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Letter from George Sibley to Thomas McKenney, October 1, 1820

George Champlin Sibley
Fort Osage

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Thomas L. McKenney, Esq.

Geo. Sibley
Fort Osage
Oct. 1, 1820

Fort Osage, 1st October, 1820

Sir,

Your letter of the 9th August, was received three days ago. I hasten to reply to the queries therein contained.

The tribes of Indians who usually hold intercourse with this trading house, are

1st. The Kansas, residing about three hundred miles up the Kansas river, in one village. They hunt all through the extensive country watered by the Kansas River, and on the Missouri, south side, above this place to the Nodoway. I rate this tribe at somewhere about eight hundred souls, of whom about two hundred and thirty are warriors and hunters, thirty or forty superannuated old men, and the rest women and children.

2d. The Great Osages, of the Osage River. They live in one village on the Osage river, seventy-eight miles (measured) due south from Fort Osage. They hunt over a very great extent of country, comprising the Osage, Gasconade and Neeozho rivers and their numerous branches. They also hunt on the heads of the St. Francis and White Rivers, and on the Arkansaw. I rate them at about one thousand two hundred souls, three hundred and fifty of whom are warriors and hunters, fifty or sixty superannuated, and the rest are women and children.

3d. The Great Osages of the Neeozho, about one hundred and thirty or forty miles south west of Fort Osage; one village on the Neeozho River. They hunt pretty much, in common with the tribe of the Osage river, from which they separated six or eight years ago. This village contains about four hundred souls, of whom about an hundred are warriors and hunters, some ten or fifteen aged persons, and the rest are women and children.

4th. The Little Osages. Three villages on the Neeozho River, from one hundred and twenty to one hundred and forty miles south west of this place. This tribe, comprising all three villages, and comprehending about twenty families of Missouries that are intermarried with them, I rate at about one thousand souls, about three hundred of whom are hunters and warriors, twenty or thirty, superannuated, and the rest are women and children. They hunt pretty much in common with the other tribes of Osages mentioned, and frequently on the head waters of the Kansas, some of the braches of which interlock with those of the Neeozho.

5th. The loways. only visit this place occasionally. This tribe is about as numerous as the Kansas. They are latterly much divided, so that I am unable to state precisely how many villages they occupy, or where they are located. About half the tribe I understand joined the Ottoes, near the Council Bluffs, last year with the intention of remaining there. I am not sure whether they still remain there or not. The other part of the tribe remains in two villages, I believe, on the De Moines and Grand Rivers. The loways hunt principally between the Missouri, north of it, and Mississippi rivers, from the heads of the Chacatons, up to the Nodoway, and sometimes still farther up.

6th. Of the Chaneers, or Arkansaw tribes of Osages, I need say nothing, because they do not resort here to trade. I have always rated that tribe at about an equal half of all the Osages. They hunt chiefly in the Arkansaw and White Rivers, and their waters.

It must be understood, that the above is merely an estimate of numbers founded on the general knowledge I have of the several tribes mentioned, and without any pretensions to accuracy, though I do not believe I am far from the truth; if any thing, I am over the mark. As relates to the Osages; it is next to impossible to enumerate them correctly. I have made several attempts in vain. They are continually removing from one village to another, quarrelling and intermarrying, so that the strength of no particular village can ever be correctly ascertained. I do not believe that any of the tribes, named above, increase in number, take them in the aggregate, and I think they are rather diminishing. They are always at war, and not a year passes that they do not lose some in that way. Epidemic diseases attack them now and then, and sweep them off by families.

I proceed to answer your 4th query. The main dependence of each and every one of the tribes I have mentioned, for clothing and subsistence, is hunting. They would all class alike in respect of their pursuits; therefore, one general remark will suffice for all.

They raise annually small crops of corn, beans, and pumpkins, these they cultivate entirely with the hoe, in the simplest manner. Their crops are usually planted in April, and receive one dressing before they leave their villages for the summer hunt, in May. About the first week in August they return to their villages to gather their crops, which have been left unhoed and unfenced all the season.

Each family, if lucky, can save from ten to twenty bags of corn and beans, of a bushel and a half each; besides a quantity of dried pumpkins. On this they feast, with the dried meat saved in the summer, till September, when what remains is cached, and they set out on the fall hunt, from which they return about Christmas. From that time, till some time in February or March, as the season happens to be mild or severe, they stay pretty much in their villages, making only short hunting excursions occasionally, and during that time they consume the greater part of their cashes. In February or March the spring hunt commences; first the bear, and then the beaver hunt. This they pursue till planting time, when they again return to their village, pitch their crops, and in May set out for the summer hunt, taking with them their residue, if any, of their corn, &c. This is the circle of an Osage life, thus it has been, with very little variation, these twelve years past. The game is very sensibly diminishing in the country, which these tribes inhabit; but has not yet become scarce. Its gradual diminution seems to have had no other effect on the Indians than to make them more expert and industrious hunters, and better warriors. They also acquire more skill in traffic, become more and more prone to practice fraud and deception in their commerce; are more and more dependent upon the Traders, and consequently more and more debased and degraded.

I ought to have stated that these people derive a portion of their subsistence regularly from the wild fruits their country abounds with. Walnuts, hazlenuts, pacons, acorns, grapes, plums, papaws, parsimmons, hog potatoes, and several other very nutritious roots; all of these they gather and preserve with care, and possess the art of preparing many of them, so that they are really good eating. I have feasted daintily on the preparation of acorns (from the small white oak) and Buffalo grease. I had the advantage, however, of a good appetite, well whetted by nearly two days abstinence from food. The acorns and fat agreed with me, however, and convinced me that a man manyvery well subsist on it, if he can get nothing better. This dish is considered as the last resort, next to acorns alone. From these facts

you will not be surprised to learn, that the arts of civilization have made but little progress, as yet, among the Indian nations in this quarter, knowing as you do, the natural propensity of the Indian to live without toil, upon the bounties of wild nature, rather than to submit to what he considers the degradation of labor, in order to procure sustenance. So long as the facilities I have enumerated exist, so long will exist the propensity to rely chiefly on them. This is nature. Art assumes the reins when nature gives them up, and we cling to nature as long as we can. So long as her exuberant bosom affords us sustenance, there we tenderly repose, free and untrammelled. On the failure of that resource, we are obliged to resort to art for support. The whole history of man shews that art never gets the ascendancy of nature, without a desperate struggle, in which the object of contention is most piteously mangled, and often destroyed, and a compromise is always obliged to be effected; which compromise if I understand the subject, is the very thing we call civilization, in reference to the Indian nations; an object we are all aiming at, and what I feel as anxious as any one to effect.

I have often noticed Indians observing, with much apparent interest, the effects of our agricultural skill, our fine gardens, abundant crops, and our numerous comforts and conveniences. A very sensible Osage, the Big Soldier, who had twice been at Washington, once said to me, when I was urging the subject of civilization on him; "I see and admire your manner of living, your good warm houses; your extensive fields of corn, your gardens, your cows, oxen, work-houses, waggons, and a thousand machines, that I know not the use of. I see that you are able to clothe yourself, even from weeds and grass. In short you can do almost what you choose. You whites possess the power of subduing almost every animal to your use. You are surrounded by slaves. Every thing about you is in chains, and you are slaves yourselves. I fear if I should exchange my pursuits for yours, I too should become a slave. Talk to my sons, perhaps they may be persuaded to adopt your fashions, or at least to recommend them to their sons; but for myself, I was born free, was raised free, and wish to die free". It was in vain to combat the good man's opinions with argument. "I am perfectly content," he added, "with my condition. The forests and rivers supply all the calls of nature in plenty, and there is no lack of white people to purchase the surplus products of our industry." This is the language that is held by the Indians in this quarter generally. Like all people in a state of ignorance, they are bigoted, and obstinately adhere to their old customs and habits. 'Tis in vain to attempt to bend the aged oak to our purposes. The tender sapling, however, can be made to yield to our efforts, and bend to our will.

The Missionary establishment now forming near the Osages, I have no doubt will tend very much to promote the civilization of those tribes, so far at least, as regards the rising generation. Few, if any, of those now above the age of fifteen, will ever wholly abandon their present savage pursuits.

It is a singular fact, however, that although the Indians who have attained the age of twenty-five years and upwards, generally refuse instruction, yet they seem by no means averse to have their children taught our arts.

I will conclude this communication with the following proposition, which you may make use of as you think proper. It is for the Government, by compact with the Indians, to cause to be surveyed certain districts of the Indians lands, suitable for the purpose, in the same manner that the United States lands are surveyed; only I would recommend that the lines should be more distinctly marked. Whenever an Indian evinced a serious disposition to settle himself permanently and to pursue civilized habits, a portion of this land, from 160 to 640 acres, as might be proper, should be allotted to him, patented to him by the Government, and secured to him and family forever. He should not have the right to sell, or

alienate it, in any manner, except by the express permission of the President of the United States, nor should it be held liable for debts. I believe that by locating each Indian family, disposed to adopt our mode of living, on a tract of land, of their own distinctly marked out, and permanently secured to them, Government would greatly promote the scheme of civilization. You would thus give them, at once, a distinct and permanent property, an interest in the soil, instead of a vague, transient, undivided, property in a vast extend of country, from which the art of a few of his leaders may expel him forever at any time. Each individual may thus be secured in his own right. He may have a house, where he and his family, may live securely on the fruits of their own industry. Each may sit under his own vine and fig tree, and have none to make him afraid. At present each individual Indian is emphatically an outcase in his own territory. We are perpetually narrowing (sic) their limits by purchases. By degrees they resign to us their best lands, and find themselves at length hemmed up, like a herd of Buffaloes, in a remote corner of their once boundless possessions. Here they sit down in despair; they have no longer a home or a country. Yet here we pursue them, and importune them to become farmers, after their spirits are broken, and after they have unwillingly deprived themselves of the power of possessing what a farmer values most, an independent home.

I forbear any farther remarks on this subject for the present. A little reflection, will, I am sure, satisfy you that it is worthy of consideration.

Geo. Silby (sic)

Rev. Jedidish Morse Report on Indian Affairs
New Haven 1822 p. 203-8