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Letter to Mary Sibley from Origen Sibley, February 24, 1841

Origen Sibley
Blakely, Alabama

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Blakely Ala. 24th Feby. 1841

Dear madam,

I received yours of the 25th ult. a few days since, & with pleasure embrace my earliest leisure to reply. You will please excuse my taking for that purpose a sheet of ___ paper, as the requests you have made seem to demand a short treatise, & I have no doubt I shall fill it before I close. Nevertheless I am truly glad that you wrote me before engaging in the silk culture, because, although its culture on a small scale will afford you much gratification, I am free to say that I believe now it will yield but little profit, unless a ___ be established in your neighborhood, to which you can dispose of your cocoons as soon as they are gathered. Mine are yet nearly all on hand, & so are my Brother Cyrus' as they are too bulky & too liable to injury by ___ & otherwise, to justify their shipment to Philadelphia or elsewhere in their present state. The process of reeling appears to be tedious, & almost discouraging to a ___' so much so that the young man who ___ my cocoons on shares although intelligent & energetic, soon gave it up as an unprofitable job. The difficulty was not that the filaments broke or were not easily wound off after the cocoons had been a few moments immersed in hot water at a temperature of 98 to 106, but in the ___, & expert manipulation requisite to maintain the thread of an equal size throughout, & ready to attach the ends of those filaments that broke, as well as of new cocoons; for it appears that the size of the filament decreases as you wind, being ever as you approach the interior which is last spun: consequently in reeling a thread composed of say 10 filaments or cocoons, by the time they are half reeled the decrease in the size of the individual filaments will have reduced in a compounding degree the main thread; so that two or three new cocoons must be added, to maintain the thread at the size at which it was commenced; & so on through the whole process. Of course practice & close observation will enable any to overcome this difficulty in time, but the object to be obtained in a pecuniary point of view was so ___ that my young man abandoned it; & as my own time is wholly taken up otherwise; I, from receipts, made no further progress. I wrote north for a competent seeder, but could not get one to operate on shares, nor one any better terms than 100 dollars per month, a salary too disproportioned to the ___ benefits, that I gave it up. I am no less confident however than formerly this silk is destined to become an important staple of the Southern States, provided the practicality of feeding succession crops can be determined. My feeding last summer was limited to two crops; the latter produced from the eggs of the farm. Both crops were very healthy. In the Northern and Middle states a succession of crops was attempted from eggs deposited in ___ houses the years previous. Contrary to the ___ & settled theory, I perceived (limited) practice, the second crops were complete failures. This result has thrown the silk world into considerable commotion; & speculation has been rife as to the cause of this fatality; until at last general consent it begins to be doubted that eggs can not be delayed or retarded, in this hatching much beyond their natural period of 12 months, and produce a healthy crop of worms. This has to be tested & further experienced; & as the present hard times have a wonderful effect in the extinguishing of ___, I have determined to let others test it, particularly as my present business is more lucrative than the silk culture can be rendered under any, the most favorable & prospered circumstances. I send you the greater part of the eggs which I recd. From the north, & as they are on a newspaper I have enclosed it in an envelope like an ordinary mailed one. I hope that they may yield you pleasures, but are certain they cannot profit, without the facility of selling your cocoons near home & unseeled. They have never been in an ice house, nor can I tell when they will hatch. The person who sent them to me, (& who to ___ sent me a large quantity but for the fatality attending the last feeding) says "They have lain rolled up ever since July, & are of the large sic weeps ___ varying". They may hatch earlier than 12 weeks from

June or July; Possibly by April or May. They require to be placed in a room where the temperature may be kept at almost 70 & if it can be increased one or two degrees daily, until they are all hatched the process will be facilitated. It is considered that all the eggs which are not hatched on the fourth had best be thrown away; but last year I placed mine in a room without troubling myself much about the temperature, (my first crop) which was without fire. For 65 to 72 [degrees] in the day, & 60 at night; they were about 8 days in hatching, & the last did as well as the first. I spread the sheets of paper on which the worms were on a large table, & every morning & night, & sometimes during the day, put on young and tender mulberry leaves to which they speedily attached themselves, when they were transferred to shelves prepared for them. There is little difficulty in feeding & rearing them, for particular in relation to which, as my ___ is nearly full, I must beg leave to refer you to some of the milk manuals of which the county is nearly full, & some of which have no doubt ___ with you ___. Care must be taken that the old leaves do not remain on the shelves until fermentation ensues. It ___ much trouble limbs, & the leaves are also preserved fresh & juicy for a longer time. They may be given to the worms as cut off during the last ages of the worms. The Piedmontese reel is that one recommended in the congressional document referred to by you. It is the one used in France & Italy, the dimensions of which are subject to legal regulations; & is considered by most the best. It must certainly be used by all who design their silk for export to Europe. Please write to me how you are pleased rearing the worms, you will feel greatly interested in their progress, & I am certain ___ regret the experiment, although immediate pecuniary benefit may not be the result. I am not without hopes that Cousin George may yet find leisure to write to me occasionally. And also Rufus, I should be glad to hear from him. Giving love to both, & my wife desires that hers may be transmitted to you all & I am with great respect, yr obt. Servt.

Origen Sibley