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Letter from George Sibley to the National Intelligencer, April 16, 1822

George Champlin Sibley
Fort Osage

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Washington, April 16, 1822. Nat'l
Intelligencer, April 18, 1822

The Factory System
G. C. Sibley

Although this system has been of late so successfully assailed, and has become extremely unpopular here, and will no doubt be abolished, I am still inclined to think favorably of it, and cannot but regret that fate that seems now to await it, because I am fully convinced that in itself the system is a good one, and ought to be greatly extended- and because I believe it has been rather unfairly attacked and unjustly denounced.

My opinion in favor of this system is the result of sixteen years' intimate acquaintance with it, the far greater part of which time I have spent in almost constant intercourse with many different tribes and nations of Indians inhabiting the plains and forests of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. I have had the best of opportunities to obtain correct information on this or any other subject connected with Indian affairs, and have I believe, used them with some advantage. When I say, therefore, that the factory system is in itself a good one; that it has been useful to the government and to the Indians, and may very easily be made so again, I feel that I have a good warrant for the assertion. I am no advocate, however, for this system as it now exists, and has existed for several years past, because I know very well that it quite inefficient and useless, and the fact has not been concealed, or attempted to be concealed, as may be seen by official documents laid before Congress and the public. The causes of its recent inefficiency have been fully developed, and the means of restoring to the system its former vigor and usefulness, have been repeatedly suggested by those who understood the subject, who were paid out of the public purse to understand it, and who were bound by duty to make those suggestions, and entitled, by their experience and knowledge of the subject, to make them with confidence.

The factory system, as it has existed since the late war, may very aptly be compared to a fine ship on the ocean, destitute of every propelling power, and surrounded by petty assailants- barely able to defend herself, but utterly unfit for any useful purpose. One of two things must be done- either to withdraw this naked hulk or give to it the necessary power to be useful. If the owner should prefer to do the first, it would surely be no argument against the use of ships; nor would it be just to blame the commander or the crew for that which necessarily resulted from the improvidence of the owner. Thus it is, as I think, with this factory system. It is a benevolent and well-contrived scheme to protect the few scattered remnants of Indian nations that our prosperity has driven from this happy land, from the avarice and cupidity of such of our people as go among them for the purposes of traffic; to prevent quarrels, and robberies, and bloodshed, along our frontier settlements; and to secure, in some degree, the good will of the Indians to our government and people. That the system might effect all this, and still more, is demonstrable- but not in its resent naked and unprotected state. The arm and authority of the government, and the active aid and countenance of all the government agents employed in the Indian department, should be extended to it before the system could be useful. These aids have never been given very freely, and latterly they have been almost

totally withheld. Nay, in some instances, the neutral indifference of some of the public agents has had the effect of hostility towards the factories; and one branch of the system at least (the Osage factory) has had to contend against the active and determined hostility of the Indian agent and his numerous family and connections, (many of whom are concerned in trade with the Indians,) from the day of its establishment, in the fall of 1808, till the present time.

The good effects of the factory system result chiefly from the free and uninterrupted friendly intercourse, which it is so well calculated to promote between the Indians, (of every class, age, and condition) and the agents or factors, at their-respective stations. It is quite a mistaken opinion, that "the factor has no relation to the Indian whatever than that of a trader," as has been said by Mr. Biddle, the Indian agent at Green Bay. His office is not only to supply the wants of the Indian on liberal terms, but to do and say whatever may be proper and necessary to inspire him friendly sentiments towards our government and people. His connection with the Indians is of such a nature as to lead to an intimate knowledge of them as nations and tribes, and to a thorough acquaintance with them as individuals. His commercial intercourse with those people is of a character materially different from that of a common trader, inasmuch as he has no motive in that intercourse but to oblige and benefit the Indians. He is selected for his intelligence, integrity, and general good character- resides constantly at his station, winter and summer- is always accessible to the Indians, always ready to aid them, on proper occasions, with his friendly counsel, or otherwise. It is his duty to maintain a dignified and correct deportment, particularly before the Indians; to maintain a good understanding with the chiefs and principal men, and promote peace and harmony among them all; and he is required to make report to the government every three months (or oftener if necessary) of all his doings, of whatever nature, pertaining to his office.

Such are the qualifications and principal duties of the factors, as contemplated by the law which creates them. The Office is sufficiently lucrative to secure the services of proper persons; and there is no reason to suppose that the President has been less fortunate in his selections for this department than for any other. Whether he has or not is a matter of indifference to the present argument.

If the intercourse be uninterrupted between the Indians and the United States' factor, it is obvious that the latter must very quickly become well acquainted with the wants, dispositions, and character of the Indians; and we all know that a decent, liberal, and well-regulated commercial relationship between nations, communities, or individuals, savage or civilized, produces mutual confidence, and respect, and peace, and good will, and that and intercourse of a contrary character must produce contrary effects.

It cannot be defined that the intercourse of our traders with the Indians is very irregular, often extremely illiberal, and far from being decent; and it is next to impossible that it should be otherwise, conducted as it now is and always has been. These traders go among the Indians to make money; and the Indians know it. They submit to many hardships and privations, and run many hazards. Their expenses are also very great. So that nothing like liberality can reasonably be expected from them. I have known them, however, to make very considerable presents to chiefs and leading warriors; not from any generous motive, but to secure the influence of the said chiefs and warriors to compel the hunters and commonalty to pay the enormous prices they fixed on their goods. When a nation or tribe is favored with the presence of more than one trader, the competition

between them necessarily reduces the prices of their goods somewhat, sometimes even below what they can afford them for.

The disorder consequent upon such a competition is excessive. Each trader has his faction among the Indians; each faction is excited to the same degree of hostility, one against the others that prevails among the traders; quarrels, jealousies, heart-burnings, and not unfrequently riots, ensue- the effects of which gradually wear off among the commonalty after the causes are removed, leaving no very favorable impression on their minds towards white men, who (as I have often heard them say) always cheat them out of their furs, or rob them of the peace of their villages.

Such things cannot happen near a factory, unless the Indians happen to have that recourse cut off from them by some artful contrivance of the traders; a circumstance very common of late. The fact is, the traders have got the "upper-hand" completely of the government already in the Indian department. Under the present laws there is no sufficient authority to control them. The agents employed to attend to these things are powerless and useless; a pack-horse trader has more influence over the Indians than any one of them- - nay, more than the President could have individually.

Some of the Missouri traders told me, in January last, that they should be compelled to withdraw from the trade, in consequence of the outrageous abuses and disorders that are practiced among the greater part of the traders in the Indian country; that drunkenness and debauchery prevailed in such a degree as to render it absolutely unsafe for nay prudent man to embark in the trade. I am well assured by respectable men who are engaged in this trace, (for I have the pleasure to know several of that description,) that it is not for the interest of the fur trade that such unrestrained freedom as now exists in it, should be longer allowed. Those who are disposed to carry on this trade in a decent and proper manner, would be glad to have fixed trading depots established by law. Those who are not so disposed, (by far the greater number) are very well satisfied as matters now stand. The licentiousness and ungovernable avarice that have been just noticed, have produced a very injurious change in the conduct of some of the Indians, particularly the Osages; between whom and some of our frontier settlements there is cause to apprehend a serious difficulty. From these facts it may very fairly be inferred, that the trade with the Indians ought, by all means, to be better regulated than it is; that no time is to be lost in providing for this object; and that the government ought never, for a moment, to suffer the control of Indian affairs to pass out of their hands.

After this digression, I will again return to the factory system, merely to answer some objections that have been urged against it, and to suggest the means that might have been very easily applied, to make it (after all the obloquy that has been cast upon it) extremely useful to the government, and of great advantage to the Indians. The most of the objections contained in Mr. Benton's speech, and in the printed documents, do not fairly apply to the system itself; they are pointed mere directly against the conduct of the agents who have had the charge of it. Against them there are, to be sure, numerous and heavy charges, not one of which, however, but can be fully answered and explained to the satisfaction, I venture to say, of even Mr. Benton.

I cannot omit to notice one objection that has been urged with great force - - that the factories are not supplied with proper goods, and that they have failed in consequence. It is freely admitted that our supplies of blankets are inferior in quality to those furnished for the Indian trade by the way of Canada, & it is altogether likely, I

think, that ours cost the most, to, as they are imported into the united States direct, and pay duties, which does not happen to be the case, I am told, with the aforesaid Canada blankets. Be this as it may, the Canada blankets are certainly the finest, the handsomest, and the best: but after all, there is not that vast difference that is represented. Our blankets are, to say truth, good, and good enough, and the Indians were never complain of them (indeed I have seldom heard them complain) was it not that the traders are eternally drawing insulting comparisons between American and British blankets, so that the same prejudice prevails among some of the Indians, that once prevailed among some of our own good people- that nothing can be good that does not come from England. As respects other articles, we have them quite as good at the United States' factories, and in may essential particulars better, than the Canada or other traders furnish.

It is, in my mind, a degrading idea, that our Indian neighbors cannot have their wants supplied except through the medium of British merchants and British traders; that because those whimsical sons of the forest have taken it into their heads to choose light blue borders to their blankets in preference to dark blue- to prefer red guns to brown ones- long ear-bobs to short ones- that we should give up the matter in despair. If it is absolutely necessary to gratify all those whims, and many others that are natural to their savage state, (but which, by the bye, some people think need not be gratified.) perhaps our own manufactures, if properly instructed and encouraged, might help us out of this difficulty. They have already put to rest, everywhere, the prejudices that once existed among our beaux in respect to English cloths, &c. and it is certainly among the possibilities that they sufficient skill and ingenuity to please our beaux of the forest in the important article of blankets.

Were I to enter into a minute examination of all the charges that have been (so unnecessarily) made against the Superintendent and Factors, the result would show most unequivocally that those charges are groundless, and that those who have urged them with such zeal, have been deceived and misled. It is not pretended that the agents of the factory system are faultless, or that they have had the good fortune to avoid errors in the discharge of their duties; from these they can claim no exemption. Their duties have been arduous and extremely unpleasant, the more so, because they have been performed successfully. They have had to contend with the brutal, the ferocious, and jealous, propensities of the savages on the one hand, and to guard against the insidious cunning of unprincipled white men on the other. If some of them, in their zeal to be useful, have endeavored to conquer the difficulties that surrounded them, the cry was raised that they were stepping beyond their official spheres. If they remained quiet and inactive, they were at once charged with neglect of duty. Their duties, however, are pointed out to them by the law, and are particularly defined in the instructions given them by order of the president. Every step they take is reported to the proper office here. They can have no possible interest in entering into unfair competition with private traders. They cannot profit themselves by it, for they are prohibited by law, by oaths and bonds, from engaging in any trade except on public account.

If they consult their own ease, without any regard to the object of the system, which, as the law expresses it, is "to carry on a liberal trade with the Indians," they might remain idle-for, whether they are idle or active, they compensation must be just the same.

There is certainly no color of evidence against the integrity of any one of these agents. Some illiberal surmises have been set forth, vaguely, against the factors, by some

of the witnesses, as they are called, who were examined on the subject; but I am authorized, by the public declarations of several honorable members of the Senate, to say, that none of those witnesses proved anything against the superintendent or factors, and I believe I may safely add, that their testimony had very little, if any, influence in the decision of the Senate to abolish the factory system. The agents of that system had already reported it to be useless, and recommended its being either abolished or new modeled. Thus much I have thought it incumbent on me to say of the charges alleged against the factors. Those who have made those charges, or insinuated them, are public officers: if they know of any dishonest or illegal act of any of the factors, there is a mode pointed out, by law, by which to bring them to punishment, and I for one, am of opinion that it is their duty, as public officers, to proceed against them. These men have, some of them, spent half their lives in the wilderness among the savages; they have had no opportunities of enriching themselves (unless their savings out of a salary of 1300 dollars a year can enrich them,) and there is no reason whatever to believe that they are rich. The truth is, the most of them will go out of office with very little else than their good name. Which [?] is peculiarly hard, and, I think unfair, to deny them the benefit of, in these pinching hard times.

For myself, I have spent (I may say wasted) the best years of my life in the wilderness among the Indians. Whether I have rendered any service to the government or to the Indians, or not, is not for me to say. I am very conscious, however, that I have endeavored to do so. At any rate, I have no been a public charge though I have been a public agent; for it is a fact, that I have not cost the government one farthing during my whole service of sixteen years.

That I am free to offer my services again to the government cannot be denied- but as I never have, so I never will, beg for any public office, or advocate any public measure, (believing it to be wrong) because of its tendency directly or indirectly to provide, or continue an office that I might possibly be honored with. I have thought fit to make this remark (and those who know me will, I am very sure, do me to the justice to believe that I make it in candor) to repel an insinuation that has gone forth, that some of the agents of the factory system, are using great exertions to sustain it, from the unworthy motive of keeping themselves a little longer in office.

I consider the factory system as defunct. Having said that the Congress might very easily have made it useful, and to answer the purpose it was originally intended for, I will now state the manner in which I believe it could have been done: It is this- prohibit all persons from trading with the Indians, except such as are specially and regularly licensed; compel all the licensed traders to fix their stores at convenient stations, and prohibit them from sending [?] pedlars among the Indians; make it one condition of each trader's bond that he shall use no improper means to prevent Indians from visiting the United States' trading houses, nor speak or insinuate any thing to the Indians disrespectful of those establishments, or suffer nay of their people to do so. Make it the duty of the Indian agents and sub-agents to promote, by all proper means in their power, a free and uninterrupted intercourse between the Indians and the factories. Enjoy it on the factors and Indian agents to co-operate with each other in their official duties. Authorize the Indian agents to order any trader forthwith out of the Indian country who shall violate any of the conditions of his bond.

I feel very confident that, with the support of the above regulations, (which I merely set down in substance,) the factory system might have been rendered extremely useful, whether on a large or small scale. It would give tone and harmony to our Indian relations, promote the real interest of the traders, and strengthen very much the power and influence of the public agents among the Indians.

G. C. Sibley.

Washington, April 16, 1822.

* The agent above alluded to (Mr. P. Chouteau) has been removed. His son, however, still acts as a sub-agent, and is extremely zealous and active in his hostility to the U. S. factory, and is also concerned personally in carrying on trade with the Osages.