

# An American Journey in 1883

## Letters written by Georg von Siemens

Georg von Siemens, chairman of the managing board of Deutsche Bank from 1870 to 1900, travelled to the United States in 1883 for the grand opening of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The problems of funding and reorganising this famous railway line, and the conflicts with its president Henry Villard kept Siemens busy during the 1880s and 1890s. He undertook several trips to the United States when it became obvious that the situation demanded his personal interference.

»On board the "Elbe", August 16, 1883

We are just off Dover and shall have an opportunity to post letters in Southampton; as a result, a writing circle has formed, which I have just joined with my precious pen, ink, and paper.

The night before we embarked there was a party in the Ratskeller in Bremen, where they served us a 1847 Hallgarten and a 1876 Rüdeshheimer, which was reasonably good, and sandwiches; in return, we had to listen to some truly awful speeches. The problem for the Senate of Bremen was that they wanted to come up with some public, political purpose for entertaining a group of private people about to embark for America, and that at the same time they wanted that political purpose to please those who are presently wielding power in Germany. If this meant that justifications like furthering emigration and German investments abroad were out of the question then all that was left was a self-glorification of the Hanse cities, showing the world how they were sponsoring friendly communications with the United States by letting other people travel there, i.e. tourists or emigrants with a return ticket. Small wonder that, the situation being so difficult, all speakers got stuck over their toasts. In a word, the whole thing was dire. But the cellar was very beautifully decorated.

Our boat is very comfortable and has a population of around 1,400. Thus laden, it slices very calmly through the waves, rolling hardly at all, and so far we have had very few cases of sea-sickness. As for myself, I have been doing really fine and am beginning to regard myself as physically robust. ...

On board the "Elbe", August 24, 1883

Today I can only write to you briefly, because I have so much work to do on board that I do not have a lot of time. For a week, I have been rising at 5 each morning in order to gain surplus time for a letter or two. As yet, all my efforts have been fruitless; of the five newspaper correspondents present none has accomplished finishing even a single article, and desperation is creeping into all our faces as we are due to arrive in New York tomorrow morning.

In the beginning there was mild sea-sickness in a few cabins, but on Sunday this increased so that only between 50 and 60 people appeared at table, and 20 of those had no appetite. I have not felt a trace of sea-sickness myself throughout the voyage.

Between decks there are some 1,000 passengers, mostly from Württemberg, Bavaria, and Baden, many of whom look fairly prosperous. The days when only poor people emigrated seem to be over. ...

New York, Brunswick Hotel, August 28, 1883

My letter from the boat was lucky with a sailing and was already on its way home by 2 p.m. Should this letter, which will go on a faster boat, arrive first I need only say briefly that we entered harbour and landed at 9 a.m. on Saturday. On the pier (every steamship company has their own little harbour terminal, a pier where their ships come in to unload) a group of persons had gathered to meet us. But they were few because the ship arrived with a delay of 18 hours, much more than anyone had anticipated. (Latterly, fog had obliged us to proceed slowly.) Unloading and the customs and immigration paperwork took about 2-3 hours which was not too bad considering that 1200 persons with all their luggage – the population of a small town – had to walk on land over two boards and be processed. By noon we arrived at the hotel where we found Schurz and other German-Americans who welcomed us. At 2 p.m. the bulk of our party joined a convoi touring the city. I detached myself and took my own tour, in the company of the young Delbrück. At 7 p.m. a grand dinner was scheduled in the Union League Club, exclusively for us. The main utility there was ice water. We all were exhausted and went to bed at 11 o'clock.

I found it really odd that at first, here on land, I could not shake off a belated feeling of rolling. In bed, everything spun round. When I got up, everything swayed around me as if I was drunk. Apparently it often happens to people who were not sick at sea. I did not feel really well again until Friday morning, when at 10 a.m. I was back on a boat with the whole party, together with lots of flags and a band, sailing up the Hudson to Westpoint.

The Hudson is a river only by name; in truth it is a lake, and it has a great deal in common with Lake Constance, except that the hills are a little less high (starting at 400-500 feet, then ascending to 1800 feet). The main attraction are the Hudson's noble waters, being furrowed by numerous steamboats. The amount of traffic on this river is beyond imagination. On the banks of the Hudson lie three cities: New York, Hoboken, and Brooklyn. Ferry boats are carrying whole stretches of street life from Hoboken to New York and back. It is a wonderful sight to see when on a ferry a brewer's dray, a hackney carriage, and a coach and horses are lined up one behind the other.

Yesterday we were invited to visit the mansion of Mr. Villard on the Hudson; at 10 a.m. we took the train there. Another grand breakfast, of course, with music, etc. They drove us around in the vicinity where we saw the charming country house of the poet Washington Irving, showed us a series of marvellous views, and dismissed us around five o'clock so that we were back to base at six. At 8 p.m. there was a party given by the German choral society of New York, with a great many toasts which you will find reported in the press, and some splendid singing.

Today is a rest day, i.e. I can visit the banker, get some money, and buy a few things I need (e.g. pen, ink, paper, some sewing things, etc.), as well as get this letter to the mail. This afternoon, my luggage will be picked up, and then the trip will proceed, according to the amusement schedule. The thought of the multitude of pleasure awaiting us makes me shudder.

Minnetonka, September 2, 1883

You have probably gleaned from the amusement schedule which was sent to you, how difficult it is to write letters from here.

From Chicago and from Niagara Falls all I could send you were some hastily written cards. In this hotel there is no ink. Or rather, in a hotel with approximately 700 rooms, there is only one ink-well, with a crowd of people sitting around it. I have occupied a side table and must get up after every other word to dip my pen again.

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, at 9 p.m., we left for Niagara Falls in a marvellously comfortable train. I rode in a car together with Villard and his family, our Prussian envoy Eisendecker and wife, Carl Schurz (who is taking care of the whole party with wonderful amiability and courtesy), Dr. Schütt and Dr. Borchardt (all old 48ers from Manchester), Dr. Jacobi (who was a defendant in the 1852 trial of the Cologne communists), the former Governor Salomon from Wisconsin, Paul Lindau, Professor Zittel from Munich, and Professor von Holst from Freiburg – that is, in the company of pleasant and witty people. We reached Niagara Falls at 2 p.m. the next day. At first sight the falls look rather insignificant, only becoming truly impressive when the masses of water are seen from close to and one gradually becomes aware of their enormous extent. An island divides the Niagara River in two falls whose water drops approximately 270 feet deep into a basin (just like a swell of water poured from a giant bucket), from where it then flows off rather calmly. Half a mile downstream the river bed narrows, and there some very violent rapids occur, in which Captain Webb drowned. The width of the Falls is: 500 m one side, 1,500 m the other. All around stand a great variety of hotels where one is addressed as in Saxon Switzerland.

At 9 p.m. we left for Chicago where we arrived at 8 p.m. the next day. There, a German deputation met us at the station and took us to the Palmer Hotel, a massive seven-storey building four times the size of the Kaiserhof in which I occupied room no. 462 on the fourth floor. The stairways, naturally enough, are not used at all in such a place, no more than they are in New York. Everybody takes the elevators up and down.

The next morning we were fetched at 9 a.m., shown up and down the parks (in which trees are scarce) and taken to the Corn Exchange where a speech was delivered to which Villard and Bunsen responded. We were allowed to have lunch and thereafter taken on a city tour again, until the train left for St. Paul, at 7 p.m. A deputation from that city had come all the way to Chicago to meet and accompany us. On the train, a magnificent supper with every possible delicacy and type of wine. I had been transferred because ex-Governor Washburn had joined our party; I was now quartered with Eduard Lasker (a National Liberal member in the Reichstag) who had also joined us in Chicago.

From here on, the settlements were thinning out. On all stations we saw lumber, sitting there in endless quantities. None other than wooden farm houses were to be seen.

We arrived in St. Paul at 10 a.m. and were driven around for 3 hours on wretched roads between delightful villas, whose occupants own 8 million, 10 million dollars, most of it acquired as a result of the rising value of real estate.

It was in St. Paul that I finally became aware of how vast America is. In 1849, this city had 3.000 inhabitants, in 1860 it had grown to 10.000, and there are currently more than 100.000. Their taxes are half what they are in Berlin. The contrast between finished and unfinished structures is a most spectacular sight to see. The city is built on rolling hills, and next to the most peculiar ruins one can see commercial buildings six or seven storeys high. In the busier streets real estate is as expensive as in Berlin's Behrenstrasse or Leipziger Strasse.

Brilliant breakfast at 2 a.m. Then by rail to Minneapolis (2.5 German miles), a city of 100.000 inhabitants as well, lying in a plane and boasting the biggest mills in the world. The Mississippi forms waterfalls here, generating an estimated 275,000

horsepower. That power is conveyed to the city by electrical engines and made available to paying customers. Here, too, unpaved streets, lined with the most beautiful houses, most of them wooden, only the most recent being of stone, and citizens everywhere with fortunes of 5 to 10 millions. All these cities expect the new railway line to triple their wealth; anticipating opening day with enthusiasm, they have prepared the most grandiose celebrations about which an American newspaper story will be mailed to you shortly. At 9 p.m. we were driven to Lake Minnetonka, whence I am writing this. Here everybody is gathering for the grand tour. At the table next to me sat General Grant, a short stocky man with the appearance of a good German gentleman farmer. Besides, a lot of American officials whose names will be of no interest to you but whom to meet face to face was an interesting experience. The number of guests being approximately 300, I deem it possible to make their acquaintance. The trains are being assembled here. I will be in the first train, with Villard and the greater part of the German guests. Tomorrow, a huge procession will take place, in the morning in St. Paul, in the evening in Minneapolis, followed by a banquet for 1.000 guests in the hotel here, for which the city of St. Paul is expending 75.000 dollars = 315.000 marks. Departure at midnight.

I don't know whether I shall be able to write much in the days to come. In the train it's too bumpy, and none of the post offices has enough postage stamps to meet the demand created by this invasion of tourists.

Portland, 12 September 1883

After leaving Minnetonka I tried several times to write to you, but either the unavailability of postage stamps prevented me from delivering, or something else got in my way. We found ourselves in such cramped quarters in our sleeper cars that none of us had any room for activities, plus I didn't exactly have one of the better seats.

The trip was extraordinarily interesting. The land, having just emerged from the state of wilderness, is being catapulted into the most advanced cultivation. In the middle of a wasteland, threshing-machines and seed-drills; alongside the Indian ... promenading ladies in velvet and silk; next to the cultivated man who would not be out of place in the finest salons in Europe, cowboys who are used to operating with revolvers and who claim (and are accorded) the same respect.

On September 3 we left Minnetonka and crossed the wheat plains of Dakota where there is not a tree to be seen, only harvested fields, through towns that were between 25 days and 5 years old, and all of which pronounced themselves, in speeches of welcome, to have the most promising future in the world – whereupon each was assured, in reply, of being one of the most important already. After two more days we reached the mountains of Montana which, however, lag far behind the magnificence and serene beauty of the Swiss alps. We heard the same speeches here and uttered the same replies.

It was here that we got to see a strange spectacle: a ritual dance of the Crow Indians. A few thousand of them, including wives, children and ponies, had set up camp – upon invitation – on both sides of the railway tracks. The spectacle, various accounts of which you will be able to read in the *Kölnische* and *Nationalzeitung*, finally started to get tiresome because of its monotonous character, although one had to wonder if one would ever again get to see such a sight – if such a great number of these people would ever get together again. The interpreter for these Indians was a man from Hannover; he introduced me to a Social Democrat from Berlin who had to leave Berlin 1½ years ago because of some troubles with the police and who, in a

blend of Berlin dialect and his adopted American, finished his story somewhat nostalgically by saying: "Es ist schon ganz gut hier, man hat plenty of money, aber für ein Berliner ist es doch nicht." [It's quite nice here, one has plenty of money, but for a Berliner it's just not the right place.]

We then descended into the valley of the Snake River where we were rolling through endless forest country for many hours, every now and then catching sight of an Indian fishing. The valley of the Columbia River, which we subsequently entered, was as devoid of trees as the latter had been rich in them. In a town named Dalles I came across a woman from Schulzendorf near Berlin – a real Brandenburger – who let me know, upon my inquiry, that she wanted to go back to the Mississippi whence she had come from. "Here there is nothing at all but heaven and rocks", she said. The area is being rendered fertile by irrigation (there had been no rain for four months), resulting in a multiplication of the yield.

Yesterday we arrived in Portland, at last, where we were treated to another reception and procession like the one in St. Paul and Minneapolis with which you are already familiar. At night a concert by a congregation of amateurs who performed Haydn, the Wacht am Rhein, etc., in a big, beautiful hall (built in wood, of course), and finally a hotel bed in which again, like in New York, I could not sleep because it was too quiet. I hope I will do better tonight.

Tomorrow we'll go north: Vancouver Island and British Columbia, from where we are due to return in four days from today. The weather has been excessively warm until now. I had expected cold temperatures but all we suffered from was heat and dust, and even here it is still like late July in Berlin.

After my return to this place I am planning to detach myself, with some others, from the main party and go to San Francisco, provided I can find a place on one of the overcrowded steamers. I have a preliminary reservation for September 19. The traffic with California is very busy from here, although it is a three days' trip. ...

I am in excellent health. I have survived the not inconsiderable eating marathons well, though I do miss the somewhat leaner fare served up in the Tiergartenstrasse in Berlin.

I received your first letter from Bosenheim here today and felt great joy over hearing from you. Before getting to New York, that is in three weeks from now, I will hardly hear from you again, and I only wish that all is well on your side and will stay that way. For a married man a journey of this magnitude doesn't seem to be a very reasonable thing to do, and if I didn't assume you in good hands, in the company of your parents, I might alarm myself into a pretty bad depression. I hope this will all go well and end well.

San Francisco, September 18, 1883

We have separated from the main party and will be returning home via San Francisco. Before that, however, we will take a trip to the "Big Trees" – a laborious 6-day mail journey. In the prevailing heat and dust (no rain has fallen for four months) this will not be comfortable at all but they say it is well worth the extra effort. After that, New York (directly) and back home. Since we are only passing through here I don't have much time for writing.

Weather marvellous. Health excellent.

San Francisco, September 26, 1883

It has been a long time since I wrote to you. The trip to the Yosemite Valley and to the big trees was so strenuous that I couldn't have written to you even if a mail access would have been available.

We left for San Francisco on September 15, 12 o'clock midnight and arrived after a journey of 60 hours, on the 17<sup>th</sup>. On September 18 we were busy preparing for the next leg of the trip (which is a rather tedious thing to do here), and on September 19 we boarded a train that took us to Madera in 8 hours. We spent the night there, sleeping on the train, and started out at 6 o'clock the next morning for a 14-hour mail journey. Through heat and terrible lime dust we initially moved through a plane, aside a dried-out riverbed. In the afternoon we entered the foothills of the Sierra Nevada and reached a mining location called "Clark's Hotel" where we spent the night. On September 21, on through the Sierra Nevada proper (which is still rich in forests there), until we reached a valley enclosed by high granite rock formations, the famous Yosemite Valley which the Americans call the Indians' Paradise. What makes this valley so attractive, apart from the imposing scenery of rocks, rarely equalled in Europe, is its splendid richness in water and its matchless flower carpetry. However, we got to see neither of the latter, as it has not been raining since March (!). Still I believe that the Americans are telling the truth in this case and that the valley must be very beautiful in the springtime. We did not get to see much, as everything was terribly dry. The waterfalls and flowers had disappeared, the trees were dried out, the forest was on fire here and there, and the dust was awful. We stayed at Yosemite on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, began our return journey on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and arrived here yesterday, September 25, by noon time, only to stumble into a portion of our old travelling party.

This day, September 26, I spent here in San Francisco visiting all the banks to see whether it is possible to set up any business between Berlin and San Francisco, but the commercial links are not of sufficient value to warrant any ventures.

After having refreshed ourselves here in the splendid Palace Hotel (which is six storeys high and has approximately 1.200 beds that are always fully occupied), we are planning to go further south tomorrow, taking the eastbound route via Los Angeles, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Kansas City and St. Louis on the Mississippi. As this route will take us far to the south, it is going to get very hot. But I want to have a look at wine production. They have come an astonishingly long way in California. The Riesling is as good as our German stuff, only slightly heavier. The artificial champagne (everybody is drinking champagne here) is as good as ours, and I really tend to believe those that contend that, in 10 years from now, California will dictate the world's wine prices.

At the same time I will see the southern desert, the habitats of the Aztecs, and will then have seen both the non-cultivated areas of the North and those of the South. Assuming that I will also see the civilised East on the return journey, I think I will then have the necessary basis for a sound judgement, acknowledging 1) what the Americans have achieved already and 2) assessing the resources and cultural conditions available to them in the future. The trip is not going to be all that easy for me, since I feel a strong urge to get back home. But I had to acknowledge for myself that a different travel plan, providing an earlier return date, would not serve my purposes well. Whether the ideas I have gathered in this way will be of any use to me is not of course something I can estimate. The one additional week of separation will surely be bearable for both of us, if one gains the conviction that reasonably solid knowledge cannot be gathered in any other way.

Not a lot is to be reported from San Francisco. After all, there is in America not nearly so much of interest to be found as there is in good old Europe, which, of course, can look back over 800 years of cultural activity. The most interesting insights

come from comparison, in that it is not so much the artifacts themselves that command admiration, as the fact that all these things have come into being in so short a time. We will have to discuss all these questions at length during our long winter nights.

My travel schedule has been finalized to a point where I can assume as certain that I will be in New York on October 10. From there I will depart by steamer, either on October 17 or 24, for Germany. The choice between the two dates will depend on whether a certain business deal I have in mind can be accomplished or not. I hope it is going to be possible for me, through a fortunate combination of disparate interests, to conclude a deal with the Northern Pacific Railroad. ...

I am still in excellent health. The hotels here are first class; even in the desert one can enjoy the most comfortable service in the world, although at a high price, and my only regret is that it has not been possible for you to come and experience all this with me. Mark Twain's account (Silverland Nevada) does not at all exaggerate conditions here. Once you leave the cities and make the tour of the mining villages by mail coach you feel like waking up in another country and another age.

When you visit an inn in the mountains and see the landlord as well as all the waiters armed with revolvers, it gives a very curious impression. However, so far as visitors like ourselves are concerned, people are extremely attentive. All Americans without exception are tickled to see people making a study of their country and passing a few compliments on it. Everybody is the visitor's best friend, and one is accorded the utmost favours from all sides. Indeed, Germans are treated much better than British, as we found on numerous occasions.

Manitou Springs, Colorado, October 5, 1883

I am sitting here in Colorado, not far from Denver, while the rest of my party is taking the tour of the towns in the Rocky Mountains in search of business opportunities. I, for once, have my head so full of visual impressions that I preferred to take a day of rest in this resort 6.400 feet above sea level (a bit higher than Pontresina), instead of roaming about.

From San Francisco we went to Southern California, to the city of Los Angeles which the Americans like to call their paradise. And it might well be a paradise if only it would rain once in a while. But a rich southern cultivation, akin to that in and around Naples, can only be maintained here by artificial irrigation. ...

We stayed there for two full days, mainly because the trains connecting from Mohave to Needles run on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays only. Riding on an Atlantic Pacific train we traversed the desert for one and a half days, visiting the canyon of the Colorado along the way. This purported American natural wonder failed to make any huge impression on us, other than through the fact that the trip up there (a six hour coach respectively horseback ride on the most atrocious mountain trails) was awkward beyond imagination. We came back late at night, travelling in poorly built mule-drawn coaches, covering 4½ hours in daylight and 5½ hours in the dark of the night. We were all thoroughly shattered. I slightly sprained my foot during the ordeal which caused me to stay behind in our train car the next day in New Mexico while the others went to see the so-called Spanish and Aztec relics. I bought a few trifles from local Indians who partly live in permanent settlements here and are said to be descendents of Montezuma.

For the saying goes that Montezuma's birthplace was in this area. The "relics", of course, turned out to be utterly shabby stuff. The local pottery industry has a poor

standard and is remarkable only for the miserably trivial nature of its artefacts. As if in retribution, items that would cost 20 pfennigs in Germany are sold for 2-5 dollars here. I bought a nice blanket which I will bring. The journey across the high planes of Arizona and New Mexico was interesting, though. The desert with its naturally growing cactuses and aloes makes a wonderful sight.

Finally, on October 10, we re-entered civilisation in Las Vegas where we visited a sulphur spa and enjoyed several truly Parisian dinners in an excellent hotel 5.500 feet above sea level. In the evening of October 4 we went from Las Vegas to Pueblo, and I proceeded to Colorado Springs and Manitou Springs, where I took my residence right next to the "Garden of the Gods", a protected ensemble of rugged limestone peaks, in a neat iron spa where the others will pick me up tomorrow morning (October 6) at 7, and will then pay a hasty visit to the sights that I have enjoyed today, at ease.

The mountains here are no match for the alpine scenery in Europe, although they rise to the same altitudes. Pikes Peak is about 14.000 feet (= 4.270 meters) high but is showing only traces of snow. What these mountains are lacking is forest growth, diversity and the sublime shape. The high peaks rise from the plane without any preliminary hills and valleys; their colors are brownish-reddish (not unlike those of the Appennino range in Italy which actually don't turn into blue until just before dusk). All of this makes for a dull impression. I must admit that America's natural scenery has been a disappointment for me throughout. Their man-made accomplishments, on the other hand, are awe-inspiring, considering that all this has been created within a very short period of time (a consideration that must be consciously applied). But their natural heritage is poor. What is admirable here is not the countryside, not the city, but the human factor, the American who constitutes, all his shortcomings notwithstanding, a most wonderful specimen of the human race from whom the Old World will have a lot to learn in the future.

Until this day I have received but one letter from you, your first one (the one you wrote from Bosenheim). Other than that I haven't heard from you, with the exception of your father's telegram. There are moments now and then when this is getting a little scary. In four weeks, however, I will be home.

New York, October 13, 1883

I arrived here the day before yesterday, terminating a very interesting but also rather strenuous journey through California, along the Atlantic Pacific Railroad, through Colorado, Kansas, St. Louis, Pittsburgh.

In Colorado I sprained my foot a bit and had to take it easy for a while. For that reason I stayed on the fast train for four days and three nights, travelling from Pueblo (Colorado) directly to New York, while the other gentlemen, who made stop-overs at several places along the way, will turn up in due time. The journey was a very comfortable one. Since American trains are rolling at much slower speeds than their European counterparts – in the West at merely 4 German miles an hour – there is considerably less vibration and concussion, so that (not unlike in Russia) one can stay in a train car forever without experiencing any inconvenience.

Here, the weather is now turning autumnal. Yesterday I experienced my first decent rain shower since August 15 and had to buy a new umbrella, having lost my old one on the journey. Nevertheless, I have rarely felt a greater joy than over this rainfall and the damp air associated with it. After having dried out almost into a mummy in this arid climate, an urge for rain had developed, and when it came it really and truly made me feel like being home.

In New York, I finally found your letters – except for the one I had received in Portland – dating from August 24 through September 15! Nothing after that. I assume that you stopped writing when you heard from San Francisco that I had detached myself from the main body of the Villard party.

I am keenly involved in business dealings here, but since the preconditions are extremely unfavourable I am not very optimistic. I have therefore not seen much of the other members of the expedition.

On October 17, I will embark for Europe, richly armed with photographs, etc. This means that I will be in Bremen on October 28 and will presumably arrive in Berlin on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, provided the steamship – the "Werra", known to be one of the best in the service of the Norddeutsche Lloyd – makes good speed, which I assume she will.«