

In Fredrika Bremer's Footsteps

TRANSLATED BY ELSA R. NORDIN

THE CENTENNIAL of *Fredrika Bremer's American pilgrimage* was the occasion in 1950 for a revival of interest, both in the United States and in her homeland, in the Swedish novelist's travels. Among those whose interest was translated into action was Tora Nordström-Bonnier, a representative of the great Stockholm publishing firm of Albert Bonnier. On a journey to the United States, she followed Miss Bremer's route of 1850, visiting the Atlantic coast states from New England to Georgia, pushing westward across the Gulf states into Louisiana, observing life along the Mississippi as far north as Wisconsin and Minnesota, and completing her grand tour by penetrating the states of Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. All along her route, like *Fredrika Bremer* a century earlier, Mrs. Bonnier made a point of meeting and talking with people in all walks of life, of visiting institutions, public and private, of inspecting public buildings, of watching industrial plants in operation, of observing cultural activity, of seeing how Americans, rich and poor, live in town and country.

All this, Mrs. Bonnier did with Miss Bremer's *Homes of the New World*—printed letters from the *Western World*—in hand. Her astute comparison of the America Miss Bremer saw and the America of 1950 is incorporated in a little book published by Bonniers under the title *Resa kring en Resa: I Fredrika Bremers Fotspar* ("Journey on a Journey: *In Fredrika Bremer's Footsteps*"). Highlighting the contrast between 1850 and 1950 are the illustrations, which include scores of modern photographs, numerous lithographs of the 1850's, and many of Miss Bremer's original sketches of places and people.

Mrs. Bonnier's report of her Minnesota visit and of her reaction to some of its institutions, here presented in translation, appears with the permission of her publisher. Ed.

[From Tora Nordström-Bonnier, *Resa kring en Resa: I Fredrika Bremers Fotspar*, 181-190 (Stockholm, 1950).]

Beyond St. Paul and the Falls of St. Anthony, the Mississippi River is not navigable. Where in 1850 there was an Indian village, now Min-

neapolis lies, larger, richer, and uglier than its twin city, St. Paul. In the latter is the state Capitol, with all the political offices. The present governor, Luther Youngdahl, is of Swedish extraction. The University of Minnesota, with 30,000 students, lies between the two cities.

In Fredrika's time, Minnesota was merely a territory, ruled by a governor appointed in Washington. The granddaughters of the governor, whose name was Ramsay [*sic*], still live in St. Paul. Since Fredrika lived in their grandfather's house while in St. Paul, I tried to contact them, but they were in Europe. On the river boat that brought her North she met one of St. Paul's prominent citizens, an important businessman and one who well understood the Indians, a Mr. [Henry H.] Sibley. His house (the first stone house in St. Paul [*sic*]) with its green shutters, still stands. It has been honored by being restored and made into a tearoom by the exclusive patriotic society, the D.A.R., or the Daughters of the American Revolution. At the Minnesota Historical Society, you can peruse one of the state's treasures, Governor Ramsay's diary, in which he kept accounts and other records. These small, worn notebooks contain fairly accurate reports of his trips with Miss Bremer, recorded side by side with information about affairs of government and relations with the troublesome Indians. The society's quarterly publication for June, 1939, contained an interesting article about Fredrika's visit to St. Paul, and a jubilee article was being prepared for publication this year.¹

Throughout her travels, Fredrika encountered the country's deposed native inhabitants in various ways. In Georgia, she was disturbed when a picnic to which she was invited was held in one of their sacred cemeteries. In Washington, she met a prominent contemporary ethnographer, Mr. [Henry R.] Schoolcraft, and admired his collection. In Chicago, she was regaled with firsthand stories about massacres; and during her entire trip on the Mississippi she saw Indians living along its shores.

In St. Paul, she found it distasteful to enter the Indians' tents, though she painted their portraits in gala costumes and, with the aid of an interpreter, she tried to understand some of their mental traits. Whether her feeling was due to circumstances or to some deeper instinct is uncertain, but she did not like these people. She thought the warriors were like strutting roosters, and she was repelled by their treatment of women. Her coolness toward the Indians contrasted sharply with her sentimental attitude toward the Negroes. Her friend Longfellow had not yet written his poem "Hiawatha," in which he described Indian virtues in delightful western metrical verse.

A stranger who now goes to the Twin Cities must see for himself

¹ See above, 20:129-139, 31:148-157.

Minnehaha, the falls which Longfellow eulogized. Close by, in the same park, is a statue of Gunnar Wennerberg, and round about him the Minnesota Swedes sing traditional songs at their midsummer festival. Everyone knows that there are many Swedes in Minnesota. As Fredrika predicted when she saw the landscape, they settled here, but in larger numbers than she ever could have imagined. Her visit is commemorated for posterity, since one of the Minneapolis public schools is named the Bremer School. Its architectural style suggests that it was built in the 1930's. In one of her letters Fredrika wrote that she would like to return to Minnesota a century hence. If this were now possible, she could enjoy her own school, where the girls don't give way to the boys a single inch.

How do the Indians live now? No campfires such as Fredrika saw from her room at the Ramsays are now visible from my hotel window. Minnesota's Indian reservations are fifty [*Swedish*] miles north in the woods near the Canadian border. But I have seen Indians in many other areas, for example in New Mexico. Fredrika doubtless read a newspaper for March, 1850, which I saw in Charleston. In it the editor made sport of an Indian chief from Florida who announced that he was about to lead his tribe to Mexico because here, in his native land, the usurpers were trying to push his people into the desert to die of thirst. Isn't that exactly what has happened? Only the Indians' thirst has been quenched with whisky.

A professor of ethnography at the University of Minnesota who knew the Indians well gave me all the information I requested regarding them. The invaders' attitude toward the natives varied from shameless and cruel treatment to stupid and remorseful sentimentality. Both attitudes have been equally harmful to the Indians. . . .

Politically speaking, Minnesota has made greater strides toward racial equality than most American states. Governor Youngdahl's inter-racial committee is flooding the state with pamphlets on race relations, emphasizing the treatment that members of minority groups should receive in a decent community. The program does not consist merely of empty words, but is supported by law. Those who act like fools toward Negroes, Indians, Mexicans, or Japanese, insulting and mistreating them, violate state laws and can be punished. Some people regard Youngdahl and his followers with disdain, calling them fanatics and small-town Lutherans. But I found the literature on the inter-racial program most inspiring, and I was particularly impressed when I learned that the pastor of a small country church discussed the subject from the pulpit.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).