

A GROWING CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

Gustaf Unonius immigrated from Sweden in 1841, and with his wife began a small farm in Wisconsin. Later, he became a minister, moved to Chicago, and witnessed much of the growth of the region. In this condensed account, he describes some of what he saw. It begins with his first short visit to the city in the 1840s.

I remained two weeks in Chicago, the Garden City, as it was called, but at that time anything but a garden. The surroundings resembled a trash can more than anything else. The entire area on which that “wonder of the western world” was to grow up might best be likened to a vast mud puddle. The principal site of the city is low and swampy, almost at the same level as Lake Michigan, and most of the buildings were at that time built close to the lakeshore or by the river flowing right through the city.

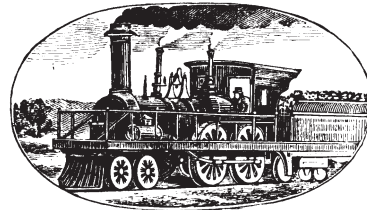
During the rainy season, and sometimes far into the summer, the streets were impassable for driving [wagons] as well as for walking. To be sure, they were provided with board sidewalks, but getting from one side of the street to the other entailed decided difficulties.

Twelve years have passed, and what a change in its appearance as well as in its population, which is now 120,000! The formerly low, swampy streets have been raised several feet and paved with planks or stone. The river has been dredged and widened, its shores have been supported with piles, evened off, raised well above the water level, and are now occupied by loading piers or used as foundations for gigantic warehouses or factories.

It is now a city in which private and public buildings have been erected that compare favorably both in size and style with the most

splendid structures in the capitals of Europe. In a single summer, in 1855, 2,700 new homes were built, many of which would be a source of pride to any city.

The web of railroads which Chicago has spun around itself during the last ten years is the thing that more than anything else has contributed to its wealth and progress. Thereby the city has communication with the



rich copper districts and other mining regions around Lake Superior, with Canada, with all the Atlantic states,

with the rich grain producing lands beyond the Mississippi, and with the cotton states around the Gulf of Mexico.

Next to traffic in grain the lumber business is the most important in Chicago. From the pine woods of Michigan and the northern sections of the lake of that name, masses of boards and other lumber are shipped annually to Chicago, whereupon they are transhipped by railroad to the interior of the country and to the southern states. Along the shores of the Chicago River there is nothing to be seen for a distance of six miles but lumberyard after lumberyard.

In addition, Chicago has great locomotive works, foundries, and all kinds of machine shops employing thousands of workmen. Among factories, McCormick’s establishment for the manufacture of agricultural machinery deserves mention.

Add to this the fact that Chicago has more than fifty churches, twenty-five newspaper presses, about a dozen banks, and a countless number of stores and hotels. All of these things will give the reader an idea of how the city has grown from practically nothing during the last twenty years.

While living in Chicago in the 1850s, Unonius also witnessed the hardships faced by its people. As a minister, he often was called upon for help when epidemics of deadly diseases such as cholera and typhus swept through the city.

The cholera spread further and further, and raged with great violence among the poorer population. In great haste a temporary hospital was nailed together in an empty block. But that hospital was completely inadequate to the need. The Swedish immigrants who arrived in greater numbers than ever before were attacked by the disease and succumbed to it [died] in masses.

And how could it be otherwise? Packed together in immigrant ships during the long ocean journey, unaccustomed to idleness, often eating spoiled and unwholesome food, living in filth and dirt, they were predisposed to the disease even before arriving in Chicago. Lodged in miserable hovels [shacks], often hungry, it was natural that in most cases medical treatment proved unavailing [not effective].

The misery of those poor people cannot be described. More than half of those who remained in Chicago succumbed [died of the disease]. Among those who stood hale and hearty at my side in the cemetery, filling the grave of a relative or friend, I could always be certain that someone, before another day was gone, would be provided with a resting place of the same kind.

The greatest problem was taking care of the children whose parents had died, and many of whom had been attacked by the diseases. To be sure, there was in the city a place for orphaned children, but when children left behind at the death of their parents were taken to the orphanage they carried the infection with them. The directors decided that they could not be admitted until they

had been in the city several weeks and might be considered perfectly healthy.

I asked some members of the church to come to the rectory [church residence] which at that time was occupied by me alone. We moved all the furniture from the first floor to the attic. Some of the women were sent out



into the city with a hastily written appeal in which I told of what had happened and asked assistance for those in need.

Before evening I had more than twenty fatherless and motherless children in the house. But I also received beds and bedclothes for them to sleep in, money to buy the food for them, suitable food and drink prepared for their immediate needs, medical aid for the sick, and fine, noble people to watch at their bedsides. For several weeks these children enjoyed shelter and care which I cannot imagine how they would have secured otherwise.

Where else but in America could a thing like that have been done? I dare not say nowhere, but I doubt that in any other country aid could have come so speedily, so willingly, and been so freely given as on that occasion. When such memories from my sojourn [travel] in that country arise before my mind's eye, I love and honor its people. In spite of their faults – and what people, what individual, is without faults? – they have proved that their hearts possess as great treasure as the ground on which they tread.

Group Discussion: *What were the main factors that contributed to the rapid growth of Chicago in this era? What impressed Unonius most about Americans when an epidemic of cholera hit Chicago?*