

BELLA FRENCH

HISTORIAN OF BROWN COUNTY

BY JOHN BERENS & RUTH ROEBKE-BERENS

WHO WAS BELLA FRENCH? For someone who wrote so many books, poems, and articles, we have only a brief historical record of her early life. Isabella “Bella” David was born in Dade County, Georgia in 1837. Her father, William, was a native of England and an amateur inventor who worked doggedly on a mill that could be operated by a single horse. When that failed, he sailed for England to reclaim part of his family’s wealth but was drowned at sea. The family moved to Missouri and Iowa, where Bella attended a course in poetry that confirmed her intent to become a poet.¹

By 1859, the twenty-two year old French was a resident of Sparta, a town in west-central Wisconsin. By then she was married to Thomas Dexter French, a painter; the couple lived in Sparta until 1863. French began her literary career in 1867, when she served as literary editor for the *La Crosse Democrat*. The next year, French relocated to McGregor, Iowa, where she worked in the office of the *McGregor News*. Later that same year, Thomas and Bella French moved twice, first to Houston and then to Fillmore Counties, both in southeastern Minnesota.² There French expanded on her experience as a writer to become a publisher. In 1870, she established a newspaper “with a decidedly literary turn,” the *Western Progress*, in Brownsville, Minnesota, and then relocated the paper to Spring Valley, Minnesota. A few years later, French sold the newspaper and accepted a reporter’s position with the *St. Paul Pioneer*.

In 1870, Bella French began to write poetry and launched her career on the lecture circuit, speaking to audiences in southeastern Minnesota on a variety of contemporary topics and sometimes reading her poems. In an era before radio, television, motion pictures, and the internet, public lectures were popular public events. Famous writers, politicians, and social activists, such as Mark Twain, Susan B. Anthony, and Oscar Wilde crisscrossed the nation, lecturing at metropolitan theaters and small-town halls. French now joined their ranks.

Opposite This 1878 map of Brown County shows locations Bella French studied and wrote about in the *History of Brown County*.

Van Vechten Snyder & Company, *Historical Atlas of Wisconsin*, 1878.

Right This etching depicts Bella French in the early 1870s.

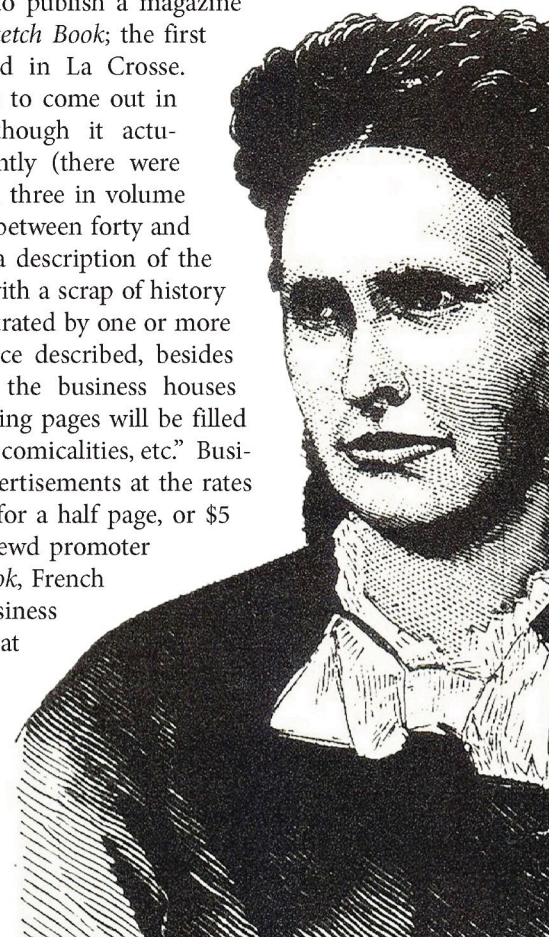
Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated, Vol. 58, June 1874.

In early November 1870, French advertised to read two of her poems, “The Work of Progression” and “The Fashionable Woman’s Plea,” at the courthouse in Albert Lea, Minnesota. The next month she spoke on “Temperance” in the Albert Lea Presbyterian Church and also repeated her poem on “Progression.” In 1872, she lectured in Ohio. French’s public lectures and poetry focused on women’s rights.

In 1872, French began to publish her first magazine, the *Busy West*, reportedly the only magazine published in Minnesota. From February to December 1872, the magazine was published in St. Paul, then from December 1872 to January 1873 in Milwaukee. From February 1873 until the magazine’s demise, the *Busy West* was published simultaneously in Milwaukee and St. Paul; it ceased publication in April 1873. There was a report that French was planning a new magazine, the *Busy West Chronotype*, which was to be published “in the interest” of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, but nothing came of this.³

In 1874, French began to publish a magazine she titled the *American Sketch Book*; the first two volumes were printed in La Crosse. She planned the magazine to come out in monthly installments, although it actually appeared less frequently (there were six issues in volume I and three in volume II). Each issue contained between forty and sixty pages dedicated to “a description of the advantages and beauties, with a scrap of history of some city or town, illustrated by one or more full-page views of the place described, besides giving advertisements of the business houses of said place. The remaining pages will be filled with choice literary matter, comicalities, etc.” Businesses could purchase advertisements at the rates of \$12 for a full page, \$7 for a half page, or \$5 for a quarter page. A shrewd promoter of the *American Sketch Book*, French pointed out that “all business men can see at a glance what a good medium it will be for advertising.”

To further subscriptions to the *American*



CHRONOLOGY

- 1837** Isabella “Bella” David born in Dade County, Georgia
- 1859-1863** French and husband, Thomas Dexter French, were residents of Sparta, Wisconsin
- 1867** Began career as literary editor for the *La Crosse Democrat*
- 1868** Relocated to McGregor, Iowa, and worked for *McGregor News*

Relocated to Houston, Texas, and then Fillmore Counties, Minnesota
- 1870** Established the *Western Progress* in Brownsville, Minnesota

Began poetry and lecture career
- 1872** Published first magazine, the *Busy West*, in St. Paul, Minnesota and Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 1873** The *Busy West* ceased publication in April
- 1874** Published magazine titled the *American Sketchbook* (volumes I and II printed in La Crosse)
- 1875** Became resident of Brown County, Wisconsin, to begin work on volume III of the *American Sketchbook*
- 1876** Published volume III of the *American Sketchbook: History of Brown County*
- 1877** Moved to Galveston, Texas
- 1878** Married John Milton Swisher
- 1893** Died in Sausalito, California, on September 28

Timeline by Ashley Shimanek

Sketch Book, French announced that “if the necessary arrangements are made, the editor will deliver one or two lectures in any town interested, and will use the proceeds, exclusive of her traveling expenses, in obtaining engravings of views, &c., for the book of said place: the engravings to belong to the town after use.”

Histories of individual Wisconsin counties (Clark and Dunn) and communities (Eau Claire, Augusta, Chippewa Falls, Black River Falls, Neillsville, Menomonie, Sparta, Reedsburg, Baraboo, and Devil’s Lake) appeared in the first two volumes published in 1874 and 1875.

In 1875, French decided to devote the entire third volume of the *American Sketch Book* to a history of Green Bay. By December 1875, she was a resident of Green Bay and began her work on the history toward the end of that year. At first she planned to remain in Green Bay only several weeks, but the project soon grew such that she became a resident for more than a year (in March 1877 she stated that the book had required “16 months [of] labor”).⁴

French became a well-known resident of Green Bay during her stay. And on July 4, 1876, when Green Bay along with the rest of the nation celebrated the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, Bella participated in Green Bay’s elaborate celebrations, reading a seven-stanza poem dedicated to the Green Bay Light Guards “at the same time decorating the flag with a beautiful garland.” The first six stanzas each ended with the line “Our country to-day is a century old.” Her declamation ended with these stirring lines:

**Noble Light Guards of Freedom, so gallant and brave,
Should the terrible moment be yours yet to see.
When ‘midst tempests of war this dear banner shall wave,
And when tyrants will reach for the land of the free,
Well we know that your bosoms, with ardor aflame,
Will be cheerfully bared for the homes you adore
And your bright, trusty steels will, in Liberty’s name,
Cut from sea unto sea, and from there unto shore;
And when many more years shall be numbered among
The ones of the hundred which backward have rolled,
By same Light Guards of freedom this song shall be sung,
Our nation to-day is ten centuries old.**

By April 1876, the history of Green Bay had expanded to include Fort Howard and De Pere. Then, in June, French announced plans to add to her history “a sketch of each of the towns in this county, descriptive of the locality, early settlement, resources, etc.” She invited town residents willing to contribute materials or stories “to give her immediately the desired information.”⁵ Thus, what was initially intended to be history of Green Bay became the *History of Brown County*. Allouez, Bellevue, Eaton, Glenmore, Humboldt, Lawrence, New Denmark, Preble, Rockland, Scott, and Wrightstown all had their pages.

French’s research methodologies were exemplary for the time. In preparation for an earlier history of Baraboo, for example, she first invited “old settlers and others acquainted with facts of general interest . . . to communicate the same to her.” She then set up a one-day meeting with all the “old settlers” from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm; the time was devoted to “conversation, and the narrative of anecdotes and incidents connected with pioneer life” in Baraboo.⁶

For her history of Brown County “documents, musty with time, have been scanned, and old settlers interviewed.” The *Green Bay Advocate* made available to French thirty years of its files. And she traveled to the many small communities throughout the county to gather information for her book. By the end of 1876, the book was available for purchase, in six editions ranging from paper (\$1.25) to leather with gold finish (\$3.50). French apologized for having to raise the prices from her earlier estimates but said that in addition to the time required to research and write her history it had cost her over \$2,000 from her own savings.⁷

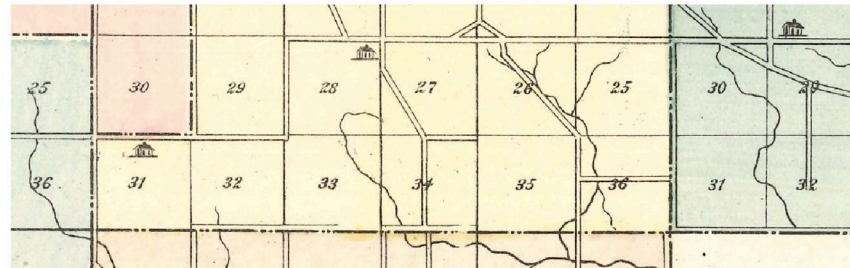
For health reasons in the fall of 1877, French left Wisconsin and moved to Galveston, Texas. So far as we know, she never returned to Wisconsin.

On October 8, 1878, French married John Milton Swisher in Austin, Texas. Her second husband was a veteran of the Mexican and Civil wars.⁸ John Milton Swisher died in Austin on March 11, 1891. After her husband’s death she moved to Sausalito, California. She died of heart disease at her residence on September 28, 1893, at the age of fifty-five.⁹

A contemporary newspaper described Bella French’s *History of Brown County* as “a volume which every citizen of the county will value.”¹⁰ Despite the passage of more than a century since its publication, this judgment still rings true. It remains an important source for anyone interested in the history of Brown County. Bella French’s novels and poems are today unread and forgotten, but her *History of Brown County* stands as a lasting monument to the life and work of this extraordinary woman.

Notes

1. *Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (June 1874): 370-371; *Magazine of Poetry: A Quarterly Review*, Vol. 1 (1889): 475; 1840 Federal Census.
2. Bella French, *History of Sparta, Wisconsin* (La Crosse: Sketch Book Co., 1875), p. 34; *Dubuque (IA) Herald*, 5 May 1874; 1860 and 1870 Federal Censuses.
3. Imogene B. Dickey, “Bella French Swisher: Texas Editor and Litterateur,” *Southwestern American Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1971): 8; Edward D. Neill, *History of Houston County* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Co., 1882), p. 316; Phebe A. Hanford, *Daughters of America; or Women of the Century* (Augusta, ME: True & Co., 1882), p. 685; Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Fillmore County, Minnesota* (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr. & Co., 1912), p. 438; *History of Goodhue County, Minnesota* (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1878), p. 640; *Janesville Gazette*, 8 May 1873; *Winona (MN) Republican-Herald*, 8 October 1947.
4. *Green Bay Advocate*, 2 December 1875; *Dubuque (IA) Herald*, 15 December 1875; *De Pere News*, 31 March 1877. As late as June 1877 she was identified as “Bella French, Green Bay, Wisconsin”: *Galveston Daily News*, 2 June 1877.
5. *Green Bay Advocate*, 20 April 1876, 15 June 1876.
6. *Baraboo Republic*, 16 June 1875, 30 June 1875.
7. Bella French, *History of Brown County* (Green Bay: American Sketch Book Co., 1876), “Preface”; *Green Bay Advocate*, 13 July 1876; *De Pere News*, 31 March 1877.
8. “Swisher, John Milton,” *Handbook of Texas Online* <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fsw20> (accessed 20 November 2017); *Biographical Encyclopedia of Texas* (New York: Southern Pub. Co., 1880), pp. 112-115.
9. *Galveston Daily News*, 18 June 1893; *San Francisco Morning Call*, 1 October 1893.
10. *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 14 March 1877.



VIEW FROM THE STACKS

Two Brown County Librarians Assess Bella French’s *American Sketch Book: History of Brown County* (1876)

Bella French’s *American Sketch Book* is full of material not found easily when researching the history of Brown County prior to the date of publication in 1876. It is obvious that French spent much time going through the files of the *Green Bay Advocate*—an honorable pursuit. If the user is looking for an incident—fire, building of a church, or celebration—this may be the volume to use. Some will say that the digital version of the newspaper, in the future, will be easier to use; however, to have someone who has already done the scanning in the nineteenth century will eliminate the review of unnecessary and minute material.

—Mary Jane Herber, Brown County Library, Local History & Genealogy Department

Bella French’s *American Sketch Book* offers readers a snap shot into the history of Green Bay and Brown County from first contact to our nation’s centennial. Her book is often overlooked, due to the lack of an index. But the chronological arrangements within the chapters along with chapter summaries allow readers to locate the information they are seeking. French’s use of local residents’ personal accounts along with references from the local newspaper offers a unique historical narrative of one of Wisconsin’s oldest counties. Business directories included in the back of the book can be used to supplement the limited city directories for the 1870s. Any scholar of Brown County history will be pleasantly surprised at the amount of facts and details along with engravings and maps contained within the cover of this historical gem.

—Dennis R. Jacobs, Brown County Library, Local History and Genealogy Department

Illustration by Megan Nighbor