abiding-place of a divinity.

In the afternoon we shall reach St. Paul's, 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 me 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. 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, so that one can either enter the gallery this way or enjoy the scenery of the shore from the cabin itself; it has also another door which opens into the saloon. 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's 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 "state-room" 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 meerschaumpipes now and then — and in particular, there are two half-grown girls who are considerably in my way sometimes. . . .

ST. PAUL'S, MINNESOTA, *Oct. 25th* [1850].

At about three miles from St. Paul's 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 [*Dr. Thomas S. Williamson*] had built for himself among the savages, and here he had established a school for the children. Upon a hill behind the village, a number of stages were placed in a half circle, upon which rested coffins of bark. Small white flags distinguished those among the departed who has been most recently brought there. The village, which is called Kaposia, and is one of the established Indian villages, looked animated from its women, children, and dogs.² We sped rapidly past it, for the Mississippi was here as clear and deep as our own river Götha, and the next moment taking an abrupt turn to the left, St. Paul's 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. . . .

Scarcely had we touched the shore when the governor of Minnesota, Mr. Alexander Ramsay [*Ramsey*], and his pretty young wife, came on board and invited me to take up my quarters at their house.³ And there I am now; happy with these kind people, and with them I make excursions into the neighbourhood. 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, whilst the great Mississippi affords the means of their conveyance to the commercial markets of the world, flowing, as it does,

² This was Chief Little Crow's village, near the present site of South St. Paul.

³ Miss Bremer arrived in St. Paul on October 17 and left on October 25. For comments relating to her visit from Governor Ramsey's diary, see Marion Ramsey Furness, "Governor Ramsey and Frontier Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 28:317 (December, 1947). The writer is the governor's daughter, the "beautiful little infant" whose room Miss Bremer occupied while in St. Paul. Mrs. Furness records also some of her own impressions of the temperamental visitor.

through the whole of Central America down to New Orleans. Hence it is that several traders here have already acquired considerable wealth, whilst others are coming hither more and more, and they are building houses as fast as they can.

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 workpeople, and ladies and gentlemen, are all alike admitted. In the meantime, Mr. Ramsay is building himself a handsome, spacious house, upon a hill, a little out of the city, with beautiful trees around it, and commanding a grand view over the river. If I were to live on the Mississippi I would live here. It is a hilly region, and on all hands extend beautiful and varying landscapes; and all abounds with such youthful and fresh life. . . .

Governor Ramsay drove me yesterday to the Falls of St. Anthony. They are some miles from St. Paul's. These falls close the Mississippi to steam-boats 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. They fall abruptly over a stratum of a tufa rock, which they sometimes break and wash down in great masses. The country around is neither grand, nor particularly picturesque; yet the river here is very broad, and probably from that cause the fall and the hills appear more inconsiderable. The shore is bordered by a rich luxuriance of trees and shrubs, springing up wildly from among pieces of rock and the craggy tufa-walls with their ruin-like forms, which however have nothing grand about them. River, falls, country, views, everything here has more breadth than grandeur. . . .

We drank tea on a considerable island in the Mississippi, above the falls, at a beautiful home [*John W. North's*], where I saw comforts and cultivation, where I heard music, saw books and pictures,—such life, in short, as might be met with on the banks of the Hudson; and how charming it was to me! Here, too, I found friends in its inhabitants, even as I had there. The dwelling had not been long on the island; and the island in its autumnal attire looked like a little paradise, although still in its half-wild state.

As to describing how we travelled about, how we walked over the river on broken trunks of trees which were jammed together by the stream in chaotic masses, how we climbed and clambered up and down, among, over and upon stocks and stones and precipices and sheer de-

scents; all this I shall not attempt to describe, because it is indescribable. 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. Uh!

The day was cold and chilly, and for that reason the excursion was more fatiguing to me than pleasant.

I have had several rambles in the immediate neighbourhood, sometimes alone and sometimes in company, with the agreeable Governor Ramsay, or with a kind clergyman of this place [*E. D. Neill*]. In this way I have visited several small farmers, most of them French, who have come hither from Canada. They all praise the excellence of the soil, and its fertility; they were capital people to talk with, seemed to be in a prosperous condition, had many children, but that neatness and general comfort which distinguishes the homes of the Anglo-Americans, I did not find in their dwellings, but rather the contrary. 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 mould, 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 most lovely little lakes lie among the hills, like clear mirrors, in romantic peace and beauty. It is a perfectly Arcadian landscape; but there yet lack the shepherds and shepherdesses. 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 the 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. It is said that the Government is intending shortly to purchase the whole of this country; and that the Indian tribes are willing to treat, and to withdraw themselves to the other side of the Missouri river, to the stepp[e]land of Nebraska and the Rocky Mountains.

October 26th [1850].—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. . . .

Fort Snelling lies on the western bank of the Mississippi, where the St. Peter[^{'s}] 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 and extensive valley through which it runs. Farther up

it flows through a highland district, and amid magnificent scenery inland five hundred miles westward. "There is no doubt," writes a young American in his travels through Minnesota, "but that these banks of the St. Peter will some time become the residence of the aristocracy of the country."

This must be a far-sighted glance one would imagine; but things advance rapidly in this country.

We visited, on our way to Fort Snelling, a waterfall, called the Little [*Minnehaha*] Falls. It is small, but so infinitely beautiful that it deserves its own picture, song, and saga. The whitest of foam, the blackest of crags, the most graceful, and at the same time wild and gentle fall! Small things may become great through their perfection. . . .

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 those states lying lower on the Mississippi. The frosts seldom commence before the middle of September. . . .

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 vallies 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. . . .

Neither would the joys of Valhalla be wanting in the New Vineland of the vine-crowned islands of the Mississippi, and the great divine hog Schrimmer has nowhere such multitudes of descendants as in the New World. But the Scandinavians must not rest satisfied with the heathenish life of festivity. They must seek after nobler enjoyments.

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 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. I have been told that the Norwegian pastor

in Luther's-dale, Mr. [C. L.] Clausen, is intending to remove hither with a number of Norwegians, in order to establish a settlement. Good. There are here, already, a considerable number both of Norwegians and Danes. I have become acquainted with a Danish merchant [*Dr. Charles W. W. Borup*], resident here, who has made a considerable fortune in a few years in the fur trade with the Indians, and who has built himself a large and handsome country-house at some little distance from the city. His wife, who is the daughter of an Indian woman by a white man, has the dark Indian eye, and features not unlike those of the Feather-cloud woman, and in other respects, is as much like a gentlewoman as any agreeable white lady. I promised this kind Dane, who retains the perfect Danish characteristics in the midst of Americans, that I would, on my return, in passing through Copenhagen, pay a visit to his old mother and convey to her his greeting. . . .

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 wage. This is an excellent country for young servants.

I shall, to-morrow, 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 sea-port towns to Cuba, where I intend to winter.

I am not quite satisfied about leaving this part of the country. I wish to see more of the Indians and their way of life, and feel something like a hungry person who is obliged to leave a meal which he has just commenced. I wish to see more of the country and the aborigines, but do not exactly see how and in what manner. Neither roads nor means of conveyance are to be met with here, as in the more cultivated States. Besides which I must not any longer remain in this family, which has so hospitably provided me a chamber, by sending the only child of the family, a beautiful little infant, and its nurse into a cold room. The child must return into its warm chamber, for the nights are getting cold. I long for the South, and dread these cold nights on the Mississippi; and it is too far, and the roads are too difficult for me to go to another family, residing at some distance, who have kindly invited me to their house. . . .

But the West is brilliant, and all the saints—St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Charles, a settlement still higher up, St. Anthony, who is beginning to build a city—who have taken up their abode on the northern Mississippi, and who now are lit up by the fires of the Indians, will give a new dawn to the wilderness and a new light to life.



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