

Sent Ahead: Carrying a Family's Hope

Oscar Sovereign Bocker 1851-1937

Written by Katie Bocker Madsen February 2026

Oscar Sovereign Bocker and his sister Caroline stood on the deck of the steamer *Aurora* in the spring of 1863, watching the shoreline recede as the ship pulled away. Their mother, Petronella Wilhelmina Eriksson Bocker, stood on the docks below, waving — a familiar figure growing smaller with every passing moment. Oscar leaned his head against Caroline's shoulder, trying not to cry. Caroline put her arm around him, wiping her own tears with her free hand.

Oscar was about twelve. Caroline was eighteen. They had only each other as the ship carried them away from Sweden's familiar shores toward Copenhagen, the first leg of a journey that would stretch across oceans, continents, rivers, and plains. The decision to leave was not sudden or careless. It grew out of years of change within their family — change shaped by faith, poverty, loss, and hope.¹

Oscar had been born in Helsingborg, Sweden, a port town that was growing rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century. Working families crowded into small dwellings near the harbor. Wages were uncertain. Life revolved around shipping, trade, and agriculture in the surrounding countryside. Oscar was one of a large family — three brothers and six sisters — though three siblings had already died, a reminder that childhood and parenthood were both fragile in that era.²

The most profound change in the family came in 1853, when Petronella joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In Sweden, Lutheranism was the state church. Although laws of religious tolerance began to expand by 1860, dissent still carried real consequences. Converts risked social pressure, surveillance, fines, and legal harassment. Church meetings and baptisms were often held in secret. According to surviving records, Petronella was confirmed at a conference held in a barn in Lund, Sweden. Baptisms were performed in a tanner's vat — chosen not for symbolism, but for privacy.³

Petronella's conversion did not occur in isolation. She was married to Johan Erik Bocker, the father of her children. While the records are largely silent on his personal views, they show that the family did not emigrate together. When the decision was made to send children forward, it was Petronella who bore the responsibility of choosing who would go—and who would remain behind.

Church teachings pointed converts toward Zion in the Rocky Mountains, where Saints believed they could practice their faith freely and build a new society. For families like the Bockers, emigration promised both religious freedom and economic possibility.

But it also required hard choices.

Petronella knew the family could not afford to travel together. Emigration costs were high, and assistance through the church's Perpetual Emigration Fund came in the form of loans, not gifts. After counsel with church leaders, she chose to send two of her children ahead — Caroline, old enough to work, and Oscar, young enough to follow and be protected by his sister. The hope was practical as well as spiritual: if they could repay their loans in America, it might open the door for others to follow.

So, Petronella decided to stay with her husband and the younger children hoping for future opportunities to emigrate.

From Helsingborg, Oscar and Caroline traveled to Copenhagen, then on to Hamburg, Germany. There they boarded another vessel that carried them across the North Sea to Grimsby, England. These intermediate stops were part of a carefully organized migration system. Converts from across Scandinavia were gathered, transferred, housed temporarily, and routed toward Liverpool, one of the major ports for transatlantic voyages.⁴

In Grimsby, immigrants slept in freight houses or large immigrant buildings. Baggage was shifted from ship to ship. They waited — often tired, often anxious — but surrounded by others who shared their faith and purpose. From there, they traveled by rail to Liverpool, where hundreds of Scandinavian and British Saints assembled to board the sailing ship John J. Boyd.⁵

On April 30, 1863, the John J. Boyd was towed into the River Mersey. Nearly 700 Latter-day Saints were on board, representing many nations and languages. The ship anchored overnight. On May 1, it lifted anchor and began its Atlantic crossing.⁶

Life aboard followed strict routines. Passengers were crowded below deck, privacy was scarce, and cleanliness was difficult but enforced. Food was rationed carefully — rice, peas, pork, beef, potatoes, oatmeal, tea, vinegar, and hard sea biscuits. Each item was measured. Each meal mattered.

Days were filled with sewing tents and wagon covers, studying English, attending devotionals, and listening to lectures from returning missionaries who described life in Utah. Hymns were sung in many accents. Prayers were offered in many languages. Oscar and Caroline were not alone — but they were far from home, surrounded by unfamiliar sounds and customs.⁷

The crossing lasted about twenty-nine days. At times, wonder broke through the monotony: “eight mighty icebergs swaying in majestic grandeur upon the shining billows,” whales surfacing near the ship, fountains of water rising into the air. But danger was never far away. At least one passenger died during the voyage and was buried at sea — a reminder that even survival was not guaranteed.⁸

The ship arrived in New York Harbor on June 1, 1863, and passengers were processed at Castle Garden. Their journey, however, was far from complete.

From New York, Oscar and Caroline traveled by rail to Albany and onward through a patchwork of rail lines, sometimes passing through Canada, sometimes crossing rivers by ferry. They made their way toward St. Joseph, Missouri, a key staging point along the Missouri River.⁹

This portion of the journey unfolded during the final phase of the American Civil War. Journals from fellow immigrants describe burned rail cars, soldiers along the tracks, damaged bridges, and deliberate sabotage. In some places, logs were placed on tracks to derail trains. Immigrants were sometimes forced into cattle cars lined with straw. For young travelers far from home, the journey could be frightening and unpredictable.¹⁰

From St. Joseph, Oscar and Caroline boarded a river steamboat bound for Florence, Nebraska — also known as Winter Quarters. This was the outfitting point for wagon companies heading west. Upon arrival, many immigrants slept outdoors, waiting for ox teams to arrive from Utah.¹¹

Florence was crowded and chaotic. Hundreds waited — sometimes for weeks — as wagons were assigned and companies organized. Supplies were gathered. Leadership coordinated departures. For Oscar and Caroline, this meant more waiting, more uncertainty, and more nights under the open sky.¹²

When their company finally departed, they joined an ox-team wagon train bound for the Salt Lake Valley. The weeks on the trail were filled with walking, tending animals, repairing wagons, cooking over open fires, and enduring heat, storms, and exhaustion.¹³

In late summer 1863 — nearly five months after leaving Sweden — Oscar and Caroline arrived in Salt Lake City. Journal accounts describe relief mixed with surprise. The city did not always resemble the promised vision they had heard described. Many immigrants arrived with no money and no property. What they possessed was endurance — and survival.¹⁴

Their passage had been financed in part by the Perpetual Emigration Fund. The assistance came as a loan. Records show that Oscar and Caroline each owed approximately \$85.40. That debt shaped their next steps.¹⁵

To repay what they owed, they were sent to Panaca, in what is now Nevada — a Mormon settlement connected to nearby mining districts such as Pioche. There, they worked where labor was needed: farming, hauling, cutting timber, and supporting mining operations. The work was hard and often dangerous. Days were long. Conditions were unforgiving.¹⁶

Yet their labor carried meaning beyond survival. By repaying their loans, Oscar and Caroline helped make it possible for others to emigrate. Their journey became a bridge — not an ending.

Epilogue: The Family Beyond the Journey

Oscar and Caroline's journey did not end in Salt Lake City or Panaca. It extended into marriages, families, and communities built in a new land. Their survival made reunion possible. Their labor helped others to follow.

In the years that followed their 1863 departure, other members of the family made the same journey, drawn by faith, necessity, and the hope of reunion.

Their brother Carl W. Bocker arrived in Salt Lake City in September 1864, becoming the next to follow the path Oscar and Caroline had opened. Matilda Bocker emigrated two years later, arriving on September 29, 1866. Joseph J. Bocker followed in August 1869, reaching the Salt Lake Valley on August 25 of that year.

Nearly a decade after waving goodbye to Oscar and Caroline on the docks at Helsingborg, their mother, Petronella, finally made the journey herself. She sailed for America on September 4, 1872, traveling with her youngest daughter, Josephine E. Bocker, age nine. What had begun as a painful separation in 1863 slowly became a long, staggered reunion—one arrival at a time.

One family member never crossed the ocean. Johan Erik Bocker, the father of the family, remained in Sweden. For reasons the records do not explain, he did not emigrate. He died there in 1874, while his wife and children were establishing new lives an ocean away. His death closed the family's chapter in Sweden even as the rest of their story continued to unfold in America.

What remains unseen in the records are the years between these departures—the waiting, the uncertainty, and the hope sustained across oceans by letters and faith. What is clear is that Petronella's decision to send Oscar and Caroline ahead reshaped the future of her family. Their endurance made later journeys possible. Their labor helped open the way.

The records preserve dates, ships, and arrivals. More quietly, they preserve a family moving forward in stages—separated by necessity, reunited by persistence, and bound together by courage that stretched across decades and continents.

Endnotes

1. Oscar S. Bocker Life Map and Timeline, "Emigration & Religious Life," 1863 departure and arrival entries; private family research file.
2. "Daily Life in Helsingborg between 1850 and 1863," Oscar S Bocker-Historical Context.txt; compiled historical context notes.
3. Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions, notes on Petronella Wilhelmina Eriksson's baptism and confirmation in Lund, Sweden, including barn conference and tanner's vat baptisms; private family transcription file.

4. Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions, Scandinavian migration route via Copenhagen, Hamburg, Grimsby, and Liverpool.
5. Ibid., ship John J. Boyd, Liverpool.
6. Ibid., April 30, 1863, Liverpool departure and Atlantic crossing.
7. Ibid., descriptions of activities aboard ship, including sewing tents, studying English, religious meetings.
8. Ibid., iceberg and whale sighting account and deaths at sea.
9. Journals of John Lingren, John R. Reddington, and others, as transcribed in Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions.
10. Journals of Mary C. Jacobs Soffe and Henry Peter Jacob, Civil War rail travel conditions, sabotage attempts, cattle cars; Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions.
11. Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions, river travel to Florence (Winter Quarters), Nebraska.
12. Ibid., waiting period at Florence and outfitting for plains companies.
13. Ibid., ox-team company departures and arrival dates in Salt Lake City.
14. John Lingren and John R. Reddington journal excerpts, reactions to Salt Lake City; Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions.
15. Oscar Sovereign Bocker Transcriptions, Perpetual Emigration Fund loan amounts for Oscar S. Bocker and Caroline C. Bocker.
16. Oscar S Bocker-Historical Context.txt, Panaca, Nevada, mining and support labor context; Panaca–Pioche district labor conditions.

About the Author

I'm Katie Bocker Madsen, the designated family historian since I was sixteen. I now live in Lehi, Utah, which is about 30 miles from where my great grandfather's family arrived in Utah after immigrating to America from Sweden in the 1860s. I'm writing this story to illustrate what that journey was like for them and why they came.

Sources

FamilySearch.org; Ancestry.org; History of the Scandinavian Mission by Andrew Jenson; LDS Church records; Perpetual Emigration Fund; "Utah, Mormon Pioneer Overland Travel Database, 1847-1868"