“The history of every life ... is important”: Lydia Olsson, Growing up Swedish American, and Midwestern Girlhood at the Turn of the Century

Rebecca Hopman
Sarah Lawrence College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory_etd

Part of the History of Gender Commons, Social History Commons, United States History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
Hopman, Rebecca, ""The history of every life ... is important": Lydia Olsson, Growing up Swedish American, and Midwestern Girlhood at the Turn of the Century" (2021). Women's History Theses. 53.
https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/womenshistory_etd/53

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Women's History Graduate Program at DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's History Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. For more information, please contact alester@sarahlawrence.edu.
“THE HISTORY OF EVERY LIFE … IS IMPORTANT”:
LYDIA OLSSON, GROWING UP SWEDISH AMERICAN, AND
MIDWESTERN GIRLHOOD AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Rebecca Hopman

May 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Women’s History
Sarah Lawrence College
**Abstract**

Our knowledge of American girls at the turn of the twentieth century is incomplete. Scholarship on Victorian American girlhood most frequently draws evidence from the papers of privileged young white women from native-born Northeastern families. But their lives only tell part of the story. We must expand our scope to truly understand the options and opportunities for girls as they came of age in this period. This thesis explores the life of Lydia Olsson, a Swedish-American girl born to immigrant parents and living in a Midwestern city. She was one of a growing number of young women participating in a quiet revolution to fundamentally alter American women’s rights and opportunities at the turn of the century. Olsson and many of the girls in her network attended college, worked for wages, and delayed marriage or chose to remain single, forging different paths than their mothers and grandmothers before them.

Here, I have reconstructed the lives of Lydia Olsson and her circle of female friends, comparing them to the dominant historical narrative of American womanhood and expanding the notion of what it meant to be a girl living in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. I do so by looking at identity formation in Olsson’s Swedish Lutheran world; Swedish and American norms and ideals of womanhood; friendship and community on a co-ed college campus; and the shift towards companionate marriage and the corresponding rise of unmarried women, with a focus on re-examining the stereotype of the spinster.

Lydia Olsson’s story serves as a crucial window onto a wider community of middle-class women living in Midwestern towns and cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argue that Olsson and girls like her merit our attention, and that women’s historians must consider lives like theirs to fully understand young womanhood at the turn of the century.
Dedication

To Dina, Ella, Lillie, Sarah, Netta, Anna, Mia, Cotta, Anna W., Agnes, Hedvig, Etta, and all of the other girls of Augustana College. And to Anna Lisa. But most especially, to Lydia. We’ll never meet, but you’ve changed my life. This thesis is my way of saying thank you.

Acknowledgements

The summer I first read Lydia Olsson’s diaries still holds a special place in my heart. Jamie Nelson and Sarah Horowitz hired me as a student employee for Augustana Special Collections and asked me to work over the summer. I spent the days processing collections and scanning photographs, then eating lunch as fast as possible so I could use the rest of my break to look through interesting collections. I came across Lydia’s diaries in this manner and could not put them down, typing up the best bits to send to my best friend Helen Reinold. (The first of many friends and colleagues who have been on the receiving end of my boundless enthusiasm for Lydia and her community.) Thank you, Jamie and Sarah, for bringing me into the world of special collections and inadvertently setting off the chain of events that brought me here.

I never imagined a scenario in which I would be stuck at home, unable to access a library or conduct research in person. When the pandemic first hit, I made the difficult decision to cancel a spring research trip to Augustana College. Then, when it became clear that we were in it for the long haul, I had to ask library and archives staff to help me remotely access the many books, articles, photographs, and archival materials that were essential to my work. Harrison Phillis at Augustana Special Collections went above and beyond, scanning documents, sending photos, searching the collections, and answering my many, many emails. Sarah Lawrence Library staff purchased and provided access to the (sometimes obscure) scholarship that informed my research. Denise Carson at Bethany College sent college catalogs and suggested
contacts in the Lindsborg area. Kelly Musher at the Rock Island County Historical Society answered my long list of questions about the Tri Cities in the 1890s. Ron Michael at the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery and James F. Shearouse at the Rock Island Public Library shared images. Thank you all, and thank you also to the many library, museum, and historical society staff who have already helped me in the next phase of my research.

Part of my research methods including contacting Augustana descendent through Ancestry.com. Deanne Morton and Jackie Morton Miller answered my call and gave generously of their time, knowledge, and incredible collection of Aunt Dena’s photographs. Your enthusiasm for my work has been the jolt of energy I needed this spring. I look forward to our coffee date.

I applied to this program in part to invest in my identity as a historian and writer. And while these two years haven’t always been easy, the support of my friends, cohort, professors, and advisor have helped me become more comfortable embracing these roles. Jamie Nelson, Tracy Savard, and Regan Brumagen, thank you for your constant friendship and support. My cohort members inspire me with their incredible scholarship and dedicated activism. Dr. Mary Dillard told me to pursue the project closest to my heart. Dr. Nadeen Thomas let me experiment with assignments and Dr. Priscilla Murolo gave me endless recommendations and expert counsel. Dr. Lyde Cullen Sizer has been unfailingly generous in her support and encouragement. I’m going to miss our Friday morning phone calls.

Enrolling in this program meant quitting my job, managing a complicated two-part move, and readapting to student life. The pandemic necessitated another move and many other adjustments. My parents, Nick and Liz, and brother, Bob, have helped keep me sane during this process. We’ve had a few good laughs too. PJ has kept me on a regular schedule with his demands to be fed in return for endless cuddles. Cats are a historian’s best friends.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication and Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: A Perfect Bird’s-Eye View</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: “I am ever sure these things will be fun to read”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude One: Little Anna on the Prairie</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: From “Swedes in America” to “Swedish Americans”: How Swedish Immigrants and Their American-Born Children Came to Embrace a Dual Identity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude Two: Somewhat of a Problem Child</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: A Bridge between the True Woman and the New Woman: Lydia Olsson’s Female Network and Changing Ideals of Womanhood</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude Three: Christmas Eve</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Best Friends and Boy Friends: Navigating the Social Communities of Augustana College and Theological Seminary</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude Four: Heartache</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: In Pursuit of True Love: Marriage and Singlehood in Lydia Olsson’s Circle of Women</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: After the Diary</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: A Turning Point</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.1 Lydia Olsson</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.2 Lydia Olsson’s diary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.1 Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.2 The second Olsson homestead</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.3 Cast of <em>Frithiof’s Saga</em></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.4 Lydia, Mia, Anna, Hannes, and Olof Olsson</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.5 Swedish Ladies Chorus</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.6 Netta Bartholomew</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.7 Augustana College coeds</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Augustana College class of 1888</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Augustana College class of 1894</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 The Lorelei Quartette</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Augustana girls in gymnastics uniforms</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Augustana College library</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 The Olsson family</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 East Hall</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Dina Dahn and Lydia Olsson</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Cederquist, Bexell; Olsson, and Dahn</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Bexell album inscription</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 The Scientifics</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 <em>Det kristna hoppet</em></td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Dina and J. A. Bexell ............................................................... 130
4.3 “Two Grief-stricken sisters!” .................................................. 135
4.4 Anna Olsson ............................................................................ 141
4.5 Cederquist album inscription ................................................... 147
C.1 Olof Olsson’s funeral procession ............................................ 151
C.2 The Olsson siblings .................................................................. 152
C.3 Anna Olsson’s books ................................................................. 154
C.4 Combination Collar Fastener ...................................................... 156
C.5 Hannes Olsson ........................................................................ 157
C.6 Lydia Olsson ........................................................................... 158
C.7 Lydia, Mia, and Anna Olsson ...................................................... 160
Prologue

A Perfect Bird’s-Eye View

Lydia Olsson breathed in the crisp, chilly air. There was frost on the ground all around her, but she knew spring was just around the corner. She turned to her friend Etta. “Did you hear that the ice finally broke last night?” Some of the boys had gone downtown to watch as the great Mississippi woke from its frozen slumber. They said the river had risen a whole foot during the day and that the ice had made the most awful creaking and echoing sounds. Lydia only wished she had been there to witness it.

“Well, said there are huge slabs of ice piled up all along the tracks, some as thick as two feet,” said Etta. “I don’t know when the trains will be able to get through.”

“What are you two talking about?” asked Anna Magnus, coming up behind them. Clara and Edith followed at a slower pace.

“The ice is cracking up on the river,” said Lydia. “Come on, let’s see what it looks like from the top of the hill.” The group climbed up Zion Hill, careful not to slip on the dead grass. The trees were still bare, but soon they would be covered with buds. Two black squirrels chased each other across the branches overhead.

At the top of the hill, the girls looked west towards the city of Rock Island. “If only we were a bit higher up,” Lydia said, standing on her tiptoes.

“Ahoy, ladies!” called a voice. The girls looked around for the source, then Edith pointed to the roof of the main college building.

“It’s Youngdahl!” she cried, laughing at the figure standing and waving at them from one of the peaks.

“What is he doing up there, the crazy boy?” asked Clara. “He could fall and kill himself.”

“Oh, but I bet he has the best view of the river,” said Lydia, waving back.

Youngdahl beckoned to them. “Come up and see the sights.”

“Is he mad?” exclaimed Etta. “It’s bad enough he’s up there—how does he expect us to join him?” She gestured at them, all wrapped up and wearing their heavy woolen skirts.

“I think it sounds like fun,” said Anna M. with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Yes, let’s go!” Lydia declared, starting back down the hill.

“I have no interest in breaking my neck,” said Clara tartly. “I’ll stay here and watch.”

Edith wasn’t interested in taking such a risk either, but Anna M. and Etta joined Lydia as they entered the building.

“How do you think he got out there?” Anna M. asked, beginning to pant a little as they climbed their third flight of stairs.

“I don’t know,” answered Lydia, “but that boy always finds a way to make trouble.” They reached the landing on the fourth floor. A ladder led up to the base of the new dome. She looked up through the hatch into the bright room above them. “And I’m ready to join him! Anna, would you hold the ladder for me?” She began to climb up the rungs.

“Oh, Lydia, wait,” exclaimed Etta. “What will people think if they see you? What will your father say?”

---

1 This prologue was inspired by the March 13, 1893, entry from Lydia Olsson’s diary and newspaper accounts of the ice breaking on the Mississippi River in March 1893. For detailed references, please see the endnotes. See appendix for a map of the Tri Cities.
“I’ll just take a peek, don’t worry,” said Lydia, already several feet off the floor.
“I think I’ll stay here,” Etta told Anna. “I’m no fan of heights.” Anna M. decided to join
Lydia, Etta holding the ladder in place. When she reached the dome room she saw Lydia leaning
out of one of the windows lining the room, talking to Youngdahl.
“It’s just a hop, skip, and a jump over this fine sturdy board,” he said. “You won’t have a
problem.” Lydia and Anna M. looked at each other. The board didn’t seem very sturdy, and it
would be a long way to fall. Then again, they had already made it this far.
Lydia decided the matter by hiking up her skirts and climbing onto the window ledge.
“I’ll just test it to see if it will hold,” she told Anna M. Youngdahl held onto the other side of the
board to keep it steady. Lydia put one foot down, then the other. Slowly she stood up, gripping
the window frame.
“That’s it,” Youngdahl encouraged. “Now just let go and walk towards me. There’s
nothing to it.” Ever so carefully, Lydia inched out onto the board, still holding onto the frame.
When she could stretch no farther she let go, putting her arms out to either side for balance.
Youngdahl kept up a steady stream of chatter—making trouble was the only thing he excelled at
more—and Lydia steadily made her way across. “Just a little further, now, and I can reach your
hand,” he said.
Suddenly Lydia’s boot slipped and she stumbled. Anna M. cried from the window,
terrified at the thought of her friend falling all that way to the ground. But Lydia caught herself
and knelt down, gripping the piece of wood with both hands. “Maybe I’ll just rest here for a
moment,” she said, trembling.
“A grand idea,” Youngdahl replied, a little bit shaken himself. “I always thought boards
made for excellent seating, and this one is a prime—”
“Oh shut up, will you?” snapped Lydia.
Youngdahl grinned in relief. “Seems like you’re in fine form.” Lydia glared at him, but
started moving again, crawling the rest of the way to where Youngdahl stood. He helped her up,
directing her where to find a stable perch. As he began coaxing Anna M. across the board, Lydia
looked out over the landscape and gasped.
“A more perfect bird’s eye view of the country I have never seen!”
Everything looked different from so high up. She could see clear across the Sylvan
Slough to Arsenal Island and, beyond that, a slice of Davenport. The factories lining the
riverfront belched large clouds of black smoke, producing goods that would be shipped up and
down the river and over the rail lines that converged at Rock Island. Looking west she saw the
buildings of that city crowded together. Closer to Augustana College, the buildings spread out,
their yards dotted with bare-limbed trees. As Lydia turned to look east towards Moline she saw
Anna M. partway across the board. “Oh, Anna, you will not believe the view,” she said.
“I’m beginning to think I would have liked the outlook much better from the safety of the
dome,” Anna M. remarked, wrestling with her skirts as she scooted over the wooden bridge on
her hands and knees. Youngdahl reached out and gripped her elbow, helping her stand next to
Lydia. “Oh!” Anna M. cried, looking out. “Oh, it’s—” She broke off, lost for words.
“I know! Isn’t it spectacular?” Lydia pointed across the college’s grounds. “Look at the
mountains of ice on the railroad tracks.” There were men the size of ants working to clear the
large chunks away. “And over there, look at the bridge.” The river was choked with ice, almost
reaching the bottom of the railroad bridge that spanned the space between Rock Island and the
Arsenal and then on to Davenport. Usually crowded with ferries, steamboats, and small craft, the
wide stretch of the Mississippi looked like the surface of the moon, pocked with holes and
littered with debris. Here and there, the surface shifted, water pushing the ice farther downstream.  

“I expect by tomorrow the river will be flowing freely,” said Youngdahl. “Before you know it, there’ll be hardly any ice left.” *What a shame*, thought Lydia. She looked forward to spring as much as anyone, but this was a sight to see.  

Directly below them, a horse trudged up Seventh Avenue, pulling a wagon filled with barrels. Lydia could just see the stone columns that had been carved to support the portico now being built onto the front of the building. In just a few months Augustana’s grounds would be crowded with Swedes gathered to celebrate the Jubilee. *I’d like to come back up here then and see all the masses of people below.* She remembered Clara and Edith, and turned around to wave at them.  

“You’re mad, Lydia Olsson and Anna Magnus, plain crazy,” cried Clara.  

“Come down before someone sees you,” called Edith. Lydia sighed. She could stay up here all day.  

Once more she turned towards the river and looked out over the countryside. She felt a sudden rush of joy being so high, practically in the clouds. “Now, *this* is freedom,” she said.

* * * *

**Introduction**

“I am ever sure these things will be fun to read”

Lydia Olsson bent over her desk, writing in her diary. It was late, past time to go to sleep, but first she wanted to jot down her thoughts.

It’s fun to keep a journal my way, altho my life is nothing romantic or anything worth keeping regular account of, but I am ever sure these things will be fun to read if I live to be either a solitary old spinster or somebody’s darling. If I marry, (as accidents will happen) I will take my little hubby by the arm, some nice spring day, and roam about in the woods,—or, in winter, sit by the fire and open these childhood treasures of mine and read him my nonsense, and show him my memories… yes, indeed the history of every life, no matter how insignificant, is important.²

She paused to wonder about the future: what would her life look like when she was a grown woman? It was too soon to know, she reminded herself; she was only eighteen—far too young to

² Lydia Olsson, Journal, Thursday, February 9, 1893, MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois (hereafter cited as Olsson Family Papers). I have kept the original spelling, grammar, and punctuation for all primary sources quoted in this thesis.
think of these things. And she knew better than to waste any effort in making plans. As Marmee told her daughters in Lydia’s favorite book, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, “Leave these things to time.”³ If that approach was good enough for the March girls, it was good enough for her. In the meantime, she would document her journey. Her entry complete, Lydia put away her diary and went to bed.

Lydia Olsson’s “childhood treasures”—five books full—amount to a bit more than “nonsense.” Her entries are rich with the details of everyday existence, so full of personality that she practically jumps off the page. It is as if she is sitting next to you, telling you about her day. Olsson’s diary provides critical insight into the life of a Swedish-American girl at the turn of the century: her identity and ideals, how she engaged with her community, and her decision to remain single. Olsson and the young women in her social circle came of age as the Victorian era came to a close. They had to navigate changing ideals of American womanhood and the new possibilities open to them as middle-class white girls, while also reckoning with the particular demands of their Swedish Lutheran community. Olsson used her diary to process her thoughts about issues like friendship, marriage, work, and education, and modeled her choices and behavior on observations of peers and treasured literary characters. Her story is a lens onto a wider community of women who are not often written about in history.

---

Born on the Kansas prairie to immigrant parents and raised in communities dominated by Swedish Americans, Lydia Olsson (1874-1958) had a dual identity. She called herself a Swede, but she was also very much an American girl. During and after the 1890s—when she wrote her diary in her late teens and early twenties—Olsson lived on the campus of Augustana College and Theological Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois. Her father, Olof Olsson, was a professor there and later the institution’s third president. Her mother, Anna Lisa Olsson, died young, leaving behind four children: Anna, Maria (Mia), Lydia, and Johannes Samuel (Hannes or Johnnie).\textsuperscript{4} Olsson’s friends were, for the most part, first- or second-generation Americans like her. They took classes together, attended the same social events, walked downtown to get their pictures taken, had snowball fights and sledding parties. Olsson enrolled in Augustana’s Preparatory Department and

Business College. There she gained crucial skills that she later used in her work as a librarian, bookkeeper, and business clerk. She never married—none of the Olsson siblings did—and lived out her later years with her family at the edge of the Augustana campus.

The bare facts of Olsson’s life show a fairly ordinary girl on the cusp of societal change. But her diary paints a more detailed portrait. I place Olsson in a wider circle of young women, including family, friends, and classmates, and use this approach to interrogate accepted wisdom about norms and ideals of womanhood in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Their stories deserve our attention, both on their own terms and because they complicate and expand our understanding of women’s history during this period, including our conceptions of immigrant daughters, college students, wage workers, and spinsters. Exploring the stories of Olsson and her community of young women allows us to reevaluate the dominant narratives and recognize these girls as historical actors in their own right.

A Brief Historiography of Nineteenth-Century American Women

Historians Joy K. Lintelman, Jane Hunter, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Zsuzsa Berend have all studied the history of American women, in particular their identities, female networks, marital status, and relationship to hegemonic gender ideals.5 With the exception of Lintelman, their work focuses primarily on middle- and upper-class, Protestant white women from native-born families living in the Northeast between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth century. Lintelman looks at working-class Swedish immigrant women who settled in the Upper Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century. All of these historians center the words of

women, as quoted from their letters, diaries, and memoirs, and supplement these sources with fiction, advice literature, and periodicals. While their topics are distinct, they overlap in the sense that they all deal with the shifting ideas of what American women should be over the course of the long nineteenth century.

Joy K. Lintelman posits that for many, Kristina Nilsson of Vilhelm Moberg’s *The Emigrants* series comes to mind when picturing a Swedish immigrant woman. A reluctant immigrant who spent the rest of her life isolated on the Minnesota frontier longing for Sweden, Nilsson’s character may represent the realities for some Swedish immigrant women, but in *I Go to America: Swedish American Women and the Life of Mina Anderson* (2009), Lintelman argues that this is not the case for many others, including her main subject, Mina Anderson. Anderson and many other peasant and working-class Swedish women immigrated to America because of the opportunities the country offered for an improved life. Lintelman provides essential information about Swedish culture, gender roles, Americanization, and immigrant experiences, especially those of nineteenth-century Swedish women. I draw from her work to understand Anna Lisa Olsson’s context and experience and the culture, practices, and expectations she and her husband passed down to their children.

In *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (2002), Jane Hunter examines how middle- and upper-class northeastern white girls, aged ten to twenty, constructed their identities at the turn of the twentieth century. They typically attended school; they did not have to work outside the home; and often they had leisure time to keep diaries, socialize with friends, and patronize local businesses. Hunter argues that these young women formed a “new notion of self” influenced both by inherited standards of “womanliness, purity, and virtue” and by a “vibrant coeducational peer culture.”\(^6\) They were able to find a middle

---

\(^6\) Hunter, 2.
ground between the older ideals of True Womanhood and the model of the New Woman that was emerging as the new century approached; Hunter calls them “new girls.” Her work is indispensable to my analysis of Lydia Olsson and her circle. While there are regional and ethnic differences between the girls we study, I demonstrate that much of Hunter’s argument extends to young women like Olsson: “new girls” who were first- and second-generation Americans in their late teens and early twenties.

During the long nineteenth century, women and men were increasingly separated into sex-segregated spaces. This meant that a large amount of women’s time was spent in the company of other women from their communities. In her classic article, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” (1975), Carroll Smith-Rosenberg examines this female space and the intimate friendships that developed between middle- and upper-class white women. Relationships ranging from “supportive love” to “sensual avowals” were accepted as natural outcomes of this system. Girls giggled over beaux before falling asleep together in bed; mothers and daughters shared great sympathy and understanding; and women sent kisses to close friends in passion-filled letters. Smith-Rosenberg positions these intimate friendships within a larger network of female relationships, relegating men to the margins. Her impression of women’s networks is at times overly rosy, but her contribution to women’s history is indisputable. Many of Smith-Rosenberg’s insights are critical to understanding Lydia Olsson’s relationships with other girls. But while girls in her community did spend time alone together, boys were also a frequent presence in their social world as friends, classmates, and suitors. In this particular community, boundaries between the sexes were not as rigid as Smith-Rosenberg suggests. My analysis takes into account how Olsson’s

---

7 Hunter, 5.
8 Smith-Rosenberg, 1.
circumstances—including her campus-based network and the early death of her mother—differed from those of Smith-Rosenberg’s subjects.

“The Best or None!” declared the women featured in Zsuzsa Berend’s article on spinsterhood in nineteenth-century New England, published in 2000. Spinsterhood, she writes, “has usually been viewed either as individual misfortune or as a manifestation of protofeminist assertion of autonomy.” But the reality was more complicated, as Berend argues: new ideals of love and marriage that arose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that women undertook marriage only if they believed they had found a “true love” ordained by God. Certainly there were women who had no opportunity to marry and those who rejected the institution in favor of a different life, but there were also women who remained single because their feelings towards a suitor did not match their high, sacred ideal of love. Berend notes a shift in the perception of the spinster from someone viewed as lesser than a married woman to an equal: a “highly moral and fully womanly creature” who chose to remain single instead of marrying any man that proposed to her. Lydia Olsson rejected at least one suitor because she could not give her whole heart to him; her sister Anna rejected close to a dozen. Berend’s nuanced examination of women like the Olsson sisters influences my exploration of love and marriage ideals in their community.

In this thesis, I examine how identity, ideals, friendship, and love played out in semi-urban ethnic communities in the Midwest and analyze how the middle-class daughters of white immigrants, like Olsson and her friends, contributed to the change in sex and gender norms and ideals at the turn of the century. By doing so, my work expands the narrative of American

---

9 Berend, 935.
10 Berend, 938.
11 Berend, 936.
women’s history as written so capably by historians such as Lintelman, Hunter, Smith-Rosenberg, and Berend.

**In Their Own Words**

Central to this thesis are my readings of Lydia Olsson’s diary, written between November 1892 and December 1896. Each entry is rich with details of her work, her social activities, and her community. And, most important for my research, she reflected deeply on issues that concerned her, including notions of respectable womanhood, relationships with friends and family members, finding a God-ordained partner, and what it took to be a true American. These passages offer an intimate glimpse of Olsson’s interior life, her identity-building process, and her developing sense of self. All of these layers help me paint a portrait of life for young women in Olsson’s midwestern Swedish-American community.

Lydia Olsson’s diary gives readers unparalleled access to her thoughts and feelings. But diaries are often (not always) created for the private consumption of the diarist. They are naturally written from a diarist’s perspective and typically ignore the broader social-historical context. Olsson’s account of life in her community is filtered through her point of view and she selects and reconstructs events as she chooses. I place Olsson’s words alongside interpretation and set them within a wider historical framework that considers her environment and circumstances.

---

12 Given Olsson’s developed writing style and references in her existing diaries, it seems very likely that there were more volumes before, between, and after these notebooks. Out of all the diaries Olsson may have written during her lifetime, five are now held by Augustana Special Collections in Rock Island, Illinois.
Lydia Olsson’s life and words form the major part of this work, but she did not live in isolation. To gain a better understanding of (predominantly) Swedish-American girls’ experiences, we must juxtapose Olsson’s circumstances with those of the young women surrounding her, including her sister Anna Olsson and her close friend Netta Bartholomew.

Anna Olsson’s diary, written between May 1889 and December 1891, chronicles the family’s year-long trip to Europe.\(^\text{13}\) In 1888 she became the second woman to graduate with a bachelor’s degree from Augustana College, and in her diary she documented her struggle

\(^{13}\) Anna Olsson, Diary, 1889-1891, Olsson Family Papers.
between her desire to continue her studies and the knowledge that (after the death of her mother two years prior) she had to give up her scholarly ambitions in order to run the Olsson household. Like Lydia, Anna Olsson used her diary as a tool to construct her notion of self, although she was forced to suppress some elements of her identity in order to fulfill her assigned role. Olsson also wrote about friendship, finding a suitable partner, and her identity as an American.\(^\text{14}\) Her observations are an important addition to the broader picture of Lydia Olsson’s community.

Netta Bartholomew was one of the few women on campus who was not ethnically Swedish, being of English and German heritage.\(^\text{15}\) She was a close friend of Lydia Olsson and another graduate of Augustana College. Her father, like Olsson’s, was a professor at the school and she too lived on campus with her family. She was an early supporter of women’s rights and was interested in women’s history. Although she married banker K.T. Anderson in 1897, she—like Anna Olsson—received and rejected multiple proposals from other suitors.\(^\text{16}\) Some of those requests have been preserved in the form of letters and give readers a sense of what the men in the Augustana Swedish Lutheran community were looking for in a wife and what Bartholomew thought of their suits.\(^\text{17}\) Also included in the collection are several of Bartholomew’s speeches and essays on topics related to women’s rights and women’s careers.\(^\text{18}\) Sometimes considered an agitator in the college community, she argued passionately against the discrimination she saw directed towards women on the Augustana campus. Alongside the diary

\(^{14}\) Anna Olsson was born in Sweden, but immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was not yet three years old. In her diary she makes it clear that although she was foreign-born, she has adopted an American identity and feels most at home in the United States. A. Olsson, Diary, July 4, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.


\(^{18}\) See, for example: “We Girls,” “Address to women entering the field of authorship,” and “Is Woman Suffrage Justifiable?” Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
of Anna Olsson, Bartholomew’s papers help to confirm, contradict, and complicate Lydia Olsson’s narrative. These are enhanced by newspaper, literary, and genealogical records. Together, these rich and varied materials reveal the nature of this community of young women and their thoughts on identity, friendship, marriage, and the opportunities available to American girls at the end of the nineteenth century.

Although Lydia Olsson’s Swedish-American community was fairly insular, her reading habits connected her to a broader range of ideas and influences. In particular, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* was central to Olsson’s understanding of what it meant to be American as well as how young women should behave. She cited the book repeatedly throughout her diary and at times her writing echoes Alcott’s text. She returned to the lessons of the book again and again when wrestling with questions of identity, marriage, and romantic ideals. In addition to sources particular to her campus-based network, then, I use passages and characters from *Little Women* to illuminate the logic of Olsson’s choices.

Truly knowing Lydia Olsson means examining the influences of her friends, her community, American norms and ideals, and texts such as *Little Women* alongside her diary entries. I weave examples of each into the larger themes of the following chapters, in an attempt to gain insight into her decisions and behavior.

**Terminology**

In her diary, Lydia Olsson regularly uses the term “girl” to refer to her contemporaries: young women in their late teens and early twenties. Traditionally, “girl” was used to indicate age or status: both prepubescent female children and servants or social inferiors were called girls.¹⁹

---

¹⁹ Hunter, 393. Olsson also refers to both of these groups as “girls,” for example: “Mrs. McCabe called this afternoon with Margarete. I must say I was very much disappointed with the little girl.” and “We are going to have a
However, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a shift in usage. Once young women began attending school in larger numbers, “girl” was used to describe respectable post-pubescent females; it was a parallel term to “boy,” used to describe young male students. By the time Olsson attended Augustana in the 1890s, Jane Hunter notes that “to be an American girl was a desired and desirable status.”

Olsson’s writing reflects this terminology, calling her peers “girls” and “boys.” Therefore I will use “girl” and “boy” interchangeably with “young woman” and “young man” in this paper when referring to Olsson and her contemporaries.

**Becoming (Swedish) American Girls**

This thesis explores the lives of Lydia Olsson and the young women in her community using their own words, sources from the period, and secondary scholarship. I assume gender, race, and class affected their experiences, and I consider these girls historical actors who shaped their own lives. The thesis is divided into four chapters, which focus respectively on Swedish-American identity, ideals of womanhood, social networks, and marriage and singlehood. Each chapter is preceded by an interlude: a creatively reconstructed scene based on historical evidence that establishes the themes explored in the chapter. The paper is framed by a prologue that introduces readers to Lydia Olsson and an epilogue that touches on the moment of discovery that launched this project.

Olsson was born and raised in the United States, but her immigrant parents and ethnic community passed on Swedish language, culture, and traditions. The first chapter of this thesis delves into the disparate influences on Olsson’s identity as a Swedish American. Beginning with a focus on Olsson’s parents and sister Anna, I look at life in Sweden and the waves of Swedish immigration.
immigration to the United States. Once Swedes settled in America, they—like all immigrant
groups—went through a process of becoming Americanized while retaining an ethnic identity.
Children born to immigrant parents, like Lydia Olsson, combined elements of Swedish and
American culture to create their own identities, which I explore in the latter half of the chapter.

Just as key to Lydia Olsson’s life is her understanding and practice of norms and ideals of
womanhood. Anna Lisa Olsson and her fellow immigrants imported Swedish ideals of
womanhood into their American communities. Their daughters grew up shaped by these notions
as well as American ideals, most prominently the Cult of True Womanhood and the New
Woman. In the second chapter, I argue that Lydia Olsson and the girls of Augustana College
bridged the gap between these American ideals as “new girls.” I weave the stories of these girls
with scholarship on women’s behavior, education, and employment opportunities.

The third chapter reconstructs Lydia Olsson’s community at Augustana College,
particularly that of her cohort, which included both girls and boys. I look first at her relationship
with her family, in particular her father and siblings, then detail the concentric circles of women
in Olsson’s network, from neighbors and casual acquaintances to intimate female friends. Finally
I examine the peer culture at Augustana and Olsson’s interactions with her male friends and
fellow students. Signature album inscriptions, diary entries, and materials passed between friends
and suitors on campus provide specific evidence of relationships between Olsson and others.

One of the key decisions in a young woman’s life at the time was whether to marry.21 As
noted above, Olsson decided not to. Her siblings and a number of friends and classmates also
remained single. Then again, many young people in Olsson’s peer group did marry. In the fourth

---

21 This is still the case, although it could be argued that remaining single—with or without children—is an option
open to more women these days. Whether it is any more socially acceptable may depend on whom you ask,
especially given Zsuzsa Berend’s argument about the moral and accepted role of spinsters in nineteenth-century
American society.
and final chapter, I look at those closest to Olsson (including the fictional Jo March) and how their choices to wed (or not) influenced her own decision. Drawing from the previous sections, I conclude that Olsson’s resolution to remain single was influenced by contemporary ideals of womanhood, opportunities available to women, and the attitude of her friends and community.

Lydia Olsson wrote that her life was “nothing romantic or anything worth keeping regular account of.” In many ways, Olsson represents the average woman in much of the existing historical literature about late nineteenth-century America: white, Protestant, middle-class; a dutiful daughter, a rule follower, a good Christian. But look closer and you will see she is no generic stand-in for American women. She was a Midwesterner and a Swedish American, the daughter of immigrants; a college student and a wage worker; a single woman who rejected a tempting suitor to retain control of her own life. Her diary reveals a self-possessed person full of humor and anxiety, morality and rebellion. The specifics of her life give us a window into the world of so-called average women, those usually consigned to the background even in women’s history. And the choices she made provide insights into the status quo and anticipate modern feminism. Here, I have attempted to reconstruct the lives of Lydia Olsson and her female network, comparing them to the dominant historical narrative of American womanhood and expanding the notion of what it meant to be a young woman at the end of the nineteenth century.

Olsson called her diary “nonsense,” but later in the same entry she wrote that “indeed the history of every life, no matter how insignificant, is important.” This was her thesis statement, her reason for keeping a diary. Let it serve as a reminder to historians that we need to examine the lives of all women—ordinary and extraordinary—to fully understand women’s history.

---

Interlude One

Little Anna on the Prairie

Anna tilted her head back, looking up, up, up at the vibrant blue expanse above her. The Kansas sky was vast, cloudless and bright. The afternoon sun kissed her small face, a spot of white in an endless expanse of yellow. She spun around, arms held out, one hand clutching a doll. Such a pretty, pretty blue.

Looking down, Anna froze. The blue sky disappeared, crowded out by tall blades of prairie grass. The grass grew so thick that she faced a yellow wall, one that shifted and moved every time the late-summer breeze blew. Was something moving through the grass? It was hard to tell, but Anna knew that snakes lived there; snakes that would bite little girls. If Anna was bitten, she knew she would stumble around, crying for Mamma and Papa, who wouldn’t be able to find her in all that tall, tall grass. Anna couldn’t even see Mamma when she was walking home from Mormor’s house—that’s how tall the grass was. Where was Mamma? Frightened, Anna, clutched her doll, turning around and around until she spotted a white sheet blowing in the breeze. Maybe Mamma was doing laundry.

Anna scurried out of the prairie grass, its blades brushing against the skirt of her calico dress. Running over to where a woman was taking the dry laundry down, she cried, “I’m scairt!”

“Who’s scairt?” the woman replied, turning around. It wasn’t Mamma; it was Maja! Anna threw herself at Maja.

“I’m scairt of snakes!” She clutched the hired girl’s skirt.

Maja looked around. “I don’t see any snakes, little flicka. They’re likely hiding from the hot sun.” She patted Anna’s hair. “Why don’t you go inside and see what your Mamma is making for dinner,” she suggested, gently disentangling the little girl from her skirts and turning her to face the newly built stone house. “She’s in the kitchen.”

Doll dangling from one hand, Anna hurried over to the house. The kitchen was built to one side, the door open to let out the heat of the fire. She looked inside, and there was Mamma. “Mamma!” she cried.

Anna’s mother looked up from the iron stove, where she was stirring a pot. Her big belly forced her to stand sideways so she could reach handles and spoons. Her face, framed by long black plaits, was tinged pink with the heat. With one hand on her aching back she reached out to Anna, drawing her in for a hug.

“What’s wrong, Anna?” she asked, rubbing her young daughter’s back.

“I’m scairt, Mamma.” Anna looked up at her mother, noticing for the first time the tears in her eyes. “Is Mamma scairt too?”

Her mother sighed, wiping the tears away. “I’m just a little sad.”

“Why Mamma?”

---

“I’m thinking about our old home, älskling.” She looked down at her daughter, seeing the question in her eyes. “Mamma longs for our home with the good tile stove, and all the pretty flowers, and her nice friends next door. I wish we were there instead of here in America.”

“I long too, Mamma. What’s long?” Anna asked, curiosity overcoming the last of her fear.

“It means to miss very much, like you miss Morfar,” her mother explained, mentioning the stepfather who had stayed behind in Sweden. “Do you remember the pretty purple lilacs and the little white lilies of the valley? And the daisies we used to pick together?” Anna nodded vigorously, wanting to please her. “I miss the bright, colorful flowers that grew around our home and the velvet-soft green grass, where now there is only ugly yellow grass.”

“I’m scared of the grass,” Anna said, remembering the snakes.

“If you stay by Papa or Maja or me, you don’t have to be scared, Anna. You should not wander into the grass by yourself. Now,” she said, letting go of Anna and turning back to the stove, “I need to finish making dinner. Why don’t you help Mamma and bring some biscuits out to Papa.” She lifted a cloth covering a plate of fresh baked goods, choosing a few to give to Anna. She counted them out. “There’s one for you, one for Papa, and one for your dolly, Emma.” She watched Anna skip out the door and took a deep breath. They were a long way from Sweden now, and she had to try to make the best of things, for Anna’s sake.

Anna knew Papa was up in the tree. That’s where he liked to read stories from the Bible. As she walked across the yard, she showed her doll the biscuits: “One for Emma.”

At the end of the clearing, a cottonwood tree stood overlooking the valley. Its branches stretched up towards the sky, the leaves still a dark, shiny green. Anna could just see her father’s slouch hat between the foliage, high above the ground. Papa had built a bench made of wooden boards up in the tree where they could see for miles across the rolling prairie grasses. Anna liked to bring her dolly up onto the bench and make chains of leaves. Papa didn’t mind her doing so, as long as she was quiet so he could read his papers. She walked around the base of the tree until she could see her father’s face.

“Papa, Papa!” she called, waving to him with a hand full of biscuits.

Her father looked up from his book. “Hello, Anna,” he said. “What do you have there?”

“Biscuits from Mamma.”

“Hmm, and do you have one to share with Papa?” Anna nodded. “Would you like to come up here and eat them with me?”

“Yes, Papa!” He laughed at her enthusiastic reply, coming down from the tree. He lifted Anna, biscuits and Emma in hand, up onto the bench, then climbed up after her. There was just enough room for the two of them to sit side by side. He put his book of sermons in a crook in the tree, then took the baked good Anna was holding out to him.

“Thank you very much,” he said, biting down into the biscuit. “Mmm, very tasty.”

The two sat there, enjoying their treats as they looked out over the prairie. Anna didn’t think the grass looked quite so scary, all the way up here. Now she was taller than the golden blades. A bird swooped overhead, landing on a stalk of grass. It had pretty white and black-streaked feathers and a bright yellow stomach. It cocked its head, its long beak pointed upwards as it looked at its surroundings. “Look, Papa!” Anna pointed, but the bird had already disappeared down into the grass where its nest was hidden.

“The prairie is beautiful, isn’t it, Anna,” said her father, looking out towards the bluffs. Endless land stretched out before them, broken only by the Smoky Hill River, edged by a line of green trees.
“Mamma longs for home,” Anna said seriously. “She is crying.”

“Is she?” He looked down at his daughter. “Well, sometimes I am sad when I think of our old home too. But we must trust in God. He will give us a good life here, if we work hard.”

“Do you cry, Papa?” asked Anna.

“I cannot cry, Anna, because I must preach to our community. If I cried over missing Sweden, I would not be able to do the work God has given me. We must think of all the good things that we have here in our new American home.”

“Where’s Sweden?”

Her father pointed, “Across the prairie and the bluffs, and far, far away. We cannot see it from here, but Sweden is still in our hearts.”

“It’s three Swedish miles away, Papa,” Anna said confidently.

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling. “It’s a bit farther than that. Do you remember what Sweden looks like?” Anna shook her head, unsure. “Well, there are mountains—much, much taller than these hills—and forests full of trees. And there are valleys carpeted with flowers and short green grass. We lived in a house built between two shimmering lakes, and out the windows we could see all the farms in our valley.”

“Why did we go, Papa?”

“Well, Anna, God called us to come to America and spread his word to the Swedish people living here. Do you remember all the people that came with us?”

“Like Farbror and Mormor?” she asked.

“Yes, and Farfar and Farmor, and many of your aunts and uncles. Lots of other people from our hometown came too, and from all the areas around us. We all wanted to live a good, Christian life in this new land. Now our home is in Lindsborg.” He pointed off to one side. “There, can you see the columns of smoke coming up from the prairie?” Anna nodded. “Those are the homes of our friends. They live in houses made of stone and grass and sod. And over there,” he pointed to the north, “you can see the men building our new church. That’s where I will lead our Christmas service.” He turned and pointed through the branches. “And there is our stone house that our friends helped me build, and the field they plowed for us.” He turned back towards Anna. “We are very lucky to live among such good friends, Anna. And soon, if God wills it, Mamma will have a new little baby.”

“Will Mamma be happy?” asked Anna.

“Yes, we will all learn to be happy here,” Papa replied. “Now, should we go thank Mamma for the biscuits?”

“Yes, Papa!” Anna watched her father climb down the tree, then held on to her doll as he lifted her down. They set out for the house, Anna running ahead.

Her father followed behind, pausing to look once again across the prairie. A western meadowlark swooped overhead, its yellow belly a contrast against the clear blue sky and its warbled song sweet to his ears. The tall grasses obscured most of his view, but he knew that throughout the shifting golden waves other families were settling in and starting their new lives on the Kansas plains. In a few years, they would all own their own property, and he would once again gaze out his window at a land filled with prosperous farms. He looked across the clearing to his own small home, where his family waited. “Yes,” he said to himself, “in America, every working man can, if he wills it, become a nobleman, baron, and count.”

He felt a small hand tugging at his. Looking down into the face of his daughter, he smiled. “Dinner, Papa!” she cried. Together they walked inside.
Chapter One

From “Swedes in America” to “Swedish Americans”: How Swedish Immigrants and Their
American-Born Children Came to Embrace a Dual Identity

Lydia Olsson did not remember much from her early days on the Kansas prairie, but she
knew they were happy ones. Her family had immigrated to Lindsborg from their homeland in
Värmland, Sweden. In fact, her oldest sister Anna came to Kansas at the same age that Lydia left
it; just about three. In her diary, she wrote that her entries included

memories which will recall one back to days of youth – back to when I was a child – in
Lindsborg at five and six and seven (that’s as far back as I can remember), when we lived
over there in the valley – oh! pleasantest days when the family was complete … I wish
with heart and soul I had an account of all these things; (am even now beginning to forget
them, no, not forget but it seems like a dream).²

Childhood memories can be hazy and Lydia recognized this; at the age of eighteen, her early
days seemed “like a dream.” Anna’s memories of Lindsborg were stronger, but she had spent
more than seven years living on the homestead. Anna later wrote a book about her Kansas
girlhood, En prärieunges funderingar (1917).³ In it, she recalled the vivid sense of fear she had
as a young child new to the dangers of the American prairie—the alien landscape, the frightening
animals, the strange people—as well as daily rhythms of life for the Lindsborgian Swedes. Her
parents and other adult community members also had to adjust to life in a radically different
setting than they were used to, but at least they had chosen to make the trip.

---
² L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, February 9, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson moved to Rock Island, Illinois, with
her family in 1877 when she was about three years old. She did not live in Lindsborg again except for a brief stint in
1888. Her note about living “in Lindsborg at five and six and seven” may be misremembered, unless the Olssons
spent summers in the valley, visiting family.
³ Anna Olsson translated En prärieunges funderingar from Swedish in 1927, titling the English version “I'm
Scairt”: Childhood Days on the Prairie. This is the version I will quote from in this paper.
The Olsson family was part of a mass migration that lasted close to a century. Beginning in the 1840s, a series of economic and political crises prompted millions of Europeans to immigrate to the United States.\(^4\) Irish and German immigrants formed the greatest number of new Americans, but Swedes like the Olssons immigrated in large numbers compared to their home country’s population. Roughly 1.3 million Swedes immigrated to North America between 1850 and 1930, in percentages topped only by the Irish and Norwegians.\(^5\) The Olssons left their home in Sunnemo, Sweden, in May 1869 with a group of eighty-five families—around 276 people—all from the same region.\(^6\) They, like many other new residents, had to adapt to American culture and a new identity, that of ethnic Americans. For the Olssons and their fellow Swedish travelers, that meant morphing from “Swedes in America” to “Swedish Americans.”\(^7\)

**Life in Sweden**

Nineteenth-century Swedish society was shaped by the Church of Sweden. A Lutheran body, the state church influenced family ideals, class structure, gender roles, and literacy rates, among other factors. Swedish families followed the three social orders of Martin Luther: church, state, and household.\(^8\) This led to a patriarchal system, with the father at the head of the family and the mother and children as subordinates. The relationship between husband and wife was reinforced by the traditional Swedish wedding vows, which placed the husband firmly above the wife.

---


\(^6\) Brorson, 15.

\(^7\) Blanck, 85.

\(^8\) Lintelman, 28.
Swedish class structure was just as rigid. Rural landowning Swedes, like both sets of Lydia Olsson’s grandparents, lived in two-story homes with four rooms. Those a step below them on the social ladder occupied backstugusittare, small one-room dwellings.⁹ The poorest did not even own land, living in communal housing. Whether they were employed in a factory or on a farm their wages were low, meaning they had little chance of improving their lot in life. Those in service did not mix with their employers, and often their only chance to rise in socioeconomic status was through marriage.¹⁰ That, or by immigrating to countries like the United States.

Women were expected to marry and produce children, and were trained from an early age to take care of younger siblings and help with household tasks.¹¹ Their educational and economic opportunities were limited, although a series of legislative actions slowly expanded their choices beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Even with these changes, a rural peasant woman was restricted in her employment options. She could work as a domestic servant (piga), factory worker, or—with additional training—move to a city and get a job as a clerk, secretary, or saleswoman.¹² Only middle- and upper-class women were well-positioned to pursue additional educational and economic opportunities granted through legislation.¹³

Regardless of gender or class, children raised during the second half of the nineteenth century learned to read and write. This was mandated by the Church of Sweden, as all citizens were expected to be able to read and understand Luther’s Small Catechism and the Bible.¹⁴ In 1842, Sweden established public primary schools. Several decades later, in 1878 and 1882, the

---

⁹ Lintelman, 24. Backstugusittare translates to “cottage that sits in a hill.” In some cases, this literally refers to a dugout.
¹⁰ Lintelman, 53-55.
¹¹ Lintelman, 30.
¹² Lintelman, 52-54.
¹³ Lintelman, 42.
state required that all Swedish children receive six full years of public education.\textsuperscript{15} This created a highly literate population: Scandinavian immigrants who arrived in American between 1899 and 1909 had a literacy rate of 99.6 percent.\textsuperscript{16}

Another crucial component of Swedish educational measures was Lutheran confirmation. Girls and boys approaching their fifteenth birthdays would attend classes at their local churches, learning about the history of the Lutheran faith and its practice in Swedish society. This instruction reinforced support for the church and state, instilling a respect for authority and ensuring students’ literacy.\textsuperscript{17} Once confirmed, students were considered adults, ready to participate fully in Swedish religious life.

A Charitable Couple: Olof Olsson and Anna Lisa Jonsdotter

Lydia Olsson’s parents were born into this deeply religious society in 1841. Olof Olsson, born March 31, 1841, in Karlskoga, Värmland, was the son of farmer Anders Olsson and his wife Britta.\textsuperscript{18} “Mor Britta,” as she was known locally, became involved in the Swedish religious revival that began in the 1840s, raising her sons Olof and Carl in a household filled with religious zeal and pietism.\textsuperscript{19} Olsson was educated at the local school, then by a tutor and later at a missionary institute, eventually attending Uppsala University with the intent to pursue divinity studies. On December 15, 1863, he was ordained, prepared to serve as a pastor in the Church of Sweden.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} Lintelman, 33.
\textsuperscript{16} Jackson, 11.
\textsuperscript{17} Lintelman, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{18} Olson, 5-16.
\textsuperscript{19} Olson, 16. Pietists, also known as l"asare (meaning readers) emphasized piety, living a simple and devoutly Christian life, and devotion to the “Word of God.” Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 10. The Pietism movement originated in the late 17th century through the work of Philipp Jakob Spener, who called for laypeople, in addition to the ministers, to know and understand the Bible. J. Stephen Lang, “582. Pietism,” 1,001 Things You Always Wanted to Know About the Bible but Never Thought to Ask (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 300.
\textsuperscript{20} Olson, 32.
Anna Lisa Jonsdotter was born to Jonas Peter Nilsson and Maria Lovisa (Maja Lisa) Ersdotter in Bottesbol, Värmland, on March 8, 1841. Her father was a bergsman, a farmer who owned a share in the local mine. In 1851, he suffered a stroke and died, after which her mother remarried, this time to a dräng (farm hand) named Olof Olsson (not to be confused with Anna Lisa Jonsdotter’s future husband). Jonsdotter had nine full and half siblings, most of whom would later immigrate to Lindsborg, Kansas. She attended classes at her local church, learning how to read, understand, and recite Luther’s catechism and the Bible.

Figure 1.1. Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson. C-N00112, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

21 Brorson, 1.
22 Brorson, 2.
Jonsdotter met Olof Olsson (her future husband) before he left for Uppsala University and the two married on December 21, 1864. The couple moved to the poor mining community of Persberg, where Olsson received a pastoral posting.23 Their first daughter, Anna Olsson, was born in Persberg on August 19, 1866.24 A second daughter, Maria, was born on December 25, 1867, after the Olssons had moved to the parish of Sunnemo. She died just six months later on June 18, 1868, the first of several Olsson children to die young.25

Biographers note that the Olssons were a charitable couple, dedicated to serving their community’s spiritual and corporeal needs.26 They regularly distributed food, clothing, and supplies to the poorest members of their parish. Olof Olsson recognized that many of his parishioners in Persberg and later Sunnemo were desperately poor, even after receiving aid from state authorities.27 In July 1868 he presented a report on Sunnemo parish to Bishop Anton Niklas Sundberg in which he wrote, “The great difficulty is found here, namely, that many poor families cannot find a piece of land to put a house on.”28 He hoped the bishop would act to resolve matters using the Word of God for guidance and felt bitterly disappointed when Sundberg declined to help. This, to Olsson, exemplified the failure of the Church of Sweden and its high-church tradition. He disapproved of the state church’s strict hierarchical structure, its disciplinary system, and its restrictive, authoritarian rule.29 Like his mother, Mor Britta, Olsson aligned himself with the pietists or läsare (readers), who were part of the low-church movement. He wished to have more freedom in his position and it became increasingly clear that this would not happen while he was still a pastor in the Church of Sweden.

23 Olson, 37.
24 Brorson, 8.
25 Brorson, 14.
26 Lindquist, 4; Olson, 41-42; Brorson, 8-9.
27 Parishes were mandated by Swedish law to provide living accommodations for parishioners who could not support themselves. Lintelman, 22.
28 O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 8.
29 Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 11.
Olof Olsson was not alone in his views of the state church, nor was he the only one to recognize the growing economic problems facing Sweden. A century of agricultural reform, increased agricultural production, and a decrease in the severity of diseases led to a boom in Sweden’s population. But more people meant fewer resources for the poorest. In the mid-nineteenth century, a growing number of Swedes lived in poverty on a regular basis. They might get by during a good year, but encountered great hardships during economic crises. The answer for many was to strike out, leaving their home country behind in search of a better life.

Immigration to America

“America was the promised land,” recalled Mina Anderson. “Everyone who was able should go.” And as soon as she had boarded a steamer out of Värmland, but her sentiments were shared by the hundreds of thousands of Swedes who preceded her. “There is I believe a great future in America,” Olof Olsson wrote to T. N. Hasselquist, president of the Augustana Synod (founded by Swedes in the United States in 1860). By December 1868, Olsson had made up his mind to leave Sweden and was certain his family would not make the trip alone. “I know that many people from my area of Värmland will come to Kansas,” he told Hasselquist. “Immigration will increase. It is necessary, too, for Sweden, because the country is overpopulated in many regions. In addition, the economy of this country is in a sad state.” Concerned with religious freedom, the Olssons might have emigrated regardless, but the number of Värmlanders following them likely grew as economic prospects in Sweden diminished.

30 Lintelman, 25.
31 Mina Anderson as quoted in Lintelman, 56. Anderson’s statement, “everyone who was able should go” (italics mine), reminds us that emigration was restricted to those who could afford it or, like Anderson, those who had friends and relatives willing to sponsor their trip. The ambitious middle and working classes made up the majority of migrants. Brorsen, 23.
32 O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 17.
Beginning in the 1840s, Swedes began coming to North America (primarily the United States) in large numbers. Joy K. Lintelman divides the next century of Swedish migration into five phases: phase one, 1845-1855; phase two, 1868-1873; phase three, 1879-1893; phase four, 1900-1914; and phase five, the 1920s. The first phase (1845-1855), was led largely by families who wished to pursue religious freedom. They belonged to sects that the Swedish government and Church of Sweden condemned. Landowning families also left Sweden in order to improve their economic status by farming in America. Immigrant women of this phase were primarily wives and daughters, often obligated to leave Sweden whether they wanted to or not.

The Olssons were part of the second major wave of Swedish migration. The immigrants of this phase (1868-1873) also left Sweden in family groups, prompted by a series of crop failures in 1867 and 1868. During this period, Swedes of lower social classes (including farm workers and domestic servants) migrated alongside landowning families. Some, like the Olssons sought religious freedom. Many were tempted by the Homestead Act of 1862, which promised 160 acres each to United States citizens—or immigrants intending to become citizens—who filed claims and improved the land. These new immigrants settled in some of the same areas populated by Swedes from the first phase, or decided to move to land recommended by those already in the United States, a trend that continued in later phases of migration.

33 Lintelman, 71-72.
34 Lintelman, 72-73.
35 Lintelman, 89. More specifically, the Homestead Act of 1862 granted land to adults, twenty-one and older, who were or intended to become citizens, and who had not borne arms against the United States. Only women who were single, widowed, divorced, or deserted could qualify to file a claim. Because slavery was not abolished in the United States until 1865, most enslaved and free Black Americans were not able to benefit from the act until later in the decade. Act of May 20, 1862 (Homestead Act), Public Law 37-64, May 20, 1862, Record Group 11, General Records of the United States Government, National Archives, accessed February 22, 2021, https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=31&page=transcript.
36 Blanck, 22. This was at the cost, of course, of Native Americans, who were forcibly resettled in order to clear the land. In September 1869, Olsson wrote to his friend C. W. Weinberg that the Midwest offered “large stretches of fertile, unclaimed land” which was “a rich field for the industrious farmer.” Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 498. The “unclaimed land” settled by the new Lindsborgians had previously been the territory of the Washtáge Moⁿzháⁿ (Kaw/Kansa), the Osage Nation, the Numunnuw Soökobitu (Comanche), the Pári
Olsson was friends with the members of the First Swedish Agricultural Company, who had acquired several thousand acres of land in central Kansas. He eventually decided to join the company and move to Lindsborg because he trusted the members and believed he could create a good future there for his family.\(^37\)

Biographers Emory Lindquist and E. W. Olson have thoroughly documented Olof Olsson’s thoughts about leaving Sweden.\(^38\) Olsson had corresponded with Swedes already established in the United States, including T. N. Hasselquist and A. W. Dahlsten (a friend and pastor in Galesburg, Illinois). Discontented with the Church of Sweden, Olsson sought to establish a *ren församling*, or pure congregation, free from state influence. Dahlsten assured him that the Augustana Synod could provide a home for his new congregation. Unlike the Church of Sweden, Augustana Lutherans did not have bishops and pastors elected their synod’s president. Pastors had equal rights across the Synod and congregations had more freedoms than those granted by the Swedish state church. Most important, Dahlsten wrote, Synod members relied on the Word of God to guide their beliefs.\(^39\) This spoke to Olsson’s alignment with the pietist movement. Olsson was decided: his family must immigrate to the new town of Lindsborg, Kansas, where he could create a religious community dedicated to the Word of God.

We know very little of Anna Lisa Olsson’s opinions about leaving her homeland. Lindquist states that Olof conferred with his wife before deciding whether to emigrate from

---

\(^37\) Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 16. See appendix for an 1884 map of the Smoky Hill region of Kansas, including the town of Lindsborg. The third (1879-1893), fourth (1900-1914), and fifth (1920s) phases of Swedish migration were characterized by additional economic crises. The years 1881-1882 and 1887-1888 saw the greatest number of immigrants coming from Sweden to the United States because of agricultural crises at home and a growing labor market in America. Single adults formed the bulk of these groups, settling primarily in urban areas where they could gain employment as industrial workers and domestic servants. Lintelman, 71-74.

\(^38\) Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 15-20; Olson, 46-50.

Sweden, and Brorson believes that Anna Lisa, as a dedicated pastor’s wife who shared her husband’s vision, supported his choice. Neither quote her on the matter.  

“Prairie and still more prairie”: A New Home on the Kansas Plains

On May 10, 1869, Olof, Anna Lisa, and little Anna Olsson set off for America. They were joined by Olof’s parents and brother, Anna Lisa’s mother and many of her siblings, and eighty-five families from the Värmland region.  

Anna Lisa was about five months pregnant at the time, and her daughter was not yet three years old. It was a difficult trip even without the addition of pregnancy and the need to keep an eye on a small child. But she was traveling with friends and loved ones, as well as a young woman named Maria (Maja) Larsdotter, aged twenty-two, who received a permit to emigrate with the Olssons. Larsdotter was listed as a domestic servant, and it is very likely she is the hired girl who works for the family in Anna Olsson’s book, En prärieunges funderingar.  

The group traveled by steamship from Sweden to Scotland, and Scotland to the United States. They landed in New York on June 9, 1869, after a month of traveling, most of it on rough seas. Once the Olssons and their companions reached New York City they were processed through the Castle Garden immigration station and ready for the next portion of their trip. The immigrants took an express train from New York to Chicago, then another train to Salina,

---

40 See Brorson, 14, 21; Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 20.
41 Brorson, 15.
42 Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 22. Many young, working-class Swedish women immigrated to the United States as domestics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the hopes of improving their lives. They were able to draw higher wages in the United States with lighter workloads, and often moved frequently between employers, searching for the best positions or leaving to get married. A Swedish domestic might work first for a Swedish-American family in order to adjust to a new country without the added burden of learning a new language. Lintelman 56, 94, 99. Having a domestic servant was a status symbol achievable for most American middle-class families in the nineteenth century, so it was not unusual for a family like the Olssons to have a hired girl, even though they were not wealthy. Hunter, 18. For more information on working-class Swedish women and their experiences in the United States, see Lintelman.
Kansas. Finally they walked or rode in wagons filled with supplies to their new home in Lindsborg. They arrived on June 27, 1869.43

These Värmland Swedes were part of a larger pattern of nineteenth-century Swedish immigrants who settled in the rural Midwest to form farming communities. Olof Olsson praised the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed the Swedes the chance to own land and prosper. “A finer law has never been enacted on the earth,” he exclaimed. “Where is the country that can boast of such an affectionate and charitable law for the poor? This is the brightest star in the whole galaxy of Stars and Stripes…. In America, every working man can, if he wills it, become a nobleman, baron, and count.”44 Olsson knew the economic pains his countrymen had experienced in Sweden—he and Anna Lisa had cared for them, providing them with food and clothing, as well as spiritual guidance—so he was overjoyed to see the advantage provided by their new country.

But the Kansas prairie—the unfamiliar landscape, harsh weather, frightening wildlife, rumors of hostile Native Americans, and all—was quite a shock to those used to a gentler setting. There is no record of Anna Lisa Olsson’s first reaction upon reaching Lindsborg in June 1869, but she likely harbored the same feelings as Mrs. Gottfrid Magnuson, an immigrant who came to the area in 1870. Upon seeing the vast, open prairie for the first time, Magnuson cried, “It is terrible…. Why should I have come to a wilderness like this? Listen to the sighing of the wind as it sweeps over the rolling prairies. What a lonesome life. Thousands of miles from friends and civilization.”45 Though Olsson came with friends, she was certainly far from civilization. And

---

44 O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 68. Although Olsson praised the Homestead Act of 1862, it does not seem as though he personally benefited from the law.
45 Daniel Gottfrid as quoted in Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 83.
she longed for the old parsonage in Sunnemo, where she had had a beautiful porcelain tile stove, three hired girls to help her, and mature trees shading the house.\textsuperscript{46}

Olsson made her preference for her homeland clear in a letter to her friend Ulrika Weinberg, reminiscing about “beautiful Sweden, whose forests, mountains, and valleys … [are] more pleasant there than here.”\textsuperscript{47} Her eldest daughter picked up on her sentiments, mimicking Olsson’s longing for home. “Värmland is the nicest place in the world,” Anna gushed. “In Värmland so many pretty flowers grow…. And in Värmland such nice green grass grows. Not ugly, yellow Buffalo grass like here…. In Värmland they have no Rattlesnakes, and no Texas cows. And no Cyclones and no Indians. And no grasshoppers.”\textsuperscript{48} Anna’s parents were not sure whether their young daughter could remember anything about Sweden, but their frequent conversations on the subject gave her plenty of information. Even after the initial culture shock wore off, Anna Lisa and Olof likely shared memories of Sweden and favorite Swedish traditions with their children. Lydia, like Anna, grew up in a predominantly Swedish household.

Anna Olsson was absolutely terrified by the prairie, according to her account in En prärieunges funderingar. Her English translation of the book opens with a jarring passage:

I’m scairt - I’m awful scairt! I’m scairt of the big Snakes! And I can’t see them ’cause the grass is so long. And if I walk in the long grass, the big long Snakes will jump up and bite me. And I’ll get losted, and my Mamma and my Papa can’t find me ’cause the grass is so long…. I couldn’t see my Mamma when she was coming back from Good Grandma’s ’cause the grass is too long. The grass is longer than Mamma.\textsuperscript{49}

For such a young girl, the shifting wall of tall prairie grass presented multiple threats: the possibilities of being attacked by an animal, getting lost, and not being able to see her parents.

Paired with her mother’s tears and constant longing for their Swedish home, Olsson’s fear

\textsuperscript{46} Brorson, 11.
\textsuperscript{47} Anna Lisa Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 504.
\textsuperscript{48} A. Olsson, “I’M ScAirt”, 120-121. The Olssons interacted with Native Americans on a number of occasions, but these were peaceful (if sometimes tense) encounters. For more information, see Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 64-65, 104-105; Olson 166-120; A. Olsson, “I’M ScAirt”, 7-21, 136-137.
\textsuperscript{49} A. Olsson, “I’M ScAirt”, 9.
created a high barrier to surmount as she came to terms with her new circumstances. Perhaps she envied her younger siblings, who knew only the prairie. More likely she acted as their protector, reassuring them that she would keep them safe in this wild country.

Her father’s response to the new land was more enthusiastic. Describing Lindsborg to his friend C. W. Weinberg, Olof Olsson wrote, “You should see our settlement out here. It is a beautiful sight. Prairie and still more prairie. Here and there a line of green trees on both sides of the winding Smoky Hill River or in the small valleys where the water seeks an outlet.” Though he saw great promise in the land, he admitted, “The view of the prairie is at the outset dismal.” Like his wife, he too missed Värmland and the friends who still lived there.\textsuperscript{50} But though “we do not dig gold with pocket knives,” Olsson argued, America offered the chance that anyone could, through hard work, “become after a few years the owners of property.”\textsuperscript{51} He recognized the adjustment would be rough, but hoped his family and fellow Lindsborgians would recognize the advantages to this American life.

In the meantime, the community faced what Swedish immigrants referred to as \textit{hundår} (literally “dog years” or “years of struggle”).\textsuperscript{52} They needed to build homes, plow fields, establish a church, and—above all—become Americans.

\textbf{Swedes in America}

Of course, to live in the United States is not necessarily to be “American.” As Swedish immigrant Mina Anderson pointed out, “Immigrants are of course transplanted here, and perhaps like a transplanted tree flourish and prosper, but the thoughts still wander back to the land where

\textsuperscript{50} O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 509.
\textsuperscript{52} Lintelman, 93.
we were born.” Like Anna Lisa Olsson, many Swedish immigrants longed for their homeland above all else. They lived in the United States and adapted to their new surroundings, but did not consider themselves American, at least at first. In particular, married women, who may not have had a choice of whether to immigrate, and who could not participate equally in American civic life or claim land through the Homestead Act, might have felt less of a connection to their adopted country. In ethnic enclaves like Lindsborg, women like Anna Lisa had little occasion to interact with American institutions, unlike their husbands. Other Swedes, including Olof Olsson, embraced the opportunities of life in the United States. They sang the praises of their new country, declared their intent to become citizens, and worked on their English. This push and pull between being a Swede in America and becoming an American with Swedish heritage eventually led Swedish immigrants and their descendants to articulate a Swedish-American identity.

Swedish immigrants entered the United States with a powerful privilege: they were white Protestants. In 1790, the United States’ first naturalization law limited naturalized citizenship to “free white persons.” Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson points to the “staggering inclusivity” of the law—as the factor that allowed many millions of new immigrants to become citizens. Importantly, the tendency for early Swedish immigrants to form insular Midwestern settlements kept them culturally and racially separate from native-born white communities, while also advancing the government’s campaign to expand the territory of the United States through legislation like the Homestead Act of 1862. Through their desire to

---

53 Mina Anderson as quoted in Lintelman, 207.
54 Jacobson, 7. Race is a constantly shifting concept: whiteness means different things at different times. Those in power define and use race in order to separate people into groups with different levels of privilege. Jacobson, 4.
55 Jacobson, 40. These new citizens included Italians, Irish, Armenians, Poles, and others whose “racial credentials” as whites were not equal to those of native-born American whites from “Anglo-Saxon ‘old stock.’” Although they were white, some new citizens’ racial privileges were challenged. Jacobson, 3-4.
56 Jacobson, 47. Beginning in the early 19th century, the United States government launched a campaign to expand the boundaries of the nation. They did so through land purchases, wars with foreign countries and Native American nations, and legislation like the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Homestead Act of 1862. Americans justified these actions, including the forced relocation and genocide of Native Americans, using the concept of manifest
improve their socioeconomic status and own property, Swedes like the Olssons helped the
government take and defend territory from Native Americans. During the first major waves of
European immigration in the 1840s and 1850s, prominent voices in the nativist movement were
more concerned with religion than race.\textsuperscript{57} These Americans were decidedly against the influx of
Catholic immigrants from countries like Ireland and Germany. Protestant Swedes were more
readily welcomed.

**Lindsborg Hundår: Establishing a Swedish Community in Kansas**

Religious identity was key to early Swedish immigrants, more important than any sense
of shared national heritage. Many fled what they saw as an oppressive and alienating state church
with the hope that, in America, they could worship as they chose. This was certainly the case for
Olof Olsson and the men who founded the Augustana Synod.\textsuperscript{58} Once the Olsson party arrived in
Lindsborg, one of its first priorities was to establish a new ren församling.\textsuperscript{59} On August 19, 1869,
less than two months after their journey to the Kansas prairie, Olof Olsson and twelve other men
joined to form the Bethany Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church.\textsuperscript{60}

Another early priority was to establish a homestead for the new pastor of Bethany
Church, Olof Olsson. The First Swedish Agricultural Company had allotted the Olsson family a
plot of land and directed the company foreman to break the ground for plowing.\textsuperscript{61} Men from the
community banded together to help Olof Olsson build a two-room stone house for his wife,

\textsuperscript{57} Jacobson, 69.
\textsuperscript{58} Blanck, 29.
\textsuperscript{59} In folk churches like the Church of Sweden, people could become members by birth. The ren församling church
only accepted “true believers” who had to verify their faith before church deacons. Even Anna Lisa Olsson,
described by Lindquist as “devout,” was not an original member of the Bethany congregation. Lindquist, *Vision for
a Valley*, 31.
\textsuperscript{60} Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 29. August 19, 1869, was also Anna Olsson’s third birthday.
\textsuperscript{61} Brorson, 29-30.
daughter, parents, and their hired girl.\textsuperscript{62} They were soon joined by the Olssons’ newest child, Mia Olsson, born September 15, 1869.\textsuperscript{63} Lydia Olsson would be born in a second, larger stone house, but in the meantime the actions of their community demonstrated the family’s “elite” social status in Lindsborg.\textsuperscript{64} Dag Blanck notes that ministers in the Church of Sweden may have claimed a higher social standing than Augustana pastors, but Olof Olsson was greatly respected as a leader of the Lindsborg community and beyond, as an important figure in Swedish Lutheran Kansas.\textsuperscript{65} Yet the Olssons’ economic status was precarious. The Bethany congregation was often behind in paying the pastor’s salary, and only the family’s farmland helped keep them afloat.\textsuperscript{66}

The first years in Lindsborg were indeed *hundår*. The harsh weather, paired with many immigrants’ limited knowledge of farming on the prairie, resulted in small crops and scarcity. More hardships came with the grasshopper invasions of the 1870s and the devastation of the Texas cattle drives.\textsuperscript{67} Families like the Olssons suffered personal losses too. Lydia was born on April 14, 1874, five years into the Olssons’ life in America. Bracketing her birth were the deaths of two infant sons: Johannes (June 24-July 27, 1872) and Johannes Timotheus (April 6-August 25, 1876). A final son, Johannes Samuel, was born on July 4, 1877, and survived into adulthood.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{62} Olson, 63-64.
\textsuperscript{63} Brorson, 38.
\textsuperscript{65} Blanck, 97. Olsson took on a number of pastoral roles during his family’s residence in Kansas. He preached and performed religious duties for the many Swedish congregations across the state and beyond, in Missouri and Colorado. He also led the 1876 Kansas Conference for the Augustana Synod, launched and regularly contributed to Swedish publications, proposed starting a mission to local Native American communities (which never came to fruition), and organized church youth societies and musical groups. These efforts led him to be recognized by Synod leadership and later called to serve as professor, then president, of Augustana College and Theological Seminary. Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 50, 53-54, 59-60, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{66} Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 99-100.
\textsuperscript{67} Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 70-71, 84-85.
\textsuperscript{68} Brorson, 38. Brorson reports that Olsson gave birth to an eighth child who died young, but gives no name or dates. In all, she gave birth to eight children, only four of whom survived into adulthood.
Lindsborg was a Swedish cultural center for the region, populated almost exclusively by Swedish immigrants. 69 Most of the settlers spoke Swedish and shunned intermarriage with “Americans”—any local who was not Swedish. 70 Although Lydia Olsson was born and raised in the United States, she spent her first years in an imported version of Sweden. But Lindsborgians were beginning to adapt to American life. Emory Lindquist’s biography of Olof Olsson notes that the immigrants combined “values and experiences of the Old World” and “conditions in the

69 Stasiewicz, 388.
70 Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 106; Elizabeth Jaderborg, Selma and Elizabeth Talk About Lindsborg (Lindsborg, KS: Lindsborg News-Record, 1973), 11. Even Swedish immigrants with U.S. citizenship were still not considered “Americans” by the community.
New World” to create a new way of life. They improved their land, interacted with more native-born Americans, and—as a new generation of Swedes was born and raised in America—began to celebrate a specifically Swedish identity.

A “shimmer from sagas”: A New Generation Celebrates Swedish Culture in America

Those Swedes who immigrated to the United States as adults had prized religion and regional specificities above a Swedish national identity. But as they shared traditions and memories of the old country with their children, the younger generation began to construct an idealized version of their Swedish heritage, one that prized national culture and history. Lydia Olsson and her siblings grew up surrounded by stories of Sweden and their mother’s strong longing for the old country. Some of those stories are preserved in *En prärieunges funderingar*, in which Anna Olsson recorded her memories of a childhood spent in a community of new immigrants, including recollections of their Swedish dialects, the unique Swenglish words they used, and their strict religious life. The book belongs to a Swedish-American literary tradition that documents the immigrant experience and the mixing of Swedish and American cultures.

Like the Olsson children, American-born Gustav Andreen heard about Sweden’s history, folk stories, and nature from adults in his community; to him it seemed as though a “shimmer from sagas was imbued in the image of the old father country.” In fact, Swedes enjoyed reading and performing the old Scandanavian sagas. During Andreen’s tenure as the fourth president of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, students staged a version of Esaias Tegnér’s

---

71 Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 81.
72 Blanck 12, 14.
73 Stasiewicz, 392.
74 Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 107. Together with fellow author G. N. Malm, Olsson helped preserve this unique segment of the Swedish immigrant community.
75 Stasiewicz, 389.
76 Gustav Andreen as quoted in Blanck, 105.
popular Swedish translation of *Frithiof's Saga*. Lydia Olsson starred as Frithiof's love interest, the princess Ingeborg.\(^7\) Swedes in America were beginning to define themselves in contrast to other immigrant groups and the Americans around them.\(^8\) They celebrated Swedish language and customs, historical and literary figures, folk tales and mythology, and their connection to their ancestral homeland.\(^9\)

![Figure 1.3. Cast of *Frithiof’s Saga*, 1905. C-D00124, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.](image)

At the same time, many Swedes recognized the importance of becoming Americanized and wanted to show their loyalty to the adopted homeland that offered them so many freedoms and opportunities. Becoming American, argues Blanck, was a matter of committing to the

---

77 Signature album, 1889, Olsson Family Papers.
78 Stasiewicz, 406.
abstract political ideals of liberty, equality, and republicanism. And Swedes’ status as white, Christian immigrants ensured that they were, in the words of scholar Lawrence Fuchs, “free … to choose to be ethnic,” while also embracing American nationalism.\textsuperscript{80}

On July 12, 1869, just over a month after his arrival on American shores, Olof Olsson formally registered his intent to become a United States citizen.\textsuperscript{81} In a letter to a friend in Sweden, he praised the fact that each citizen “is equal to every other one at the ballot box.”\textsuperscript{82} Wanting to advocate for his community, Olsson ran for and was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 1870 and 1871. In one of his first steps as a legislator, he introduced an act to publish the Constitution of the United States in Swedish, in order to make it more accessible to his fellow Swedes.\textsuperscript{83} Even as Olsson was helping Swedes understand American political ideals, he began teaching his congregation English. He knew that Americanization required education.\textsuperscript{84}

Later, as president of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, Olsson made an October 1892 speech emphasizing to students that “we must be faithful and enthusiastic patriots for the land of the free and the brave.” He asserted that “if President Harrison were to come to the campus, he would find ‘no false Americans’ but would instead be ‘moved’ by the ‘true American civic spirit’ at the college.”\textsuperscript{85} Although Lydia Olsson was excluded from voting in the 1892 presidential election, she showed her civic spirit in her political interests and awareness. A

\textsuperscript{80} Lawrence Fuchs as quoted in Blanck, 13. Jackson, 8.
\textsuperscript{81} Lindquist, 68. Olsson was granted citizenship on May 3, 1876.
\textsuperscript{82} O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 504. Of course this is inaccurate. Although the 15th Amendment to the Constitution was certified earlier in the year (Olsson wrote this letter on May 13, 1870), African American men faced discrimination and violence when trying to exercise their civic duty. White women did not gain the right to vote until 1920, and women of color had to wait even longer, deep into the twentieth century. That being said, Olsson indicates that the Swedish system was a “monstrosity” compared to the American system.
\textsuperscript{83} Lindquist, \textit{Vision for a Valley}, 68-69. Olsson’s “unhindered (male) civic participation” was another privilege enabled by his whiteness. Even though he was not yet a citizen, his racial status marked him as fit for self-government. His official intent to become a citizen made him eligible for political office in Kansas. Jacobson, 42.
\textsuperscript{84} Lindquist, \textit{Vision for a Valley}, 72.
\textsuperscript{85} O. Olsson as quoted in Blanck, 83.
month after her father’s speech, she expressed her disappointment at Benjamin Harrison’s defeat by Grover Cleveland: “There don’t seem much to thank for now as Harrison didn’t become elected!” Her father likely ensured that his children learned about the American political system as part of his efforts to educate his community about American civic duties and values. He was joined in his Americanization fervor by many Swedes, who realized they were not only Swedish, or American, but Swedish Americans.

**Becoming Swedish American**

Lydia Olsson grew up during the apex of Swedish America, when immigrants and their American-born children formed a vibrant ethnic community. Ethnicity, writes historian Agnieszka Stasiewicz, is culturally constructed, molded by forces within and outside of a particular community. Swedish-American ethnic identity constantly evolved as Swedish Americans interacted with American society, other ethnic groups, and the different fractions of Swedish America. This identity was shaped by Swedish history, language, and traditions as well as American cultural contexts and political ideals. Historian Jon Gjerde calls it a “complementary identity,” one that “pledged allegiance to both American citizenship and ethnic adherence.” Swedish Americans used the community institutions they established to create,

---

86. L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, November 24, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
87. Stasiewicz, 385-386.
88. Blanck, 6-7. Major factions of Swedish Americans included the Augustana Synod; other Swedish-American religious groups, like the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church and Swedish Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, and Adventists; secular groups, including newspapers and Swedish-American orders and lodges; and politically radical groups like Swedish-American Socialists. These factions differed on matters including politics, Americanization, and retention of Swedish, but united to demonstrate the might of Swedish America. Blanck, 36, 39.
89. The authenticity of the Swedish traditions is not important. The more salient point is that the Swedish-American ethnicity, constructed by Swedes in America who worked to reconcile their dual identities, was constantly evolving in response to forces within and outside of the Swedish-American community. Stasiewicz, 386-387.
practice, and exhibit their multiform identities, even as new American-born generations and fresh waves of immigrants kept Swedish America in flux.

The Augustana Synod, to which the Olssons and the Bethany congregation belonged, formed the largest fraction of Swedish Americans. In 1860, the Synod was founded as a Lutheran church body by the first wave of Swedish immigrants and by the turn of the century its members gathered in more than a thousand congregations across North America.91 Augustana Swedes were most numerous in the rural Midwest, home to the early waves of Swedish immigrants and their American-born children.92 Aiding the Synod’s influence was its establishment of hospitals, educational institutions, a publishing house, and homes for children and the elderly.

In 1877, Olof Olsson and his family left Lindsborg and the Bethany congregation to move deeper into the Synod’s organization. He accepted a position as professor of theology at Augustana College and Theological Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois.93 Another haven of Swedish America and the main educational arm of the Synod, the Augustana campus became the Olssons’ home for a decade. Lydia Olsson, still a young girl, was now enveloped by another Swedish ethnic community, this one surrounded by the more diverse population of the Tri Cities (Davenport, Iowa, and Rock Island and Moline, Illinois) located on both sides of the Mississippi River. Looking back on the early Rock Island years in her diary, she remembered “when Young and Hult used to come down evenings and chat and tease and read by that big fat stove, when we used to bring lunch upon the hills, pick flowers and have all kinds of innocent gayities, when I attended ‘Fair View,’ … [and went] up to the old old Chapel for lectures, entertainments, singing

91 Blanck, 3.
92 Blanck 33, 35. This led to a version of Swedish ethnicity dominated by memories and stories of early- to mid-nineteenth century Sweden and a focus on art, history, and religion. Later waves of immigrants were less interested in religion and therefore less likely to join a religious organization like the Synod. Stasiewicz, 387; Blanck 34-35.
93 Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 113.
and meeting.”94 These were happy days, filled with fun, learning, and celebrations of the community’s ethnic identity.

Figure 1.4. (L to R) Lydia, Mia, Anna, Hannes, and Olof Olsson. Folder 11, Box 16, in MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

94 L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, February 9, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Fair View Academy was a primary and secondary school for girls run by Anna Reck, the widow of an Augustana College professor. Boaden, 36.
“Oh! there is nothing like a home in America”: A Visit to Europe, a New Home in America

The happy days did not last. Anna Lisa Olsson died of heart failure at the age of forty-six in 1887, just weeks before Lydia’s thirteenth birthday. In mourning, Olof Olsson resigned his professorship and moved the family temporarily back to Lindsborg, whose residents gave him a monetary gift that enabled him to take his children on a European tour, one that would allow them to come to terms with their loss. It was during that trip that Lydia’s sister Anna Olsson came to contemplate her identity as an American. Reflecting on a disappointing visit to Sweden (her first since leaving twenty-one years earlier), Anna wrote:

This is the last evening we are in Europe…. It seems too good to be true that we are going back again! I have enjoyed my stay in Europe so much and value it more than thousands of dollars, but I like to get back to America more than I can explain; there seems to be no home for us any place but in America. And as for Sweden, I never could expect that I could have felt as strange in Sweden as I really did. I got such a dislike to Sweden that I don’t know if I ever can get rid of it. So much drinking and other detestable things go on there, especially among the classes who want to be considered refined, that I thoroughly hate the so called “hättre herrarne.”

Finally, a chance to see the homeland so treasured by her mother: the beautiful landscape, the family members who stayed behind, the home of great literary and historical figures. What a disappointment it must have been to find reality instead of the beloved stories imbued with the shimmer of sagas. But it confirmed what Olsson already knew: she was Swedish by birth, but American at heart. “How can one express one’s joy when seeing America after a year’s absence from it,” she asked, several weeks later. “The very houses seem to welcome one, these neat American cottages, with their little verandas and bay windows. Oh! there is nothing like a home

---

95 Brorson, 56.
96 Olson 227, 229.
97 A. Olsson, Diary, June 17, 1890, Olsson Family Papers. “Hättre herrarne” translates to something like “better gentlemen.”
in America especially if one can call it one’s own!”  
Lydia left behind no record of the trip, but as an American, born and bred, she perhaps shared her sister’s sentiments. They belonged in the United States; regardless of their heritage, America was home.

Upon returning from Europe, the Olssons spent a short time in Woodhull, Illinois. In 1891, he accepted a call to his highest position within the Synod: president of Augustana College and Theological Seminary. The family moved back onto campus, this time into the president’s home. Augustana was the Synod’s only seminary, which meant that all of its ordained ministers trained at the school. Speaking to the incoming classes of 1892, Olof Olsson stated that it was the school’s mission to “bind together all Swedes in America in a Swedish-American Lutheran church” by educating the Augustana clergy and its lay members. Together, these Augustana Swedes would have a “common education on a Christian basis,” one that was built on both Swedish and American educational traditions. The school was founded with the intention of offering students both Swedish- and English-language instruction; the early leaders recognized that their students would need to function in an English-speaking society. While Swedish instruction diminished over time, a Swedish Department, Swedish-oriented student organizations, and lectures on Swedish subjects kept the school’s ethnic heritage alive.

Lydia Olsson was an active member of the campus community. She took classes in the Preparatory Department and the Business College: “Great Cesar! He drilled us four on the

---

98 A. Olsson, Diary, July 4, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
99 Boaden, 21-22.
100 O. Olsson as quoted in Blanck, 57.
101 Blanck, 53-54, 57.
102 Blanck, 59. There was tension between the first two presidents over the balance of Swedish and American elements. Founding president Lars Paul Esbjorn wanted to preserve the college’s Swedish character, while second president T. N. Hasselquist argued that Augustana would only survive as “a complete American College.” Olof Olsson, the third president sought a middle ground, but emphasized the importance of using English in class and in the mandatory morning prayer sessions. Boaden, 3; Blanck, 62.
103 Blanck, 103.
type-writer for speed to-day and my how we did go it. I got six letters written in 30 min.”\textsuperscript{104} She joined organizations celebrating Swedish and American heritage, including the Swedish Ladies Chorus, the Augustana Foreign Missionary Society, and the Phrenokosmian Society.\textsuperscript{105} One Phrenokosmian meeting included a debate on the question “Är det rätt att försvara samling med svärdet?” (Is it right to protect the assembly with the sword?) She wrote, “When the first person got up I tho’t he was surely right and when the neg. gave his arguments I thought he was right…. That discussion put ‘myror’ [ants] in my head to be sure.”\textsuperscript{106} Olsson attended morning prayers and weekly services in chapel. By participating in the academic, secular, and religious aspects of campus life, Olsson constructed her own ethnic identity and helped shape that of the community.

Figure 1.5. Swedish Ladies Chorus, 1898. C-D00123, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

\textsuperscript{104} L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, February 15, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{105} Blanck, 56, 81-84. Phrenokosmian meetings were conducted alternately in Swedish and English.
\textsuperscript{106} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, January 26, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
“The only American girl”: Netta Bartholomew

Lydia Olsson’s close friend Netta Bartholomew, herself a professor’s daughter, was one of the few non-Swedes in Olsson’s social circle. In fact, Bartholomew later described herself as “the only American girl among my schoolmates.”107 She had come to Augustana in 1888 when her father, Edward Fry Bartholomew, accepted a position as professor of English and philosophy. At first she had felt like an outsider looking in. Swedish was the dominant language on campus, the students ate Swedish food, and Augustana Synod services differed from what she had experienced before. The church music was “ponderous and mournful” and she struggled to keep up with “a language [she] did not understand.” Coming from a “typical small American prairie college town, where … there was nobody of foreign birth,” Bartholomew must have felt like she was suddenly transported to Sweden.108

To Lydia Olsson, Bartholomew may have seemed just as foreign. An American girl, born to American parents, Bartholomew was one step further removed from her immigrant ancestors. Spirited and intelligent, Bartholomew was outspoken when she felt mistreated. Enrolled in the college, Bartholomew noted that the male students “did not care for us [women] as students. [They were] so scornful of ‘women’s rights’ about which everybody was then talking, and so given to the old world tradition of regarding education for women a waste of time…. I very much resented this male assumption of superiority.”109 Olsson, also spirited but bound by her position as president’s daughter, likely appreciated Bartholomew’s perspective. And she may have enjoyed Bartholomew’s success in combating the gender discrimination she faced on

campus, including successfully demanding entry into the all-male Adelphic literary society and becoming the first woman to speak publicly in Augustana’s chapel.\textsuperscript{110} In her diary, Olsson records another of Bartholomew’s speeches. “This morning I went to the Seminary course of the Senior class. I enjoyed it very much. Netta was the first one, then Mr. Stewart criticized her and that was terrible! He simply told her that she had copied everything from diff. critics.”\textsuperscript{111} Clearly Bartholomew’s efforts had not changed the opinion of all men on campus. But Olsson appreciated this American girl and her bold actions. She had a positive opinion of Americans, including their free and forthright behavior.

Figure 1.6. Netta Bartholomew. C-N00054, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{110} Boaden, 61. Bartholomew notes that her boundary-breaking speech was “The True Greatness of the American Nation.” Fitting on a campus where—although Swedish culture still dominated—Americanization was encouraged. Netta Bartholomew Anderson, “The True Greatness of the American Nation,” oration, 1892, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{111} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, February 2, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.}
A Community of Readers: Establishing Identity through Books and the Periodical Press

While Augustana College and Theological Seminary provided a Christian education for Lydia Olsson, Netta Bartholomew, and other students, the Augustana Book Concern and Synod-sponsored publications reached a far larger Swedish-American audience. Language retention was important to their ethnic identity, as was the dissemination of cultural knowledge.\textsuperscript{112} Swedish Americans could participate in the creation of their identity by reading, circulating, and contributing to the hundreds of Swedish-language newspapers published in the United States, or by reading or writing some of the many books printed by Swedish American presses.\textsuperscript{113} Scholar Ulf Jonas Björk argues that immigrant newspapers were essentially “community papers,” serving “communities defined by ethnicity rather than physical territory.”\textsuperscript{114} Swedish-American newspapers, like other immigrant papers, were places to share and celebrate ethnic heritage, but also to learn Swedish and American news and discuss the issues of the day. The Augustana Synod’s members spread across an entire continent, yet they could unite through Swedish-American publications.

Anna Olsson wrote fiction and nonfiction that celebrated and promoted the Swedish language and her personal Swedish-American story. Her work appeared in both Swedish and English periodicals and she was published by the Augustana Book Concern.\textsuperscript{115} She also translated German children’s tales into Swedish, promoting language retention among Swedish-American children. Throughout her literary career Olsson shared a home with her sister

---

\textsuperscript{112} Stasiewicz, 401.

\textsuperscript{113} Dag Blanck notes that the Swedish-American press was only second in size to the German-American press in the United States, publishing up to 1,000 Swedish-language newspapers. Some of the Augustana Synod publications included the newspaper Hemlandet, the official periodical Augusta, the annual literary calendar Präriebloomman, and the monthly magazine Ungdomsvänner. Blanck, 26, 31.

\textsuperscript{114} Ulf Jonas Björk as quoted in Lintelman, 210.

\textsuperscript{115} Boaden, 24.
Lydia, and while it is unknown how frequently Lydia read or commented on Olsson’s work, it is likely that she too balanced her Swedish heritage and American life.


“True American” was high praise from Olsson, who admired American values and characteristics. She reserved this compliment for the March family and Clarence Cederquist, an Augustana College student whom she was coming to admire. As for what made an American true, Olsson may have considered some of the qualities celebrated in the pages of *Little Women*, including generosity, industry, independence, common sense, loyalty to country, and free-and-easy ways. As one of the novel’s minor characters observes, “Young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves.” Olsson observed and emulated the March women’s behavior, praising those in her community with similar attributes.

**“Never before have the Swedes so united”: Celebrating Swedish Heritage**

Some days, though, were meant for being Swedish. Regardless of the differences among them, Swedish Americans across the United States came together to celebrate their ethnic

---

117 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892; Thursday, December 15, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
heritage. In 1888 they assembled in Minneapolis to honor the 250th anniversary of the New Sweden colony.\textsuperscript{119} Five years later, on June 9, 1893, twenty thousand Swedish Americans descended on the Augustana College and Theological Seminary campus for a Jubilee celebrating the 300th anniversary of Sweden’s becoming a Lutheran nation.\textsuperscript{120} This was a major event for President Olsson and the campus community. Lydia Olsson looked forward to it with great anticipation. “Dear, I do wonder how our Jubilee will turn out?” she wrote. “No doubt it will be quite grand!”\textsuperscript{121} They booked “that grand organist” Clarence Eddy, arranged for speeches by Synod leaders, and hoped for good weather.\textsuperscript{122} The Olssons hosted Bishop K. G. von Schéele, representative for the King of Sweden.

The event was a triumph, leaving Augustana Swedish Americans all the more excited about an upcoming national celebration of Swedish heritage. On July 20, 1893, little more than a month after Jubilee, Swedish Americans from all secular and religious factions united to celebrate “Swedish Day” at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Lydia Olsson attended, likely as part of a contingent of Augustana students and faculty.\textsuperscript{123} She joined tens of thousands of other Swedish Americans who descended on Chicago to participate in concerts, speeches, and a parade featuring more than fifty Swedish American organizations. The Swedish-American press proclaimed that “never before have the Swedes so united and so completely gathered around the blue and yellow flag.”\textsuperscript{124} Exposition Commissioner Thomas B. Bryan gave a speech praising Swedish immigrants as “pioneers of civilization” who surpassed all

\textsuperscript{119} Blanck, 39.
\textsuperscript{121} L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, April 6, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{122} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, April 11, 1893; Monday, May 1, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{123} L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 3, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
other immigrant groups in “opening up our continent” and in displaying “loyalty to the Union.” At this moment, it was clear the Swedish-American ethnic project was a success.

Jubilee and “Swedish Day” were events to remember, but annual holidays gave Swedish Americans regular opportunities to exhibit their ethnic identity on a smaller scale. Jul (Christmas) and Luciadagen (St. Lucia’s Day) brought Swedish-American families together in order to celebrate their religious heritage and customs. Lydia Olsson spent Jul with family and friends, commenting, “I guess Christmas day is the longest day in the year for us Swedes.” In addition to observing the widespread traditions of decorating a tree and exchanging gifts,


125 Thomas B. Bryan as quoted in Huntsha.
126 Stasiewicz, 394; Jaderborg, 49.
Swedish Americans attended *Julotta*, a pre-dawn church service. Olsson noted her day started before three in the morning, when she lit candles in the windows of her family home. An hour later, friends arrived to drink coffee and walk to church. “It wasn’t cold,” she wrote, “and the snow fell lovely so it was very pleasant.” Olsson attended a church festival with friends and family in the evening, then likely celebrated *Annandag Jul*, an afternoon service, the next day.

Lydia Olsson came of age at the height of the Swedish-American ethnic project, as Swedes in America reckoned with their new dual identity. She heard tales of the glorious homeland from her parents and grew up in Swedish enclaves, first on the Kansas prairie, then in an Illinois city. In her diary, she had little to say directly on the subject of her Swedish-American identity, but her actions speak volumes. She celebrated her ethnicity on the Augustana campus through clubs, events, and holidays. But as a daughter of immigrants, Olsson aspired to become more like American girls, including her friend Netta Bartholomew and Louisa May Alcott’s March sisters. She and her family benefited from their religious identity and their racial and social status, which allowed them greater privileges than other immigrants when it came to navigating between their ethnic and American identities. Olsson’s Swedish heritage and American life colored her notions of ideal womanhood, friendship, and marriage, as discussed below. As a result, her choices reflect the push and pull between the facets of her identity.

She was the result of her parents’ decision to leave Sweden, the culmination of a mass migration followed by Americanization. Lydia Olsson was a true Swedish American.

---

128 Jaderborg, 43.
130 Jaderborg, 43.
Interlude Two

Somewhat of a Problem Child¹

Applause rang out, the sound of hundreds of clapping hands echoing in the chilly two-story college chapel. Netta Bartholomew shook herself out of a daze. Professor Williamson had finished his speech and was acknowledging the approval of the crowd. The student reception so far had been a great success. First Alma Larson had performed on the organ, followed by a violin solo from Andrew Axelson and a duet by Amy Huey and Eva Entrikin. Now that the professor was done there was only one name left on the program. Hers.

Netta suspected her speech was only included to avoid offending her father, the professor of English. The men in charge certainly did not believe it was a woman’s place to speak in public, but as a growing number of women enrolled in college departments the old rules were beginning to bend. And Netta was there, ready to take advantage and push for more equality between the sexes. Today she had a chance to air her views in front of the faculty and the whole student body. Suddenly, her speech did not seem like such a good idea. She smoothed her skirts, nervous. Her knees felt like they were made of jelly, but she pushed herself out of the hard wooden chair. Slowly, she made her way to the speaking platform, making sure to keep a tight hold on her handwritten pages. Dropping them would be humiliating, a bad start to her performance.

It would be a performance, of course, and she was the dancing monkey. Now on the platform she looked out, seeing an ocean of pale faces, most of them men and boys. There wasn’t a vacant seat in the room. It appeared as though everyone had turned out to see the fun, a girl trying to make a speech. Netta couldn’t seem to take a full breath; her stays pinched her uncomfortably. How was she expected to stand in front of these men and speak? Why was she always rushing into things like a fool? Somehow she made it to the pulpit. Behind her, the electric lights hanging above the stained-glass window flickered.

Placing her speech on the surface, she gripped the sides of the wooden lectern and faced her audience. She saw some of her friends sitting together a few rows back: Lydia Olsson, Sarah Lawson, and Lillie Cervin. Netta took a breath. The president, Olof Olsson, sat next to her father, mother, and her younger sister, Cotta. Her brothers were at home in bed, too young to stay up for such an exciting night. Her father looked proud; her mother smiled at her in encouragement; Cotta grinned.

Netta took another breath, straightening. Her stays may be rigid, but they were her armor. They would help her stand tall and proud at the pulpit while she gave her speech. And her friends and family were here to cheer her on. Feeling more confident, Netta peered up at the faces in the balcony. There were some of her male classmates, Frank Engstrand and Fred Wicklund. And Anton Youngdahl, of course. She squinted—was he looking at her with his opera glasses? The scoundrel! But she would get even with him.

---

¹ This interlude was inspired by passages from the following sources: Netta Bartholomew, “We Girls” speech, 1891, Bartholomew Anderson Papers; Anton C. Youngdahl, “Woman” speech, circa 1895, Bartholomew Anderson Papers; Netta Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago Through a Co-ed's Eye,” circa 1944, Bartholomew Anderson Papers; Glen E. Brander, An Historical Survey of the Augustana College Campus. Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1992. For detailed references, please see the endnotes.
Youngdahl was one of the reasons why Netta was speaking at the student reception tonight. She thought back to his speech on “Woman,” inspired by that ridiculous toast making the rounds. Specifically, he had focused on the line: “Woman - the fairest work of the Great Author, the edition is large and no man should be without a copy.” The speech had been a disgrace, objectifying women as beautiful things to be acquired by men. Of course, Youngdahl had been sly, smirking at his audience while tossing off lines about women with gilt edges. Netta could never tell how much he was in earnest about these things and how much he said to provoke her and the other girls.

She thought back to her days at Carthage College, where her father had once taught. There women were equal to men; there was no thought of discrimination against them because of their sex, nor was their right to an education ever questioned. At Augustana she was finally considered a young lady, old enough to enroll in college courses. So it stung even more that many of her male classmates did not see her as an equal. These Swedes were scornful of women’s rights and disapproved of giving girls access to higher education. They made Netta furious, with their assumptions of their own superiority. Somehow she always ended up in situations like these, giving a speech to the campus community. It was no wonder she had a reputation for being somewhat of a problem child.

Ignoring Youngdahl, Netta straightened her pages, then looked out once more at the crowd. She cleared her throat and began. “Talk about conceit as much as you like,” says Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘it is to human character what salt is to the ocean; it keeps it sweet and renders it endurable.’ Every great genius has a liberal share of conceit, and we girls are not an exception to the rule.” She paused, allowing the audience a moment to absorb the fact that she had just equated girls with great geniuses. Then, with a twinkle in her eye, she continued. “Our vanity is not like that of the English man, who, it is said, in his own mind is the first of all things, the center of the solar system. We do not consider ourselves centers of solar systems though sometimes sons are found revolving around us, and we have been known to cause lunar perturbations and are the conspicuous objects of stellar gazings—the cynosure of all eyes. We are content if we can contribute a humble share toward keeping society sweet and making it endurable.”

This wasn’t so bad, thought Netta. She looked up at that cluster of faces on the balcony, Youngdahl’s words ringing in her ears. At the Cleveland Convention some witty divine commenting on the woman question in the Methodist Church, remarked that: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and then he rested. He then created man and again he rested. Then he created woman, since that time neither man nor God has rested.”

So women’s only contribution was havoc, was it? Netta would show him. “Yes though we are but few here,” she declared, “yet we have conceit enough to think that we are of some value, not only to society, in general, but to Augustana College in particular. Mr. Mackintosh has said: ‘Every American is a declaration of Independence’ and so, when in the course of human events it becomes necessary for us to assume the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of Augustana College entitle us, we girls, having the true American spirit, make bold to declare our Independence.” She saw Lillie and Sarah laughing in their seats, and even Wicklund had a hint of a smile on his face.

In her head, Youngdahl responded. Some time ago I heard the etymological meaning of the word woman explained by a Presbyterian minister in my home town, in the following wise. He said, Eve was the appropriate name for the first woman, for wo-man means woe-to-man, and as woe had now come to man, so the eve of his happiness was nigh. Really, what nonsense! She
It seems to be so universal in speaking about woman to always associate with her beauty in its highest form. Of course there might be a few who would object when they see some of these latter day freaks riding the bicycle. Latter-day freaks? Was that the best he could do?

She forged on, bolstered equally by determination and her womanly armor. “We girls have our likes and dislikes. We like to feel that Augustana College is a home, we dislike to feel that it is a prison. We like to be trusted—we dislike to be always watched. We like to be praised when we are worthy of praise, but we dislike to be flattered. In man we like a noble, manly bearing, but we dislike a fawning, sneaking character.” She glanced at Youngdahl. “We admire and reverence true scholarly worth but we dislike hollow, hypocritical pretence.” There, she had said it. She made it clear that the college was not an idyllic place of learning to all.

Still, Youngdahl’s voice persisted. *We expect from an author in his mature years the best of his works. That the finest material for the make up of such a volume is used is nothing uncommon, and, of course, in such a case, it must be ornamented in every possible way as artistically as human ingenuity can devise. The morocco binding and gilt edge are never forgotten. At any rate the top at least must be a gilt edge. This gives us in some measure a picture, though faint, of the fairest work, namely woman. She is the last and great work, more handsomely made, numerically greater, fairer, more artistically ornamented than man. Gilt edges indeed!*”

Netta looked to her friends, seeing that Lydia and the others were watching her intently. It was to them she addressed her next words. “But now a word among ourselves. None of us claim to be beautiful but we console ourselves with the thought that no matter how homely the face, if there is a beautiful spirit within us, that reflects itself on our face, it can not help but be beautiful. On such a face is never seen the vacant stare of the idiot but the clear placid aspect of truth and goodness. The woman who has such a face is beautiful. She has a beauty which changes not with the features, which fades not with the years. It is a beauty of expression; and it is the only kind of beauty which can be relied upon for a permanent influence with the other sex. And so if we girls will be the beautifying, uplifting power in the world that we hope and plan for, we must cultivate the beautiful within us.”

In her head Youngdahl’s voice threatened again, but this time Netta drowned out his words with her own. “While we do not expect the world to revolve around us, yet some day we hope to move the world, being as we have already moved Heaven or as it is better known to you—Hashmium. The world moves and with it Augustana College, seeing that it allows one of us girls a place on a public program.” Netta nodded to President Olsson, who had a thoughtful expression on his face. “Yes it moves for the time was when we were not admitted here as students and much has allowed a voice on such an important occasion. Now we have no sage advice to give nor many pleas to make for though things may move slowly now, still we are sure that with each passing year, bringing increased numbers of us girls, things will be improved.” She looked up at her male classmates. Engstrand looked bored. Youngdahl was whispering something to Wicklund. Netta remembered—how could she forget?—how he had concluded his despicable speech.

*Woman—the fairest work—a large edition,—no man should be without a copy. We will not talk about quality and price. Each one must investigate for himself before a bargain is made. May these few thoughts lie deeply in our hearts in the near future and the result be shown at a future reunion of the Class of ’94.*
Netta took a deep breath and looked straight at Youngdahl. Her final words were for him and any other man who still believed women didn’t belong at the college. “For the present we are content to know that we are the pride of the Institution, the cynosure of all eyes, the hope of the country; we are content to know that in the future you, gazing at us in astonishment, when you listen to one of us girls charming large audiences with the rich cadences of our music, when you listen to another, by her eloquence winning over the world to recognize human rights, when you listen to the words of wisdom falling from the lips of that learned professor, when you read the books of that famous Authoress—I say you, gazing at us in wonder and admiration will point to us and say with a pardonable ring of pride in your voice, ‘She was my classmate.’” Triumphantly, Netta looked out into the crowd. Let us see what they thought of that!

The audience was silent, stunned by her bold declaration. Whispering broke out among the students, and still Netta waited. Then she heard it: applause. Lydia, Lillie, and Sarah clapped their hands furiously, smiling with delight. Her parents and Cotta joined in. Even President Olsson applauded politely, as did some male students like Wicklund. Others stayed silent or muttered to their neighbors. Netta wasn’t surprised—she knew most of them considered her disruptive at best. An American girl. And there was Youngdahl, grinning from ear to ear as he saluted her with an elaborate bow, one speechmaker to another. Netta didn’t care whether he did so in jest or seriousness. Somehow she had done it. She had given her speech, declaring women students just as worthy as their male classmates, asserting that Augustana would someday be proud of their accomplishments. Maybe now the men would stop struggling to exclude them. Oh, not all of them, she knew, but each time a woman spoke up and demanded equality on campus, the tide turned a bit more in their favor.

Netta was certain: a new day was dawning at Augustana, and women like her would be ready to take advantage of it.

* * * * *

Chapter Two

A Bridge between the True Woman and the New Woman: Lydia Olsson’s Female Network and Changing Ideals of Womanhood

The night was dreary, damp with a bit of a chill. The Sunday evening service had concluded and students dispersed into the dark November night, chatting with companions as they made their way back to their rooms. Lydia Olsson walked towards the president’s house, accompanied by Clarence Cederquist. He was a new student at Augustana College and, although Lydia did not yet know him well, she admired his gentlemanly behavior. She enjoyed his
presence, but she refused when he asked her for her regular company on Sundays. Later she wrote in her diary that he “felt rather insulted” so she “wrote a note to him this evening and explained matters.” She was a pastor’s daughter, raised in a household where the Word of God held great importance. And she was a young woman living at a time when a woman’s claim to purity determined her reputation in polite society. Having a regular escort to and from evening chapel services might seem acceptable, but she disapproved of “little girls running around with regular company.” And she was very aware of those on campus observing her behavior, noting that “the ‘Hashamia’ girls,” or resident’s of Ladies’ Hall, “are forever sneering at me if they see me in company with a young man.”

Netta Bartholomew—an American girl and a professor’s daughter—might give speeches about women’s rights on campus, but Lydia Olsson—a Swedish-American girl and the president’s daughter—had to be careful of her reputation.

Lydia Olsson, Netta Bartholomew, and their female peers became young women during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At the time, the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood was giving way to the emerging notion of the New Woman, and girls in their late teens and early twenties had to navigate the transition, defining themselves and the boundaries of their behavior. Olsson’s Swedish Lutheran heritage also played a role in shaping her girlhood. Her parents and older family members had grown up with Swedish notions of ideal womanhood and evolving women’s rights legislation, influencing how they raised their daughters. Olsson wrote, after having a bad day, “Can’t sleep—too much bothering this stupid head of mine.” She could easily have been referring to the challenge of finding her way through the cacophony of advice from family, peers, and experts about how young women should conduct themselves.

---

2 L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, November 20, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. Hashamayim means “the heavens” or “abode of angels” in Hebrew. Ladies’ Hall—the women’s dormitory on campus—was referred to as “Hashmium” or “Hashamayum” and its occupants the “Hashamia.” Netta Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls” speech, 1891, Bartholomew Anderson Papers; Brolander, 29; L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, November 18, 1892.

3 L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, December 14, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
Women in Sweden

Olof Olsson and Anna Lisa Jonsdotter grew up in a patriarchal society in which middle- and upper-class women were expected to be submissive to men, embrace domesticity, and observe the norms of genteel respectability.⁴ Although girls learned to read and write, as required by church and state, most did not receive any further education. They were presumably destined to marry and raise children, so helping at home was seen as more appropriate than attending school.⁵ In effect, girls were apprenticed to their mothers, assisting them with food preparation, cleaning, caring for younger siblings, and weaving textiles by the age of seven.⁶ Adult women were not encouraged to work outside the home after marriage; unmarried women’s opportunities were limited by their socioeconomic status. A peasant woman might become a piga (servant girl), working on farms and in homes. Middle- and upper-class women taught school or found employment in nursing or related fields.⁷

Legally, women’s position in Sweden improved over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Lawmakers debated their competence and equality to men in society. When considering legislation tied to women’s property rights, some argued that women were weaker vessels, less well-informed than men and in need of their protection.⁸ Others took the stance that women were not so vulnerable: they were well-equipped to take care of themselves and their children.⁹ Advocates of women’s rights argued that women’s contributions to society were of

---

⁵ Lintelman, 34.
⁶ Lintelman, 30.
⁷ Lintelman, 44.
⁸ Ågren, 94.
⁹ Ågren, 83.
equal value to those of men and that the work women did to raise the next generation was especially critical to a well-functioning state.\(^\text{10}\)

Beginning in the 1840s, when Lydia Olsson’s parents were still young children, Swedish women benefited from a series of new laws. In 1845, women attained rights of inheritance equal to men’s. The next year they gained the right to practice certain trades independently. The 1850s and 1860s saw the establishment of teacher-training schools for women and their graduates began teaching in elementary schools. Under a law enacted in 1858, single women over the age of twenty-five could make an official request to become legal adults, and in 1884 this right was extended to all women twenty-one and older.\(^\text{11}\) In 1862, women gained the right to vote in local elections, and in 1864 Sweden’s national legislature ruled that single women could establish small businesses of their own. That same year, husbands lost the legal right to beat their wives.\(^\text{12}\) In 1870, a year after the Olssons immigrated to the United States, women were allowed to take university admission exams; soon after, in 1873, women became eligible to earn degrees (except in law and theology).\(^\text{13}\) Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson likely learned of these reforms from their old-country correspondents and new Swedish immigrants. The couple certainly supported the higher education of their daughters.

Despite these legal advances, many single Swedish women—including several of the Olssons’ hired girls—decided to emigrate at the turn of the century. The most popular destination was the United States, where they were promised more personal freedom, a larger pool of potential spouses, a higher social status, and better wages.\(^\text{14}\) Married immigrant women like Anna Lisa Olsson were obligated to follow male family members to a new country. In the United States, Sweden Institute, 1993), 15.

\(^{10}\) Ågren, 182-183.
\(^{11}\) Lintelman, 42, 78.
\(^{13}\) Lintelman, 42; Jacobsson and Alfredsson, 15.
\(^{14}\) Lintelman, 56.
States they encountered what the historian Barbara Welter calls the “Cult of True Womanhood,” which was familiar to those used to Swedish ideals of domesticity and respectability.

**American Ideals: The Cult of True Womanhood**

“Woman,” writes Welter, “was a hostage in the home.”\(^\text{15}\) Like eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Swedish ideals of womanhood, the American Cult of True Womanhood, as defined by the secular and religious press, stressed women’s passivity. A True Woman was pious, pure, submissive, and domestic.\(^\text{16}\) She was defined in her relationships to others—as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow—and depended on the men in her life to care for her. Netta Bartholomew’s classmate Anton Youngdahl claimed that the biblical Eve and her daughters brought an end to men’s happiness.\(^\text{17}\) But a True Woman was a “better Eve,” a good wife, mother, and friend.\(^\text{18}\) She put the needs of others before her own, prioritizing her domestic duties and good works. Religion gave her strength and sexual purity gave her femininity. Men like Youngdahl might like to “investigate” potential spouses, but it was up to women to remain chaste before marriage.\(^\text{19}\) Lydia Olsson, in refusing Clarence Cederquist’s request to escort her to Sunday evening services, reinforced her claims to purity. In her mind, young women with regular escorts were one step away from allowing more compromising liberties.\(^\text{20}\)

A True Woman was submissive, obedient, and pliant, but that did not mean she was inferior. Like Swedish advocates of women’s rights, the American periodical press valued women’s work in the sense that the country depended on them to raise the next generation of

---

16 Welter, 152.
17 Youngdahl, “Woman” speech, circa 1895, Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2.
18 Welter, 152, 154.
19 Youngdahl, 6; Welter, 157.
Christian leaders. A woman’s place was in the home, the press argued, because her work there helped uphold American society. She had to be patient, gentle, and merciful; skilled at nursing, household duties, and dispensing comfort and cheer. In short, the nation depended on her to be the angel of the home.

An “angelic lady”: Anna Lisa Olsson

In Värmland, Sweden, and Lindsborg, Kansas, Anna Lisa Olsson was called an “angel of mercy.” A pious woman prone to charity, Lydia Olsson’s mother exemplified overlapping Swedish and American ideals of womanhood. As a pastor’s wife, she brought food and clothing to the poor members of her husband’s parish and nursed the sick. Contemporary Nils J. Forsberg remembered: “It was no uncommon sight on a Sunday afternoon to see the pastor and his radiant young wife, laden with packages on their way to the huts of the poor, who at these visits were given both bodily and spiritual food.” One of the parishioners called her an “angelic lady.” She was beautiful as well as useful, busy tending her husband’s flock.

Caring for the poor may have been wearying, but a True Woman faced her ultimate test with the early death of a child. Anna Lisa Olsson bore eight children; only four survived to adulthood. On June 24, 1872, Olsson gave birth to a baby boy named Johannes. She later wrote to a friend that it was her “great joy” to see such a “dear child.” When Johannes died just over a month later on July 27, she wrote, “I lacked so in judgement and grieved so much that I became ill as a result.” Olsson’s daughter Anna remembered that her mother cut a lock of the baby’s

---

21 Welter, 171.  
22 Welter, 163.  
23 Anna Olsson as quoted in Brorson, 9.  
24 Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 4.  
25 Welter, 161.  
26 Brorson, 38.  
hair and kept it in her Bible. “Mamma she cries and cries,” she wrote. “She feels so bad ’cause Little Brother is dead.”29 But a True Woman recognized that God knew best and Olsson was eventually able to reconcile herself to her son’s death. In the same letter to her friend, she wrote that even when events go “against what I wish … ‘God’s ways are not our ways.’” She acknowledged that “I felt that I attached myself so much to him,” then continued, “But the Lord loved him still more and took him to Himself when he was only a month and two days old.”30 As a toddler, Lydia—born two years after Johannes’ death—witnessed her mother’s fresh grief over the death of another son in 1876. Resigning herself to give one child to God was difficult enough; witnessing the deaths of four children in less than a decade (while giving birth to three others) must have challenged Olsson’s faith to the core. When Olsson died at the age of forty-six, her family was similarly forced to accept the fate God had given them.

Anna Lisa Olsson left few traces in the historical record, appearing most frequently when scholars mention her in relation to her husband, Olof Olsson. Like a good True Woman, she did not exist independently of her husband; she was in large part silent, unseen.31 To Alf Brorson, author of Olsson’s only biography, she was a devoted and faithful wife. In Mrs. Olof Olsson: The Story of Anna Lisa Jonsdotter and her Swedish-American Family, Brorson frequently refers to her as “wife Anna” and “Mrs. Olof Olsson.”32 He populates his book with phrases such as “Mrs. Olsson never complained,” and “she shared not only her husband’s life but also his vision.”33 Yet it was precisely because of these qualities, Brorson argued, that Olof Olsson was able to succeed as a pastor and later as a leader in the Augustana Synod. During the early Lindsborg years, for

29 A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 139.
31 Welter, 155, 160.
32 See, for example, Brorson, viii, 17, 26, 39. Brorson states that he refers to her in this manner to avoid confusing “wife Anna” with her daughter, Anna Olsson. But the solution seems as simple as using the second name in his book’s title - not “Mrs. Olof Olsson,” but “Anna Lisa.” Anna Lisa Olsson (née Jonsdotter) seems more solid on the page than “wife Anna.”
33 Brorson, 37, 39.
example, Pastor Olsson frequently traveled across Kansas to preach and fulfill his political

duties. He might come home only once a month, leaving Anna Lisa Olsson to “endure the

consequences”: taking care of their children, the household, and the farm.34 A True Woman was

submissive, but how far did her forgiving nature last when left for long stretches of time with

small children underfoot, snakes in the house, cattle trampling her crops, and cyclones

thundering through the valley?35 Brorson agreed with historian and theologian Conrad

Bergendoff, who wrote:

Too little attention has hitherto been given to the wife of the pastor…. Who has sought to
describe her service and trials as the pioneer pastor was gone for weeks at a time on his

missionary journeys? Complaints are often heard as to the pastor's low salary—who more

than she endured the consequences? What was her place in the difficult days of language

transition with its dissensions? Yet in ministerial records, such as obituaries, her name

may not even be mentioned, and congregational histories take her for granted.36

He could have been writing about Anna Lisa Olsson, left at home while her husband traveled,

making do with what little money parishioners were able to pay their pastor, learning English

while longing for her beloved Sweden. When she is mentioned in the historical literature it is her

piety, her submission, and her domesticity that is celebrated. Thank goodness for wife Anna,

historians seem to say (that is, if they acknowledge her at all), thank goodness she was so good,

so devoted to her husband. What an angelic lady, the embodiment of a True Woman.

Anna Lisa Olsson’s archival record is equally slim, but here she emerges as a person in

her own right, independent of her spouse. The Olsson family papers at Augustana Special

Collections include a series of her drawings and an undated handwriting book she signed using

her maiden name.37 Historian Emory Lindquist translated a small collection of letters written by

---

34 Brorson, 46.
35 A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 9, 39, 94.
36 Conrad Bergendoff, The Augustana Ministerium: A Study of the Careers of the 2,504 Pastors of the Augustana

37 See the Anna Lisa Olsson series in the Olsson Family Papers finding aid, accessed March 4, 2021,

Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson to friends C. W. and Ulrika Weinberg in Sweden between 1869 and 1873. Anna Lisa Olsson penned five of the nine letters to Ulrika or “Ulla,” writing lively descriptions of the landscape around her, careful accounts of her livestock, and a gracious acknowledgement of the Weinbergs’ gifts to her family. She sent ears of corn (or maize) to her friend, asking “Did Ulla plant the corn I sent? … I thought it was fun to show you how large maize was.” In another letter she describes how the settlers pressed sugarcane stalks “when they are almost ripe and the juice is sweet, and then it is cooked until it is well thickened and it is the same as syrup in Sweden.” She speaks with pride about the family’s growing collection of livestock, including “3 milk cows … 3 pigs for butchering, and 4 small ones, 3 dozen hens, so we got a score of eggs a day for a long time.” And she thanks Weinberg for cloth, clothing, and other gifts sent from Sweden: “I thank you so personally and heartily for all the gifts which you have sent all of us…. Dear Ulla! What does it mean that you sacrifice so indescribably much for old friends who are so very far away?… my eyes moisten with tears of joy when I know that we are still remembered in the dear homeland.” Olsson may have exemplified multiple virtues of a True Woman, but she was not a two-dimensional paper doll included in periodicals alongside odes to the angel in the house. She was a person full of longings and complicated feelings about

42 Literature scholar Frances B. Cogan holds a dim view of Barbara Welter’s Cult of True Womanhood, which she argues has influenced readers to think that the vast mass of nineteenth-century American women were “mindless consumers and drudges of a male-dominated capitalist world” who demonstrated “tremendous idiocy.” She proposes a “competing ideal … [of] Real Womanhood,” one that situates a large number of women between the angelic True Women and the comparatively radical women’s rights advocates. The Real Woman accepted her place in a separate, female sphere, but pushed the boundaries of that space to accommodate her notions of duty and survival. The reality of nineteenth-century women’s lives meant that while they may have striven towards one or the other of these ideals, they likely compromised where necessary. I would argue that Anna Lisa Olsson fit within this spectrum rather than exclusively in the domain of the True Woman. Frances B. Cogan, All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 3-4.
her family’s new life in the United States, and her early death in 1887 left a three-dimensional hole for her oldest daughter to fill.

“Learn to labor, and to wait!”: Anna Olsson

When Anna Lisa Olsson died, her children grieved alongside their father. Olof Olsson, devoted to his beloved wife, never remarried. That left Anna Olsson (age twenty) to step into her mother’s role, running the household and caring for her younger siblings: Mia (seventeen), Lydia (twelve), and Hannes (nine).\(^{43}\) Olsson was a college student and in 1888 she became the second woman to graduate with a bachelor’s degree from Augustana College.\(^{44}\) She had hoped to continue her education, but if she were to live up to her mother’s legacy, she had to submerge her desires in order to serve her family.\(^{45}\) And as the American periodical press could tell her, a woman’s “true” education was the “gentle science of homemaking.”\(^{46}\)

During the family’s yearlong trip to Europe, beginning in May 1889, Anna Olsson struggled between her desire to learn and the need to attend to household tasks.\(^{47}\) “I am so dissatisfied with myself tonight, that, had I a room of my own, I would go there and cry, cry,” she wrote in Zürich, Switzerland. “I have so very little time for my studies, when all the house-hold duties have been attended to…. This made me dissatisfied and gloomy all day. Oh! how wrong!” Olsson had wished to make “some sacrifice” for her family, but found it challenging to accept her new position as housekeeper. “Have I considered the true meaning of the word sacrifice?!”

\(^{43}\) Jane Hunter noted the incapacitation or death of a mother, like Anna Lisa Olsson, ended her daughter’s existence as a relatively carefree girl. Anna Olsson could no longer pursue her girlhood desires for education. Instead, she put them aside in order to support her father and siblings. Hunter, 24.
\(^{44}\) Boaden, 20.
\(^{45}\) Welter, 160.
\(^{46}\) Welter, 166.
\(^{47}\) At different points throughout the trip the family rented living accommodations for months at a time. Based on her journal, Olsson and her sisters were responsible for at least some of the upkeep. See, for example, A. Olsson, Diary, October 1, 1889, and October 19, 1889, Olsson Family Papers.
she asked herself. “No!” She was loath to relinquish something so key to her identity—to throw away her dreams of becoming a scholar—but her sense of familial duty won out. She rededicated herself to her housework, adopting the mantra, “Learn to labor, and to wait!” Jane Hunter describes this act as “the project of female adolescence,” namely, “the obliteration of one kind of self and the assumption of another.” Olsson found it was impossible to fully immolate her scholarly ambitions, but she knew her place was now in the home, not the classroom.

Figure 2.1. Augustana College class of 1888. Anna Olsson, the only graduating woman, is seated in the front row. C-D00017, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

48 A. Olsson, Diary, January 30, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
50 Hunter, 101.
When the family returned to the United States in June 1890, Olsson’s household duties increased. “Today I was on my feet all day except a few minutes after coffee. My feet pain me very much.” Despite this, she was “glad to be of some use.”51 She resolved to study in her spare moments between washing dishes, baking bread, and ironing her father’s shirts. During this period the Olssons did not employ a hired girl, so Anna Olsson could not rely on a servant to take on the more difficult chores. But her sisters helped share the load: Mia often worked alongside Olsson and Lydia wiped dishes and assisted with other tasks. Yet Olsson felt exhausted in the evenings and consistently experienced pain in her feet. On one particularly grueling day in April 1891, she got up at six in the morning, made a fire, washed the dining room floor, made breakfast, dusted the dining room, gave her father coffee, made the beds, swept the bedrooms, swept the hall and stairs, and washed the dishes—all before noon. Then she made dinner (the noontime meal), cleared the table, washed the porch and front step, scrubbed the kitchen, made coffee, washed the dishes (with help from Lydia), cleaned the lamps, made supper, washed the dishes again, and went to town to do some shopping. At last she rested, somehow finding the energy to write in her journal.52

Still, Anna Olsson could not give up her dreams of going back to school. She documented the constant push and pull between housework and her studies throughout her journal.53 Living up to her mother’s example did not preclude an education. In fact, American magazines published articles meant to convince unmarried men that they need not fear educated wives.54 At the same time, women were expected to put their intellectual pursuits aside in favor of their household duties and religious commitments. Women who wished to pursue knowledge

51 A. Olsson, Diary, November 22, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
52 A. Olsson, Diary, April 18, 1891, Olsson Family Papers.
53 See, for example, A. Olsson, Diary February 8, 1890; June 26, 1890; September 13, 1890; October 4, 1890; January 14, 1891; January 27, 1891, Olsson Family Papers.
54 Welter, 167.
of the world outside the home—or, even worse, wanted to publish their work—were
“semi-women, mental hermaphrodites” says Welter, so far from the True Woman ideal they
could only be considered “nonwomen.”

Olsson was many years away from publishing her work, but she did “thirst” for
knowledge. “Even now,” she wrote, “in the midst of my daily toil, often when washing dishes,
sweeping, etc., the wish becomes so strong, the wish that I could sometime be able to study
philosophy that I have a hard struggle before I can quiet the storm in my heart.” She came up
with schedules and schemes to fit her studies into her spare moments, refusing to submit wholly
to domesticity: “Give up!—I cannot do that.” She admired (and envied?) those of her male
classmates who went on to earn additional degrees.

In October 1890 Olsson learned that classmate Bernard Anderson had enrolled in
Harvard University. She decided to look through a catalog of courses, and by early February
1891 had sent for a pamphlet on Harvard’s philosophy program and written a note to the
university secretary. That same day the Olssons heard the news that Augustana president T. N.
Hasselquist had died, and soon Anna’s father was called to fill the position. She put off her
dreams of Harvard and rededicated herself to taking care of her family, but when she learned
about university extension programs for “solitary students” her enthusiasm returned: “Now my
plan to stay at home and work, and take a little time for study shall, if God permits, be
realized.” There is no evidence that Olsson was able to enroll in an extension program, but she
may have filled some of her intellectual needs by teaching in the English department at
Augustana College and publishing books and articles for a Swedish-American audience. Though

55 Welter, 173.
56 A. Olsson, Diary, September 25, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
57 A. Olsson, Diary, October 7, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
58 A. Olsson, Diary, October 24, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
59 A. Olsson, Diary, February 4, 1891, Olsson Family Papers.
60 A. Olsson, Diary, April 18, 1891, Olsson Family Papers.
Anna Olsson tried to emulate the traits of a True Woman, she and her contemporaries—with their desires for education, employment, and personal freedoms—were something new.

American Ideals: The New Woman

Who was the American New Woman? Was she one of Anton Youngdahl’s latter-day freaks riding bicycles—the antithesis of his beautiful gilded woman bound in morocco? Or was she like Anna Olsson and Netta Bartholomew: young women who desired an education and opportunities equal to those of their male peers? As historian Martha H. Patterson poses the question, was the New Woman to be “celebrated as the agent and sign of progress or reviled as a traitor to the traditional family and by extension her race?”

Like the ideal of the True Woman, the New Woman was defined in periodicals and literature. The term “New Woman” was popularized by British writers Sarah Grande and Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) in their 1894 exchange in the North American Review. Grande, in her article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” defined the New Woman as someone who “proclaimed for herself what was wrong with the Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy.” In doing so, she positioned the New Woman ideal in direct opposition to the Cult of True Womanhood. A True Woman was pious, pure, submissive, and domestic; a New Woman was strong, educated, independent, and politically active.

Lydia Olsson and her peers came of age as the New Woman ideal exploded onto the scene. The emergence of this new ideal signaled a cultural shift at the end of the nineteenth century.

---

63 Roberta Seelinger Trites, Twain, Alcott, and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 92.
century. Previous generations of Swedish-American women looked to the Swedish ideals of domesticity and passivity, as well as the American Cult of True Womanhood. But many of their daughters wanted a better education and more career options. New Women wanted the same opportunities as their male peers. Detractors in the popular press stereotyped these women as bicycle-riding, cigar-smoking, college-educated usurpers of traditionally masculine roles; supporters positioned New Women as well-informed, progressive, and politically active: modern women for a new age. Importantly, for Olsson and her community of Swedish-American women, the American New Woman was, as scholar Martha H. Patterson describes her, an “icon of successful assimilation into dominant Anglo-American culture.” These girls shaped and celebrated their ethnic heritage, but were equally invested in being American.

“Don’t we girls have our fun”: The Emergence of the New Girl

The factors shaping the New Woman ideal were in place long before Grande and Ouida’s debate, creating a generation of young women historian Jane Hunter calls “new girls.” These (mostly white, middle-class, native-born) girls navigated a culture which still valued the virtues of the True Woman, while taking advantage of new leisure and educational opportunities available to them. They were, Hunter argues, “less sober and intellectual than the New Woman, but her significant precursor.” New girls were a product of the middle- and upper-class Victorian household. Before the mid-nineteenth century, daughters typically assisted their mothers with running the household and weaving cloth or were loaned out to other families in

---

64 Patterson, ed., *The American New Woman Revisited*, 1.
65 Nelson, ix-xi.
67 Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 4.
68 Hunter, 2.
69 Hunter, 5.
need of help. But as manufacturing became industrialized and an influx of immigrants provided a cheap workforce in factories and as domestics, middle-class girls were increasingly displaced from their traditional roles.\(^70\) Their families hired servants to signal their socioeconomic status, leaving girls an increasing amount of leisure time to fill.\(^71\) They were free from the responsibilities and hard work faced by their parents, leading historian Joseph Kett to categorize them as “the first adolescents.”\(^72\)

In return, families expected their daughters to cultivate themselves through reading, writing, light chores, exercise, and education.\(^73\) By assuming the role their mother left behind, Anna enabled Mia and especially Lydia to become part of this trend. Lydia spent hours reading novels and writing in her diary. Both she and Mia took art classes, lessons in fancy work (ornamental needlework), and participated in musical groups at Augustana. Lydia was responsible for tidying her room, wiping dishes, and other light housework, but Anna and a series of hired girls managed the heavier chores.\(^74\)

New girls like the Olsson sisters and Netta Bartholomew began attending schools in greater numbers, including coeducational high schools and colleges. There they were graded using an empirical system, allowing girls for the first time to experience a type of equality with

\(^{70}\) Hunter, 12-13.

\(^{71}\) Hunter, 19. Economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen notes that it is not enough to have wealth or power: middle- and upper-class families had to demonstrate their status to gain social standing. So by hiring a servant to replace a perfectly capable daughter, a family proved they could afford to let their daughter live idly. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (B. W. Huebsch, 1928), 36, accessed March 7, 2021, https://www.google.com/books/eDITION/The_Theory_of_the_Leisure_Class/lbQjAAAAIAAJ;

\(^{72}\) Hunter, 12.

\(^{73}\) Hunter, 280.

\(^{74}\) Anna Olsson notes in her journal that the family hired a new servant girl, Ida Lundblad, in May 1891. Lydia mentions at least two hired girls, Hanna and Hilma, in her diary. It is unclear how often the Olssons were without a servant, although after their father’s death in 1900 it is possible that Mia Olsson took over from Anna and the hired girls to save money and allow her older sister to focus on a career as an author. A. Olsson, Diary, May 16, 1891, Olsson Family Papers; L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, February 20, 1893; Tuesday, February 6, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
boys.\textsuperscript{75} Although Bartholomew resented that some boys did not like having girls as classmates, other Augustana women, like Anna Olsson, felt a deep bond with male classmates. Though her experience after graduation diverged wildly from those of her classmates—she cooked and cleaned for her family while they pursued graduate studies and careers—she still considered them comrades.

Outside of classes, new girls had time to walk the city streets, socialize with friends, spend money in shops, and generally have fun.\textsuperscript{76} Hunter notes that a key aspect of the new girl was “her claim to public space and public attention without paying a price.”\textsuperscript{77} While Lydia Olsson was painfully aware of other girls’ scrutiny and her position as the president’s daughter, she, Bartholomew, and their friends spent many days walking on campus, shopping in town for fripperies, and giggling during evening lectures.\textsuperscript{78} Although they were concerned with “being good,” new girls engaged in a peer culture that prized fun and free spiritedness over old fashioned propriety by moving freely in public without their parents or chaperones.\textsuperscript{79} In her speech, “We Girls,” Bartholomew warned Augustana boys: “We are a peculiar class and there is no telling what we will not do. We have our rights and we will use them. But we girls have our fun and our peculiar ways of perpetrating jokes. We have our hours spent together in laughing over the latest games, in reading the future with our hands on the mystic planchette and in planning new jokes. Let verdant swains beware.”\textsuperscript{80} She was letting them know that girls were serious scholars, worthy of admiration, but they also liked to have fun. Their education and

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{75}] Hunter, 4.
\item[\textsuperscript{76}] Hunter, 2, 277.
\item[\textsuperscript{77}] Hunter, 309.
\item[\textsuperscript{78}] See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, November 21, 1892; Friday, December 2, 1892; Monday, March 13, 1893; Sunday, January 28, 1894; Wednesday, January 30, 1895; Saturday, December 5, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
\item[\textsuperscript{79}] Hunter, 5, 99, 261.
\item[\textsuperscript{80}] Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls” speech, Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 3.
\end{itemize}
leisure time led new girls to reimagine their fates. Many entered the paid workforce, delaying or dismissing marriage and motherhood. Some, though not all, became New Women.\textsuperscript{81}

\textbf{“They did not care for us as students”: Women’s Education at Augustana College}

Louisa May Alcott, advocated for women’s co-education in her novel \textit{Jo’s Boys}. Jo March (now Bhaer) declares, “It is all nonsense about girls not being able to study as well as boys.”\textsuperscript{82} Access to education—especially education beyond grammar school—was a key to the identity of the new girl and New Woman. Between 1880 and 1900, high school enrollments of American girls increased fivefold.\textsuperscript{83} During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the proportion of young women (particularly white, middle- and upper-class daughters of businessmen and professionals) enrolled in college increased from seven tenths of a percent in 1870 to almost three percent in 1900.\textsuperscript{84} In 1870, forty-one out of 582 degree-granting institutions in the United States admitted women; by 1890, that number increased to sixty-three degree-granting institutions out of a total of 1,082.\textsuperscript{85} The number of women earning degrees also rose dramatically: eight percent more between 1880 and 1890, and a staggering ninety-five percent more between 1890 and 1900.\textsuperscript{86}

At Augustana College and Theological Seminary, non-matriculated women had attended classes since 1871.\textsuperscript{87} In fact the institution’s second president, T. N. Hasselquist, actively recruited women students: Augustana Business College and the Conservatory were established in part to attract them to the campus and many others joined the Preparatory Department.\textsuperscript{88} A

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{81} Hunter, 395.
\textsuperscript{82} Alcott as quoted in Trites, 93.
\textsuperscript{84} Patterson, ed., \textit{The American New Woman Revisited}, 11; Cookingham, 353.
\textsuperscript{85} Boaden, 5.
\textsuperscript{86} Cookingham, 356.
\textsuperscript{87} Boaden, 4.
\textsuperscript{88} Boaden, 6. The Preparatory Department was the school’s equivalent of a high school.
\end{flushleft}
normal department and art school were also launched. Most women students at Augustana enrolled in these programs during the last part of the nineteenth century, including Lydia Olsson, her sister Mia, and her best friends Dina Dahn and Ella Nordstrom. A smaller number of women matriculated into the baccalaureate program. Inez Rundstrom was the first woman to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in 1885, followed by Olsson’s older sister Anna in 1888 and Anna Westman in 1892.89 Demonstrating the rising number of women graduates, the Augustana College class of 1894 included Netta Bartholomew, Lillie Cervin, and Sarah Lawson. In their senior year, 1893-1894, eleven of one hundred and fourteen students registered in the college program were women. By 1900 that number had increased to fifteen of ninety-five students.90

![Figure 2.2. Augustana College class of 1894. The graduating women are (L to R) Sarah Lawson, Lillie Cervin, and Netta Bartholomew. C-D00030, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.](image)

89 Boaden, 12, 20, 30.
90 Boaden, 45-46.
At Augustana, all departments (except the seminary) were co-educational. But as Netta Bartholomew noted in her December 1891 speech, young women were not always treated as equals. Looking back on her experiences fifty years after her graduation, she remembered: “We were frankly told that while they loved us as girls, they did not care for us as students.”91 Her words mirror Alcott’s Jo in Jo’s Boys, who proclaims “the girls who love to study wish to be treated like reasonable beings, not dolls to flirt with.”92 New girls wanted to be taken seriously as scholars and given the same advantages as male students. But whether Youngdahl meant to provoke Bartholomew with his words or said them in earnest (or a bit of both), his speech would not have been the first time she heard that women were better off married than in the classroom.

Even so, women were making progress at Augustana. First by taking classes, then by enrolling as students, and finally by graduating with degrees. Bartholomew challenged the rule that only men could speak in public; after her success other girls followed.93 Socially they made advances too. The meetings of the Phrenokosmian and Adelphic literary societies were the “high social and intellectual point of each school week” according to Bartholomew. A few bold girls had joined the former by the time she came to campus but, Bartholomew remembered, “the Adelphians were still a bachelor aggregation and quite content to remain so.”94 They had not counted on someone like Bartholomew demanding to become a member. They set her the task of giving a three-minute speech on Thomas Gray’s poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1750) and though afterward she did not have the “faintest idea” of what she said, she earned her place in the group.95 Lydia Olsson regularly recorded her involvement in both groups, planning

---

92 Alcott as quoted in Trites, 94.
93 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, April 7, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
95 Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 10.
programs, attending meetings, and performing in musical groups and dramatic scenes. Women students even began their own literary society, the Ionian. Netta Bartholomew, Anna Westman, Dina Dahn, and Agnes Branney founded the first “ladies quartette” on campus, the Philodoi Quartette. Additional social groups for Augustana women were established including the Swedish Ladies Chorus, the Augustana Endowment Fund Society, and the Lorelei Quartette.

Figure 2.3. The Lorelei Quartette: Lillie Cervin, Dina Dahn, Signe Telleen, Lydia Hult. Courtesy of Deanne Morton and Jackie Morton Miller.

90 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, November 17, 1892; Friday, December 9, 1892; Friday, February 10, 1893; Thursday, January 25, 1894; Friday, March 9, 1894; Friday, March 8, 1895; Friday, December 11, 1896, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson sometimes mentions the “girls meeting” and “girls program” alongside meetings of the full membership, so it is possible that the groups still segregated the sexes to a certain degree.

97 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, November 30, 1892; Wednesday, February 15, 1893; Wednesday, March 22, 1893; Wednesday, April 19, 1893; Monday, April 24, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. The group eventually disbanded due to lack of interest.

Although there is no mention of bicycles in Lydia Olsson’s or Netta Bartholomew’s papers, they both participated in another athletic endeavor: women’s gym classes. Approved by Augustana’s board of directors, these classes met as early as 1893 and gave women the opportunity to exercise in public.⁹⁹ In her diary Olsson noted that she made her own “gymnastic suit” in 1893, and in 1895 she bought materials for a new outfit: “16¢ a yd. half wool real cute green.”¹⁰⁰ “The boys will have to give up the gymnasium to us on Tuesday 5-6” for their class, she wrote.¹⁰¹

Figure 2.4. Drawing of Augustana girls in their gymnastics uniforms. Pehr Henrik Ling pioneered a Swedish system of gymnastics, hence the word “Ling” on the back of the girls’ uniforms. Signature Album, 1889, Folder 1, Box 25, in MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

Apparently “some of the boys” liked to watch them exercise, but the girls were having too much fun to care: “We had some new movements which kept us a-giggling.”¹⁰² Augustana

---

¹⁰⁰ L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 6, 1893; Wednesday, January 30, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
¹⁰¹ L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, December 1, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
¹⁰² L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, March 6, 1895; Friday, March 8, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
College and Theological Seminary may have been dominated by men, but young women made their presence felt. As Bartholomew said in her speech, “Though things may move slowly now, still we are sure that with each passing year, bringing increased numbers of us girls, things will be improved.” Girls had declared their independence and the world—including Augustana College—was changing to accommodate them.  

“If I could earn some money wouldn’t I rejoice”: Augustana Women in the Workforce

Young women were increasingly educated, acclimated to mixed-sex spaces, and moved more freely in the world. Once they left high school or college they were reluctant to return to the confines of domestic life and sought to make themselves economically independent. Their mothers, raised with the ideal of True Womanhood, were taught that their place was in the home. A good True Woman would do her work for “pure affection,” not to make money or for their own ambition. But a new girl (or New Woman) was educated and therefore more qualified to enter the paid workforce. Sixty-four percent of those who graduated from college between 1865 and 1880 held paying jobs for at least a short period of time, and their options expanded in the 1880s and 1890s. Teaching was perennially popular, and the expansion of both corporate and civil-service bureaucracies led to an explosion of clerical jobs. While the Panic of 1893 and subsequent depression in the United States reduced economic opportunities for most workers, including middle-class men, educated women made gains. By 1900, roughly one out of every five women participated in the paid workforce, an estimated five million women in total.

---

103 Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls” speech, Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2.
104 Welter, 160.
105 Cookingham, 355.
106 Cookingham, 358. By 1890, clerical workers often outearned teachers.
107 Cookingham, 359.
108 Patterson, ed., The American New Woman Revisited, 12.
At Augustana Business College, students like Lydia Olsson and Ella Nordstrom took
courses in phonography (specifically Pitman shorthand), typewriting, accounting, rapid
calculating and note taking, spelling and grammar, and business correspondence. They learned
how to manage ledgers and invoices and could take classes in business law and civil
government.\footnote{Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, 1892-1893 (Rock Island, IL: Lutheran Augustana
All this prepared them for office work. A year after leaving school, Olsson was
restless and ready to put her clerical skills to good use: “If I had a regular work of something and
earnt a little money regularly I would feel as tho’ I had some mission to fulfill in this world, but
now sometimes I feel as tho I were no earthly use or good.”\footnote{L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, January 4, 1894, Olsson Family Papers. This was a
common response among former schoolgirls, who felt that coming home to domestic work or long, empty hours to fill was a letdown after
their busy class schedule. Hunter, 368.} The structure of work could fill
the gap left by the absence of classes.

In April 1894, Augustana’s general manager Johannes Jesperson said he might have some
office work for Olsson and perhaps a job in the library. “Oh! what a picnic that would be!”
Olsson wrote in her diary. “If I could earn some money wouldn’t I rejoice.” The next day she
began, writing letters to ministers in the Augustana Synod. By the end of her second week she
concluded that nothing much of importance happened in the office and, though she was glad for
the work, she wished for a shorter schedule (eight to five, with an hour break at noon). “When
can I even enjoy the summer breeze and sunshine!”\footnote{L. Olsson, Journal, Monday April 2, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.}
Joining the workforce meant Olsson had to
forgo some of the leisure time she was accustomed to as a middle-class daughter.

At the end of April Olsson began working in the college library, a job she would hold on
and off for the rest of her career. At first the collection was not organized and few students used
the space, so she spent most of her time reading novels, crocheting, and gossiping with friends.\footnote{See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, April 23, 1894; Thursday, May 3, 1894; Wednesday, January 9,
1895; Thursday, February 21, 1895; Friday, September 11, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.}
Her main duties were to supervise the reading room, write catalog cards, and keep the library clean.\(^{113}\) She was of two minds about the job. On one hand she did not like being “locked up so much,” working eight-hour weekdays and two hours on Saturdays.\(^{114}\) But on the positive side she earned five dollars a week, money that seems to have been hers to spend as she liked. “It’s going to be awful nice to not have to ask papa for any money,” she noted.\(^{115}\) Earning a wage could be a heady experience for girls, especially when their income was not needed to support the family.\(^{116}\)

![Library interior](image)

Figure 2.5. Augustana College library. C-L00012, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

Olsson records when she was paid, frequently going out the same day to purchase

clothes, treats, and other leisure goods for herself. “Bersell gave me $15.00 from Jesperson

\(^{113}\) See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, January 24, 1895; Friday, February 1, 1895; Thursday, March 7, 1895; Monday, October 19, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.


\(^{115}\) L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, September 12, 1896, Olsson Family Paper.

\(^{116}\) Hunter, 369, 372.
to-day. Maybe I didn’t jump both within and without,” she wrote in May 1894. “I of course went down town after dinner to get a new hat and a few small things which I needed very much. I also went to a dressmaker who shall make me two waists.”\(^\text{117}\) Later funds went to pay for lace, ribbon, fabric, shoes, candy, and studio portraits.\(^\text{118}\) In this way, young women—working for pay or using allowances from their parents—were able to participate in the consumer economy.\(^\text{119}\) In the end, Olsson concluded, her job was “the best gift and I am so thankful for it.”\(^\text{120}\)

Many of the young women in Lydia Olsson’s social circle worked outside of the home after leaving school: her sister Anna Olsson and Anna Westman served as principals for Ladies’ Hall (the women’s dormitory) and instructors at the college; Lillie Cervin was an instructor at the Conservatory; Sarah Lawson worked as a post office clerk and librarian; Agnes Branney taught in the Rock Island public school system; Cotta Bartholomew was a newspaper editor; Hedvig Hageman was a nurse.\(^\text{121}\) Some, like Branney, worked for a short time before marriage; others remained unmarried and worked for decades.

Beyond wage work, some girls aspired to make a mark on the world, often through the arts.\(^\text{122}\) In her speech, Netta Bartholomew told her male classmates that one day they would gaze at their female peers in astonishment, listening to their beautiful music, their eloquent speeches, their words of wisdom, and reading their notable books. While Bartholomew married soon after graduation, she continued to speak and serve on many local boards (she was the first woman on Augustana’s board of directors). Inez Rundstrom taught on the faculty at Gustavus Adolphus

\(^{117}\) L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, May 12, 1894, Olsson Family Paper.

\(^{118}\) See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, May 17, 1894; Saturday, May 19, 1894; Wednesday, January 30, 1895; Thursday, January 31, 1895; Saturday, December 5, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.

\(^{119}\) Hunter, 29.

\(^{120}\) L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, December 3, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.


\(^{122}\) Hunter, 375.
College, chairing the mathematics department; Anna Olsson became a published author, known for her contributions to the Swedish-American literary tradition. 123 Did any of their male classmates say, “with a pardonable ring of pride … ‘She was my classmate’”? 124

Lydia Olsson inherited the Swedish and American ideals of domesticity from her mother. She, her sisters, and girls like Netta Bartholomew came of age as the New Woman was debated in the British and American popular press. But these girls already had opportunities enabled by their class. They went to coeducational schools, participated alongside male peers in campus organizations, took gym classes and long walks, and patronized local businesses with their hard-earned wages. These advantages allowed them to imagine new possibilities: lifestyles, careers, and the ability to support themselves (even to the point of remaining single). Their growing freedom from housework meant they had leisure time to engage in fun with friends; going to school alongside boys changed their relationship with the opposite sex.

Anna Olsson learned to labor, and to wait, eventually becoming a published author and college instructor; Netta Bartholomew campaigned for women’s equality on campus and continued to give speeches and break gender barriers after getting married; Lydia Olsson took classes at the Business College and embarked on a career of clerical and library work. Each embodied more than one ideal; like Anna Lisa Olsson, they were more than the simplified caricatures bandied about in the press. They were new girls, positioned along a spectrum between the True Woman and the New Woman.

---

123 Boaden, 12, 24, 62.
Interlude Three

Christmas Eve¹

Snow fell on the Augustana College campus, covering the ground in a thick white blanket. The classroom and dormitory windows were dark, most students having gone home for the winter holidays. But light shone out from the President’s Residence. The curtains of one of the parlor windows were pulled back, revealing a scene of merriment. A group of girls clustered around a table, eating sweets and playing a board game. To one side stood a tree, festooned with pink and green crepe paper and small candles. Underneath was a pile of presents, waiting to be opened. One of the girls picked up two dice, shaking them in a dramatic fashion. She tossed them on the table.

“One and four makes five,” declared Lydia, moving her piece forward on the board.
“One, two, three, four—oh no!”
“Lost pocketbook, pay ten dollars,” cried Dina.
“Back to the police station!” crowed Esther and Hannah.
“I’ll never make it to the end,” groaned Lydia. She slowly pushed her piece back along the “Innocence Abroad” game board to the square marked “Police Station,” then grudgingly handed two paper bills to Anna Westman, who was acting as the game’s banker.

“Better luck next time, Lydia,” said Anna W.
“Just be careful not to lose all your money first,” remarked Agnes.

Lydia sat up, rising to Agnes’s challenge. “I’m sure I’ll make it to the Depot soon. At least I didn’t have to go all the way back to pay an old bill.” Agnes huffed in irritation.

“Girls, girls,” said Lydia’s older sister Anna, coming in from the kitchen, “remember this is a friendly game. No need to be so competitive.”

“Yes,” Lydia agreed, with a twinkle in her eye. “Let the best girl win.”

“Of course,” Agnes shot back sweetly, “all’s fair in love and war.”

“While you two bicker I’m going to win the game,” teased Dina, who had been sent back to the start twice already. She reached for the dice. “Anna, are there any sweets left or have we eaten them all?”

“You girls finished the store-bought candy,” Lydia’s sister replied, “but if you ask nicely I might be convinced to cook some taffy.”

“Oh, please!” chorused the group.
“We’ll be forever grateful,” said Hannah.
“Promise!” added Esther.
“I’ll help you, Anna,” offered Lydia’s other sister, Mia, getting up from the table.

“Oh, but you’re the furthest along!” exclaimed Lydia.

“Dina can take my place,” said Mia, “I don’t mind.”

Dina cheered. “Now I’ll actually win!” The other girls laughed.

“Well hurry up and do so,” smiled Anna. “It’s almost nine o’clock and you haven’t touched your presents yet.”

Spurred on by the thought of those carefully chosen gifts, the girls raced to finish the game. Dina was crowned the triumphant winner; she celebrated by capering about the room, the

¹ This interlude was inspired by passages from Lydia Olsson’s diary, particularly the entries on Saturday, December 24, 1892, and Sunday, December 25, 1892. For detailed references, please see the endnotes.
girls giggling at her enthusiasm. Anna and Mia came back with the freshly pulled taffy and the group settled down to eat the sugary treats and open their presents. Esther received a stylish new parasol and Anna W. a pair of crocheted slippers. Lydia treasured a small souvenir spoon given to her by Clarence Cederquist. But by far the most admired gift was a pretty locket from J. A. Bexell to Dina.

“What a sweet little chain of love,” declared Lydia.

“Yes, he is so romantic,” sighed Hannah. The girls knew that the couple planned to announce their engagement the next evening, when Bexell would present Dina with an engagement ring. Lydia suspected that it would not be long before they were married. They were too spoony for her taste, gazing at each other in adoration during concerts and laughing over private jokes. But such was love. Lydia wondered whether she would ever feel that way about a boy. She found herself contemplating her new little silver spoon, and the boy who gave it to her.

She was jolted out of her thoughts by a great shout of laughter. Dina was standing near the tree, twirling Esther’s parasol, while Hannah had dropped to one knee, pretending to propose to her with a great lump of taffy shaped into a ring. She declared her ardent love, begging her “sweet Dina” to “speak that most beloved word: yes!” Dina considered, putting a finger to her chin in a thoughtful pose.

“Put the poor swain out of her misery,” cried Esther, almost in tears with laughter.

Finally, Dina nodded. Hannah leapt up, embracing her lady love and showering her cheeks with kisses. The girls fell over themselves in merriment.

All too soon it was time for the party to end. The girls picked up their gifts and wrapped themselves in warm layers. Dina was spending the night with Lydia, but the rest set off together, promising to come back the next morning at four o’clock for coffee and the Julotta service at the Moline church. Dina and Lydia blew out the candles on the tree, then brought the candy bowls in to Anna and Mia, who were putting away the last of the dinner dishes.

“You girls head up to bed,” said Anna. “We have an early start tomorrow.”

The two climbed the stairs to Lydia’s room, chattering as they changed into their nightclothes. Lydia sat down to write an entry in her diary while Dina brushed her hair. Finally they got into bed, burrowing under the covers. Dina told Lydia about their friend Ella, who was being pursued by several men at the same time. With Lydia’s help, she had ultimately rejected the seminarian J. S. Brodeen and fled home to Rockford before the term had ended.

“I am afraid she will have a hard time of it, poor girl,” Dina confided.

“It’s all right if she only hasn’t encouraged him,” said Lydia. “I hope I will never be in her shoes!” She thought of Clarence Cederquist, who seemed so manly and good in comparison to Ella’s suitors.

As if she had read her mind, Dina asked, “Has Ceder popped the question yet?”

“We children aren’t to be bothered with love, only friendship,” Lydia responded. “And I am not ready for marriage for many, many years to come.” Dina gave her an incredulous look, but Lydia persisted. “Besides, he gave me a hint the other night which hurt my feelings. We were talking about friends and some way or other he said ‘I have a lady friend of my class who I think the world of, next to my sister, I am going to write to her next Sunday’ and something about that no one need interfere in his friendship. Honestly,” she said, “it sounded as though he wanted to warn me that he didn’t mean anything by his friendliness to me. I thought it was so hateful. As though I was trying my best to get him.” Lydia huffed angrily. “No matter what I thought of a young man, I wouldn’t be the one to show it first.”
Dina comforted her friend. “But, Lydia, Bex says Ceder thinks the world of you. I’m sure that’s not what he meant.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Lydia, “although he is very kind and gentlemanly to me.” Dina could see she was upset and hugged her, knowing how Lydia took these things to heart.

Lydia realized she was acting selfishly, and on the night before her friend was to become officially engaged. “Tell me how Bex proposed to you,” she said, changing the subject.

Dina described the precious moment when Bexell had asked her to marry him, one Sunday evening in the fall.

“He proposed to you in the baseball park?” exclaimed Lydia.

“Oh, it was so lovely,” sighed Dina, caught up in the memory. Lydia giggled at her friend, who smacked her playfully in response. They tickled and slapped each other, still feeling the effects of all the sugar they had consumed earlier.

“Say, let me tell you something,” laughed Dina.

“Now we must sleep, so goodnight!” proclaimed Lydia.

All was quiet for a moment. Suddenly Dina let out a loud, drawn-out snore. Lydia played along, contributing her own nasal whine. The two competed for who could snore the loudest, before breaking down in giggles.

“I’ll just tell you this one thing and then I’ll say goodnight,” said Dina.

Lydia turned over. “The one that says anything more after I have counted to three must give Bex a kiss!” she announced. “Good night Dina now for good one—two—three!”

Neither said a thing, but Dina could feel her friend shaking with laughter. “What are you giggling about, Lydia Olsson?” she asked.

Lydia kept still, pretending to be asleep. As much as she would like to talk more with Dina, she knew the two would have to get up in just a couple of hours to light the candles and mark the start of Jul. She contemplated her friendship with the girl lying next to her and how it would change once she was married. Of course they would still be close, but Dina would be a grown woman—a wife—no longer a girl. Lydia would miss these moments with her friend. Dina thought of Bex, imagining the moment he would slip the engagement ring onto her finger. She smiled to herself—how she longed for them to be wed. Soon the friends were off in dreamland, with sweet visions dancing through their heads.

* * * * *

Chapter Three

Best Friends and Boy Friends: Navigating the Social Communities of Augustana College and Theological Seminary

At five o’clock the bell rang; fall term was over. Lydia Olsson and her friends went down to the train depot to wave goodbye to students traveling home over the break. When they arrived
back on campus, Lydia and her friend Helena decided to play a prank on the girls staying in
Ladies’ Hall. They went next door to the president’s house where Lydia borrowed her brother’s
new suit with long pants; then the two girls knocked on the Hashamias’ kitchen door. Later, she
recounted the outcome in her diary: “The girls were popping corn. Say they didn’t laugh to see
me hugging and kissing Etta. Such a time. Some of the girls wanted me to take a walk with them,
but alas! if I’d be caught by some boys, my reputation would be spoiled.” Lydia knew that a little
spontaneous fun between girls was all well and good, but if any boys saw her wearing pants in
public there would be trouble. A proper young woman would only wear clothes deemed
appropriate for her sex. Just as Lydia refused Clarence Cederquist’s regular company on Sundays
for fear the Hashamia girls would judge her behavior, she would not let any boys glimpse her
playful games with female friends. “No doubt but that girls can have more fun together than
boys,” she concluded.2

Lydia Olsson grew up when it was still common for men and women to lead relatively
separate lives. Women’s days were filled with the rituals of domestic work, social calls, and
religious life. The rigid gender roles of the Victorian era dictated that men and women keep to
their separate spheres, leading women to form intimate friendships within their female worlds.3
Olsson’s community of women visited with each other over coffee, had cheese parties, and
arranged sewing circles.4 She had intimate friendships with girls like Dina Dahn and Ella

---

2 L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, December 21, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson put her brother Hannes’ clothes
on more than once. In May 1894 she tried on his “new gray suit” and noted, “I don’t look near as good in long pants
3 Smith-Rosenberg, 9-10.
4 Historian Thomas Bender describes community as “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and
emotional bonds.” Community can refer to any group that meets this definition, including a family, a town, an
academic cohort, or a group of friends. Bender argues that communities come in many forms, and therefore scholars
need to keep this in mind when examining particular groups. Lydia Olsson participated in many communities:
Swedish America; the Augustana Synod; Augustana College and Theological Seminary; Lindsborg, Kansas; and
Rock Island, Illinois; as well as the social communities discussed in this chapter. Thomas Bender, Community and
Social Change in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 7.
Nordstrom, sharing beds, exchanging secrets, and showering each other with physical affection. At the same time, Olsson was part of a generation of “new girls” who attended school alongside boys, forming coed peer groups.⁵ Students bonded as cohorts, and while Netta Bartholomew’s college experience points to lingering divisions between the sexes, girls and boys spent many hours together walking, attending social events, and participating in campus organizations.

Olsson was particularly close to boys like Clarence Cederquist and J. A. Bexell, but she regularly spent time with a larger group of young men and women at Augustana literary society meetings, in choral groups, at parties and church socials, and outdoors while skating, sledding, and walking. Even so, Olsson’s family was perhaps her most important support. She shared a close relationship with her siblings, who depended on each other even more after their mother’s early death. Their bond lasted a lifetime, transcending all other relationships.

“I will not live further away from home but what I can mend their stockings”:

The Olsson Family

Lydia’s sister Anna Olsson recalled being surrounded by family during her early days on the prairie. The Olssons were fortunate in that their immediate families lived in Lindsborg. Her book En prärieunges funderingar is full of stories about Mormor and Farmor, Farbror and Moster, and others.⁶ She also writes about her new baby sister, Lydia:

Mamma lets me help to look after our new baby. I can make her go to sleep. I carry her, and I walk around the whole front room till she goes to sleep. Our new little baby she has gold hair just like a Angel. And she has little tiny hands and feet…. just like a Doll. But one time when I was carrying her, I was walking around in the dining room, and then she bited my nose. She bited hard too. But I didn’t get mad on her, ’cause she couldn’t help it. She has to bite something, ’cause her little tooths hurt her.⁷

---

⁵ Hunter, 2.
⁶ Her maternal and fraternal grandmothers, respectively, and her paternal uncle and maternal aunt. Jaderborg, ed., and Winblad, trans., Anna Olsson, 119-120
⁷ A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 147.
Anna was already practicing for a role she could never anticipate: serving as a surrogate mother. Later, in Woodhull, she resolved, “I ever get married, I will not live further away from home but what I can mend their stockings.” Marriage was a distant possible future, not something she would embark upon anytime soon: “I don’t know anyone I should trust enough to marry; and besides I love my sisters and brother and papa too much to part from them yet.” Her desire to study was more urgent than her wish for a husband, but even then she was happy to care for her siblings and her father.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argued that an “inner core of kin” was of utmost importance to women in the nineteenth century. Relationships between mothers and daughters formed the basis of their wider female networks. Daughters were folded into mothers’ social circles, going on calls with them and receiving visitors. This was likely true for the Olsson sisters while their mother lived, and perhaps Anna Olsson also filled that role in her absence. After all she was twenty in 1887, old enough to have formed friendships of her own. The girls were dislocated from their social circles during the family’s trip to Europe, but they kept each other company. In her travel journal, Anna Olsson recounted a lively incident while in Stuttgart, Germany: “We three [sisters] were at the Gasthaus. A soldier came and sat down by our table. I guess he must have thought we were terrible girls, we laughed and talked so. But Lydia always said something to make us laugh.” Even though Olsson acted as something of a mother figure, she clearly shared a close, sisterly bond with Mia and Lydia.

---

8 A. Olsson, Diary, December 21, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
9 A. Olsson, Diary, July 26, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
10 Smith-Rosenberg, 11.
11 Smith-Rosenberg, 15.
12 Smith-Rosenberg, 17.
13 A. Olsson, Diary, May 7, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
The three also held their little brother dear. Anna Olsson was mending Hannes’ stockings while she thought about marriage. During their trip, Olsson and her father spent a month in Italy while her younger siblings stayed in rented accommodations in Zürich, Switzerland. She missed them as soon as they were parted. “But oh!—how I have longed for those dear children today; if I am going to be so home-sick every day, I don’t see how I can stand to be away from them three long weeks,” she wrote in Milan.14 When they reunited, she was ecstatic: “Oh! who can describe my joy when I saw them all safe and well again! It seemed to me as if I had been away from them a year instead of a month. I had almost forgotten how they looked.”15 The time spent together in Europe, where Lydia Olsson turned fifteen, solidified their bond as a family.

![Figure 3.1. The Olsson family: (L to R) Anna, Mia, Olof, Lydia, and Hannes. Folder 12, Box 18, in MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.](image)

14 A. Olsson, Diary, March 27, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
15 A. Olsson, Diary, May 3, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
In 1891, when they were once again in Rock Island, Anna, Lydia, and their family members were able to renew friendships they had left behind three years prior. Still, much of their time was spent together. Lydia Olsson, who frequently attended meetings and went on social outings, notes other occasions in which the siblings spent a quiet night reading to each other, conversing, playing music, or making taffy.\(^6\) When her sister Anna was unwell, Olsson read her “some short stories by Miss Alcott … one was by Joe March; namely: ‘The baron’s gloves, or Amy’s romance.’”\(^7\) Later that same day, when Olsson developed a headache, she lay in bed while her sister Mia read to her.

Other episodes provided humor: “We had a laughing fit at Mia before we went to bed because she had the hiccup for about 15 min. I guess. She crowed and crowed so funny.”\(^8\) Another time her attempts to play a duet with Hannes “sounded very rididious.”\(^9\) Olsson’s sense of humor shone through during an especially memorable exchange with her younger brother: “Hannis had a band suit on this eve – that is: a cap and coat – so I asked him what kind of pants he should wear to it. He said, ‘No pants’ I told him I wasn’t going to the band concert for one. Ha! Ha!”\(^10\) Olsson also went on many outings with her siblings—particularly Mia and Hannes—shopping, ice skating, going to meetings, and attending church.\(^11\) In another instance of girlish hijinks, the sisters and their friends Sarah Lawson and Anna Westman dressed up in “ugly dresses” with “shawls + ‘kläde’ [clothes] on their heads.” Then, carrying “ugly umbrellas and red bandanas,” they trooped over to Augustana professor Bersell’s house.\(^12\) Although Olsson had

\(^6\) See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, January 26, 1893; Wednesday, February 1, 1893; Friday, December 22, 1893; Monday, January 15, 1894; Monday, January 7, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
\(^7\) L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, February 6, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\(^8\) L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, February 15, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
\(^9\) L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, December 7, 1895, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson mislabelled this entry: the date was actually Monday, January 7, 1895.
\(^10\) L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, April 7, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
\(^11\) See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 2, 1894; Monday, January 8, 1894; Wednesday, January 31, 1894; Tuesday, February 6, 1894; Saturday, April 7, 1894, Olsson Family Papers
\(^12\) L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, October 23, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
refused to parade around in her brother’s long pants, capering across campus in a silly outfit with a group of similarly clad girls was fun, not social suicide.

In her diary, Olsson’s father appears infrequently, most often when he preaches at church or comes and goes on school business. Jane Hunter notes that mothers were often absent in daughters’ diaries, but this reflected her “omnipresence” rather than her “real-life absence”; she was “part of the assumed background of her daughter’s life.”\textsuperscript{23} For Olsson, this was true in regards to her sister Anna and her father, Olof.

As with any family, there were disagreements too. Olof Olsson seems to have been a fairly benevolent father, but his daughter recorded two occasions on which he assumed the mantle of a stern patriarch. On Christmas Day 1893, Lydia Olsson visited the Boman family for supper then went to a glee club performance later in the evening. Her father had not been at home, so she had not asked for his permission. The next day her sister Mia told her that he was cross. “Of course I know it was my duty to tell where I was going,” Olsson wrote, “but as I am not in the habit of running out at nights without the folks knowing where I am I shouldn’t think once without permission would provoke him. I had a ‘bawl’ this morning when papa was cross although he hasn’t said a word to me about it.”\textsuperscript{24} The next March, Olsson hosted “a little party” at home. She was having fun when at nine-thirty, her father told everyone they would have to go home by ten. After, she wrote, “it made me feel so mad [and] cheap that I bawled in the kitchen and vowed I’d never have a party again. It was horrid to sit in there and hear him say it for it sounded as if he just chased them home. I felt \textit{awful} mean.”\textsuperscript{25} These are both fairly typical interactions between parents and their growing children—especially a girl like Lydia, who enjoyed an active social life—but they demonstrate that even Victorian-era families engaged in

\textsuperscript{23} Hunter, 103-104.
\textsuperscript{24} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, December 26, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{25} L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, March 1, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
conflict. Fathers were expected to be stern patriarchs, but that did not make daughters happy about perceived injustices. When she was upset, Olsson could write about events in her diary, but she could also confide in her closest female friends.

“Talked, had coffee, talked!!!”: Women’s Social Networks

On a visit to Rock Island in November 1890, Anna Olsson recounted a day of social calls: “This morning I went to call on Mrs. Lawson, Mrs. Jesperson, and Mrs. Granere; then Mrs. Cervine went with me to call on Mrs. Esbjorn. She was determined to cook coffee…. We had a pleasant time. Then Mrs. Cervine went home, and I up to Hollands; Prof. Carl, seeing his mother ready to go with me, took his hat, and very politely offered to accompany me.” In the afternoon she made a final call to Mrs. Granberg, who also served her coffee.26 Between the morning and evening meals, Olsson visited the homes of six women and was served coffee in at least two. Calling on friends and social acquaintances was part of a woman’s regular routine, as was hosting callers and serving them refreshments. Olsson—in Rock Island for only a short time before returning to the family home in Woodhull, Illinois—seems to have visited a greater than average number of women on this occasion, but the concept remained the same for her and her sisters throughout their lives. After they left school, their days were filled with domestic work, social calls, and formal and informal group activities.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that women inhabited a social world mostly devoid of men, and when men were present gender roles and social norms necessitated rigid and formal affairs.27 This was not strictly true of the Olsson sisters’ campus community, but they did spend

---

26 A. Olsson, Diary, November 10, 1890, Olsson Family Papers. It’s very possible these women were Anna Lisa Olsson’s friends. Her daughter Anna may have been reestablishing ties with her mother’s circle once the family returned to the United States.
27 Smith-Rosenberg, 9.
much of their time with other women and were freer and more intimate with female friends. In
the bustling community on and around the Augustana campus, women met for coffee and formed
sewing circles. But while still in the small community of Woodhull, the Olsson sisters
encountered another type of social event common to rural Swedish-American women: cheese
making. “A new thing is to take place in our house, a ‘cheese-party,’” noted Anna Olsson in
October 1890. “We were told to expect about a dozen or more to-morrow.” Not having
participated in one of these affairs before, she wondered about the logistics: “They are going to
make a cheese, but it hardly seems possible that twelve are required for making one cheese. The
most of them will bring their milk and not help at all. But of course,” she concluded, “we must
give them coffee and dinner and perhaps supper too.”28 To Olsson, a cheese party sounded like
more work than fun.

In many rural Swedish-American communities, cheese parties provided opportunities for
women to socialize and share the hard work they bore as farmers’ wives. Joy K. Lintelman notes
that combining work and fun was typical in the Swedish countryside and immigrant women in
the United States carried on the tradition in their new homes. The women in Mina Anderson’s
Minnesotan community joined together to make “traditional julost (Christmas cheese).”29

Anderson’s friend Mary Norlander described the reason behind the event:

None of us had milk enough to make one by herself and with no refrigeration it couldn’t
be kept till we got enough of it. So several women got together on it. Each would come
with her pail of milk and while the cheese was being made drank coffee and partook of
all the good coffee bread and other goodies the Swedish housewife is so adapt at making.
Then in a few days all would go to another and so on till we all had our cheese.30

Anna Olsson and her sisters had spent their first years in Lindsborg, Kansas, a similarly rural
farming community, but perhaps Lindsborgian women did not have cheese parties. Olsson was

28 A. Olsson, Diary, October 7, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
29 Lintelman, 185.
30 Mary Norlander as quoted in Lintelman, 185.
certainly unfamiliar with the concept. Despite that fact, she and her sisters hosted the Woodhull cheese party. A total of thirteen women and three children came and stayed for coffee, and nine “strangers” stayed for dinner. It took Olsson and her sisters several hours to wash the dishes and clean up.\textsuperscript{31} Later that month Olsson took Lydia “out in the country” for another cheese party, where they received “3 big and two small cheeses”; Olsson and Mia went to a third party at the Edmund family home the next day, collecting two more large cheeses.\textsuperscript{32} In the spring the family moved back to the more urban Rock Island, meaning the Olsson sisters’ cheese party days were over. Anna Olsson could return to the more familiar practice of purely social calls.

One element was common between cheese parties and social calls: coffee. Swedish Americans loved their coffee, drinking it at meals, parties, and on special occasions like birthdays.\textsuperscript{33} Lintelman notes that coffee drinking was also popular during midmorning and midafternoon social visits. Women offered coffee and baked goods, such as “the ubiquitous Swedish cardamom-flavored coffee bread,” as a sign of hospitality to their friends and neighbors. “Even when household economics were tight,” she writes, “coffee and bread could almost always be offered.”\textsuperscript{34} In his biography of Anna Lisa Olsson, Alf Brorson recounts an instance in which a man named Francis Johnson came to the Olsson homestead on an errand, only to be told by Anna Lisa, “I ought to ask you to stay for coffee, of course, but we have had no coffee for three days.”\textsuperscript{35} This must have been difficult for her, especially as the pastor’s wife and someone

\textsuperscript{31} A. Olsson, Diary, October 8, 1890, Olsson Family Papers. Perhaps this was an effort to include the motherless Olsson girls in the community of Woodhull women. In any case, Anna did not seem particularly pleased by the opportunity.
\textsuperscript{32} A. Olsson, Diary, October 22, 1890; October 23, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{33} Both Anna and Lydia Olsson mentioned birthdays celebrated by drinking coffee. Anna and her father drank coffee to celebrate Lydia’s birthday while away from the family in Rome. Lydia recorded several instances of having people over for coffee on family birthdays. She also noted that she has had coffee in honor of the birthday of a friend who lived in Lindsborg. See, for example, A. Olsson, Diary, April 14, 1890, Olsson Family Papers; L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, March 31, 1894; Saturday, April 14, 1894; Thursday, February 28, 1895; Tuesday, September 15, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{34} Lintelman, 186.
\textsuperscript{35} Brorson, 36.
prone to caring for others. But it demonstrated the scarcity the Olssons faced during their first years in America: sometimes they were so poor they could not offer coffee to their visitors.

By the time Lydia Olsson was old enough to participate in social calls, the family’s finances were in much better shape. She would never have to deny callers coffee. And in fact, the beverage is a frequent presence in her diary, mentioned more than seventy times. “I. M. Anderson, Branney, Westman and Dahn, were here for coffee this afternoon, they ‘dropped in,’” she wrote in November 1892.36 A few months later she and Mia “took a walk and then we dropped in to Bersells and had coffee.”37 On a Sunday in December 1893 she noted, “[we] spent the afternoon talking and reading and drinking coffee as almost always.”38 Although coffee was most often accompanied by talk—or, as Olsson put it, “talked, had coffee, talked!!”—groups played games, sewed, and read together during these occasions.39

Social calls were predominantly a women’s activity, although men joined in the coffee drinking as well. But they did not intrude on another type of women’s social event: the sewing circle. Anna Lisa Olsson hosted sewing circles in the family’s Lindsborg home, and her daughters carried on the tradition in Rock Island.40 In 1893, Lydia Olsson documented the regular monthly meetings of the “Girls’ Sewing Circle” on Saturdays at a rotating set of homes. In January they met at the Seaburg house; in February they gathered as Miss Hillstrom’s; in March Olsson hosted the group at the president’s house; and in April they met at the Hendle and Hasselquist homes.41 Jane Hunter argues that circles like these were “designed to encourage the

---

36 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 19, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
39 L. Olsson, Saturday, February 4, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 2, 1895; Saturday, January 26, 1895; Tuesday, February 12, 1895; Saturday, October 3, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
40 Brorson, 44.
41 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 28, 1893; Saturday, February 18, 1893; Saturday, March 18, 1893; Saturday, April 15, 1893; Saturday, April 29, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson’s diary breaks off between May 15, 1893 and December 16, 1893, but it is possible the circle continued to meet at least through the end of the school year.
practice of dying arts.”

Because middle-class girls of Olsson’s generation were increasingly freed from household duties, some observers feared that they were losing traditional skills.

Olsson was more concerned with having fun at these gatherings than with sewing. During one memorable meeting, Sarah Lawson and Olsson dressed up as an organ grinder and her dancing monkey:

Our sewing circle met at Sarahs. Sarah + I at last performed what we have so long talked about. Sarah had a suit of Hannis’ on and a big black soft hat with a red bandana around her neck. She had the meat-grinder on a little table and turned the crank. I wore a tight flannel waist, a base ball cap, a red kneed flannel skirt, a tail made out of wire with black cloth wound around and was in my stocking feet so that I could dance well. Sarah had a rope on to me and made me obey orders while she turned the meat grinder crank + I danced and Mia turned-off a music box, (our old one) I lifted my cup occasionally and got some candy. I also scratched sometimes. It’s pretty hard to act off monkey. We got the girls to laugh all the same.

With all the excitement over their act, it is easy to imagine little sewing was accomplished.

Olsson’s entry demonstrates another aspect of women’s social networks. Among themselves, women and girls were able to relax and enjoy private gatherings free from restrictive social norms. Olsson’s generation in particular, writes Hunter, “celebrated fun and challenged rectitude.”

Among her girl friends, dressing up in boy’s pants or wearing a monkey costume was fun, rather than damaging to her reputation.

“No doubt but that girls can have more fun together than boys”: The New Girls of Augustana

In 1888, the Olssons left Augustana College and Theological Seminary just as the new Conservatory was attracting more women to campus. When they returned in 1891, the addition

---

42 Hunter, 25. Sewing their own clothes and linens was also far cheaper than purchasing ready-made goods.
44 Hunter, 261.
of the Business College and Normal Department, as well as the expansion of the Conservatory, led to an explosion in women students, so much so that a dormitory—Ladies’ Hall—had been established for girls boarding at the school.\textsuperscript{46} The dormitory, known to students as Hashmiun, was housed in one half of a duplex; the other half was the president’s residence, home to Lydia Olsson and her family.\textsuperscript{47} This proximity allowed a pants-wearing Olsson to sneak over quickly rather than risk a walk across campus. The official name of the dormitory, Ladies’ Hall, hints at the behavior expected of occupants. For anyone who was unclear, the college catalog and other literature clarified the matter:

In order to make it a well-regulated family the hearty sympathy and cooperation of the students themselves is necessary. Hence girls who are unwilling to yield a ready and cheerful obedience to the regulations deemed necessary for the general good, and who care more for fun and shallow enjoyments than for real knowledge and culture and solid worth, are not wanted here…. Girls who feel that they are above any rules of government are a nuisance in any sphere in life and doubly so at school…. Ladies rooming at the Hall will not be allowed to have any company of the opposite sex. Those unwilling to comply with this regulation need not apply for rooms.\textsuperscript{48}

Boarders were supervised by a live-in matron (later known as the Lady Principal) and girls were expected to attend daily devotional exercises in the parlor.\textsuperscript{49} Augustana assumed “no responsibility” for those girls who roomed off campus.\textsuperscript{50}

“Those unwilling to comply … need not apply for rooms.” As Lydia Olsson’s prank demonstrates, the reality was a bit more complicated than the catalog suggests. Both Anna Westman and Anna Olsson served as Lady Principals during the 1890s, and while they likely enforced the rules in some circumstances, it seems they were more flexible when it came to the

\textsuperscript{47} Brolander, 29.
\textsuperscript{48} Conrad Bergendoff, Augustana ... A Profession of Faith: A History of Augustana College, 1860-1935 (Rock Island, IL: Augustana College Library, 2010), 77.
\textsuperscript{50} Bergendoff, Augustana ... A Profession of Faith, 77.
occasional “fun and shallow” enjoyment.\textsuperscript{51} Lydia Olsson makes an intriguing reference to “the time we took a ‘swim’ in the old kitchen at Ladies’ Hall.”\textsuperscript{52} While writing in her diary one evening she heard the “‘Hashamia’ bell” and concluded “Some girl been out sparkling and got locked out, I ’spose.”\textsuperscript{53} Though that girl may have been chastised for staying out late, the same entry documents a more serious offense by another boarder: “Elvira has gone home, as good as expelled—her father came this morning to get her, poor girl I do feel so bad for her, but she seemed to have no shame nor feel bad…. Since she had stolen the $5.00 etc. she has taken handkerchiefs, so it seemed almost a disease with her.”\textsuperscript{54} Elvira was deemed a nuisance, her transgressions more serious than a disregard for curfew.

Figure 3.2. The duplex that housed the president’s residence and Ladies’ Hall. C-L00028, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

\textsuperscript{51} Boaden, 28; see, for example, \textit{Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, 1897-1898} (Rock Island, IL: Lutheran Augustana Book Concern), 65, accessed March 11, 2021, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012103595.

\textsuperscript{52} L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 27, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{53} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, November 18, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. “Sparkling” means to engage in courtship.

\textsuperscript{54} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, November 18, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
The girls of Ladies’ Hall formed a regular part of Olsson’s social circle, sharing coffee, sledding, and walking together.\textsuperscript{55} Olsson spent a lot of time walking: around campus with girls and boys, downtown with friends, and to and from social calls and events. According to Hunter, girls like Olsson often took daily walks for exercise; they also walked downtown to shop, flirt, and generally have fun on the city streets. They did this without the supervision of parents or a chaperone and therefore could behave more freely.\textsuperscript{56} Olsson frequently shopped with a close friend or a family member. She purchased clothes with Mia, picked out a new suit for Hannes, bought birthday presents with Sarah Lawson, and had photos taken with Lillie Cervin, Dina Dahn, and J. A. Bexell.\textsuperscript{57}

Although genteel society’s matrons may have looked askance at girls having fun in public spaces, they were more concerned about girls’ perceived precociousness. Periodical columnists warned that girls educated alongside boys were too bold in their behavior. For example, some girls drew attention to themselves at concerts and lectures, laughing, whispering to friends, and looking around.\textsuperscript{58} The columnists could have been writing about Olsson and her friends. At a Sunday evening service she and Sarah Lawson noticed A. J. Malmquist staring at them, which made the girls “nearly croak.” “I told Sarah,” wrote Olsson, that “I could see my picture in his greasy hair.”\textsuperscript{59} Olsson and Netta Bartholomew gossiped during musical performances more than once.\textsuperscript{60} And she made herself laugh during a lecture over the names listed on the program.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{55} See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, December 1, 1892; Thursday, December 8, 1892; Friday, May 12, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{56} Hunter, 263, 274.
\textsuperscript{57} See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 3, 1892; Monday, January 8, 1894; Tuesday, March 27, 1894; Thursday, November 19, 1896; Saturday December 5, 1896; Tuesday, December 8, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{58} Hunter, 289, 292.
\textsuperscript{59} L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, January 29, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{60} See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, November 21, 1892; Friday, February 2, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{61} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 2, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
even Olsson knew that sometimes she had gone too far. “Helena, I and Dina sat together and I
know we carried on pretty gayly,” she wrote after an evening choir practice, “I’m ashamed!” She
committed to “begin anew next month and be a real good and lady like girl,” making a daily
program composed of singing, playing music, and sewing, followed by writing in her diary. A
regular schedule would help her “learn to be orderly,” and the activities represented proper,
domestic pursuits for a young Victorian lady.\textsuperscript{62} Olsson’s determination lasted about as long as it
took to write the entry; having fun was just too, well, fun!

The Victorian search for “sweetness and light” extended beyond personal improvement
and into a young woman’s social connections.\textsuperscript{63} Smith-Rosenberg argues that nineteenth-century
female networks were safe spaces, where antagonism against other women was discouraged.\textsuperscript{64}
Certainly Lydia Olsson felt comfortable acting freely when among her girl friends, but the full
picture is more complex. There was plenty of conflict in her circle, even among girls with whom
she socialized frequently like Agnes Branney and Hedvig Hageman. Sometimes they seemed
like good friends, stopping by for coffee and celebrating holidays together.\textsuperscript{65} Hageman (or
Haggie) frequently came to the Olssons’ home for supper and to spend the night.\textsuperscript{66} But Olsson
felt that Branney intentionally snubbed her by not inviting her to parties. In January 1893, she
wrote, “Miss Branney has another party to-night. Makes the 3[rd] she’s had and slighted me.”\textsuperscript{67}
A year later when Branney asked her to come to another party, Olsson decided not to go: “She
has had 3 parties before where I was not good enough—twice both of my sisters were

\textsuperscript{62} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, February 28, 1893, Olsson Family Papers; Hunter, 42, 71.
\textsuperscript{63} Hunter, 3.
\textsuperscript{64} Smith-Rosenberg, 14.
\textsuperscript{65} See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 19, 1892; Sunday, December 25, 1892; Thursday, April
13, 1893; Monday, January 29, 1894; Tuesday, January 1, 1895; Tuesday, February 12, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{66} See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 11, 1892; Wednesday, December 27, 1893; Sunday,
February 18, 1894; Saturday, January 5, 1895; Monday, February 4, 1895; Sunday, September 20, 1896, Olsson
Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{67} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 17, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
invited—now as Anna is not at home, I should have to be invited.”68 Her hurt over this slight is palpable and her relationship with the other girl became strained.

But Olsson’s bruised feelings were nothing compared to the anger and jealousy she felt when seeing Branney and Hageman cozying up to Clarence Cederquist. On New Year’s Eve 1894 the Olssons had a party for some students, including Branney, Hageman, and Cederquist. Olsson observed that “Miss Hageman + Branney are all ‘in it’ with Cederquist. He was between them all over and Hageman put her arm around him and stroked his hair.” Olsson was uncomfortable with public displays of affection, so perhaps she was particularly unhappy to see other girls acting so freely with Cederquist. “It’s wonderful what power and influence some people have,” she wrote, complaining that “Ceder is out with those ‘old maids’ all the time.”69 Olsson’s use of “old maids” is pointed and unkind, markedly different from many of her other references to unmarried women.

Two weeks later at a campus sociable Olsson noticed Branney and Cederquist were missing. Her brother told her they went ice skating and another friend mentioned they had gone to the theater the other night, something strictly forbidden to students.70 When asked about their absence, Hageman said, “Å, han och Agnes ville vara för sig sjelva i quäll.”71 (Oh, he and Agnes wanted to be by themselves tonight.) Olsson was furious and despondent. “I tell you Miss Branney has those boys under her thumb, and still they don’t feel it,” she wrote a few nights later. “Many women in this world have that power to command and control all of humanity, so to speak. The rest of us poor women are always left to ourselves to be misunderstood by others…. Sometimes I get desperate in my tho’ts but I controll myself and call up my better sense to help

69 L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 1, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
71 L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 15, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
me. I know my temper is a desperate one … and I know I must take heed or I will be very
unhappy.” Olsson was struggling with her feelings towards Cederquist and the
knowledge that he would graduate and leave campus in a few months. It could not have helped to
see another girl spending time with him and acting affectionately towards him in public.
Although she may have only expressed her true feelings to her diary, Olsson’s entries prove that
there were indeed conflicts and hurt feelings between members of her network. When she needed
another outlet, Olsson confided in her closest friends.

“Dear girl she is!”: Lydia Olsson’s Intimate Female Friendships

Within the homosocial world of female networks, girls formed devoted friendships with
each other. These frolicsome relationships were forged in adolescence and filled with intimate
verbal and physical gestures: kisses, hugs, romantic language, shared secrets. Girls often slept
together, gossiped about suitors, wrote each other notes filled with endearments, and spent hours
in each other's company.

Jane Hunter documents the routine nature of girls sharing a bed, particularly those
boarding at school. Sally Dana, she writes, corresponded with her parents while at boarding
school, assuring them that she “was following her father’s advice not to form special friendships
too soon”; instead she had slept in eight different girls’ beds. Lydia Olsson formed strong
attachments with several girls, most notably Ella Nordstrom and Dina Dahn. But she shared her
bed with a wider circle of friends, including Lillie Cervin, Sarah Lawson, Hedvig Hageman, and
visiting acquaintances such as Olga Jacobson and Miss Dahlstrom. Sometimes this seems to

---

73 Smith-Rosenberg, 11.
74 Smith-Rosenberg, 19-22; Hunter, 179.
75 Hunter, 179.
76 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, January 1, 1893; Thursday, January 12, 1893; Saturday, January 5,
Wednesday, October 21, 1896; Thursday, November 26, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
have served a practical purpose—sharing beds while on a trip or when a girl might not have
another place to stay—but just as often Olsson slept with friends who came over to talk late into
the night and have fun.

On New Year’s Day 1893, Lillie Cervin and Dina Dahn spent the night with Olsson. All
three girls shared a bed and shenanigans ensued. “I poor critier in the middle, ’twas no fun
neither being kicked, pushed, tickled and shoved by one on each side of me,” lamented Olsson,
jokingly. “We thought we heard burglars and such a row we made. I had a real thin nightgown on
which was torn by the right sleeve and when I went to put it on I tore it 2 or 3 places and then
Dina would take some and Lillie some till at last my sleeve was all off and such a time I do
declare.” Finally the girls settled down, cuddling close to one another. “We did fall asleep at
last,” Olsson wrote. “I was so warm and nice espesially my feet and the girls were so cold they
both used me as a stove and then I’d kick.”77 The girls were still in a playful mood the next
morning: “Lillie said the first thing I said this morning was C-C-c.-cede- but I didn’t mean to say
it I was trying to snore. The first thing Dina did was to shove up my nose like she always does on
everybody; indeed she is getting quite an expert at it now.” That evening while on a trip, Olsson
and Dahn shared a bed, but woke to hear a “dreadful racket” and a “tremendous laugh.”78 They
found out that when Anna Westman got in bed with two other girls the bed frame broke and the
girls were all stuck. Since there were no more beds to be had, the three girls had to squeeze into
bed with other visitors, including Olsson and Dahn.

Girls who had bedrooms of their own enjoyed a private space in which to work on
projects of self-improvement.79 When alone they read, wrote, and ordered their lives just as
Olsson had resolved to do when she created a schedule full of ladylike activities. And when

79 Hunter, 96.
sharing their rooms with friends, girls had a chance to talk about their innermost thoughts and secrets. Smith-Rosenberg quotes pioneer girl Sarah Foulke, who confided in her diary that “I laid with my dear R[ebecca] and a glorious good talk we had until about 4[A.M.]” Similarly, Olsson noted in her diary that Sarah Lawson “wanted me to go with her” one afternoon: “We layed down to rest and sleep but didn’t do any sleeping because of talking.” That night Lawson slept in Olsson’s bed after attending a concert with friends.

Olsson regularly slept with her closest friend, Dina Dahn. On Christmas Eve 1892, Dahn spent the night with her and the two talked about their respective suitors, J. A. Bexell and Clarence Cederquist, and their concerns about their friend Ella Nordstrom’s romantic troubles. In her own room with her closest friend, Olsson was able to open up about her confused feelings over Cederquist and his actions, and the two shared their concerns about a good friend who was in trouble. They had plenty of fun too—both types of intimacies made possible because Olsson had her own private space.

Lydia Olsson met Dina Dahn and Ella Nordstrom when she returned to campus with her family in 1891. Dahn had enrolled as a student in the Conservatory in January 1891, and Nordstrom joined the Business College, taking phonography and typing courses beginning in fall 1891. Olsson was enrolled in the same Business College classes as Nordstrom and participated in campus choral groups with Dahn. The three soon formed a tight bond, attending church and college events together, gossiping, and generally having fun. By the end of 1892, however, Nordstrom was embroiled in a mess wherein several male students and seminarians

80 Smith-Rosenberg, 21.
81 Sarah Foulke as quoted in Smith-Rosenberg, 24-25.
84 Mrs. Dina Dahn-Bexell registration card, MSS 241c Augustana College Office of the Registrar Records, Early Registration Records, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois (hereafter cited as Registrar Records); Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, 1891-1892, 22.
were pursuing her romantically. When Olsson and Dahn spoke about her on Christmas Eve, they likely discussed her unexpected engagement to the seminarian Mr. Brodin (possibly J. S. Brodeen), a particularly aggressive suitor who proposed to her after only a month. “I have heard many love-stories but this one is pretty bad,” Olsson wrote in another entry.\textsuperscript{85} Nordstrom abruptly left for home, and by the time she came back Olsson had made up her mind:

Nordstrom’s behavior was far from innocent, and she could no longer be friendly with her. “I … wash my hands of the whole affair,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{86}

Their relationship remained frosty and Olsson continued to disapprove of Nordstrom’s behavior. Their friendship was effectively over. But when Nordstrom fell suddenly ill with typhoid fever in March 1893, Olsson rushed to her side, disapproval forgotten. She and another friend spent an agonizing night with Nordstrom as she died.\textsuperscript{87} The next day there was a service for her in the college chapel. Olsson nearly fainted during the sermon, but was determined to look at Nordstrom: “it seemed as if I had to.”\textsuperscript{88} For the rest of the month she recorded her thoughts and memories of Nordstrom in her diary. “I really now am glad, so glad that I could stay with Ella the last moments of her life,” she wrote a day after the service.\textsuperscript{89} And, “Every day I look out and expect to see Ella come passing by and waving to me. We were going to write short-hand notes, and never got started! Well, it’s all so queer that I can’t believe it.”\textsuperscript{90} Her father attended the funeral in Rockford, Illinois, bringing back two roses for his daughter.

Olsson cried just thinking of her, writing, “Oh! Ella, my poor little friend, now you are free from all trouble and woe. We often spoke of having our pictures taken together, and how

\textsuperscript{85} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{86} L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 17, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{88} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, March 7, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{89} L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, March 8, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{90} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, March 10, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
queer that we never got a chance. It would have been a nice memory!”91 Close to a year later, Olsson was reminded of Nordstrom while watching “a bunch of business girls’ going to or fro” on campus: “Some of them look to be such ‘flips’ and act so silly that I often wonder if Ella + I looked like that when we went there.”92 Though they did not have time to repair their relationship, Olsson could not easily let such a friendship go.

Her bond with Dina Dahn was much less troubled, and the two grew closer over the years. They went dress shopping together and made each other laugh during campus events.93 “Somebodie’s hungry stomach wrattled so funny, in the Choir,” Olsson wrote in February 1893. “Dina nuded me—mean thing—I thought I’d croke!!!!!! Next time I’ll bring a cracker for the poor byped.”94 Dahn told Olsson how J. A. Bexell proposed to her “one Sunday evening in the base-ball park” and Olsson in return confessed her anxieties about her relationship with Clarence Cederquist.95 “Dina … got me to confess, after many oaths and hand-shakings, who that person was that I admire above all, and the goose! altho I swore to myself that it never should be known, alas! I told it,” Olsson wrote. “Many have teased me but all have teased in vain, until Dina got it out of me. But—if ever she tells her B. or any living being—wo! be unto her. I showed Dina the verses I composed about that—or to that friend and it brought the blood to her face, ha! Ha!”96

The girls trusted each other deeply, to the extent that Olsson told Dahn secrets so private that she did not even confess them to her diary.

---

92 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 20, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
93 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 21, 1893; Sunday, February 5, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
When apart they sent letters to each other and when together they gave each other presents for holidays and birthdays.97 “Got a letter from Dina this morning,” Olsson noted in her diary, “Dear girl she is!”98 After Dahn performed in a concert featuring the Philodoi Quartette, Olsson “wrote a little verse to Dina complimenting her voice.”99 They even attended a campaign stop by 1896 presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. (Olsson thought he was “a homely

---

97 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, December 18, 1893; Saturday, December 23, 1893; Monday, January 29, 1894; Thursday, April 12, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
98 L. Olsson, Saturday, February 2, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
man.”)ⁱ⁰⁰ So unusual was it for them to be apart that Olsson made note of her absence one day in March 1894: “I haven’t seen Dina all day, she has been away all the time.”ⁱ⁰¹ Dahn asked Olsson to be one of her bridesmaids and discussed her wedding plans with her closest confidant.ⁱ⁰² Theirs was a true friendship, one that lasted long past their school days.ⁱ⁰³

“Dina, Bex, Ceder, … and I”: A Quartet of Friends

Dina Dahn and Lydia Olsson shared something else: boy friends. J. A. Bexell and Clarence Cederquist were members of the Augustana College class of 1895 and, like Olsson and Dahn, they were best friends. Bexell (Bex) matriculated into the Preparatory Department in January 1890, eventually enrolling in both the baccalaureate program and the Business College; Cederquist (Ceder or Cede) joined the college in September 1892.ⁱ⁰⁴ The campus community divided the quartet into two couples: Dina and Bex, Lydia and Ceder. Olsson was uncomfortable with this designation, struggling to define her relationship with a boy she admired deeply but insisted she saw “not as a lover” but as a “big brother.”ⁱ⁰⁵ Dahn and Bexell were devoted to each other and got engaged less than a year after they met. Regardless of their romantic connections, the four were fast friends. Their names appear together again and again in Olsson’s diary: “Dina Bex Cede and I,” “Dina Bex and Cede came over,” “Messrs. Bexell and Cederquist; Dahn and myself,” “Bex, D + I + C,” “Dina, Bex, Ceder, … and I,” “Dina, Ceder + Bex were here for

---

ⁱ⁰⁰ L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, October 24, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
ⁱ⁰³ Although there is no known correspondence between the two and Olsson’s diary ends in 1896, a photograph from the private collection of Deanne Morton and Jackie Morton Miller shows an older Olsson and Dahn posing together.
ⁱ⁰⁴ John Anders Bexell registration card, Registrar Records; John Herman Clarence Cederquist registration card, Registrar Records.
They attended lectures and concerts, went on walks, and spent endless hours together in the Olssons’ home.  

In 1893 the group decided to start a “Home reading circle” together with Mia and Hannes. Reading had become a central part of Victorian family life with the explosion of the periodical press in the nineteenth century, and middle-class girls in particular spent hours each day reading. Reading aloud with family and friends was a common “domestic entertainment,” one which allowed for the public discussion of themes and issues in a text. The Olsson sisters

---

106 L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, January 1, 1893; Monday, February 20, 1893; Tuesday, March 21, 1893; Monday, December 25, 1893; Sunday, March 4, 1894; Thursday March 22, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
107 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892; Wednesday, January 25, 1893; Thursday, March 2, 1893; Tuesday, March 21, 1893; Thursday, April 13, 1893; Thursday, March 22, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
110 Hunter, 62-63. Public in the sense that girls spoke about books with others, including men and boys, rather than interpreting them on their own in diaries.
often read to each other and friends came over to listen to serialized stories from periodicals like the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and to the books of popular authors. In January, Olsson, Cederquist, Bexell, and Hedvig Hageman gathered in front of the Olssons’ stove to eat apples and read *Little Women*. That night Olsson wrote in her diary that “Laurie and Jo are two characters that I can’t admire enough.” Olsson and her friends decided to meet regularly to read and set their first meeting in early February; the group made “nut-taffy” and read several short stories. Later that same month Dahn joined them and they “quarreled a long while about who should read,” eventually nominating Olsson as the narrator. Soon after she wrote that “the rest can’t come and read any more for lack of time,” but Cederquist continued to visit at least once a month to read with Olsson and her siblings (although sometimes they gossiped instead of reading). The next year Olsson and Cederquist renewed the tradition, often reading together in her home. The two increasingly spent time together in private and in public.

Lydia Olsson attended lectures and events with a variety of friends and relatives including Dahn and Bexell, but she was frequently escorted alone by Clarence Cederquist. Those who took a conservative standpoint on relations between the sexes dictated that girls and boys who went out walking together must have a chaperone; but if a young man was escorting a young woman to or from an event, it was acceptable for them to walk unchaperoned. Olsson and Cederquist also walked out together in the evenings with friends. “It’s a lovely evening,” wrote Olsson in early December 1892. “Etta, Sysphia and I took a walk, and Wickberg and

---

115 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, February 11, 1894; Sunday March 25, 1894; Friday, March 30, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
116 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, November 20, 1892; Friday, December 9, 1892; Saturday, January 28, 1893; Tuesday, March 21, 1893; Monday, December 25, 1893; Friday, January 26, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
117 Hunter, 268.
Cederquist followed as we went way beyond the Park up around and came the hill-way home, it’s a delightful walk up there (in the mud) moonlight evenings.” On another occasion Olsson and Lillie Cervin met Cederquist on the college grounds and he accompanied them while they gathered violets and sat on Zion Hill. The two walked up the hill alone one night after they had a fight: “it turned out all right altho’ we didn’t say much on the subject.” They spent the evening together on the hill another night, Olsson telling Cederquist the story of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. In these moments the two achieved a sort of intimate friendship, although unlike Olsson’s bond with Dahn there was always another layer to their relationship.

For many American girls, Smith-Rosenberg observes, boys represented an “other or out group,” and relationships between the sexes often “lacked the spontaneity and emotional intimacy” found between young women. Certainly Olsson did not spend the night in bed, tickling and talking with a boy, but her diary documents her friendly relationships with several young men at Augustana, including Cederquist and Bexell. She and her girl friends spent almost as much time with boys as they did with each other. They shared a “vibrant coeducational peer culture” that privileged fun and flirtation, as argued by Jane Hunter.

Olsson had a particularly playful relationship with Cederquist and Bexell. They teased and sometimes played pranks on each other. Once Olsson went into the boys’ room (which she cleaned for them) and found Bexell asleep in bed. “I quietly took a piece of paper and wrote on it ‘Look out, he bites!’ in plain letters and pinned it to his coattail,” she recorded in her diary. “I stood there watching the poor innocent thing asleep and then I went out to laugh aloud. When he

---

118 L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 2, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. See also L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, April 9, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
119 L. Olsson, Sunday, May 14, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
120 L. Olsson, Monday, April 16, 1894, Olsson Family Papers. See also L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, April 29, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
123 Hunter, 2.
woke up and was going to school Mia called him back and told him my trick. If she had only shut up he would have gone off with the tag.”124 Olsson teased him for his devotion to her best friend, asking “Say, Bex, when it comes to the point, you really don’t see any faults in Dina, do you?” Bexell answered, “Well—I, no not exactly any visible faults, but—ah, yes—she has one great fault that I admit…. That is,” he continued, “that she is not prompt in answering her correspondents.”125 Theirs was no formal acquaintance: Olsson was comfortable teasing Bexell and speaking to him about his fiancée.

Figure 3.5. J. A. Bexell signature album inscription to Lydia Olsson, November 21, 1891. Signature Album, 1889, Folder 1, Box 25, in MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

125 L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 30, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
Cederquist teased Olsson when he saw one of her admirers in the college library making
her “nearly explode of laughter.” She told him “it is lonely and I need some company oftern.”126
She played a joke on Cederquist at a friend’s home by pulling the chair out from underneath
him.127 He and Bexell returned the favor, giving her and Dahn Christmas presents in two of
Olsson’s “ragged black stocking[s],” procured for them by their accomplice Hannes Olsson.
“They thought it a capital joke and who can blame ’em,” wrote Olsson in reaction to the trick.128
Though Olsson drew the line in some cases—like wearing pants where boys could see her—she
enjoyed having fun with friends of both sexes.

“We had a jolly time”: Peer Culture at Augustana College and Theological Seminary

Augustana students led busy social lives, attending parties, playing outside, and
participating in campus activities. During the winter months they split their time between indoor
gatherings and outdoor fun. Olsson and her friends went sleighing, sledding (or coasting), ice
skating, and had snowball fights. “It was raining when we got up this morning, but soon turned
into snow, so I have already been out fighting with some boys,” she wrote in November 1892.129
Olsson did not want to grow up, and by participating in these winter activities she was able to
extend her childhood. “Some of us girls went down to the hill and some boys were sliding down
so we got each a ride down on the bob, and I should say it went a-flying. Then we had a
snow-ball-fight. Jupiter!,” she exclaimed, “I thought my head was off when we reached our
destination. My hat flew, goodness knows where—but Emil Lofgren captured it.”130 Augustana

---

128 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 6, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
129 L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, November 17, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
130 L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, November 30, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
girls and boys had fun together, engaging in rough and tumble activities far from the stiff
interactions described by Smith-Rosenberg.\textsuperscript{131}

Large groups of friends went sledding down the steep hill behind the main college
buildings, taking advantage of the winter break to fit in extra outings. “As it is such a beautiful
evening,” Olsson wrote, “we went out coasting—Carl Nel. brought down his great big bob and I
should wonder if we didn’t have a jolly time. Mr. Scott, Mia, some 6 hashamia girls, some boys
etc. took turns. I was down 6 times.”\textsuperscript{132} Another evening she agreed to go out, noting that “it does
seem queer for me to stay in the house a whole day.” Even a fall could not dampen her spirits:
“Once we dumped and I slid half a half block rolling in thick snow drifts till my eyes, mouth and
all was in one cloud of snow. Edith discovered me and helped me out. But it does not hurt to
have a fall in soft clean snow.”\textsuperscript{133} Olsson relished the fresh air and exercise as much as having
fun with her friends.

Sledding and snowball fights were fun, but sleighing and skating could give girls and
boys a chance to flirt with each other. “Lillie + I wanted to go skating from 4-6 and she didn’t
want to go alone so I said if she got me a beau I’d get her one,” wrote Olsson in November 1896.
“We decided so! At four o’clock we met. I got Lillie Carl Nelson and she got me Emil Lofgren.
We went down the river and had a very nice time.”\textsuperscript{134} On another afternoon Olsson, Cederquist,
Lillie Cervin, and her cousin Fridolf went out to skate, then came in to warm themselves by the
fire and eat nuts and candy.\textsuperscript{135} Even when the ice was not good Olsson stayed out for hours with
her friends, declaring, “We had a jolly time.”\textsuperscript{136} In the evenings boys and girls coupled up for
sleighing parties. “The Juniors are going to have a sleighing party tomorrow night and lo! Mr.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131] Smith-Rosenberg, 9.
\item[132] L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, December 1, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
\item[133] L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 10, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\item[135] L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, December 29, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
\item[136] L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 17, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
\end{footnotes}
Malmquist invited me!” Olsson wrote in December 1892. She did not find Malmquist particularly appealing, but said yes to avoid any awkwardness and because “I have … never had the pleasure of being along on such jollification-trips and am anxious to go.” These were opportunities to partner up and find a potential beau, although Olsson—never keen to attach herself to a particular boy—would have rather gone without an escort.

Olsson had a much better time sleighing with a group of girls: “Ella took Lillie, Alice, herself and I out for a sleigh-ride in the silliest looking sleigh—one-seated with a board behind where Lillie and Alice sat—much lower than we so it did look crazy. We bundled up … and talk about a glorious time!” She added, “Even ‘Nellie’ [the horse] seemed to enjoy herself to her hearts’ content … for she willingly galloped away very nicely.” In this case she did not need to worry about being part of a couple with some boy; sleighing was pure fun when it was just with her girl friends.

Indoors, students were kept busy with programs for the Phrenokosmian, Adelphic, and Ionian literary societies, church sociables, and choir practices. Olsson noted an endless stream of lectures, concerts, and debates on campus, and frequent off-campus talks on subjects as varied as dress reform and scientific curiosities. She attended events with girl friends and boys, particularly Cederquist. Some students formed special interest groups like the “Scientifics,” an early science club on campus whose membership included Sarah Lawson, Lillie Cervin, Carl Appell, Herman Lind, and J. Alfred Anderson.
Figure 3.6. The Scientifecs, 1894. (L to R) Carl Appell, Sarah Lawson, Herman Lind, J. Alfred Anderson, Lillie Cervin. C-L00004, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

But perhaps the most enjoyable events were holiday parties with friends. Olsson wrote about New Year’s Eve parties in 1892, 1893, and 1894. The Cervin family hosted a party on December 31, 1892. Olsson and Cederquist joined at least half a dozen other guests for supper, and while they were eating the Philodoi Quartette came in to serenade them. The group played several games of Parcheesi and Olsson noted that she and Cederquist won twice. During the evening, Olsson wrote that she and Cederquist exchanged rings and wished on them. At midnight the group had tea and prayed together, then dispersed. Cederquist escorted Olsson home, then gave her a present. “I scooted up in my little room (when all the secrets are opened) and found in the box a pin home-made by his brother from the east.” Olsson usually did not approve of boys
giving her gifts, but in this case she was pleased. “That boy! He is too kind and generous for any use.”\footnote{L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 31, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.} She was willing to bend the rules for Cederquist, but only so far.

The next year the Olssons hosted the Cervin family for supper along with half a dozen others. After going to church the young people came back to the Olsson house. The boys played “Threading a Needle,” a game where the players sat on a bottle and tried to thread a needle. The winner was predicted to be the first to marry.\footnote{Mary E. Blain, Games for All Occasions (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1909), 181, accessed on March 14, 2021, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Games_for_All_Occasions/JIVOAQAAMAAJ.} Then the group blew out the lights and gathered around the fireplace, “Miss Hageman telling hospital stories and Fridolph Ghost stories.” At midnight the local church bells rang and some students ran over to ring the college bell. Sarah Lawson and Hedvig Hageman stayed the night. Before she went to sleep Olsson wrote, “I have now had my 3-leaved clover ring on a whole year this evening. Ceder wished it on a year ago this eve. He won’t tell me what he wished.”\footnote{L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 31, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.} Their relationship was close but still had secrets.

In 1894, the Olssons hosted a dozen or so students for an evening of supper and games, including Cederquist, Hageman, and Brannya. It was at this party that Olsson witnessed Brannya and Hageman putting their arms around Cederquist and stroking his hair. At midnight most of the students went over to ring the college bell, but Olsson stayed behind with her sister Mia and Sarah Lawson, upset about what she had witnessed. “When the bells were ringing I felt a sad sensation and should have liked to have a little weep to myself,” she wrote. The group came back to wish the girls a happy new year and, Olsson noted, “Ceder looked at me and squeezed my hand for a few seconds. I don’t know what he meant—he might have meant a farewell to me forever or that you have done me much harm or you are my friend—it remains a mistory to me what it was.”\footnote{L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 1, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.} Lawson spent the night with Olsson; perhaps they discussed what had happened.
These New Year’s Eve gatherings were typical of home parties attended by Augustana community members. Parents or other adults typically joined boys and girls for an evening meal. Once they left, young party goers played games and amused each other with stories and music. Couples stole private moments to themselves and jealousies might have been aroused by overly-friendly behavior, but for the most part they had fun. These events were an opportunity for young men and women to socialize with their peers, free from close adult supervision.

During the nineteenth century, American men and women often socialized apart, creating rich communities within their homosocial networks. Some of Lydia Olsson’s most important relationships were with girls like Ella Nordstrom and Dina Dahn, and her female circles incorporated a range of activities, from formal calls to sharing beds. Olsson’s observations of Nordstrom, Branney, and Hageman show that girls' friendships were not always rosy, just as the disagreements with her father demonstrate that the Victorian family was not entirely serene. The reality was more complex, as Olsson’s diary entries demonstrate.

Olsson felt able to act more freely when among young women, but she bonded with her whole generation of Augustana peers, both boys and girls. Her status as a “new girl” at a coeducational college meant that she socialized with male peers, frequently and with varying levels of familiarity. Boys made regular appearances in her diary, whether as friends, unwanted suitors, or beaux. Her closest boy friends were J. A. Bexell and Clarence Cederquist and she interacted with a wide circle of young men while playing outdoors and attending events. More familiar with the opposite sex than previous generations, new girls like her were able to assess potential partners, allowing them to aspire to marriages with boys they knew and loved.
**Interlude Four**

**Heartache**¹

Lydia settled into a rocker by the parlor stove. For once her whole morning was free, and she intended to spend the time reading *Little Women*. Picking up the well-worn volume, she turned to where she had left off the previous evening. Jo March was preparing to leave New York and go home to her family. She made her farewells to those living at Mrs. Kirke’s boarding house, and invited Professor Bhaer to come and visit her during Laurie’s commencement.

“That is your best friend, of whom you speak?” he said in an altered tone.

“Yes, my boy Teddy. I’m very proud of him and should like you to see him.”

Jo looked up then, quite unconscious of anything but her own pleasure in the prospect of showing them to one another. Something in Mr. Bhaer’s face suddenly recalled the fact that she might find Laurie more than a “best friend,” and simply because she particularly wished not to look as if anything was the matter, she involuntarily began to blush, and the more she tried not to, the redder she grew.

Lydia sighed. Professor Bhaer was no match for Laurie Laurence, but she knew all too well the feeling of discomfort when someone hinted that her relationship with “my boy”—in her case, Clarence Cederquist—was more than an innocent friendship. She turned the page to the next chapter, simply titled “Heartache.” Lydia was reluctant to read this section, for it contained one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in the whole book. She braced herself for the dreaded moment between Jo and Laurie.

“No, Teddy. Please don’t!”

“I will, and you must hear me. It’s no use, Jo, we’ve got to have it out, and the sooner the better for both of us,” he answered, getting flushed and excited all at once.

“Say what you like then. I’ll listen,” said Jo, with a desperate sort of patience.

“I’ve loved you ever since I’ve known you, Jo, couldn’t help it, you’ve been so good to me. I’ve tried to show it, but you wouldn’t let me; now I’m going to make you hear, and give me an answer, for I can’t go on so any longer.”

“I wanted to save you this. I thought you’d understand—” began Jo, finding it a great deal harder than she expected.

Lydia clenched the page with her hand, wrinkling it a little bit. She had read these lines dozens of times, but they never got any easier. Poor Laurie—and poor Jo. Each was making the other miserable, though neither would ever wish unhappiness on the other. Lydia didn’t understand why boys and girls rushed to spoil their childhood friendships. There were so many years ahead of them before they needed to make any decisions, especially regarding marriage. Why not just enjoy the relationships they already had?

“I hoped you’d love me, though I’m not half good enough—” Here there was a choke that couldn’t be controlled, so he decapitated buttercups while he cleared his “confounded throat.”

“You, you are, you’re a great deal too good for me, and I’m so grateful to you, and so proud and fond of you, I don’t see why I can’t love you as you want me to. I’ve tried, but I can’t change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don’t.”

---

¹ This interlude was inspired by passages from Lydia Olsson’s diary, particularly entries in January 1893, as well as “Heartache” in Alcott, *Little Women*. For detailed references, please see the endnotes.
Oh, but how could Jo refuse him! thought Lydia. If there were a Laurie in the neighborhood who paid her any attention, she would give in on the spot. He was such a gentleman and Lydia admired how he behaved towards Jo. Not all men were so good—some carried on like fools, saying that girls ruined their lives and drove them crazy. Just think of how J. S. Brodeen had treated Ella, making her feel so miserable for refusing his proposal. Laurie would never do that to Jo.

“Oh, Teddy, I’m sorry, so desperately sorry, I could kill myself if it would do any good! I wish you wouldn’t take it so hard. I can’t help it. You know it’s impossible for people to make themselves love other people if they don’t,” cried Jo inelegantly but remorsefully, as she softly patted his shoulder; remembering the time when he had comforted her so long ago.

“They do sometimes,” said a muffled voice from the post.

“I don’t believe it’s the right sort of love, and I’d rather not try it,” was the decided answer.

Lydia brushed a tear away. If Jo couldn’t love Laurie, what hope was there for a girl like her? Her friends teased her about Ceder, asking her if he was going to propose, but she wasn’t sure of his feelings for her, and like Jo, thought forced love—love that didn’t come naturally on both sides—was not the right kind. Lydia loved him as a brother and a friend, but wasn’t sure if she could ever think of him as anything more. What a mess, she thought, we’re just as bad as Jo and Laurie, me and my boy.

How could she say hard things to her boy while he watched her with eyes full of love and longing, and lashes still wet with the bitter drop or two her hardness of heart had wrung from him? She gently turned his head away, saying, as she stroked the wavy hair which had been allowed to grow for her sake—how touching that was, to be sure!—

“I agree with Mother that you and I are not suited to each other, because our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable, if we were so foolish as to”—Jo paused a little over the last word, but Laurie uttered it with a rapturous expression.

“Marry—no we shouldn’t! If you loved me, Jo, I should be a perfect saint, for you could make me anything you like.”

“No, I can’t. I’ve tried it and failed, and I won’t risk our happiness by such a serious experiment. We don’t agree and we never shall, so we’ll be good friends all our lives, but we won’t go and do anything rash.”

“Yes, we will if we get the chance,” muttered Laurie rebelliously.

Jumping up, Lydia paced around the room, book in hand. It was impossible to read this scene without thinking of the conversations she imagined between Ceder and herself. People had put this romantic rubbish in her head, but she must keep calm. If Ceder gave her any hints she would respond as Jo had. It was true that they both had tempers, arguing over how often he could escort her home, how friendly he could act towards her. She wasn’t like Dina, comfortable with being spoony in public. Should she refuse his company, lest he get the wrong idea? She didn’t want anyone to break his heart over her. What would Jo do? Lydia returned to the chapter.

“I’ve done my best, but you won’t be reasonable, and it’s selfish of you to keep teasing for what I can’t give. I shall always be fond of you, very fond indeed, as a friend, but I’ll never marry you, and the sooner you believe it the better for both of us—so now!”

That speech was like fire to gunpowder: Laurie looked at her a minute as if he did not quite know what to do with himself, then turned sharply away, saying in a desperate sort of tone, “You’ll be sorry some day, Jo.”

“Oh, where are you going?” she cried, for his face frightened her.
“To the devil!” was the consoling answer.
Lydia slumped back down into the rocker. It was exhausting, all of this emotion. Images flitted through her head of Jo and Laurie, her and Ceder. Could she be as strong as Jo if Ceder ever— No, she must not think like that. They were just friends. But she found a great deal of “Laurism” in him, her good boy. She was getting to like him more and wanted to feel that way towards him for a long, long time. Lydia remembered Marmee’s advice to her daughters: “Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands…. Leave these things to time.” She thought of her maiden sisters, both content with their lot. She thought of Ella, besieged by men fighting over her hand, and Dina, blissfully in love with Bex. What would her path be? For now, Lydia knew, no boy could fully claim her heart. Children should be children as long as they can, she thought.

Lydia looked out the window. Outside it was a crisp January day, sunny and cold. The Philodoi Quartette would arrive back from their tour soon, and this evening there was a party at the Bersells’ home. Tomorrow students would begin to return to campus, Ceder among them. Lydia longed for something to keep her mind off certain topics—if only she had some work to do. She put down her book and got up. Reading *Little Women* always did her good, and the March family offered admirable examples of true American women. Mimicking Jo, she said, “I love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man.”

* * * *

**Chapter Four**

_In Pursuit of True Love: Marriage and Singlehood in Lydia Olsson’s Circle of Women_

“Mia and I were talking about marriages,” Lydia Olsson wrote in her diary. “We said we wish one or two of us would get married. We picked one out for Anna. It was, ‘Rev. Younger.’

A nicer husband in many respects she could never have, but of course if the ‘love’ is lacking it makes all the difference in the world. I wish she would change her mind about it kind of.” She paused. She really would not want her sister to marry without love; it was the tie that bound a husband and wife together. Lydia worried about finding true love. Some people said it came naturally, that you would know it when you felt it. But what if your instincts were wrong and you married someone that God had not chosen as your lifelong partner?
Mia said she did not want to marry, but Lydia had not made up her mind yet. “Some day when I get old and sensible,” she wrote, “I am going to think over every thing and see what conclusion I come to. The first question is: Do I? and will I ever regret it? The second: Who to? and do I love him with all my heart and soul, or is it a fancy. 3\textsuperscript{rd}: Is this the one that Providence has picked out for me? 4:—Will we always love the same?” These questions were perhaps the most difficult she would ever have to answer. When she was in school she could put thoughts of marriage out of her mind, but now that she had left, the notion was becoming harder to ignore. Ceder’s question rose in her mind. Oh, how could she know? “I’ll sleep over it,” said Lydia. “The best way is to let time and future deside all such jawbraking problems.”\textsuperscript{2} She put down her pen and closed her notebook. Maybe tomorrow she would have more answers.

Whether or not she would marry was a mystery that faced Lydia Olsson and every other girl in her circumstances. Although a growing number of women chose to remain single, the vast majority of middle-class American girls became wives and mothers. Olsson was not alone in asking herself whether a potential spouse was a man she could love for the rest of her life, one chosen by God. Prior to the late eighteenth century, most Europeans and Americans accepted that marital matches were based on economic and political considerations, whether a monarch was seeking a military alliance or a farmer was looking for a skilled wife to keep his house. Although some may have married for love, most men and women entered into pragmatic partnerships based on skills and resources. With luck, they would come to admire and appreciate—and perhaps love—each other.\textsuperscript{3} However the concept of marriage shifted, and by the nineteenth century it became acceptable for couples to marry for romantic love. Men and women vowed

\textsuperscript{2} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 22, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

\textsuperscript{3} Stephanie Coontz, 	extit{Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage} (New York: Viking, 2005), 6-7.
“until death do us part” to those they already knew and loved.⁴ All the better if they also shared a higher, spiritual bond.

In fact, many middle-class American women took contemporary ideals of love and marriage so seriously that, if they could not find their God-ordained partner, they would refuse to enter into the institution altogether. Because of this uncompromising attitude, along with the value they provided to society, unmarried women were considered both highly moral and just as womanly as wives and mothers.⁵ Girls like Lydia Olsson had more freedom to ask “Do I?” before contemplating “Who to?”⁶ While trying to make up her mind, Olsson remembered her parents’ marriage and observed the relationships of those around her: Dina Dahn’s engagement to J. A. Bexell, the suitors pursuing Netta Bartholomew, her sister Anna and other girls who chose to remain single—even fictional women like Jo March and characters in the stories published in the Ladies’ Home Journal. Her ultimate decision to reject Clarence Cederquist as a marital partner was influenced by these relationships as much as by larger societal trends and community expectations.

**Swedish Marital Ideals**

Olof Olsson and Anna Lisa Jonsdotter were raised during a time when Swedish lawmakers were debating the nature of marriage. During the nineteenth century, legal reforms to Swedish marital rights and the rights of inheritance prompted arguments between legislators in two opposing camps. One side believed the marital bond to be a partnership based on economics as well as love, in which women and men were equal actors deserving equivalent rights and duties. Marriage was a public union, they contended, and the participants duty-bound to adhere

---

⁴ Berend, 937.
⁵ Berend, 935-936.
to the legal system and the norms of Swedish society. The other side argued that marriage was a private union, based solely on spousal love and affection. In their eyes, husbands possessed more authority than wives, and neither the Swedish legal system nor society at large should intervene in their marital affairs. Both sides in this debate acknowledged the role of love between partners, nodding to the larger transformation of the marital institution across Europe and the United States. But, as suggested by lawmakers’ disagreements about gender roles and the state’s right to regulate marriage, this was no easy transition.

Lydia Olsson’s parents married before they emigrated from their homeland, but many single Swedish immigrants chose to wed ethnic Swedes when living in the United States. This endogamy was common among immigrant groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because so many Swedes settled in ethnic communities, their pool of potential partners would have been predominantly Swedish. Marrying a fellow Swede often guaranteed a similar set of values, a common religious background, and shared language and traditions. Joy K. Lintelman argues that these matches rested on “rationality, practicality, and convenience” just as much as romantic love. Her research focuses on working-class immigrants, and it is possible that Swedish-American daughters of the middle classes enjoyed more leeway in choosing their partners (although they, too, had to weigh economic considerations when deciding whether a suitor could support them). Lintelman also notes that it is difficult to determine the balance of power between Swedish-American spouses. Some women felt dominated and unhappy, choosing to focus their energies on child rearing and external social and charitable organizations rather than companionship with their husbands. Theirs were not matches made in heaven.

---

7 Ågren, 177, 181.
8 Lintelman, 144.
9 Lintelman, 148.
10 Lintelman, 166-167.
“A most happy and congenial marital union”: The Marriage of Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson

By all accounts, Olof and Anna Lisa Olsson had an ideal marriage and partnership based on love and a deep spiritual connection. Anna Lisa’s biographer, Alf Brorson, states that she “shared her husband’s vision” and “faithfully followed” him.\textsuperscript{11} One of Olof’s biographers, Ernst W. Olson, wrote that Anna Lisa “won his heart” and that their relationship was a “full-hearted mutual devotion.”\textsuperscript{12} The reality was likely more complicated, but it does seem as though they were well matched. While Lydia Olsson did not write about her parents’ marriage in her diary—her mother had died more than five years before her earliest-known entry—she must have looked to her memories of the two together as an example of a successful partnership. Her older sister Anna recalled their father and mother working in tandem to help others: “Ever since I can remember, we took into our home strangers who were victims of some misfortune…. Father and Mother both showed a truly marvelous patience in dealing with these…. Often he would spend his afternoons visiting the sick, and Mother would be helping someone in trouble, perfect strangers as often as friends.”\textsuperscript{13} Pastor and pastor’s wife, the two seem perfectly matched. Theirs was, as Ernst W. Olson wrote, “a most happy and congenial marital union” blessed by God.\textsuperscript{14}

These descriptions are reinforced powerfully by Olof Olsson’s own words to his wife on her deathbed. He wrote, “we awoke about 4 o’clock. She came over to my bed, and we talked almost till six, when I arose … ‘Anna,’ I said, ‘I shall—I will love you in my latter years more fervently than ever before.’ So I felt, and so I feel now.”\textsuperscript{15} At her funeral, speaking in front of mourners including his four children, Olsson was no less certain: “The darling of my youth, the beloved one who has filled my wedded life with temporal bliss—now she is gone from me and

\textsuperscript{11} Brorson, 21, 54.
\textsuperscript{12} Olson, 37, 209.
\textsuperscript{13} A. Olsson as quoted in Brorson, 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Olson, 208.
\textsuperscript{15} O. Olsson as quoted in Olson, 209.
our dear children…. In heaven is my Lord and Saviour; my faithful Anna is there…. Would that I were a heavenly being!”16 To wish that he was in heaven with his wife instead of living out the rest of his life: that was an example of devotion that his daughter could cling to. And Olsson was true to his word. He never remarried, strongly rebuffing any suggestions from friends that he do so.17 His devotion would have loomed large in Lydia’s mind as she contemplated marriage.


---

16 O. Olsson as quoted in Olson, 210.
17 Brorson, 62.
American Marital Ideals

As in Sweden and other European countries, the concept of a marriage based on love rather than solely on practical considerations took hold in the United States beginning in the late eighteenth century. The shift to romantically-matched couples was paired with expectations that husbands would serve as the primary providers and authorities within the household, and that marriage demanded monogamy in addition to intimacy. The nation’s Protestant majority also believed strongly in the need for a spiritual love—or “true love”—between spouses. Romantic love was not enough: only a partnership blessed by Providence would thrive. As Zsuzsa Berend argues, “falling in [romantic] love” was acceptable only if an individual had a “strong conviction that the beloved was one’s other half.” In other words, couples should be soul mates in both a spiritual and a romantic sense. This idea of true love was promoted in the advice literature of the time. In *What Our Girls Ought to Know* (1885), physician Mary J. Studley writes, “Marriage is the ultimate aim and end of every life, and the true marriage is that holiest of all possible relationships. It is of God’s own ordaining.” Although she was a strong proponent of marriage, Studley then goes on to argue, “Second only to [the true wife and mother] is she who had the courage to remain single because the right man never came … I am ready to do her honor for living up to the principle, ‘The best, or none!’” As discussed below in more detail, spinsterhood was seen as a moral alternative to marrying without true, spiritual love. To marry was a serious and permanent action in nineteenth-century America, especially for religious women like Lydia Olsson and those in her circle.

---

18 Coontz, 11.
19 Berend, 938.
20 Berend, 939.
22 Studley, 201.
In addition to didactic literature, Olsson consumed advice about love and marriage through fiction. In *Little Women*, the relationship between Jo and Laurie may be a perennial reader favorite, but Jo’s sisters Meg and Amy also demonstrate how American girls should choose a spouse. In particular, Amy’s plan to marry for money fails when she realizes that “something more than money and position was needed to satisfy the new longing that filled her heart.”\(^{23}\) She had planned to marry Fred Vaughn, writing to her mother, “If Fred asks me, I shall accept him, though I’m not madly in love. I like him, and we get on comfortably together.”\(^{24}\) Although this would have been a perfectly acceptable match prior to the elevation of romantic and spiritual love, Amy comes to recognize that her strategy is “mercenary” and “unwomanly.” Ultimately Amy gives up Fred, preferring to be a “lovable woman” rather than a “queen of society.”\(^{25}\) Laurie, her eventual husband, approved: “Girls [marry for money] every day, poor things, and are taught to think it is their only salvation; but you had better lessons, and, though I trembled for you at one time, I was not disappointed, for the daughter was true to the mother’s teaching.”\(^{26}\) A girl’s salvation was a true love match, not a marriage for economic gain.

Lydia Olsson would have encountered celebrations of true love, romantic love, and companionate marriage in her regular diet of novels and periodicals. She gossiped with other girls about boys and spoke to her sisters and intimate female friends about the possibility of marriage. She referenced the idea of becoming a wife in her diary, joking, “If I ever marry I pity the poor man who shall keep me in shoes!”\(^{27}\) But Olsson, like many young women, had little control over who might propose to her and when.\(^{28}\) Theirs was a waiting game, and a successful

\(^{24}\) Alcott, *Little Women*, 327.
\(^{25}\) Alcott, *Little Women*, 433. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that the American concept of True Womanhood, which was at its peak in advice literature while Alcott was growing up, promoted the notion of “true love” over marrying for money. Smith-Rosenberg, 171.
\(^{26}\) Alcott, *Little Women*, 466.
\(^{27}\) L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 25, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\(^{28}\) Hunter, 341.
match necessitated a major adjustment for girls who were used to socializing within predominantly female spaces. It also required that they give up the growing level of autonomy enjoyed by young unmarried women.

Increasingly, then, American girls were ambivalent about becoming wives. As Jane Hunter writes, getting married meant “trading in the known experience and freedoms of home for a hazardous dependency upon a man likely to be at least part alien.” In her diary, Olsson repeatedly agreed with Marmee’s assertion that “Children should be children as long as they can.” She, for one, was not ready to rush into marriage.

“Love, I ’spose”: The Engagement of Dina Dahn and J. A. Bexell

Lydia Olsson’s best friend Dina Dahn, on the other hand, had found her true love match. In November 1892, Olsson speculated that her friend was attached. “I bet a nickel that Dina and Bex are secretly engaged—that is, have promised each other to be true,” she wrote in her diary. “Ush! They are too spoony for me, but I won’t judge them too badly for such is love, blind, and I may some future day, be as silly myself.” Olsson’s comment reveals her discomfort with public displays of affection and her opinion of real love as a feeling so overwhelming it obscures imperfections in the beloved. She wondered if she would experience all-consuming love one day, but did not seem eager to be “silly.” She regularly recorded Dahn and Bexell’s affection for each other, always a bit too much for her taste. But she also recognized true love when she saw it and was likely less disapproving of their relationship than disappointed that the marriage would change her friendship with Dahn.

---

29 Smith-Rosenberg, 22, 28.
30 Hunter, 342.
31 Alcott, Little Women, 62.
32 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. “Spoony” means sentimentally or foolishly amorous.
Figure 4.2. Dina and J. A. Bexell wedding portrait. Courtesy of Deanne Morton and Jackie Morton Miller.

Olsson compared Dahn and Bexell’s relationship to hers with her “good boy” Ceder. At a concert she observed: “Dina and Bexell look real nice together. Sometimes he would look at her for a long while; he evidently breathed in the beauty of her face, while she, the music. But that isn’t the way me and my little dude did; we listened to the music and made remarks about it.” It is a romantic image: Bexell gazing in adoration at Dahn while she listens to the music.

But Olsson is quick to disrupt the picture with her decidedly unobjectionable behavior with her “little dude.” On another occasion she noted, “As quick as Bex is home you hear Dina trotting up there are they two sit a-talking (love I ’spose) to each other as long as they can…. Sometimes I think they get to much that way—can’t be apart half the day, but … I think I better not be too severy in my criticism for some day I may get there and there we will see how I fell and act.”35 Her friends’ behavior showed Olsson what was possible when someone met their other half. Seeing true love in her contemporaries gave Olsson a more recent example to study alongside her memories of her parents’ relationship.

“I'll never marry you”: Refusing Unworthy Suitors

By reading Little Women and observing Netta Bartholomew, Lydia Olsson learned to reject suitors who were not soul mates. Following the shift in American ideals of love and marriage, men and women became more selective when it came to picking a mate. In 1868 the Nation published an article arguing that this change was far from “unnatural.” Instead, it was the result of “prudent hesitation,” which should be “praised” over the actions of those who rushed into the “sacred responsibilities” of marriage and parenthood. “Men and women can less easily find any one whom they are willing to take as a partner for life,” the author wrote. “Their requirements are more exacting; their standards of excellence higher; they are less able to find any who can satisfy their own ideal and less able to satisfy anybody else’s ideal.”36 The idealization of romantic and spiritual love made it personally and socially acceptable for a young woman to reject a potential spouse if she could not “give her whole heart” to him.37 This included turning down proposals from boys whom girls loved as friends or considered brothers.

36 “Why Is Single Life Becoming More General?” Nation, March 5, 1868, as quoted in Cogan, 171-172.
37 Berend, 938.
In *Little Women*, Jo realized Laurie was falling in love with her in a way she could not return. “I love the dear boy … but as for anything more, it’s out of the question,” she told her mother. “It would trouble me sadly to make him unhappy, for I couldn’t fall in love with the dear old fellow merely out of gratitude, could I?” Like the subjects of the *Nation*’s article, Jo would not settle for a spouse who fell short of her ideal. When he finally proposed she firmly declined, though she did not like hurting his feelings. Middle-class girls like Lydia Olsson identified with Jo and regardless of their feelings about her rejection of Laurie, Alcott had given them a script if they fell into a similar situation. She gave Jo the agency to reject Laurie and later accept the proposal of Professor Bhaer; it was her choice. Alcott’s message to her readers was clear: they, too, could decide whether or not to say “yes.”

Both Jane Hunter and Barbara Sicherman argue that nineteenth-century American girls drew on literature to shape their identities and real-life choices. Those who, like Olsson, kept a diary “read and wrote in tandem, often patterning their writing on their reading,” states Hunter. And because Jo March was so relatable, they could use her as an example of how they might act. In *Little Women*, Alcott reinforces the idea that Jo is a regular girl just like her readers: “Jo wasn’t a heroine, she was only a struggling human girl like hundreds of others, and she just acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless, or energetic, as the mood suggested.” Lydia Olsson certainly identified with Jo, comparing their tempers (hers “resembling [Jo’s] though luckily to a slightly cooler degree”) and their tendency to bicker with their beloved boys (“it seems as tho’ we couldn’t love without disagreeing”). She saw her relationship with Clarence Cederquist through the lens of Jo’s friendship with Laurie. “‘My good boy’ (as Jo calls her Laurie) took me

40 Sicherman, 22.
42 Lydia Olsson, Journal, Saturday, February 11, 1893; Wednesday, March 21, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
to supper,” Olsson wrote in her diary. “Indeed he is a good boy, and I … am getting to like him like Jo did.”43 As Sicherman would argue, Olsson understood herself and her own situation better by using Jo as a model for her choices and behavior.44

“Going, --- going, --- gone!!”: Netta Bartholomew’s Rejection of Joseph A. Anderson

Lydia Olsson did not have to rely solely on fictional characters, however. She could also come to the conclusion that it was acceptable to reject unworthy admirers based on the actions of Netta Bartholomew. Bartholomew was one of Olsson’s few close friends to marry, but first she was obliged to turn away several suitors. The most determined of these was the seminarian Joseph A. Anderson, a self-proclaimed “sincere lover.”45 Anderson made a bold declaration of his love in a letter dated May 2, 1892. He was soon to be ordained as a minister in the Augustana Synod and was eager to secure Bartholomew’s hand before he was installed as a pastor of a congregation in Creston, Iowa.46 “I must speak out of the fullness of my heart,” he wrote, “My soul but longs for you…. I long for nothing more than your ‘yes.’” He was confident: “A deeper, a truer and a more earnest love you can not receive from anyone.” He was demanding: “You can not afford to throw away such a treasure as is offered to you!” He was a little bit desperate: “You can not make me a forlorn, vagrant vagabond … sent out vainly seeking peace and refuge in a cold, unkind world, but ever doomed to disappointment.” He spent four pages alternating between self-assured wooer and despondent “double bankrupt” wreck.47

Anderson’s words were hardly inspiring to a girl who had no interest in him. Although her reply is not preserved, a second letter from Anderson confirms Bartholomew’s “kind

---

44 Sicherman, 53.
45 Joseph A. Anderson to Netta Bartholomew, May 2, 1892, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
46 Bergendoff, The Augustana Ministerium, 49.
47 Anderson to Netta Bartholomew, May 2, 1892, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
although positive way of putting the refusal.” For him it was a “most bitter, most sad
disappointment,” but he forged on, determined to “conceal the lover and be … [her] sincere
friend.” If Bartholomew would not marry him, the least she could do was write to him
throughout his “future lonely years.”48 By November, Anderson begged her to “find some way”
to respond to his latest missive. Hope gone, he demanded she burn his proposal—“you could
properly have no such keepsake”—and bid her forever “farewell!”49 Bartholomew denied his
request, preserving his letters alongside a document that reveals her true feelings towards him.

Four years later, in September 1896, Lydia Olsson received an invitation to the wedding
of Joseph A. Anderson and Ellen Sophia Carlson. Remembering his proposal to Bartholomew,
she drew up a mock invitation for her friend, pretending to mourn the loss of such a desirable
beau.50 In Olsson’s illustration, she and Bartholomew cannot contain their grief, soaking
handkerchiefs and “weeping a pond of tears” to the benefit of the local flora and fauna.51 Inside
the invitation, she counseled Bartholomew to “be calm” at the thought of losing Anderson’s
affections forever to his most fortunate bride. It is easy to picture Olsson howling with laughter
as she doodled his shock of untamable hair. “But --- there are others!” she assured her friend,
who was being courted by her future husband, K.T. Anderson.52 Days later, Olsson received a
“letter of sympathy” from Bartholomew.53 These letters demonstrate the girls’ disdain for Joseph
A. Anderson and his unsuitability as a romantic partner. Smith-Rosenberg notes that female
friends would “band together to harass” unwanted suitors, and though there is no evidence to
suggest that Olsson and Bartholomew confronted Anderson directly, they certainly discussed and

48 Anderson to Netta Bartholomew, May 7, 1892, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
49 Anderson to Netta Bartholomew, November 16, 1892, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
50 “Two Grief-stricken sisters!” mock wedding invitation, September 1896, Bartholomew Anderson Papers.
51 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, September 12, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
52 No relation to Joseph A. Anderson.
laughed over the situation later. Olsson knew it was better for a girl to remain unmarried altogether than to accept the hand of someone so unworthy of her love. Marmee had taught her that by telling the March daughters that she would rather have them be happy spinsters than marry unwisely. Once again, Olsson’s reading material and real-life examples converged to show her the possibility of living a single life.

Figure 4.3. “Two Grief-stricken sisters!” mock wedding invitation drawn by Lydia Olsson, 1896. Folder 7, Box 4, in MSS 19a Netta Bartholomew Anderson Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

54 Smith-Rosenberg, 20.
55 Alcott, Little Women, 104.
“A highly moral and fully womanly creature”: Spinsters in Nineteenth-Century America

One of the natural outcomes of the idealization of marriage based on romantic and spiritual love was a rise in the number of unmarried adults. As What Our Girls Ought to Know contended, a woman who had the “courage to remain single” because she could not find her soulmate deserved honor and praise for her uncompromising moral standards. This attitude, common in nineteenth-century America, helped to destigmatize single women, variously called spinsters, old maids, maiden aunts, and—increasingly in the late nineteenth century—bachelor girls. The word spinster was first used to describe any woman who spun yarn, but by the seventeenth century had become a synonym for an unmarried woman.

The term took on negative connotations in eighteenth-century America, but in the nineteenth century a spinster was recognized as “a highly moral and fully womanly creature.” This change in public opinion allowed a growing number of women to remain both unattached and respectable, productive members of society. Over the course of the nineteenth century, more and more American girls and women chose to stay single. Those born between 1780 and 1840 married less frequently than had their predecessors. Eight percent of women born between 1845 and 1849 never married, and almost nine percent of women born between 1855 and 1859 followed suit. Among women born between 1865 and 1875, eleven percent never married, including many of those in Lydia Olsson’s social circle.

The reasons for this shift are complex and individualized, ranging from a scarcity of men (due to war, disease, or the disproportionate numbers of single men who migrated westward), to the costs of maintaining a household, to a family’s or parent’s need for a long-term caretaker, or

56 Studley, 201.
57 Coontz, 147; Berend, 936.
to a fear of or disinterest in sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbirth.\textsuperscript{59} As middle-class American women’s economic and educational opportunities expanded, moreover, they were also increasingly able to support themselves, especially those who lived with family, as did the Olsson siblings.\textsuperscript{60} Hunter notes that unmarried women were allowed “great liberty of movement and freedom from housework,” while their married counterparts had “onerous, endless, narrowly prescribed duties.”\textsuperscript{61} Even those couples who married for love were forced into the gendered roles of husband and wife, and laden with the accompanying obligations.

Although spinsters have often been regarded as unwanted women or protofeminists, for the large majority of American spinsters, it fell somewhere in the middle.\textsuperscript{62} Their reasons for remaining single may have involved multiple intersecting factors or one simple cause: many spinsters chose not to marry because they could not find a man to whom they could fully give their hearts. As discussed below, women like Anna Olsson had multiple suitors and remained single despite receiving several proposals. As Berend argues, “their choice was not between marrying or not marrying but whether to marry a particular man.”\textsuperscript{63} Spinsters contributed to society by caretaking for relatives, working for pay, or participating in charitable ventures, and they were valued alongside mothers as useful citizens.\textsuperscript{64}

\section*{“Happy Women”: Spinsterhood in the American Press}

The popular books and periodicals that Lydia Olsson read portrayed spinsterhood as an estimable choice that could be more desirable than marriage. Louisa May Alcott, a prominent

\textsuperscript{59} Chambers-Schiller, 2; Hunter, 348.
\textsuperscript{60} Chambers-Schiller, 4; Patterson, ed., \textit{The American New Woman Revisited}, 11. See Cookingham for statistics. In Sweden, a rise in spinsters led to legal reforms (including bills in 1858, 1863, and 1884) increasing their rights as legal adults and allowing them to pursue more economic opportunities. Ågren, 205.
\textsuperscript{61} Hunter, 349.
\textsuperscript{62} Berend, 935.
\textsuperscript{63} Berend, 936.
\textsuperscript{64} Berend, 941-942.
spinster herself, advocated on behalf of unmarried women in several of her works. Though Meg, Jo, and Amy March all marry, their mother impresses upon them that spinsterhood is an honorable choice. In fact, Jo considers it quite seriously, convinced that she will end up “a literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame.” Alcott breaks into the text at this point to remind her readers, “Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls,” and “Gentlemen, which means boys, be courteous to the old maids.” In _Jo’s Boys_, notes Roberta Trites, “The girls at Plumfield admire the many post-Civil War spinsters who have ‘proved that women is n’t a half but a whole human being, and can stand alone.’” _Little Women_ and _Jo’s Boys_ emphasized the need for middle-class women to earn a living, especially when choosing not to marry, a theme Alcott explored further in _An Old-Fashioned Girl._

Perhaps Alcott’s most direct commentary on the subject came in an article she published in _The New York Ledger_ in April 1868. Titled “Happy Women,” the piece looks at the lives of four unmarried women, L., M., S., and A. “One of the trials of woman-kind is the fear of being an old maid,” wrote Alcott. “To escape this dreadful doom, young girls rush into matrimony with a recklessness that astonishes the beholder; never pausing to remember that the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Miss.’” But, she noted, the perception of old maids was changing thanks to their efforts to do “earnest work” like L.’s career in medicine—“a truly womanly work” which helps L. avoid “ennui, unhappiness, or the vague longing for something to fill heart and life.” M. had a suitor but rejected him because she could not love him with her full heart. “People tell me that I am

---

65 Alcott, _Little Women_, 448.
66 Alcott, _Little Women_, 448-449.
67 Trites, 94.
68 Sicherman, 27.
foolish to reject this good fortune,” says M., “that I shall get on very well without love … [but] I cannot make it seem right to take this offer, and I must let it go, for I dare not sell my liberty.”

Careful readers will note the similarities between M.’s language and that of Jo March. Alcott beseeched her readers, “My sisters, don’t be afraid of the words, ‘old maid,’ for it is in your power to make this a term of honor, not reproach.” She wanted women to participate in the remaking of the unmarried woman’s reputation, especially when that woman had principled reasons for remaining single.

Authors elsewhere in the literary landscape were also engaged in the rehabilitation of the spinster, especially those writing for the periodical press. Sociologist Naomi Rosenthal, reviewing issues of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* published in the late nineteenth century, notes the regular presence in its pages of fictional spinsters and of columnists who described their own lives as unmarried women. The *Journal* was one of the most popular and conservative magazines of the late nineteenth century. If its writers were discussing spinsters, no doubt the subject had penetrated deep into American culture, particularly the homes of the magazine’s readers, which included Lydia Olsson. In her diary, Olsson regularly noted when she sent off money for her subscription and when new issues arrived.

Edward Bok, the magazine’s editor at the time, gave plenty of space to stories about unmarried women. In his July 1890 editorial, Bok wrote, “You and I may believe that it is for the greatest happiness of all women that they should marry,” but “that is no reason why we should

---

70 Alcott, “Happy Women,” 204.
71 Alcott, “Happy Women,” 205.
72 Berend, 949; Welter, 169.
74 See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 6, 1894; Wednesday, February 14, 1894; Wednesday, January 2, 1895; Monday, February 25, 1895; Thursday, November 12, 1896; Tuesday, December 1, 1896, Olsson Family Papers.
not respect those who by their lives show that they have decided otherwise.”75 His writers
described spinsters as “sophisticated and attractive … exemplars of a new form of existence.”76
Unmarried columnists writing autobiographical pieces made sure to let readers know that they
had been proposed to at least once and had chosen to reject their suitors.77 In Alcott and the
*Ladies’ Home Journal* alone, Olsson frequently encountered the spinster as a woman who made
her own fate and garnered the admiration of society.

“I thought of my spinster sister”: Anna Olsson and the Spinsters of Augustana College

Closer to home, Lydia Olsson was surrounded by examples of respectable spinsters, most
prominently her older sister Anna. One way unmarried women could thrive was by maintaining a
supportive female network beyond adolescence. Jo March had her mother and sisters, and was
therefore able to reject Laurie without fear that she would be left alone.78 Lydia and Anna Olsson
were also able to rely on a circle of friends and family when making decisions about whether to
marry. Anna exemplified a trend among the first women to graduate from Augustana College
with a bachelor’s degree. Out of the first seven women graduates, five never married. In addition
to Olsson, this included Inez Rundstrom, Anna Westman, Sarah Lawson, and Lillie Cervin. The
two who married, Netta Bartholomew and Agnes Branney, did so within several years of
graduation. Other women in their community remained single (Mia Olsson, Cotta Bartholomew,
Hilma Nelson, and Emily Anderson) or married late (Hedvig Hageman, and Etta Setterdahl).79

---

75 Rosenthal, 45.
76 Rosenthal, 40.
77 Rosenthal, 48.
78 Sicherman, 27.
79 Cotta Bartholomew was another baccalaureate student, Nelson one of the Olssons’ hired girls, and Anderson a
local dressmaker. Hageman and Setterdahl, both Augustana students, married in their forties, Hageman after a career
in nursing. These women were working class and middle class, surrounded by family or alone. Their numbers point
to a larger trend in the Tri Cities community of Swedish American women that merits more investigation.
An Augustana girl who chose to remain single would not stand out as an anomaly—she was in good company.

Figure 4.4. Anna Olsson. C-C00049, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

As one of the older members of this group, Anna Olsson demonstrated her regard for true love by rejecting not one, not two, but at least ten proposals by January 1893, according to her sister Lydia.80 Anna’s many admirers visited the Olsson home and were often held off by her younger sisters. In December 1892, Lydia Olsson recorded in her diary, “Mr. Modin asked me in

---

80 Lydia Olsson, Journal, Monday, January 30, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Among her suitors were some of the prominent men of Augustana College and the Synod.
morning prayer if my sisters would be at home at 4. P. M.—said he wished to borrow a French book of Anna which he had had before and copied some verses out of but had lost them and wished to copy them again.” Lydias disdain is palpable well over a century later. “He did stammer out that excuse in such a ridiculous way that any common sense person could understand there was something up. When I got home I told Mia and through myself across the bed and laughed till the tears came.” In another instance Lydia wrote, “Moren is taking Brodins method I do believe for he is beginning to come in so often in spite of the refusal and warning Anna gave him…. Poor fellow—I pity him and all others who fall in love—but he is awfully silly, which I didn’t think of him. He tries to say things to Mia to tell Anna, but she changes the subject.” Anna Olsson was smart enough to avoid these men when she could; they were not worth her attention or affections.

Despite her disinterest in these laughable suitors, Anna Olsson did dream of finding a husband with whom to share her interests. In July 1890, she noted in her diary that “Nearly all our girl-friends are married by this time…. and we—well, we feel like remaining single yet, and I don’t know but that we would be very slow in making up our minds to get married.” But later in the same diary entry Anna imagined her ideal spouse:

I should wish that my husband would let me be the sharer of all his little and great joys and sorrows. And I want him to let me keep up some of my studies, and to teach and study with me (when he is not too tired of course). In the meantime I would keep the home pleasant and when any concerts or lectures take place, I should want to remember that his wife wanted him to take her and go sometimes. Now, I don’t think I’m unreasonable…. If I ever get married, and get a good husband, and by that I mean a [noble, educated] man loving with some feeling, I shall try … to be so good to him…. I wonder if I ever shall find a man, towards whom I shall have such feelings!—But no, I hope he will not come soon, for I don’t want to get married now for ever so long.

---

81 Lydia Olsson, Journal, Monday, December 19, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
82 Lydia Olsson, Journal, Thursday, February 9, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
83 A. Olsson, Diary, July 26, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.
She dreamed of a partner who was intellectually as well as spiritually matched with her, one who would consider his wife’s scholarly interests. She set a high bar, rejecting several pastors, college professors, and her father’s successor to the Augustana presidency, all of whom had graduated from college with at least a bachelor’s degree, and some who had attended seminary school or pursued secular graduate studies.

Later that year, in November 1890, Anna Olsson wrote that she was “half afraid of meeting” her other half “lest he should touch the soft spot in my heart, and I should not be strong enough to withstand! I believe that when I once will love a man, I will do it ‘von ganzem Herzen.’”\textsuperscript{84} Lydia and Mia “picked out” Reverend S. G. Youngert, who attended both Augustana College and the Theological Seminary.\textsuperscript{85} In her diary, Anna Olsson called Youngert “the most intelligent of all the students we have met at our college, and in many respects seems to be a gentleman,” but still this was not enough to tempt her into accepting his proposal and leaving her family.\textsuperscript{86} Olsson received and rejected a remarkable number of proposals, but by turning just one suitor down, she demonstrated to Lydia that it was acceptable to say no to a man—smart and accomplished as he may be—if he could not claim her whole heart. When faced with her own decision, Lydia took this into account alongside all of the other models she saw and the advice she received.

\textbf{“Do I love him with all my heart and soul?”: Lydia Olsson and Clarence Cederquist}

Lydia Olsson’s surviving diary begins two and a half months after Clarence Cederquist joined the Augustana College class of 1895. In her first entries, she mentioned this new

\textsuperscript{84} A. Olsson, Diary, November 10, 1890, Olsson Family Papers. “Von ganzem Herzen” means “with all my heart” or “fully.”
\textsuperscript{85} Bergendoff, \textit{The Augustana Ministerium}, 51.
\textsuperscript{86} A. Olsson, Diary, May 16, 1891, Olsson Family Papers.
boy—Ceder to his friends—and that she was grappling with the jealousy of another young man, Carl J. Appell. Olsson and Appell had been partnered at events and formed some level of friendship, but when he confronted her about becoming her regular escort she lashed out, telling him “I advise you to seek a young lady who desires regular company, for I do not, and therefore I think it better that you do not trouble yourself about me at all. If possible, I wish to be friendly to all, and not more to one than another.” In her diary she wrote, “Now of course he will say that he got tired of me and broke up. But I don’t see anything to ‘break up’…. He acts and talks as if we were engaged, but had I known that that was the way he misinterpreted my friendship I would never have gone a step with him…. Deliver me from that temper!” Although Olsson was upset by Appell’s behavior and by the implication that they were more than platonic friends, she realized the humor in her situation. “I write this in my journal so as to have something to laugh at when I become an old spinster, sitting in a big armchair by the hearth meditating over the by-gone-days!!!!!!!!!!!” she concluded. “Oh! How romantic.”

If she became a spinster, at least she would have some good reading material.

Olsson ended her friendship with Appell—though she continued to note whom he partnered with at events—and turned to someone she already thought of as a gentleman.

Comparing Cederquist with Appell in her diary, she wrote:

I believe I am going to [like Clarence Cederquist] real well because [he] isn’t of that jealous kind like [Carl Appell] at all, he is kind of boyish in his ways and jumps and kicks around but that is all the better he is a good true American. I don’t know if he is tender hearted, because he always acts cool, but I admire him because he is at the same time manly and I believe there are many good things to be discovered in him, which I may find some time. I really believe I shall like him if he is what I now think he is. But if he don’t like me I shall not try to break anybodies heart (out in Pa) by trying to win his love, for if such does not come natural on both sides, I do not think it the right kind.

---

88 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
Her high opinion of this new boy shows in her description of him as a “good true American.” Like Olsson, Cederquist was born in the United States to Swedish immigrant parents, but he embodied many of the qualities she associated with genuine Americans and with Laurie Laurence, her ideal romantic hero. Despite the fact that she told Appell she wished to be friendly to all, her preference for Cederquist quickly became clear. She initially refused Cederquist’s regular company, but his friendship with J. A. Bexell guaranteed that they would be partnered at any event she attended with Dina Dahn.  

When Dahn and Bexell became formally engaged, Dahn and others began to ask Olsson about Cederquist’s intentions. She protested their insinuations, but in her diary she wrote, “I guess I must stop mentioning the name Ceder. in here now, it occurs too frequent and if anyone should find my Journal and read it they would surely think I was ‘gone’ on him, which from the bottom of my ‘sole’ is not so.” Instead, she reasoned, she had nothing else to write about since everyone had gone home for the winter holidays. “Consequently I have reasons for thus using his name…. But,” she continued, “if he knew how often his name has been mentioned in here what would the poor boy think???” Her excuses were flimsy even in her own eyes, and over the following months the pair became a regular couple.

The two exchanged rings on New Year’s Eve 1892 and spent most days of the week in each other’s company. Olsson insisted Cederquist was “just like a big brother” to her, but admitted “Probably we are getting a little too intimate to be common friends—we are always together at places—and—and—it’s no use to let anything go too far.” Like Jo, she could not resist spending time in her good boy’s company. What she did object to was the general campus opinion that they were matched. “I don’t like to be tagging Cede as tho’ we were ‘a pair’ like the

89 L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, November 20, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
90 L. Olsson, Journal, Thursday, December 29, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
other,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{92} The two argued and Olsson agonized over her options. She felt deeply for Cederquist, but could not see a future in which they would be together. They cycled in and out of fights over how often he could walk her home or whether they could act warmly towards each other in public. At the same time, they became closer than ever, leading to what was the first of several times Cederquist asked Olsson to marry him.

The moment is lost to time, but a close reading of Olsson’s diary indicates that Cederquist likely proposed in the spring or summer of 1893.\textsuperscript{93} Olsson refused and continued to do so. “Ceder has asked me so many times and I have refused that he is getting tired of it,” she wrote in March 1894.\textsuperscript{94} No matter how close she felt to him, Olsson did not believe her feelings reached the level of true love. She knew that God’s choice for her husband would be a man she loved more deeply than any other, as her mother had loved her father, and in the way Dina Dahn loved Bexell. Ceder was the Laurie to Lydia’s Jo, and as desperately as Jo wanted to love Laurie, she told him, “I can't say 'yes' truly, so I won't say it at all. You'll see that I'm right, by–and–by, and thank me for it.”\textsuperscript{95} Perhaps Olsson borrowed parts of Jo’s speech to Laurie when rejecting Cederquist.

\textsuperscript{92} L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, March 21, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{93} Olsson finished one book on Monday, May 15, 1893, and the next book begins on Saturday, December 16, 1893. Given that Olsson’s May 15 entry includes the line “Another book!” it is possible a book covering the gap was lost or destroyed. Between May and December 1893, Olsson and Cederquist’s relationship gained a new tension. This strain, plus later hints, lead me to believe Cederquist proposed to her during that time.
\textsuperscript{94} L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, March 21, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{95} Alcott, \textit{Little Women}, 372.
To Mrs. Olsson:

If I should make a wish for you it would be this: I wish you a large share of success in your pursuit of happiness; may your efforts in the direction of right bring abundant reward. I would not wish your path to be one flower only, God made the roses and thorns grow together, let me not separate them, but with you may the roses be many and the thorns few.

Your friend,

Clarence Cederquist.

Figure 4.5. Clarence Cederquist signature album inscription to Lydia Olsson, ca. 1893. Signature Album, 1889, Folder 1, Box 25, in MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.
Cederquist was no Joseph A. Anderson but, as his graduation and departure from campus approached, Olsson’s relationship with him became strained. They turned to writing letters about their feelings instead of talking, but the words still hurt. “I wanted to speak to him this eve.,” Olsson wrote, “but changed my mind and wrote when I saw how cross he was. I told him I ’sposed he was my enemy etc. and that we both saw it didn’t seem to want to work for us two to keep company. Well, he answered back in a way that made me weep so hard.”96 If she had ever questioned her feelings, the hurt Cederquist could provoke convinced her that they were not truly matched. Speaking with Bexell, she agreed to accept Cederquist’s company and “keep the peace … to avoid any sad memories when we part.” But it would not be easy. “O, God,” she wrote, “help me to do this!”97 The two managed some normalcy but could not regain their closeness.

Olsson and Cederquist’s friendship did not end when he left campus. They became correspondents, writing frequent letters to one another. Each time she received one of his letters, Olsson noted it in her diary, and the presence or absence of a letter often determined her mood for the day. She still missed Cederquist, and often wished he was there with her, reading by the fire as he had so many times before. “I longed for C.C. today,” she wrote in October 1896. “I layed me down on papa’s lounge and fell asleep.”98 On nice days, she thought back over their many walks around campus and all the things they told each other. “Beautiful evening. I know what I would do if somebody was here. Now I go home alone and read a little and write a little and then go to bed to dream!!”99 If she regretted her decision to reject Cederquist’s proposal, she did not say so directly in her diary.

---

97 L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, January 19, 1895, Olsson Family Papers.
Through her actions, Lydia Olsson had finally answered those questions she had contemplated when she and Mia had discussed marriage. No, she would not marry. She loved Cederquist, but not as a husband. He was not her God-ordained partner, and their love was not true enough to permanently attach them to each other. Olsson suspected she could never “make up her mind” about these issues, but in rejecting Cederquist she decided that her most serious suitor was not enough.\textsuperscript{100} Even he was not worth giving up her freedom as a single woman.

“Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives,” said Marmee.\textsuperscript{101} And though Olsson mourned the loss of the closeness she once shared with Cederquist, she was surrounded by friends like her, women who remained single because they had not found their other halves. She continued to work in the campus library, read novels, sing in the choir, and laugh with her friends. Olsson remained unmarried, but that did not make her any less of a woman than Bartholomew or Branney. She was a whole person, equally valuable to society. Lydia wrote that she “loves liberty,” and in the end, she chose to keep her freedom.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 22, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
\textsuperscript{101} Alcott, \textit{Little Women}, 104.
\textsuperscript{102} L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, January 16, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.
Conclusion

After the Diary

On December 14, 1896, Lydia Olsson sat down to write a brief entry in her diary. “Very nice and warm again. I do wish it would have the kindness to snow. Afternoon I went up with Sarah from 5-6. Eve: I commenced to tie the 4” bag. I have racked my brain until there is no more ‘to rack’ about what I could give papa, Hannis + Ceder for Xmas. It is still a mystery to me.” Then she wrote, “See other book. Closed Dec. 14” 1896—Augustana College.”¹ She shut her diary and got up from her desk. It was time to go to bed.

This is the last entry in Lydia Olsson’s diary.² Five notebooks—five hundred and twelve entries—detail four years of her life, from November 17, 1892, to December 14, 1896. Carefully housed in acid-free folders in the climate-controlled stacks of Augustana Special Collections, Olsson’s diary gives us a rich account of her time on the Augustana College and Theological Seminary campus. Her comments on Swedish-American identity, ideals of womanhood, friends and community, and love and whether she would marry: all can be found within these pages.

Lydia Olsson was twenty-two years old when she wrote that December entry, but she lived for sixty-one more years. Without another book, we have to rely on drier, official records for the details: the federal census, city directories, Augustana catalogs. They might not be as illuminating as her own words, but they still give us a picture of her life.

Olsson spent the rest of the 1890s living with her family in the president’s residence on the Augustana campus. She worked in the college library, first as an attendant, then as an assistant librarian in 1895, and finally as the college librarian in 1897.³ In 1898, Carl Granere

² At least those volumes held by Augustana Special Collections. I have not yet found any more.
was appointed as the college librarian; Olsson is no longer mentioned.\(^4\) Her older sister Anna became the principal of Ladies’ Hall in 1895, living in the dormitory adjoined to the Olssons’ home.\(^5\) All four siblings took the occasional class on campus.

In 1900, their lives changed again. On May 12, Olof Olsson died at the age of fifty-nine. In his final days he was surrounded by lilacs and lilies-of-the-valley, those flowers blanketing the Swedish valleys that Anna Lisa Olsson so desperately missed.\(^6\) Above his bed was a map of Sweden, the homeland he left with his family thirty-one years before.\(^7\) His funeral was held on May 16, 1900; he was buried next to Anna Lisa in Riverside Cemetery, Moline, Illinois.\(^8\)

![Image of Olof Olsson's funeral procession, 1900. C-D00167, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.](image)

---

\(^4\) *Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, 1895-1896* (Rock Island, IL: Lutheran Augustana Book Concern), 53; *Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, 1897-1898*, 65.

\(^5\) *Augustana Alumni Register*, 92.

\(^6\) A. Olsson, *“I’m Seairt”*, 120.

\(^7\) Olson, 323.

\(^8\) Olson, 324.
Once again the Olsson siblings lost a parent to an early death, but this time they also lost their home at the college and their main means of financial support. In his will, their father equally divided his estate among his children, requiring that each child must marry in order to gain control of their inheritance. In the meantime, the net funds would be used to establish a common home for the four in Rock Island, Illinois, or Lindsborg, Kansas.\(^9\) Olof Olsson left them another major asset: a home built for the family at 3912 8th Avenue in their beloved Rock Island, Illinois.\(^10\) The siblings, Anna (age thirty-three), Mia (thirty), Lydia (twenty-six), and Hanne (twenty-two), moved into the house later that autumn; none of them ever married.

---


\(^{10}\) Boaden, 22.
Anna Olsson

In 1900, Anna Olsson resigned her position as Ladies’ Hall principal to live with her siblings. Between 1900 and 1902 she taught as an instructor in the Augustana English Department, then left the college’s employ to work full time on her writing career. She published her first story anonymously in *Ungdomsvännenn* in 1901.\(^\text{11}\) Her first book, *Från Solsidan*, was published by the Augustana Book Concern in 1903. She became a regular contributor to Swedish and Lutheran periodicals, sending short stories and articles to *The Lutheran Companion, Ungdomsvänner, Fosterlandel, Prairieblomman, Julrunan*, and *Julgranan*, among others. Olsson often published her work under the pen name “Aina” or her initials, “A.O.” She wrote or translated at least ten books over the next several decades, including a number of German children’s stories she translated into Swedish.

*En prärieunges funderingar* was published by the Augustana Book Concern in 1917. Ten years later, in 1927, Olsson translated her book into English, titling it *“I’m Scairt”: Childhood Days on the Prairie*.\(^\text{12}\) The work has since been published in Sweden by Albert Bonnier’s Publishing House (1919), Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag (1926), Rabén & Sjögren (1984), and Föreningen för Värmlandslitteratur (1998). In the United States, Elizabeth Jaderborg and Martha Winblad published a new English translation in 1978, which was reprinted by the Folklife Institute of Central Kansas in 1992.\(^\text{13}\)

On February 15, 1946, at the age of seventy-nine, Olsson died after a lengthy illness.\(^\text{14}\)

---


\(^{12}\) Boaden, 24.

\(^{13}\) Stasiwicz, 389. Stasiwicz refers to the “1990s editions” of the book published in Sweden. At this point I have only been able to identify one edition, published by Föreningen för Värmlandslitteratur in 1998. That being said, there may be other editions of the book not included in this list.

Figure C.3. *Top,* six editions of Anna Olsson’s key work, *En Prärieunges Funderingar; bottom,* several of Olsson’s other books, including translations of German children’s stories. Author photograph.
Mia Olsson

Mia Olsson is the most elusive of the siblings, rarely appearing in detail in primary or secondary sources. She took over the role of the family’s chief housekeeper so that Anna could focus on her career as a writer. The Olsson siblings did not maintain a servant in their 8th Avenue home, but did take on several lodgers.\(^\text{15}\) So there was plenty of work to keep Olsson busy, cleaning and cooking for the household. In 1890, Anna Olsson imagined her sister teaching fancywork and music.\(^\text{16}\) If Mia Olsson ever did so it was not reported in official records.

However Olsson did leave a major accomplishment behind: a patent for a “Combination Collar Fastener.” Her fastener predated the invention of the modern zipper and was particularly useful for closing “the ends of a collar or stock and guarding against riding or upward displacement of the collar or stock,” and to prevent “wrinkling or sagging.” Olsson filed for copyright on her design in 1903, witnessed by her sisters. Her application was approved on March 22, 1904.\(^\text{17}\) The family’s archival collection includes samples of the Combination Collar Fastener as well as advertisements, sample sheets, and photographs.\(^\text{18}\)

After a month-long stay in the hospital, Olsson died at age sixty-four on May 3, 1934.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{16}\) A. Olsson, Diary, December 31, 1890, Olsson Family Papers.


\(^{18}\) “Historical Note,” Olsson Family Papers finding aid.

Hannes Olsson was doted on by his older sisters. He enrolled in the Augustana Conservatory and took classes in the Business College. In 1901, he was hired as a clerk at Hartz and Company, a wholesale and retail drug business.\(^\text{20}\) He lived with his sisters for several years, but left around 1907 to live in Chicago and make a living as a music teacher.\(^\text{21}\) In 1929 he moved back home and spent the next decade working as a band leader, teacher, and musician.\(^\text{22}\) Olsson spent his final years in the Augustana Home for the Aged in Chicago. The longest-lived of the siblings, he died on September 23, 1967, at the age of ninety.\(^\text{23}\)

![Hannes Olsson](image)

Figure C.5. Hannes Olsson. C-L00440, Augustana College photograph collection, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

\(^{20}\) “Historical Note,” Olsson Family Papers finding aid.


\(^{22}\) “Historical Note,” Olsson Family Papers finding aid. See also city directories for the area during those years.

Lydia Olsson

As for Lydia Olsson, she worked at a series of office and library jobs. Between 1901 and 1912, she was a bookkeeper, first for Augustana and then for J. Peterson Co., a piano and organ company. In 1914 she returned to the Augustana College library, but left in 1916 to work as a bookkeeper for the local Lutheran hospital and then the Griswold Manufacturing Co. She held additional jobs as a cataloger at the Rock Island Arsenal, a clerk at the Royal Neighbors of America, and a clerk at the Moline Tractor Company. Finally, in 1922, Olsson returned to the Augustana College library to stay, until her retirement in 1945. It is unclear why she changed employers so frequently. Regardless, she provided a regular source of income for the family.

Lydia Olsson died at the age of eighty-three on March 1, 1958, after a long illness. She, along with Anna, Mia, and Hannes, was buried in the family plot at Riverside Cemetery.

Figure C.6. Lydia Olsson. Courtesy of Deanne Morton and Jackie Morton Miller.

---

24 “Historical Note,” Olsson Family Papers finding aid. See also city directories for the area during those years.
The outline of Olsson’s life does not lead to any grand new conclusions or dramatic headlines that might splash across the pages of academic journals. But fill in the details and she reveals herself to be one of the many women participating in a quiet revolution to fundamentally alter American women’s rights and opportunities at the turn of the twentieth century. She and many of the girls in her network attended college, worked for wages, delayed marriage or chose to remain single. They forged different paths than their mothers and grandmothers before them, entering the public sphere and engaging with their male peers. Some, like Netta Bartholomew, were more outspoken in their beliefs, serving on boards and giving speeches. Others, like Anna Olsson, worked hard and waited for their chance to build a life for themselves. Both Bartholomew and Olsson have been written about in scholarly literature, their achievements deemed important enough to be remembered. Lydia Olsson has not. Until now, she has only received passing mentions as a daughter, a sister, or a friend. Sometimes she is not even named.

Lydia Olsson deserves our attention. She acted boldly if not loudly, wrote profoundly if not publicly. She is not a cardboard cutout for an American girl and should not be relegated to the background of someone else’s story. Her diary provides critical insight into her life and how she conformed to and rejected the roles society assigned to women like her. Her life is a lens onto a wider community of women who merit more scholarly attention, and her particular experience can help shed light on the lives of Swedish Lutheran women and middle-class girls living in Midwestern towns and cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I first read Lydia’s diary (she will always be Lydia to me) during the summer of 2010. I was a student worker at Augustana College Special Collections, a history major, a budding archivist, a twenty-one-year-old woman on a campus where six in ten students were women. (A long way from the days when Anna Olsson was the only girl in her class.) Reading Lydia
Olsson’s diaries changed my idea of what history could be and of who I could learn about. I discovered the field of women’s history and became convinced of the importance of using personal narratives in history education. Lydia brings history to life for me.

A diarist writes in her present moment. She cannot look back at a complete life story; she cannot smooth over rough edges or draw sweeping conclusions. She is in the thick of things. And because of this, she still lives in those moments for readers, as if preserved in amber. Lydia Olsson exists on the Augustana College campus: typing letters in business class, cataloging books in the library, singing in the chapel choir. She is in downtown Rock Island: riding streetcars, attending parties, patronizing dressmakers and photographers. Well over one hundred years have passed since she sat at a desk, writing her daily lines, but she still walks alongside the Augustana students of today. Her diary preserves five years of her thoughts, dreams, and daily affairs: a portrait of a young woman in motion.

Figure C.7. (L to R) Lydia, Mia, and Anna Olsson. Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.
Epilogue

A Turning Point\textsuperscript{26}

I came back from my lunch break with time to spare. There was no point in stretching my sandwich out for another twenty minutes when I could be looking through the archives instead. I hung my bag on a hook and went through to the special collections workroom. What would I read today?

Lately I had been lingering over the love letters between Edward Fry Bartholomew and his wife-to-be Kate Fasold. Who could resist such sweet correspondence?

\textit{Dear Eddie, It is ten o'clock the rest of our family have all retired and I have just picked up this faithfull servant the pen to write to him who is dearest to me.}

\textit{My Darling Kate, It is Saturday evening—a lover’s evening. The sun is gradually sinking beneath the western hills. And I alone am sitting upon our favorite spot.}

Their love and affection for each other was swoon-worthy. But with so few letters left to read I needed to find another collection to explore. Walking into the reading room, I lifted the thick binder of finding aids from its place on the shelf and began flipping through its pages. I remembered that Olof Olsson, one of the college presidents, had several daughters, one of whom was an author. Skimming through the Olsson finding aid, I saw a listing for “Diaries, 1892-1896.” Perfect! They were written by Lydia Olsson. Looking at the historical note, I read that Lydia was Olof Olsson’s youngest daughter. Anna was the author, and it looked like she had a journal too. Well, there would be plenty of time to read through Anna’s papers—I still had a month before the fall semester began. Today I would take out Lydia’s diaries.

I checked the location, then headed into the stacks, shivering as I stepped into the back room. Archivists have the best job, I thought. Top-notch air conditioning in the summer and they get to read love letters and diaries. I found the right box on the shelf and lifted it down. Taking a quick peek, I saw several bound notebooks in folders. I shut the gray lid and carried the box back to my desk.

After tidying some papers away, I took out the first folder, titled “Diary, November 17, 1892 – January 16, 1893.” The book inside was covered in faded black cloth and stamped with intricate silver decorations. Carefully, I opened the diary. Inside the front cover, “Topsy’s Journal. Strictly private!” was written with a flourish. The first entry was written on November 17, 1892.

\textit{Thursday:—It was raining when we got up this morning, but soon turned into snow, so I have already been out fighting with some boys. The snow-flakes are raising in the air, as fast as they can, it is quite pleasant to watch them.}

\textit{Eve. The wind is howling very loudly out of doors, but in my room all alone I sit and enjoy the winter’s night by the register. A committee met here this evening to arrange a program for the girls meeting in Phreno.}

\textit{The ground is covered with snow now, and if only the river would freeze we could begin our winter’s frolic.}

Charmed, I turned the page and kept reading.

\textsuperscript{26}This interlude was inspired by my experience working in Augustana Special Collections during the summer of 2010, in particular my memory of reading Lydia Olsson’s diary for the first time. For detailed references, please see the endnotes.
Appendix

Map of Lindsborg in the Smoky Hill region of McPherson County, Kansas (1884)

Map of the Tri Cities: Davenport, Iowa, Rock Island and Moline, Illinois (1894)

Glossary

Älskling. Darling or sweetheart. A term of endearment used between loved ones.

Annandag Jul. An afternoon church service held on December 26th.

Backstugusittar. A cottage that sits in a hill; a dugout or small, one-room dwelling.

Bergsman. A farmer who owns a share in the local mine or foundry.

Dräng. Farm hand.

Farbror. Father’s brother (uncle) or brother-in-law.

Farfar. Father’s father or grandfather.

Farmor. Father’s mother or grandmother.

Flicka. Girl.

Hundår. Dog years or years of struggle.

Jul. Christmas, December 25th. Swedish celebrations have a religious emphasis often missing in the more commercialized American holiday.

Julost. Traditional Christmas cheese.

Julotta. A pre-dawn church service on Christmas Day, traditionally held at four in the morning.


Mor. Mother.

Morfar. Mother’s father or grandfather.

Mormor. Mother’s mother or grandmother.

Moster. Mother’s sister (aunt) or sister-in-law.

Piga. Servant girl.

Ren församling. Pure congregation. Members had to verify their faith before church deacons.
Notes

Prologue: A Perfect Bird’s-Eye View

1 **the ice finally broke last night:** The winter of 1893 was a particularly cold one in the Tri Cities region, causing the Mississippi River to freeze. Newspaper accounts between March 11 and 14, 1893, chronic the breaking of the ice and the resulting damage to the Iowa and Illinois shores. The *Rock Island Argus* reported that the ice finally broke on Sunday, March 12, at half past eight in the evening. “Crystal Mountains,” *Rock Island Argus*, March 13, 1893, accessed April 16, 1893, Newspapers.com.

1 **the river had risen a whole foot:** “Crystal Mountains.”

1 **there are huge slabs of ice pile up along the tracks:** “Crystal Mountains.”

1 **The group climbed up Zion Hill:** “After meeting in the morning we girls: Edith, Anna, Etta, Clara and I took a walk upon Zion’s hill.” Lydia Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 13, 1893, MSS 3 Olof Olsson Family Papers, Special Collections, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois (hereafter cited as Olsson Family Papers).


1 **Youngdahl beckoned to them:** “We saw Youngdahl upon College roof and he beckoned for us to go there.” L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 13, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

2 **Anna M. decided to join Lydia:** “Anna and I got up, but the other girls didn’t dare, for one place we had to climb a board.” L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 13, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

2 **“A more perfect bird’s eye view of the country I have never seen!”:** L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 13, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

2 **She could see clear across the Sylvan Slough to … yards dotted with bare-limbed trees:** I used several maps and photographs to describe what Lydia Olsson may have seen when she looked out from the roof of Old Main. I relied most on a very detailed map of the Tri Cities: M. Huebinger & Co., *Tri-Cities Davenport, Iowa, Rock Island and Moline ILL, Rapids*, Davenport, IA: M. Huebinger & Co., 1894, David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries, accessed April 16, 2021, https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY--8--1--255352--5519747. For a modern view from the Old Main dome, see Barb Ickes, “Big Story: Off Limits at Augustana College,” *Quad-City Times*, February 4, 2018, updated July 7, 2020, accessed April 16, 2021,
There were men the size of ants … the river was choked with ice: “Crystal Mountains.”

The portico now being built: “The cupola is being built, also portico.” L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, March 13, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.


Interlude One: Little Anna on the Prairie

Thanks to Grace Kredell, for connecting me with little Anna, and to Liz Hopman, for helping me hash out the intricacies of this scene. Only a truly dedicated parent would be willing to get sucked down a YouTube black hole of Q&A videos with three year olds to determine their vocabulary and speech patterns. Anna Olsson wrote “I’m Scairt”: Childhood Days on the Prairie (1927), the English translation of En prärieunges funderingar (1917), in the voice of a young child, using a combination of English and Swenglish words. Some scholars argue that a later translation by Elizabeth Jaderborg and Martha Winblad better reflects Olsson’s literary skills, but I was struck by the raw emotions present in “I’m Scairt”. Seeing as I do not read Swedish (yet), Olsson’s translation has been my guide to Little Anna in this scene and elsewhere in this thesis. I hope I have done her justice.

The afternoon sun: “The Summer is warm with almost always a constant fresh breeze, the evenings and nights pleasantly cool, the Autumn dry and clear with cool air almost until Christmas.” Olof Olsson as quoted in Emory Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson, 1869-1873, Pioneer Founders of Lindsborg,” The Kansas Historical Quarterly 21, no. 7 (Autumn 1955): 503.

hand clutching a doll: “When I get growed-up I am going to knit stockings for Emma. That’s my Dolly.” Anna Olson, “I’m Scairt”: Childhood Days on the Prairie (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1927), 15.

The blue sky disappeared…. Where was Mamma?: “I’m scairt - I’m awful scairt! I’m scairt of the big Snakes! And I can’t see them ’cause the grass is so long. And if I walk in the long grass, the big long Snakes will jump up and bite me. And I’ll get losted, and my Mamma and my Papa can’t find me ’cause the grass is so long…. I couldn’t see my Mamma when she was coming back from Good Grandma’s ’cause the grass is too long. The grass is longer than Mamma.” A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 9.

“Mormor” means mother’s mother or grandmother in Swedish. For definitions of Swedish terms found in this thesis, please see the glossary.

17 **calico dress:** “I’m careful of my new calico dress.” A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 30.

17 **“I’m scairt!”:** A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 9.

17 **it was Maja:** A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 10; Emory Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley: Olof Olsson and the Early History of Lindsborg* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1970), 22. Maria (Maja) Larsdotter was the Olssons’ hired girl, or live-in domestic servant.


17 **newly built stone house:** “We live for the time being in a two room stone house, which Anna finds so pleasant that she does not want to move from it.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 501. See also Ernst W. Olson, *Olof Olsson: The Man, His Work, and His Thought* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1941), 63-64.

17 **The kitchen was built to one side:** “The kitchen is always built here next to the house proper, since the heat in the summer makes a fire inside the rooms unbearable.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 501.

17 **iron stove:** “We use stoves made of iron.” Anna Lisa Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 505.

17 **Her big belly:** Anna Lisa Olsson was pregnant with Maria (Mia) Olsson when the family immigrated to the United States. This scene is set shortly before Mia’s birth on September 15, 1869. Alf Brorson, *Mrs. Olof Olsson: The Story of Anna Lisa Jonsdotter and Her Swedish-American Family* (Torsby: A-Ö Handelsbolag, 1998), 38.

17 **long black plaits:** “Mamma has black hair that is long and that she plaits into three thick braids.” A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 66.

18 **älskling:** “Älskling” means darling or sweetheart in Swedish. It’s a term of endearment used between loved ones, including parents and children.

18 **“Mamma longs for our home…. I long too, Mamma. What’s long?”:** “Mamma she cries and cries and wants to go back to Sweden. She says she longs for Sweden. I don’t know what longs means, but when Mamma longs for Sweden, I am going to long there too.” A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 29.

18 **good tile stove:** Brorson, 11.

18 **Morfar:** Jaderborg, ed., and Winblad, trans., 120. “Morfar” means mother’s father or grandfather in Swedish. Anna Lisa Olsson’s stepfather, named Olof Olsson (not to be
confused with her husband, also named Olof Olsson), stayed behind in Sweden until 1870, when he joined the family in Lindsborg, Kansas. Brorson, 15-16.

18 **pretty purple lilacs … ugly yellow grass:** “In Varmland so many pretty flowers grow. White flowers and blue flowers and lilacs and—lilies-of-the-valley—and daisies…. And in Varmland such nice green grass grows. Not ugly, yellow Buffalo grass like here. Soft green grass - just as soft as velvet.” A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 120. “Sweden still lives in lifelike memory for me. Beautiful Sweden, whose forests, mountains, and valleys, in a word, everything is more pleasant there than here.” A. L. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 504. See also Lindquist, *Vision for a Valley*, 82.

18 **some biscuits:** A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 10.

18 **Papa was reading in the tree…. his papers:** “And Papa he made a bench up in [the tree].” And: “When we sit on Papa’s bench high up in the tree, then Papa points with his finger and shows me where Sweden is. Far, far away, much farther than Salina. We have so much fun up in the tree. I bring my Dolly up there, and then I pick leaves and make a chain of them like Mamma learns me to do. And Papa he reads in a paper from Sweden and in a book.” A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 27, 29.

18 **cottonwood tree:** “Just one big cottonwood tree—that’s all.” A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 27.

18 **slouch hat:** “He wore a slouch hat, bought in Salina for a dollar.” Olson, 63.


18 **looking out towards the bluffs:** “Sometimes he doesn’t read, he only looks—far away over the Bluffs.” A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 29.

18 **Endless land … a line of green trees:** “You should see our settlement out here. It is a beautiful sight. Prairie and still more prairie. Here and there a line of green trees on both sides of the winding Smoky Hill River or in the small valleys where the water seeks an outlet.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 498.

19 **sometimes I am sad:** “I very often remind myself of Sunnemo. I must also acknowledge that I experience a longing to see my old friends again, but such weak feelings must be stricken away.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 509.

19 **I cannot cry, Anna, because I must preach:** “Papa he don’t cry ’cause he has to stay here and preach.” A. Olsson, “*I’m Scairt*”, 29.
Her father pointed: “Papa points with his finger and shows me where Sweden is. Far, far away, much farther than Salina…. We can see far, far away when we sit up in the tree - almost as far as to Sweden.” A. Olsson, “I’m Scairt”, 29-30.

It’s three Swedish miles away: “Little Anna said once when we first arrived that it was 3 Swedish miles to Sunnemo.” Anna Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 510.

there are mountains … our valley: “Beautiful Sweden, whose forests, mountains, and valleys, in a word, everything is more pleasant there than here.” A. L. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 504. In Sunnemo the Olssons lived in the Noretorp rectory, which was built between two lakes. Their home was shaded by hardwood trees and looked out “over a wooded landscape where farm after farm was visible in the valley between the hills.” Brorsen, 10.

all the people: Olof, Anna Lisa, and Anna Olsson traveled with more than 270 people destined for Lindsborg, including Olof’s parents, Olof and Britta Olsson; his younger brother, Carl Olsson; Anna’s mother, Maria Olsson; her younger sister, Britta Olsson; and her half-siblings Carl, Anders, Erik, and Lovisa Olsson. Brorsen, 15.


Christian life: See chapter one for more information on Olof Olsson’s discontent with the Church of Sweden and his desire to create a ren församling (pure congregation) in the United States inspired by the pietist or läsare (readers) tradition and low-church movement.

houses made of stone and grass and sod: Olson, 66. Most early Lindsborg residents lived in dugouts and sod houses. Those who were able later built houses using local stone. For a description of prairie dugouts, sod houses, and interior furnishings, see Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 87-89. Olsson, describing the quickly-growing community to his friend C. W. Weinberg in a letter dated September 11, 1869, wrote that some men find “a spade, dig a cave, cover it as well as they can, secure some food for the family, leave them in the dugout, and go in search of work…. Here houses are being built with all possible haste, and we all heartily rejoice over all the neighbors’ houses that we see.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 498-499.

new church: The first Bethany Lutheran Church was built southwest of the Olssons’ homestead, soon after the congregation was founded on August 19, 1869. For a description
of the building and its interior, as well as an illustration of the church, see Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 37-38.

19 **Christmas service:** The community planned to celebrate Christmas in the new church, but the service was delayed due to inclement weather. The first service was eventually held on New Year’s Day in 1870. Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 38.

19 **our stone house that our friends helped me build:** “The building of the parsonage was begun in the fall of 1869. We all took part, even those who were not members [of the church]. There was plenty of rocks in the hills and lots of sand in the creek… We raised cash enough for a shingled roof and lime for outside mortar, while the inside was plastered with sand and clay…. Olsson was there all the time.” Francis Johnson as quoted in Olson, 63-64.

19 **the field they plowed for us:** Brorson, 29-30. The First Swedish Agricultural Company allotted the Olsson family a plot of land and directed the company foreman to break the ground for plowing. Olsson noted in September 1869 that his brother was “plowing for the second time (it was broken for the first time in May and June). It looks like a well-worked and fine garden plot.” O. Olsson as quoted in Lindquist, ed. and trans., “Letters of the Rev. and Mrs. Olof Olsson,” 499.

19 **“In America, every working man can, if he wills it, become a nobleman, baron, and count.”**: Lindquist, Vision for a Valley, 68. Olof Olsson said this specifically in reference to the Homestead Act of 1862, what he called “the brightest star in the whole galaxy of Stars and Stripes.”

Interlude Two: Somewhat of a Problem Child

Netta Bartholomew gave her speech, “In response to the Toast, We Girls,” at a Student Reception in December 1891. Anton Youngdahl’s speech, “Woman” almost certainly dates to 1895 or 1896. The setting of the latter is unclear, but considering comments in the text he likely spoke at a reunion event for the class of 1894. A copy of Youngdahl’s speech is in Bartholomew’s collection, preserved alongside her essays and speeches on women’s rights. And since it speaks so directly to the same issues as “We Girls”—most importantly, the place and purpose of women in American society—I could not resist putting the two in dialogue with each other. After all, Bartholomew and Youngdahl were classmates, and given what we know of their perspectives and personalities, it is easy to imagine them debating the subject.

53 **two-story college chapel:** For a description of the college chapel, see Glen E. Brolander, An Historical Survey of the Augustana College Campus (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1992), 33.

53 **Professor Williamson … the program:** Augustana College and Theological Seminary held student receptions at the beginning and end of the fall term. Netta Bartholomew gave her “We Girls” speech at the December 1891 reception, mentioning that she had “a place

53 Netta suspected … speak in public: “The committee was very irritated and uncomfortable on the two horns of the dilemma for either they must risk offending the new Professor of English, whose daughter I was, by declining to enter me in the contest, or they must waive the old tradition of only men being worthy of speaking from the chapel platform.” Netta Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago Through a Co-ed's Eye,” circa 1944, Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 13. Bartholomew was referring to her very first speech from the chapel pulpit, but it is easy to imagine her additional speeches were tolerated at least in part because of her father’s status on campus.

53 Her knees felt like they were made of jelly … the hard wooden chair: “No one can ever know what agonies of apprehension I suffered before my turn came and when at last it was announced … my knees turned to jelly as I pulled myself out of my chair.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 9. This quote is in reference to a speech Bartholomew gave when demanding entry into the all-male Adelphi literary society. Like the previous quote, it seemed fitting for the occasion of speaking in front of the whole school. Bartholomew describes the chapel seating as “the swankiest new type ‘opera’ seats.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 9-10.

53 She looked out, seeing an ocean of pale faces … a girl really trying to make a speech: “[I] went to the front and faced what seemed a limitless sea of boys’ faces all grinning expectantly at me. There wasn’t a vacant seat in that old history room and even standing room was all taken for all who could crowd in had come to see the fun, a girl really trying to make a speech!” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 9-10.

53 her stays: Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 11. Bartholomew compares her hustle and stays to the relatively daring uniforms girls wore to Augustana’s first gym class for women students.

53 rushing into things like a fool: “I could relate many anecdotes since being the kind of person I am ‘rushing in where angels fear to tread,’ I usually was tangled up somehow in them.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 8.
the electric lights: Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 12. As a member of the Philodai quartette (the first women’s quartette at Augustana), Bartholomew went on a fundraising trip with President Olof Olsson to advertise Augustana College and raise money for a pulpit and other chapel furnishings. The group was so successful that they were also able to purchase and install “electric lights all around the arch of the large stained glass window” behind the speaking platform.


her armor: Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 11. Bartholomew refers to her bustle and stays as “rigid armor.”

her male classmates: Catalogue of Augustana College and Theological Seminar, 1891-1892, 12.

She squinted … she would get even with him: “I saw Youngdahl in his window with an opera-glass—the mean thing. I’ll get even with him some day.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, November 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. This description of Youngdahl is borrowed from a particularly funny entry in Lydia Olsson’s diary. Given Olsson’s descriptions of Youngdahl, I suspect he used his opera glasses for comedic effect on more than one occasion.


“Woman … no man should be without a copy.”: Anton C. Youngdahl, “Woman” speech, circa 1895, Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 1.

Youngdahl had been sly: “Yl is too funny and sly!” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, February 17, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson also writes about another of Youngdahl’s speeches, calling it “humorous of course.” On that occasion, Youngdahl “got up and said, ‘Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, halloo girls!’” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, January 20, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

She thought back … ever questioned: “Our college received women students on an equal footing with men students and there was no thought of discrimination against them because of their sex nor was the matter of giving them the advantages of an education ever questioned.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew
Anderson Papers, 1. Bartholomew’s father, Edward Fry Bartholomew, served as the
president of Carthage College in Carthage, Illinois, from 1884 to 1888. That year he moved
his family to Rock Island, Illinois, to become the chair of the English Literature and
Philosophy departments at Augustana College. “Edward Bartholomew,” Notable Faculty in
Augustana History, Augustana College, 2009, accessed March 2, 2021,

54 **young lady:** “To be, at long last, recognized as a ‘young lady’ in my own right and no
longer to be bunched with ‘just one of the Bartholomew children’ was a wonderfully
stimulating experience.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,”
Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2. Like Lydia Olsson, Bartholomew was once the daughter
of a college president, known to the community as “the daughter of…” Bartholomew was
fifteen when the family moved to Rock Island—no longer a child—and now just a
professor’s daughter, a position that presumably allowed more freedoms than that of a
president’s daughter.

54 **These Swedes … with their assumptions of their own superiority:** “We were frankly
told that while they loved us as girls, they did not care for us as students. I have often
wondered … how such a proposition [as co-education] ever carried among a group of men
so scornful of ‘woman’s rights’ about which everybody was then talking, and so given to
the old world tradition of regarding education for women a waste of time and money.
Having come from a school that harbored none of this prejudice against women students, I
very much resented this male assumption of superiority.” Bartholomew Anderson,
“Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 8. In this speech,
Bartholomew reminisces about the culture shock she experienced as “an American girl”
from “a typical small American prairie college town” with “nobody of foreign birth in the
whole town” who was “suddenly transported … into a community where the majority of
the people with whom I would now come in contact were of foreign birth.” Augustana was
a Swedish-American enclave, and the Swedish-American men Bartholomew encountered,
according to her, held very different views on women’s roles than the “American” men in
Anderson Papers, 1-2.

54 **somewhat of a problem child:** “This accounts for some of the wilful forwardness that
made me somewhat of a ‘problem child.’” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years
Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 8-9.

54 **“Talk about conceit as much as you like,’ says Oliver Wendell Holmes … making it
durable”**: Beginning with this section, all quoted text as spoken by Bartholomew is
excerpted from her speech, “We Girls.” I have made minor changes, including some edits
for spelling and grammar. Because this is a creatively reconstructed scene, I thought it
more appropriate for the text to flow and felt more free to make small changes (those that
do not change the meaning of the text) as opposed to the unaltered quotations I include in
the chapters themselves. Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson
Papers, 1. The quote from Holmes is found in Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Autocrat of
the Breakfast-Table,” November 1857, *The Atlantic*, accessed March 2, 2021,
At the Cleveland Convention some witty divine … neither man nor God has rested: Beginning with this section, all italicized text is excerpted from Youngdahl’s speech, “Woman.” Youngdahl, “Woman,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 1.

Yes though we are but few here … declare our Independence: Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 1-2.


Some time ago I heard … some of these latter day freaks riding the bicycle: Youngdahl, “Woman,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2-3. Youngdahl’s comment about “latter day freaks riding the bicycle is his nod to the stereotype of the New Woman.

We girls have our likes and dislikes … we dislike hollow, hypocritical pretence: Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 4.

We expect from an author … more artistically ornamented than man: Youngdahl, “Woman,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 3-4.

But now a word … we must cultivate the beautiful within us: Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 4-5.

While we do not expect … things will be improved: Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2.

Hashmim: Hashamayim means “the heavens” or “abode of angels” in Hebrew. Ladies’ Hall—the women’s dormitory on campus—was referred to as “Hashmium” or “Hashamayum” and its occupants the “Hashamia.” Bartholomew, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2; Brolander, 29; L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, November 18, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

Woman … at a future reunion of the Class of ’94: Youngdahl, “Woman,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 6. Youngdahl’s original speech reads “at the next reunion.” Because I shifted his speech earlier in time, I changed this text to reflect that he and his classmates were still students.

For the present we are content … ‘She was my classmate.’: Bartholomew Anderson, “We Girls,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 2-3.
**American girl:** Netta Bartholomew was the child of native-born parents with English and German heritage. This marked her as an outsider, since most of her fellow students were Swedish immigrants or children of Swedish immigrants. “Edward Bartholomew.” See Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 1-2, for her impressions of life as an “American girl” among Swedish Americans.

**Somehow she had done it:** “Somehow I got through it.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 10.

**She had given her speech … in their favor:** “I have always felt rather proud of my part in this incident which marked the end of the prejudice and discrimination against women students which had persisted up to this time. The men ceased to struggle against the tide of female demand for equal opportunity.” Bartholomew Anderson, “Augustana Fifty Years Ago,” Bartholomew Anderson Papers, 13.

---

**Interlude Three: Christmas Eve**

**winter holidays:** L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, December 21, 1892; Thursday, December 22, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. Lydia Olsson notes that Wednesday, December 21, 1892, was the last day of fall term. She went to see her friends off as they traveled home by train.

**scene of merriment:** Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Signet Classics, 2019), 55-56. This description was inspired by a passage in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, in which Laurie Laurence tells Jo March about looking through the family’s window when the curtain was pulled up: “I can’t help looking over at your house, you always seem to be having such good times… sometimes you forget to put down the curtain at the window where the flowers are; and when the lamps are lighted, it’s like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all round the table with your mother; her face is right opposite, and it looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can’t help watching it.”

**festooned with pink and green crepe paper and small candles:** “We have been decorating our tree and our hanging lamp in the sitting room with pink and pea green crepe tissue paper and small candles.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 23, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

store-bought candy ... taffy: Lydia Olsson and her friends regularly made taffy at home in the wintertime. They ate candy at parties and sociables and gave boxes of candy to each other as gifts. Since they were celebrating Christmas Eve, it seems likely that the Olssons would have bought some candy as a treat for their guests. But once they ran out, it was simple and relatively quick to make homemade taffy. See, for example, L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, December 12, 1892; Thursday, January 26, 1893; Monday, February 6, 1893; Friday, February 17, 1893; Monday, March 5, 1894; Saturday, April 14, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.

Esther received ... from J. A. Bexell to Dina: L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 24, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson mentions receiving a parasol, crocheted slippers, and a souvenir spoon from Clarence Cederquist; she also writes about the chain J. A. Bexell gave to Dina Dahn. Because she does not record what the other girls received, I decided to spread her gifts out among the group. I also took the liberty of assuming Dina’s “sweet little chain (of love)” was a locket.

sweet little chain of love: “[Bexell] sent Dina a sweet little chain (of love.)” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 24, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

the couple planned to announce their engagement: “To-morrow [Bexell] is going to present her the _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ ring.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 24, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

Lydia suspected it would not be long before they were married: “I prophecy that Dina and Bexell won’t have patience to wait very many years.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. “Spoony” means sentimentally or foolishly amorous.

They were too spoony.... But such was love: “Ush! They are too spoony for me, but I won’t judge them too badly for such is love, blind, and I may some future day, be as silly myself.” And: “Dina and Bexell look real nice together. Sometimes he would look at her for a long while; he evidently breathed in the beauty of her face, while she, the music.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892; Thursday, March 2, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. “Spoony” means sentimentally or foolishly amorous.

The girls fell over themselves in merriment: This description was inspired by another moment of levity between girls in Olsson’s diary: “When we got home, Helena went with me in so I put Johnnie’s new long-pants suit on and knocked on “hashamia” kitchen door where the girls were popping corn. Say they didn’t laugh to see me hugging and kissing Etta.” Girls at the time often expressed physical and verbal intimacy with their female friends. They kissed, hugged, and wrote long letters filled with romantic declarations. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1 no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 22.

**Lydia sat down to write an entry in her diary…** Finally, they got into bed: “Dina stays here with me to-night…. oh! I must go to bed, Dina is waiting.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 24, 1892, Olsson Family Papers. It was common for young women to share beds with friends and acquaintances. Smith-Rosenberg, 24-25; Jane Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 179

**She had ultimately rejected the seminarian … and fled home to Rockford:** “This afternoon she asked me to help her write to him and I did my best about it.” And: “Ella came in and said she was going to leave for home in the morning so as to get away and out of trouble.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**“I’m afraid she will have a hard time of it poor girl!”:** L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**“It’s alright if she only hasn’t encouraged him…. I hope I will never be in her shoes!”:** L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**seemed so manly and good:** “I admire him because he is at the same time manly and I believe there are many good things to be discovered in him.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**Has Ceder popped the question yet?:** “Dina asks me if Ceder hadn’t popped the question to me yet.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**“We children aren’t to be bothered with love … for many, many years to come.”** “I told her that we children aren’t to be bothered with love, only friendship and that I am not ready for marriage for many, many years to come.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**he gave me a hint … interfere in his friendship:** “I told her about that hint which [Cederquist] gave me the other night which hurt my feelings, it was queer to me. We were talking about friends etc. etc. and some way or other he said ‘I have a lady friend of my class who I think the world of, next to my sister, I am going to write to her next Sund.’” and something about that no one need interfere in his friendship.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

**Honestly … I wouldn’t be the one to show it first:** “And honestly the words in which he said it, I took it that—well, it sounded as though he wanted to warn me not to think anything of him for he didn’t mean anything by his friendlyness to me, and I’d better not think so. Honestly I thought it was so hateful, but I know not how he meant it only this is the way it sounded to me. Yes, as though I was trying my best to get him. No, never would
that me my aim no matter what I thought of a young man, I wouldn’t be the one to show it first.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

85 **Bex says Ceder thinks the world of you … he is very kind and gentlemanly to me:** “Dina said that [Bexell] said that [Cederquist] thinks “the world of me” but that I don’t believe. However, he is very kind and gentlemanly to me.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

85 **Dina described the precious moment … in the baseball park:** “On the way she told me how B. proposed to her one Sunday evening in the base-ball park!” L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, February 15, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

85 **They tickled and smacked each other … shaking with laughter:** This section was inspired by Olsson’s December 25 entry recalling the night before, including several direct quotes. “Such a night as Dina and I had last night. Talked a long while and then I’d slap her and say good-night,—and then she’d say ‘say’—and tell me something and then say goodnight. Then I’d say “_ _ _ _” and give her a slap and say, ‘now we must sleep, so goodnight.’ That is the way we kept on until the clock must have been one or around there. Then she’d say ‘I’ll just tell you this one thing.’ Then we would turn our backs to each other and snore, and not talk but she’d tickle me so I had to laugh and say something. At last I said ‘The one that says anything more after I have counted to three must give [Bexell] a kiss—good night Dina now for good—one—two three!’ Sure enough it was quiet for quite a while until Dina shook me and wanted to know why I was laughing.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.


85 **Soon the friends were off in dreamland:** “We soon were off in Dreamland.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, December 25, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

Interlude Four: Heartache

119 **Lydia settled into a rocker:** “Buried myself into a rocker and had a nice little chat with ‘Little women.’” L. Olsson, Journal, Monday, January 9, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

119 **“That is your best friend”…. The redder she grew:** Alcott, *Little Women*, 366. All passages in italics are quoted from “Heartache,” part II, chapter 35.

119 **more than an innocent friendship:** “Lillie was teasing me for Cede, so I said, ‘Lillie, don’t talk that way, you spoil the innocent friendship.’ She said, ‘Do you suppose a boy
would go with you so long if he didn’t care for you.’ She spoke as if it was in ‘earnest.’ I don’t like to have people talk that way for it may reach his ears as well as mine and kind of spoil the childish friendship.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, March 19, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

119 “my boy”: “My good boy’ (as Jo calls her Laurie) took me to supper…. ‘My boy’ and I had a talk about Connie.” L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 25, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson also refers to Clarence Cederquist as “my boy” on Tuesday, February 7, 1893.


119 “No Teddy”…. harder than she expected: Alcott, Little Women, 369.


119 There were so many years ahead of them … regarding marriage: “I told her that we children aren’t to be bothered with love, only friendship and that I am not ready for marriage for many, many years to come.” L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

119 “I hoped you’d love me”…. “I don’t”: Alcott, Little Women, 370.

120 If there were a Laurie in the neighborhood…. drove them crazy: “Were there a Laurie in the neighborhood and he paid any attention to me, I’d give in on the spot. Really, it’s touching when he speaks to Jo and she cannot return her love to ‘her boy.’ But how well he kept his temper and bore it like a man—a gentle-man. I admire that of him although it cost him much. Some carry on like fools – say you ruin their lives—will go crazy—etc. etc. It makes the poor girls feel like - - - - - - - ” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, January 15, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

120 Just think of how J. S. Brodeen had treated Ella: L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

120 “Oh, Teddy”…. was the decided answer: Alcott, Little Women, 370.

120 Her friends teased her about Ceder: L. Olsson, Journal, Friday, December 16, 1892; Sunday, March 19, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

120 love that didn’t come naturally on both sides—was not the right kind: “But if he don’t like me I shall not try to break anybodies heart (out in [Pennsylvania]) by trying to win his love, for if such does not come natural on both sides, I do not think it the right kind.” L. Olsson, Journal, Saturday, November 26, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
Lydia loved him as a brother and a friend: “I like him, as said before, as a big brother in whom I can confide, who is kind and whom I can respect – not as a lover for all the world, I don’t want any.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, February 5, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson mirrors Jo’s language towards Laurie, for example: “I love the dear boy … but as for anything more, it’s out of the question.” Alcott, Little Women, 338.

120 **How could she…. Muttered Laurie rebelliously:** Alcott, Little Women, 371-372.

120 **romantic rubbish:** “No ‘romantic rubbish’ around these quarters.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, February 5, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. See also Tuesday, February 7, 1893. Olsson mirrors Marmee’s language when speaking to Jo: “We … had better not get ‘romantic rubbish,’ as you call it, into our heads, lest it spoil our friendship.” Alcott, Little Women, 209.

120 **they both had tempers, arguing:** See, for example: L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, November 20, 1892; Tuesday, January 9, 1894, Olsson Family Papers.

120 **like Dina … being spoony:** “I almost think that Dina and Bexell are engaged, they are getting too spoony!!!” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, November 27, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.

120 **refuse his company:** “How can I then, refuse his company? Although I came on the point of swearing off going with my boy.” L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, February 7, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

120 **She didn’t want anyone to break their heart over her:** “I don’t want any one to break their hearts over me!” L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 25, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

120 **“I’ve done my best”…. was the consoling answer:** Alcott, Little Women, 373.

120 **But she found a good deal of “Laurism” in him, her good boy:** “Indeed he is a good boy, and I find a good deal of “Laurism” in him.” L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 25, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.

120 **She was getting to like him … for a long, long time:** “[I] am getting to like him like Jo did.” L. Olsson, Journal, Wednesday, January 25, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. “I want to feel that way to him for a long, long time.” L. Olsson, Journal, Sunday, March 19, 1893, Olsson Family Papers. Olsson mirrors Meg’s language when speaking to Marme: “I was very grateful for his kindness, and would be his friend, but nothing more, for a long while.” Alcott, Little Women, 213.

121 **“Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives…. Leave these things to time”:** Alcott, Little Women, 104. Olsson refers to this passage in her diary: “Like Mrs. Marsh told her girls that they shouldn’t do any “planning” but let time and future do it.” (This line also


121 **Children should be children as long as they can**: Alcott, *Little Women*, 62.


121 **students would begin to arrive back on campus**: L. Olsson, Journal, Tuesday, January 10, 1893, Olsson Family Papers.


Epilogue: A Turning Point

The summer I first read Lydia’s diaries still holds a special place in my heart. Jamie Nelson and Sarah Horowitz, the Augusta Special Collections librarians, had asked me to work there between my junior and senior year. I spent the days processing collections and scanning photographs, then eating lunch as fast as possible so I could use my spare time to look through interesting collections, the Bartholomew love letters among them. I came across Lydia’s diaries in this manner and could not put them down, typing up the best bits to send to my best friend and roommate, Helen Reinold, who was working across the hall in the interlibrary loan department.

What started as a series of “can you believe what Lydia wrote?” emails and instant messages turned into a word document of favorite entries, which morphed into a transcript of all five notebooks. I’ve kept those transcripts on my computer and in cloud storage for the last decade, occasionally finding time to research people and events Lydia mentioned in her diary. I knew they would be key to my thesis work, but never imagined a scenario in which I would be stuck at home, unable to visit Augusta for thesis research. When the pandemic hit, those transcripts were my lifeline to Lydia. I have to thank my twenty-one-year-old self for putting in all those hours to create a document without which this thesis would not exist.

161 **Dear Eddie … him who is dearest to me**: Kate Fasold to Edward Fry Bartholomew, November 22, 1870, MSS 19 Edward Fry Bartholomew Papers, Special Collections, Augusta College, Rock Island, Illinois (hereafter cited as Bartholomew Papers).

161 **My Darling Kate … I alone am sitting upon our favorite spot**: Edward Fry Bartholomew to Kate Fasold Bartholomew, Saturday evening, June 1881, Bartholomew Papers.

161 **Topsy’s Journal. Strictly private! … we could begin our winter’s frolic**: L. Olsson, Journal, November 17, 1892, Olsson Family Papers.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archival and Manuscript Material

Tredway Library, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL
Augustana College Office of the Registrar Records
Edward Fry Bartholomew Papers
Netta Bartholomew Anderson Papers
Olof Olsson Family Papers

Published Material


https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/012103595.

https://books.google.com/books?id=u9FQAQAAMAAJ.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Games_for_All_Occasions/JIVOAQAAMAAJ.


---

**Secondary Sources**


Olson, Ernst W. Olof Olsson: The Man, His Work, and His Thought. Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1941.


