Across the Unknown Waters to Wisconsin: The Migration Narratives of Four Women Settlers

"When I [sic] looked into the water and see the little waves that receded back from the boat it seemed that every one was bearing me away from all my friends forever."
— Orpha Bushnell Ranney, letter of September 1847

"Sick still. Took nothing the last two days except a little brandy and Laudnum. . . . A fair wind, a great swell on the sea. Ship rolling tremendously."
— Isabella McKinnon, diary entry of April 15, 1852

"All of us, including the sailors thought that this was the end, for we could feel the ship sinking lower and lower. . . . The yelling, the noise, and the panic was terrible."
— Emilie Schramm Crusius, memoir of 1854 trans-Atlantic voyage

"What inexpressible joy and relief did I experience when I set my feet on terra firma."
— Racheline S. Wood, letter of December 1, 1838

The words of ordinary women in a period of upheaval chronicle homesickness, seasickness, shipwreck, and joy at setting their feet again on firm ground. Compelling glimpses into individual women's lives in the mid-1800s, these words are more compelling for their rarity—few Wisconsin women's writings from the settlement period are accessible which describe the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean and through the Great Lakes to Wisconsin. Held in archives or remaining with family members, the sometimes brief or fragmentary diaries,

*Writings have been transcribed as found with no editorial corrections.*
letters, and memoirs of common women have often been viewed as historically insignificant and remain unpublished. The memorable writings of four women of this period, describing travel by water to Wisconsin, humanize the broad sweep of Wisconsin history by focusing on personal accounts of voyages. What does one write when the immediate future is unknown, when the only certainty is what one has left behind? These women express in four unique, feminine voices not only daily experiences while sailing or steaming toward Wisconsin but feelings and attitudes about their lives during this transition.

Who were these women? Isabella Mckinnon, quiet and uncomplaining, crossed the Atlantic in a sailing ship in 1852 and wrote each day in a diary ending with her arrival in Otego, Wisconsin. In 1854, adventurous, seemingly ever-hungry Emilie Schramm and her mother traveled by steamship from Germany bound for Sauk City. Racheline S. Wood, self-assured but lonely, chronicled in letters her difficult travels of 1838, through the Erie Canal and through the Great Lakes by steamship settling in Plattville. Orpha Bushnell Ranney, although the least-educated, expressed clearly in letters of 1847 her loneliness for loved ones left behind, as she and her husband undertook Great Lakes travel to reach Sun Prairie.

Across the Atlantic

To merely state that the population of Wisconsin grew from 30,945 to 775,881 between 1840 and 1860 is to belie the drama as well as the tedium of the actual journeys of settlers (Smith 466). Immigrants who had crossed the Atlantic by sailing ship or steamer during this period made up approximately half the population of Wisconsin in 1860 (Current 78). The diary of Isabella Mckinnon, written aboard a sailing ship, and the memoir of Emilie Schramm Crusius, describing a steamship voyage, are first-person descriptions of trans-Atlantic immigration to Wisconsin.

Isabella Mckinnon

Nineteen-year-old Isabella Mckinnon, after leaving her village of Findhorn, Scotland, boarded the sailing ship “Sarah Mary” on April 9, 1852, bound for America. In her small four-by-six inch leather journal, Isabella recorded in pencil the notable happenings of each day until June 4, 1852, when she reached her destination—Otego, Wisconsin. Written in sentence fragments most often without subjects, her diary never reveals whether she made the trip alone or with her family. Isabella’s account is notable for her succinctness and calm in describing a voyage that included days of discomfort and dangerous storms as well as days of calmed seas when the ship made no progress.

The average length of travel to America by sail was six weeks, depending on whether the wind was fair and whether the captain and crew were skilled. Isabella’s trip took eight weeks, and she probably traveled as a steerage passenger rather than a higher-paying cabin passenger. The steerage passenger lived in the long ‘tween decks—the space between the main deck open to the weather and the lower deck below it. The rows of bunks built there, usually in two tiers, were temporary for the east to west journey. For the trip from America back east, the ‘tween decks often carried lumber—a cargo commonly considered more valuable than the steerage passenger (Greenhill 16–17).

Isabella’s record did not dwell on the living conditions but briefly described activity on board. Her first entry after boarding the “Sarah Mary” was typical as she matter-of-factly stated “Captain Brown delivered a lec-
1852

Feb 3. Left Sandhurj for America

Wednesday morning October 11 arrived at Montreal 11 o'clock A.M.

after a pleasant passage

thought little of the capital

of the Highlands except a

few public buildings

Saw the St. Lawrence Hoarse fair tale of sun

through the Cal-endram canal

6 o'clock P.M. enjoyed the sunny day

much had very agreeable

company landed at Fort Amherst

visited the fort. Proceeded to

London visited Lodhtieber

Sat at the foot of Ben Nevis

the inhabitants res one and

the house key. One in the other

april 2 arrived at Glasgow 6 P.M.

Spent a very happy day with

kind friends and acquaintance

I thought a great deal of Shaw

came visit all the public buildings.
ture on board to the passengers from John 6." They remained in the Bay of Greenoch for one day for inspections:

Passengers examined by the Doctor and Government Inspector. Eight of the passengers rejected. The sugar condemned by the Government Inspector. Superior [sugar] returned. Left the Bay of Greenoch at 5:00 o’clock P.M. Wind unfavorable. Towed out to Sea by a steam tug. One of the passengers a woman, got drunk and disorderly and was put in irons for sometime.

On April 11, she recorded the first of many Sundays, the observance of Sabbath being important enough to her always to merit comment. Of one Sunday, she wrote: "Public worship on the quarter deck. A good attendance, very impressive on the mighty deep." This Sabbath she called unprofitable because the ship was becalmed. To pass the day, the Captain distributed tracts to the passengers, and Isabella spent the greater part of the day reading. The following day the rules of the ship were read.

April 12: A committee of the passengers formed to keep order and observe cleanliness, one of the rules, to rise at 7:00 A.M. To be in bed at 10:00 P.M. to be rigidly enforced. A fine day, wind favorable. Took the last look of Scotland hills at 10:00 o’clock A.M. A little sick, soon got better, employed the day in sewing, crocheting and reading. An alarm of fire, nothing serious. A fair wind, all sails set. Going at the rate of 8 knots an hour. A dance, to the music of the Bagpipes, Fiddle and Tambourine, got up amongst the passengers. A beautiful night. On deck all the evening.

And so Isabella was on her way, and her diary revealed that she did not complain and she did not dramatize happenings. Unused to the motion of the ship, many passengers on sailing ships were seasick as the ship rolled and pitched and tossed. Isabella was seasick for several days and wrote only "A strong fair wind. Sick all day," and the next day "Still continuing a fair wind. Very sick." On the sixth day out, she was still seasick and mentioned the remedy she was trying: "Sick still. Took nothing the last two days except a little brandy and Laudnum." Later that day she reported:

Went on the quarter deck at 12:00 o’clock. Was much refreshed with the fresh air. A fair wind, a great swell on the sea. Ship going at the rate of 8 1/2 knots an hour. Ship rolling tremendously. Every one more afraid than another. Passed a wreck in the morning.

That seemed to be the end of her seasickness, and she turned to brief descriptions of daily activities. The weather and sailing conditions always merited comment, and during an April storm she did not display her usual calm:

April 20: A very fine day, calm. The Atlantic like a loch. The wind rose at 3:00 p.m. A strong breeze with rain at 7:00 P.M. Ship going a good rate. On deck at 9:00 o’clock, looking rather stormy. Stayed on the deck an hour with very interesting company.

April 21: Very stormy all day. High wind with showers of rain and hail, continued very severe all night. Thought we would never see morning. Water rushing into the steerage.

April 22: Storm somewhat abated, wind contrary.

After this initial storm, even severe weather did not cause her to make worried remarks about their safety. The days seemed to drag on and Isabella’s writing dwindled to two or three phrases each day. Noteworthy were two days when fights broke out and the men involved were put in irons for an hour. Passing ships also broke the monotony.
On May 7, about four weeks out, she experienced an event worth recording in more detail:

Seven ships in sight, fishing for cod. Passed close by one. Some one with the life boat went and brought some cod, part of which Captain Brown distributed to the passengers gratis. The deck very much resembled a fish market. Every one crowding to get their share. Wind somewhat favorable. 16 miles from Sable Island, 400 from New York.

The passengers’ enthusiasm probably reflects the poor quality or at least the sameness of the food provided on board. The food provided for cabin passengers on many sailing ships was adequate to mediocre, and for steerage passengers some ships provided only meager rations with the passengers being expected to cook their own (Greenhill 17).

After several days of misty weather, Long Island, “a very welcome sight,” came into view on May 17, and Isabella’s daily writing increased. Her first views of America were described with a good-humored tone:

The tug came along side at 12:00 o’clock. Coming up the River was the finest sight I ever saw. The scenery exceeded everything I have seen. Off Staten Island at 2:00 o’clock. A very pretty place. The doctor came aboard. The passengers all on deck and examined in less than five minutes. The Doctor said he had never examined a more healthy good looking set of passengers. Arrived opposite New York at 3:30 o’clock P.M. The first thing I got belonging to America was a New Testament, which a gentleman came aboard and kindly presented to the passengers. A very amusing sight to see friends meeting friends.

True to form, Isabella did not say who met her. She noted that New York was a very fine city and then detailed her methods of travel across the country. She traveled up the Hudson River and took the Erie Railway for 500 miles to Dunkirk, New York. She took lodging there in a house kept by “very fine people” but was “very much disappointed with the look of the country.”

The steamer “Niagara” took her up Lake Erie to Cleveland, a city which she found
impressive: “A very fine place and beautiful buildings. Far surpassing any I have yet seen in America. Streets so wide and trees growing on each side.” Continuing to Detroit by the steamer “Detroit,” Isabella arrived on a Sunday morning in time to visit a Roman Catholic Church. She appreciated the very large, fine building but not the “very strange ceremonies.” After staying only a few minutes, she found a Methodist Episcopal Church more to her liking: “Very clean, never saw a more respectable looking congregation.”

Continuing on to Chicago by railroad, she found that cholera was spreading in the town. On May 29 she took the “Arctic Steamer” to Milwaukee of which she wrote, “Apparently a fine place.” She took lodging in the Wisconsin House, walked around the town, and visited the Congregational Plymouth Church and an “English Church.”

On June 1, 1852 she left Milwaukee for Otsego, a distance of 80 miles. Traveling half way the first day, she stayed overnight at “a tavern by the way.” Her last three diary entries took her through stormy weather to Otsego:

June 2nd - Passed through Watertown in the forenoon. A very nice little place. Arrived at Lowell a small village and stayed all night. An awful night of thunder and lightning. Never saw anything like it before. The sky all in a blaze for two hours.

June 3rd - Left Lowell early in the morning and were detained in Columbus by a thunder storm. A nice little place. Proceeded to Otsego and were overtaken by another thunder storm and heavy rain. Were obliged to remain all night in the “Prairie House” about 5 miles from Otsego.

June 4th - Arrived all safe at Otsego in good health not without a good deal of fatigue on the 4th of June, 1852.

There, Isabella Mckinnon ended her diary with no mention of whom she might have joined in Otsego or her reasons for this destination. Isabella’s detached written reaction to the trip, although not the difficulty of the ocean passage itself, is in stark contrast to Emilie Schramm Crusius’s descriptive and good-humored memoir of her trans-Atlantic voyage on a steamship.

Emilie Schramm Crusius

In 1854, the unmarried Emilie Schramm and her mother crossed from Neckargartach, Germany, to Philadelphia on the maiden voyage of the screw steamship “City of Philadelphia.” During this mid-1800s period, when sailing ships were being replaced by steamships for emigrant travel, the conditions for passengers did not improve immediately. However, the traveling time was cut from six weeks on a sailing ship to about ten days on a steamer, meaning a shorter time to endure the hardships and the tedious. Cabin passage on some liners became lush, but ship owners remained disinterested in the conditions for steerage passengers until William Inman began in 1850 providing ships on which emigrants in steerage could travel in relative comfort. His liners were built to accommodate emigrants, not to transport timber, mail, or other freight (Armstrong 34–35). Emilie and her mother were fortunate that the “City of Philadelphia” was an Inman steamer, because although they had paid for cabin passage, they were assigned bunks in the steerage section because of the large number of passengers.

From the beginning of her account, Emilie wrote as if the trip were an adventure. At age 28, Emilie took charge of the arrangements, and, by comparison, her mother seemed timid and scolding and always expecting the worst. Beginning with the steamboat trip down the Rhine River to
Rotterdam, Emilie wrote with a great deal of descriptive detail and expressed an appreciation for any kindness shown her and her mother:

On Thursday we boarded the steamer, "Victoria," and traveled down the Rhine, admiring the beautiful scenery, the many romantic ancient castles, and the high bluffs on either shore, covered with rows upon rows of fruitful vineyards. On board we found a rather boisterous group, but we always discovered some nice people with whom we could chat. We were traveling second class, but for some unknown reason the steward allowed us to occupy two beautifully upholstered easy chairs in a cabin with large gold-framed mirrors on the walls and beautiful rugs on the floor. I had never seen such regal splendor.

Emilie tended her seasick mother on the steamer and also recorded that her mother became ill after drinking the water in Rotterdam. Because milk soup was all her mother wanted to eat, Emilie sought out fresh milk and, when she could find it, cooked milk soup for her mother.

On the night before departure for Philadelphia, they waited with other travelers in the Emigrants' Hotel, and that evening a dance kept them awake most of the night: "We both wept to think of such levity and irresponsible behavior on the last night on terra firma. So many were very drunk in spite of having to start on the long perilous journey the next day." In boarding the tender that was to take them to the "City of Philadelphia," they faced trouble with their baggage:
All passengers had to carry their own luggage. We were really in a bad situation. I tried to take some of our belongings to the tender, but there was such a crowd of passengers who pushed and crowded so persistently that it was impossible to make any headway, much less to go back after mother. I was beside myself; called to her and finally she came, hardly able to drag the remaining luggage with her. Just as she set foot on the boat it raised anchor. To this day I can't understand how we two helpless women overcame every obstacle as well as we did!

While her mother was again seasick, Emilie couldn't get enough to eat. Although the soup was too peppery, the smoked meat smelly, and the coffee served with molasses, she enjoyed the excellent potatoes and delicious white bread so unlike what she had eaten in Germany. Emilie soon made friends with Marie Siegel, another young adult traveling with her mother, and the two became friendly with the steward who "showered us with favors whenever possible." Emilie reported: "I really had no complaint, and so, just like pretty blond Marie, I was always in a happy mood. She and I were among the few who weren't seasick, spending most of our time on deck, healthy and gay as the fish."

This carefree passage to America was interrupted when the ship rammed a cliff near Newfoundland. Near midnight a terrific crash was followed by a furious rolling of the ship.

All of us, including the sailors thought that this was the end, for we could feel the ship sinking lower and lower. . . . The yelling, the noise, and the panic was terrible. . . . The men who slept on the level below us tumbled out of their beds and immediately found themselves standing in a foot of water. Trying to save what they could, they grabbed the next best thing and rushed up the stairway.

When they reached us,—but what was that? There the fellow stood, wearing nothing but a long white shirt and a high silk hat! We all screamed with hysterical laughter, but soon again soberly realized our perilous plight. Everyone was terrified; mother prayed fervently and I—-I went to get something to eat. I recollected the story of Robinson Crusoe who was shipwrecked on a deserted island and learned to fend for himself without the help of the barest necessities. Of course, mother scolded me for thinking of food at a time like this when we stood so close to eternity.

By pumping out the engine room, the crew was able to back the ship onto a sandbar. The passengers were ordered to one side of the ship to counter-balance the tilt of the ship which continued to sink. Rockets were sent up, a little cask containing the names of the passengers and the crew thrown into the sea, and the lifeboats lowered. Amid terrific crowding and pushing, Emilie, holding her mother's hand and the zwieback and honey cakes from Germany, stepped down into a lifeboat. They were taken to a nearby island where the men made a big bonfire out of driftwood.

The next few days the crew rowed back to the ship several times and retrieved luggage and food. Their baggage was not recovered, and Emilie theorized that their cases had “probably plunged into the ocean through the great hole in the hull when we struck the rock.” On the third day they heard a startling blast of a cannon from a ship that was to transport them to the city of St. John on the Canadian coast. When their turn came:

We scrambled on to the little steamer, but it didn't leave until ten o'clock that night! Never, as long as I live, will I forget the awful nightmare of that trip. Frenzied, hysterical screams of “Fire! Fire!” suddenly awakened us out of
a deep sleep. Poor mother, wringing her hands and weeping, kept lamenting, “We’ve escaped death by drowning, and now we’ll be burned to death!” the fire at last brought under control and after a seemingly endless night we landed, exhausted, at St. John at 5 a.m.

Those people who were shipwrecked lodged with families in St. John for nearly a month, and Emilie was amused when “a mass was said for all of us poor victims of shipwrecks.” Her proud mother refused offers of financial assistance as well as gifts including used clothing from a Protestant bishop, so Emilie sewed garments for them. She seemed happy in their cozy host home, appreciated the food, attended a church service at which they couldn’t understand the sermon but enjoyed the music, and turned down social invitations because they lacked suitable dresses. However, they continued to be concerned by the high stormy seas and the reports of steamers sinking.

On a stormy October day they departed for Boston, but couldn’t land there:

We were supposed to disembark at Boston, but imagine our surprise when we passed it by, why we weren’t told; but some of the passengers said it would have been impossible to land in Boston Harbor. This is a rough voyage, very stormy, with a dark, forbidding sea, and our boat, a small steamer, rocks and pitches like a cork on the angry waves. Poor mother has lost all hope thinking the good Lord has forsaken us now.

But eventually the strong wind subsided, and they entered Philadelphia harbor on a calm, placid sea.

Emilie and her mother settled with her brother in Sauk City, where Emilie became a school teacher and married Louis Crusius in 1860. While her travel narrative brims with youthful enthusiasm and optimism, her summation of her life written in a second memoir is heavily sad. She lost all but three of the nine children she bore. At age 73 she wrote:

I was blessed with a sunny nature and really would have enjoyed life, had not misfortune after misfortune continually hunted me down. While my children were small I was so happy with them and it was my then care-free outlook which my dear husband so loved in me; but the tragic loss of one dear little one after the other threatened to break me down both mentally and physically... It truly is a miracle I'm still alive; I must be a pretty tough weed. My one wish is just to be near my dear children.

Through the Great Lakes

While Emilie’s travel memoir does not detail her methods of travel to Wisconsin, she may have joined the tens of thousands in this mid-1800s period who crossed the Great Lakes to settle in Wisconsin. Often beginning with a trip down the Erie Canal, approximately half of all trans-America migrants to Wisconsin during this period made part of their journey by steamboat through the Great Lakes. Steamers advertised regular schedules, speedy trips, and luxurious accommodations, but travel by Great Lakes steamer was not without mishaps. Seasickness among passengers was common as were accidents involving piers, ice, rocks, and other vessels. Larger steamers were especially prone to hang up on sandbars and beaches during low water or storms. Fires on board were sometimes deadly: the steamship “Niagara,” taken by Isabella Mckinnon, was destroyed by fire in 1856 at a loss of over 60 lives (Jenson 212). Some passengers described their trips through the Great Lakes as more harrowing than crossing the Atlantic Ocean.
Racheline S. Wood

In 1838, Racheline S. Wood experienced an eventful trip west through the Great Lakes which included the rescue of passengers after their steamboat hung up on a reef of rocks. Her letters of 1837 to 1840 chronicle Racheline’s travels from Vermont to Platteville, Wisconsin, where she settled. Each letter was addressed to her sister Maryann Wood, Enosburgh, Vermont, a place Racheline called home.

Racheline’s letters show a degree of education and lofty language not found in the first two travel accounts. At times she projected the sense that she was above the station of many of her fellow travelers, and in frequent comparisons between the east and other areas through which she traveled, she left no doubt that New England was superior in most respects.

In a letter of December 1, 1838, Racheline described the highlights of her journey through the Erie Canal and Great Lakes and her loneliness. The previous distance that divided her from her sister in Vermont seemed short in comparison: “now hundreds of miles with the broad lakes roll between us.” But although she and her sister were divided in body, Racheline said their spirits might converse through letters, and she began with the story of her journey. After deciding in mid-August 1838 to leave “dear New England for the far west,” she traveled by private conveyance for three days to Troy, New York.

Her spirits fell as they entered New York state: “we rumbled along over those try patience roads gasping at the lofty eminences which rose on either side of us threatening to shut out the light of day.” Having previously mentioned “the sterile fields, the frowning heights, the miserable huts” they passed in their travels, she became more cheerful as they came to an area of “highly luxuriant and fruitful fields” which extended all the way to Troy.

Arriving in Troy, she “spent there about three hours running up and down the city most delightfully, called at multitudes of stores and milliners shops and at 5 o’clock was glad to get on board of a canal boat bound for Buffalo on which I remained a week.” Her summary of Troy was this:

Yet with all the pride and advantages of the Yorkers I think New England has whereof to boast not only in morals but in the tidiness and good taste of their establishments. Their buildings are constructed very different from ours with much less good taste and with a general appearance of slackness.

Racheline’s “brief sketch of our first nights repose” on the Erie Canal boat included a characterization of her fellow travelers as all grades and ages from the “poor to the man of honour, little babes of 3 weeks, squalling young ones of 1-2-3 years.” The sleeping arrangements proved less than satisfactory. Near nine o’clock hammocks were swung to accommodate about half the passengers. In the small room appropriated to the ladies, she selected a place to sleep:

The middle birth in the middle range was fairly laid there and congratulating myself in having found the best birth when crash went the one above me and down it fell. I sprang to evade it, which going down went mine with the one beneath. Such a racket, the ladies room called forth the sympathies of the gentlemen whose room resounded with mirth when ascertaining the cause of disturbance.

They picked up their berths and made beds on the floor, but she reported that she didn’t get a wink of sleep with the “noise of the crew on the deck and the fussing of the rolling of babies upon my feet.” During the day, she wrote, they were privileged
to get out on the tow path and walk a mile or more.

Leaving the canal, Racheline joined the estimated 5,000 travelers who in a single day in 1838 steamed from Buffalo through the Great Lakes for the west (Channing 267). Racheline reduced the steamboat trip through Lake Erie to only a single line: “Thursday I took the steamboat at Buffalo had a pleasant ride to Detroit where we stopped some hours.” After changing boats, the passengers continued the journey through Lake Huron and into Lake Michigan, but Sunday morning their boat ran up on a reef of rocks opposite Beaver Island in the straits of Mackinac: “a punishment it would seem for travelling on the sabbath but I must do so or lose my company.” The passengers were thrown from their berths as the first sign of disaster, and all attempts to free the boat failed. They waited “near 40 long, wearisome, trying hours” hoping for a boat to come and take them to shore which was about two miles away.

On Tuesday with the waters rising, freight was thrown overboard and the 400 passengers were taken to shore in a small boat:

In haste we prepared to leave what had seemed our grave, and although the waves were so high as to hide the small boat from view when within but a few rods of our deserted home I never enjoyed a ride better. What inexpressible joy and relief did I experience when I set my feet on terra firma.

After the boat landed with difficulty still some distance from shore, Racheline was carried ashore on a gentleman’s shoulders and the passengers took refuge in the fort. In a note written in the margin she regretted she did not have space to better describe “the thousands of Indians which I saw at Michaelmack in their bark canoes their tents which were placed along the Lake almost as far as the eye could reach.”

Late in the afternoon enough freight had been thrown overboard so that their ship floated, and it was moored about six miles further out. On Wednesday the passengers were returned to board, and they continued to Chicago having been on the lakes “near a fortnight.” “Carelessness was considered the cause of the disaster; as the boat was at least six miles out of its right course when she struck.” Thus she ended her travel narrative but her marginal writing included a plea for a long and detailed letter from her sister. Her loneliness was clear in this marginal note:

I seem to be clear out of the world. I cannot ever realize how far I am from you and every relative on earth. When musing on what intervenes between me and those dearer than all resides on earth my heart sickens within me. I dash the thought away as poison.

In a final letter from Platteville, Wisconsin, dated March 10, 1840, Racheline urged her sister Mary to come and live with here and take up a teaching position. Racheline had planned a select school for girls, number limited to 20 and pay of $4 a quarter. She would not be taking the post because she was to be married:

About a year since, I became acquainted with a Mr. Bass. . . . A strictly moral person, a member of the total abstinence society and is reputed to be worth . . . some thousands exclusive of all debts. I think it more than probable you will not like him but if I do no matter for your opinion.

After giving Mary traveling advice and asking her to bring a dozen good used silver teaspoons and a pair of sugar tongs, Racheline concluded: “I would like to have you live constantly with me.” No further letters
are available to indicate what Mary thought of these plans and whether she moved to Platteville.

**Orpha Bushnell Ranney**

Also urging her family to move to Wisconsin, Orpha Bushnell Ranney’s letters provided details on farming in Wisconsin as well as a description of her trip west. As a new bride of 21, she traveled with her husband from New York State in September, 1847, settling first near Sun Prairie. In the first of her letters written over a period of 50 years to her sister in Connecticut, Orpha described her trip by canal boat through the Erie Canal and then by steamboat through the Great Lakes.

Of the four women in this article, Orpha appears the least educated. Her writing, with its lack of punctuation and capitalization (except for names), was not unusual for women’s writing of the time. Her letters continued line after line with no sentence breaks and sometimes incorrect grammar and spelling. The spidery script penmanship of the period filled every inch of the paper.

Most letter-writers of this time used a standard 10”x15” sheet of paper which was folded once to provide three writing pages and one blank side. The written-on sides were folded inside the blank side until a 3”x5” clean surface remained for the address. The folds were then sealed with wax. Orpha not only filled the three sides of her paper in the usual fashion but also filled all the margins as well by writing in them sideways. From the tone of her letters, and many others from this period, this practice of using every bit of space spoke not only of the frugality of the writer but the desire and urgency to use every opportunity to communicate with loved-ones left behind.

In her letter of September, 1847, Orpha seemed alternately engaged in the new experiences of the “long and tedious journey” and saddened by leaving family and friends.

It was very pleasant on the canal i see a great many pleasant places and things and those that were interesting but when i looked back and thought of what i was leaving and where i was going it spoil it all when i looked in to the water and see the little waves that reeded back from the boat it seemed that every one was bearing me away from all my friends forever.

Although lacking in education, Orpha’s writing clearly conveyed her feelings of loneliness as well as her amazement and sometimes fear during some of the trip’s happenings. She wrote that she loved to travel and “see so many things which you know are new to me.” Orpha, probably from a lower social stratum than Racheline Wood, did not expect special favors and appreciated any that came her way. Describing the journey from Buffalo by steamboat through the Great Lakes, she wrote:

we took Cabin passage had a room to ourselves which was pleasant than to be obliged to stay with the rest of the passengers all the while if you want to see a table set in style and virtuls cooked in style of all sorts and descriptions you must travel on board a steamboat there is a great deal to be learnt you are waited on in style if you take a Cabin passage you are as big as any of them.

However, on the third day the weather became stormy, and Orpha became seasick as did her husband Edward: “the third the lake was rough enough the white caps rolled the boat rocked and tumbled we staggered about like a pack of drunkards i was as sick as death.” She also feared that the boat would sink in the storm: “every time the boat stirred it seemed as if we should all sink to the bottom she would rock and twist
about and I thought she would all fall to pieces if I wished I was on land.”

The water remained rough for the remainder of the trip, and Orpha reported that the crossing took eight days rather than the general four days when the weather was good. One night the steamer struck a sandbar, and it took the crew most of the night to free it. On a second stormy night the boat was anchored on a sandbar behind an island, perhaps to evade the windy weather. In the process the engine was damaged: “when they were on the sand bar they strained there engine so that they could not keep up against head winds at all when the wind was ahead they had to stop I was afraid the old boiler would burst I was sick all the rest of the way.”

Although her letter did not contain specifics on the route traveled, she wrote “we stopped at Cannada and at Mackinaw” where the passengers had some trout. She was impressed by an Indian camp probably on the north shore passing through the straits of Mackinac: “there was between two and three hundred Indians there boats and wigwams were scattered all along the shore they had on there blankets and their vampum and tassels on there heads they looked curious enough.”

The travel portion of her letter ended with a visit ashore at one of their stops: “I went in and see the glass works how curious and the salt works it does not seem as if man could ever learn so much.” So despite the stormy weather and seasickness, Orpha seemed to retain her sense of amazement at the things she was seeing on the trip.

From later letters and a short memoir, we know that Orpha and Edward Ranney lived the first winter of 1847 in Wisconsin with his brother and that their first child was born in January and died that September. The Ranneys’ story was not one of successful Wisconsin settlers who easily put down roots. The family farmed only a short time in Wisconsin, moved back east to New York and then Connecticut. They returned to a Wisconsin log house and farming in Dane County in 1852. By the time they moved to Dunn County in 1855, first living in a shanty, Orpha had given birth to six children, five living. Edward soon built a house and, within weeks of moving in, Orpha gave birth to her seventh child who lived only minutes. After living for six years “on the prairie,” Edward sold out, invested in timber, and moved the family to Cedar Falls, Dunn County. While her writings indicated that Edward was the decision-maker, Orpha wrote matter-of-factly about all these moves and followed no matter how harsh the conditions.

Edward’s health failed and he died “of consumption” in May 1867. Their ninth child was born three months later. Orpha and the children stayed to farm—raising crops and hogs, cattle, and hens. The family got along pretty well, according to Orpha, and she continued to write her sister from Cedar Falls, Dunn County, Wisconsin, the last letter dated August 28, 1898 (Orpha was 74).

Conclusion

Each of these women wrote a highly personal account of her migration to Wisconsin, and each writing provides both glimpses of what happened on the journey as well as how each woman felt and reacted. These accounts vary from brief and detached to detailed and humorous and are expressed in styles from very educated to bordering on illiterate. Each trip was unique, but the sense of voyaging into the unknown was universal. These narratives make clear that there were no uneventful voyages in route to Wis-
consin. Because of storms, accidents, and shipwreck, each of these four women feared for her safety and her life during her travels. Every voyager bound for Wisconsin may not have experienced such life-threatening events, but all had to cope with unfamiliar and often harsh conditions on board and throughout their travels. While caught up in the rigors of the trip, travelers were also painfully aware of the distance between them and loved ones left behind. For most immigrants there would be no going back.

It is not surprising that these women voiced complaints and fears, described loneliness and bouts with seasickness. It is surprising that their writing and outlook is not more negative. They just as readily wrote with humor and matter-of-fact acceptance and expressed appreciation for kindliness received and amazement at new sights and experiences. Their writings contain a mix of beautiful as well as bleak scenery, unease at unfamiliar types of fellow travelers and pleasure with new companions, strange food relished or found unpalatable, luxurious cabins as well as difficult sleeping accommodations, events that were amusing and fearful events that nearly led to a watery grave. They recorded their travels to Wisconsin with a keen eye, and amazingly their complaints were not in proportion to the conditions and events they endured during their trips.

Although Emilie describes herself and her mother as “we two helpless women,” this characterization clearly does not hold for any of these women. They each accomplished their trips across unknown waters, the Atlantic and the Great Lakes, with a combination of resilience, sturdiness, and courage—qualities that stood them in good stead when they reached Wisconsin.

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