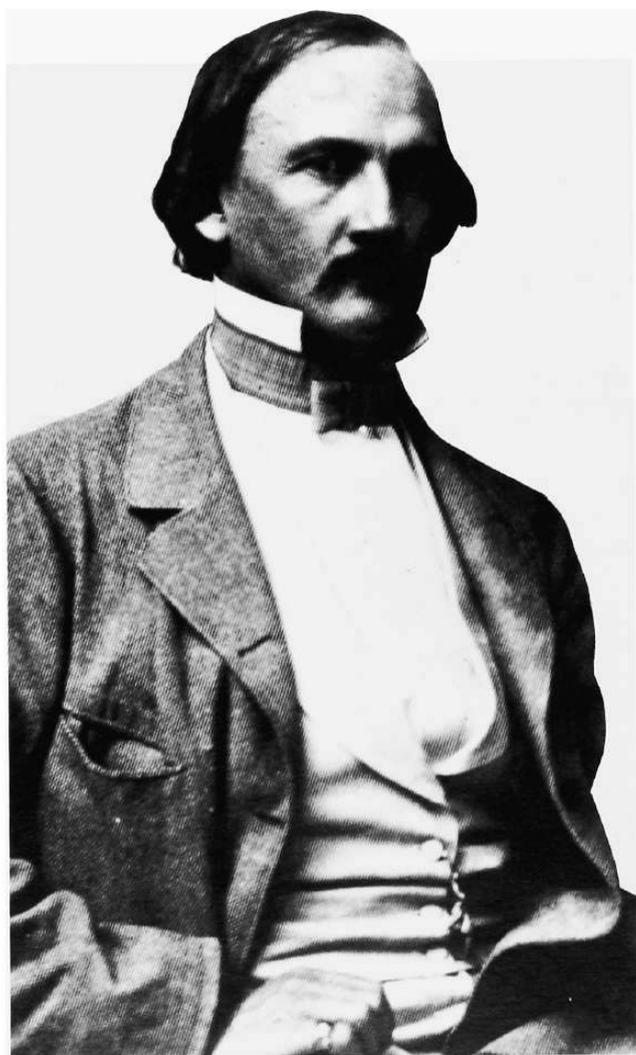


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# HOW HENRY SIBLEY TOOK THE ROAD TO NEW HOPE



**RHODA R. GILMAN**

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In late summer of 1834 Henry Hastings Sibley, then 23 years old, left Mackinac Island and headed for Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi River. It was a journey that would result in a lifetime of association with the upper Mississippi country, lead him to the conventions that founded Minnesota as a territory and state, and take him to the statehouse as first governor of the new commonwealth. For better or worse, the journey would also forever link his life and his place in history to the tragic fate of the Dakota people.<sup>1</sup>

In later years, Sibley explained his choice of direction as the romantic impulse of an adventurous young man. But there was more to it than that. His decision was also the immediate and logical outcome of birth-right and milieu. Beginning with his grandfather, the Sibley family had been part of the tight network of movers and doers who shaped the history of the Northwest Territory. Born in Detroit in 1811, Henry himself had grown up in that old French settlement and new American outpost, then the hub of commerce, military activity, and political life for the western Great Lakes country. It was from Detroit that Lewis Cass, for 17 years governor of Michigan Territory, built the policies of economic pressure, deceit, and veiled force that held back British competition and wrenched the land from its Indian owners without bloody confrontation. Sibley's father, Solomon, as lawyer, congressman, and territorial judge, was a close associate of Cass.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This article is based in part on research begun in 1970 and continued during a sabbatical leave in 1974-75, looking toward a biography of Henry H. Sibley.

<sup>2</sup>Information on Sibley's family and early life is included in Nathaniel West, D.D., *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley, L.L.D.* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Pub. Co., 1889). His maternal grandfather, Ebenezer Sproat, was a surveyor of the Northwest Territory and a founder of the first American settlement at Marietta, Ohio. The papers of Solomon Sibley are in the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. In addition to holding the posts of congressional delegate, judge, and district attorney, Solomon served under Cass as territorial auditor and as a treaty commissioner in negotiations with several Indian tribes in 1821. In 1827 he became Michigan's chief justice. On Cass, see Frank B. Woodford, *Lewis Cass, The Last Jeffersonian* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1950).

A major ally and instrument in Cass's strategy for the Northwest was John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company; Cass abetted the spread of its trading monopoly westward from the Great Lakes to the upper Mississippi and the Missouri. When young Sibley, at age 17, became impatient with the study of law, the fur trade offered a natural alternative. He served an apprenticeship of nearly six years as a clerk and storekeeper for American Fur at Mackinac and was also sent as a buyer of supplies into the back country of Ohio. Then, with the company undergoing reorganization and change of ownership, he faced a crucial choice.<sup>3</sup>

For some time it had been an open secret that Astor wanted to retire from the business, and in 1832 he began negotiations toward that end. By early 1834 the lines of the future were growing clear. Astor's sprawling firm was to be split, with the trade of the Missouri Valley and northern Great Plains (first known as the Western Department of American Fur) becoming independent under Pratte, Chouteau & Company of St. Louis. The former Northern Department, centered at Mackinac, would retain the name of the old company and become a partnership. Its president and senior partner would be Ramsay Crooks, who had for years been Astor's chief lieutenant. Among the other major investors were several leading Detroit merchants, including William F. Brewster and the Abbotts, James and Samuel, all of whom had been longtime friends and neighbors of the Sibley family. At the same time there was a shakeup of the districts and subsidiary traders within the Great Lakes-upper Mississippi region.<sup>4</sup>

Sibley's contract of employment with Astor ran until 1835, but he was ready to leave in the summer of 1834; he determined to discuss the matter with Crooks directly, as he explained in the fragmentary autobiography that he started to write in 1884. Across the chasm of 50 years, Sibley recalled: "I sought [Crooks] out, and told him frankly, that my parents were strongly opposed to my longer sojourn in what was little better than a wild Indian country, that I had been offered the



Ramsay Crooks

position of cashier in two banks, one in Detroit, Michigan, and the other in Huron, Ohio, with a liberal salary for so young a man as I was, and while I did not recognize the right of the new company to insist upon my remaining to fulfil [sic] the old contract, I preferred out of respect to him as an old friend of my father, and myself, that he would voluntarily release me from my engagement, in consideration thereof I would pay the new corporation \$1,000."<sup>5</sup>

Crooks had obviously kept an eye on Judge Solomon Sibley's promising son at Mackinac and had been responsible for broadening the fledgling clerk's training in the business. Young Sibley had proved sharp and reliable. Now the new president had further plans for him.

NEXT TO ASTOR himself, Ramsay Crooks had been the most powerful figure in the American fur trade for many years. His early life had seen enough perils and adventures to fill a novel, but he was not the sort of

<sup>3</sup>Many details of Sibley's early career and life at Mackinac can be found in letters among the Henry H. Sibley Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

<sup>4</sup>One of the best accounts of the later years of the American Fur Company is David Lavender, *The Fist in the Wilderness* (New York: Doubleday, 1964; reprint edition, Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press, 1979). See also the American Fur Company (AFC) Papers, microfilm copies in MHS from originals in the New-York Historical Society. Some earlier correspondence is preserved in three letter books held in the Stuart House on Mackinac Island; microfilm copies in MHS, henceforth cited as Mackinac Letter Books.

<sup>5</sup>Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 1932), 25; this account also appeared in *Minnesota History* 8 (Dec., 1927): 329-362.

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man that legends gathered around. Personally quiet and kindly, he might in England have passed for the benevolent father figure of a Dickens story. In the seedy, cutthroat world of the American fur trade, where survival often called for ruthless tactics, he was regarded with deep ambivalence. The one thing no one questioned was his single-minded dedication to business.<sup>6</sup>

Studying Sibley from behind his deceptively mild, heavy-lidded eyes, Crooks marshaled the powers of persuasion that had put together Astor's fur trade empire from half a dozen warring elements. He had no doubt long been aware of the judge's objections to his son's choice of a career, and he sensed as well the young man's prickly pride and need to prove himself. So Crooks applied first a large helping of flattery. He spoke in the warmest terms of Sibley's record with the company and implied that the firm would suffer a significant loss if he should refuse the new responsibilities that awaited him.

What Crooks had to offer was in fact tempting. It consisted of a junior partnership in a new outfit that was to manage the largest and westernmost district remaining under American Fur. This newly constituted Western Outfit would include the entire territory formerly commanded by the Upper Mississippi Outfit under Jean Joseph Rolette. With headquarters at Prairie du Chien, it included the Sauk, Fox, and Winnebago tribes in southwestern and central Wisconsin and northeastern Iowa, and the Dakota or Sioux of the Mississippi, Minnesota, and upper Des Moines river valleys. It reached north along the Mississippi from Dubuque to the shifting buffer zone between the Dakota and Ojibway (Chippewa) above the Falls of St. Anthony. On the west it bordered the Upper Missouri Outfit of the Chouteau Company, and loosely attached to it on the northwest was the small fiefdom of Joseph Renville, a semi-independent trader who was of predominantly Dakota lineage.<sup>7</sup>

Rolette, who was to be senior partner of the Western Outfit, was known from St. Louis to Montreal as a tough, unscrupulous operator. It was rumored that he had once been a theology student and a novice among the Jesuits. More definitely established was his skill at running whisky past an Indian agent or at quietly roughing up a competitor. For years he had been a headache to the management of American Fur, but he was too powerful to dismiss.<sup>8</sup>

In 1827 Astor and Crooks had commissioned a talented young clerk named Hercules Dousman, son of Mackinac merchant Michael Dousman, to straighten out Rolette's tangled accounts. Young Dousman proved so useful in Prairie du Chien that he stayed on as Rolette's junior partner. It was this team that Sibley was asked to join, with the promise that he would have

independent management of the entire Dakota trade north of Lake Pepin and up the Minnesota Valley.<sup>9</sup>

To reinforce his own arguments to Sibley, Crooks relied on Hercules Dousman. It was a shrewd move, for although Dousman at 34 was 11 years older than Sibley, the two men had developed a warm rapport during the years the young clerk had spent at Mackinac. Sibley also knew Dousman's family; old Michael had administered Sibley's oath when Henry became a justice of the peace for Mackinac County in 1832, and the young man had often called at the Dousman house to pass time with Hercules's sisters, Nancy and Kate. Whatever reservations Sibley understandably might have had about a partnership with Rolette, there could be none about working with Dousman.<sup>10</sup>

Still Sibley hesitated. He had practically promised his parents that he would return to the Detroit area, and he knew that the distant assignment on the upper Mississippi would be greeted with anything but enthusiasm. It was Dousman who sensed the weak point in his defenses. The Minnesota Valley was still unspoiled country—the final stronghold of the legendary fur trade. Dousman painted glowing pictures of the high, rolling plains, the herds of buffalo and elk, and the thousands of lakes alive with waterfowl. It was this persuasion, Sibley always maintained, that finally brought him around. The cashier's cage yielded to the hunter's paradise.<sup>11</sup>

UNDER a contract to run for six years, Crooks's new American Fur Company, headquartered in New York, would supply the capital and hold a half interest in the business. The remaining half was divided among Rolette, Dousman, and Sibley on a 5–3–2 basis. The partners would draw no salary, but Dousman was guaranteed \$1,500 per year and Sibley \$1,200 before any further distribution of profits.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Impressions of Crooks are from Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, which is virtually a business biography of him, as well as from his numerous letters in the Sibley and AFC papers.

<sup>7</sup>Rhoda R. Gilman, "Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade," *Minnesota History* 42 (Winter, 1970): 125, 126.

<sup>8</sup>Rhoda R. Gilman, "The Fur Trade in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1630–1850," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn, 1974): 16, 17. Numerous glimpses of the strained relationship between Rolette and American Fur appear in the Mackinac Letter Books.

<sup>9</sup>Gilman, "The Fur Trade," 17.

<sup>10</sup>Henry H. Sibley, "Memoir of Hercules L. Dousman," *Minnesota Historical Collections* (St. Paul, 1880), 3:192–200, hereafter *MHS Collections*; Sibley's commission as justice of the peace, June 29, 1832, and Sibley to Nancy and Kate Dousman, Mar. 25, 1833, both in Sibley Papers.

<sup>11</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 26.

<sup>12</sup>A copy of the contract is in the Hercules L. Dousman Papers, MHS, original in the Newberry Library, Chicago.



*Hercules Dousman*

American Fur undertook to deliver all goods to Prairie du Chien, receiving its usual five percent commission on cost and transportation charges. All purchases made in the Mississippi Valley were to be handled directly by the western partners themselves. Furs and skins were to be funneled through Mackinac, where they would be sorted, graded, and repacked for shipment farther east. American Fur would make a flat offer for the season's catch; if the partners refused it, the furs would be sold on commission either in New York or Europe and the receipts credited in due time to the Western Outfit.

The partners had full control over hiring of employees and contracts with subsidiary traders, although American Fur had access to the books at all times and

<sup>13</sup>Contract dated Sept. 2, 1825, between Alexis Bailly and Joseph Rolette; "Recapitulation of Furs & Peltries rec' from Uppr Mississippi Outfit, 1833," dated Aug. 15, 1834; Bailly to Joseph P. Bailly, Mar. 2, 1835 (typewritten copy)—all in Alexis Bailly Papers, MHS.

<sup>14</sup>"Auto-Biography of Maj. Lawrence Taliaferro," *MHS Collections* (St. Paul, 1894), 6:189–255; Lavender, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 371–372.

the business was subject to Crooks's general supervision. Rolette and Dousman were stationed at Prairie du Chien and Sibley at the mouth of the Minnesota River (then called the St. Peter's), opposite the fort that had been named Snelling in honor of its builder. The partners would meet each summer in Prairie du Chien, and the books would be closed on August 1.

Numerous other details were spelled out in the long document. These included a prohibition on all trade with the Ojibway, which was specifically reserved to the Northern Outfit under William A. Aitken, who was headquartered at La Pointe on the southern shore of Lake Superior.

One matter not mentioned in the contract was the question of Alexis Bailly. Since 1823, with a brief hiatus in 1831, Bailly had traded for the American Fur Company and Rolette in the territory now slated for Sibley. He was not a party to the new arrangement, and his contract with the old company had still a year to run. Both Crooks and Rolette were anxious to get rid of Bailly. He was an energetic and competent trader, whose string of posts along the upper Mississippi and up the Minnesota Valley had grossed some \$20,000 during the year just past. But he had quarreled with Rolette, and an unsuccessful attempt in 1831 to break away and establish himself as a competitor had marked him as unreliable. An even greater objection was his longstanding feud with Indian agent Lawrence Taliaferro at Fort Snelling.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike most of the other agents in the northwestern region, Taliaferro was no friend of the American Fur Company. Nor did he owe his appointment to Lewis Cass. A stubborn, patriotic, and intensely self-righteous Virginia aristocrat, he had political connections in the Old Dominion that had enabled him to hang on to the agency at Fort Snelling for 15 years. During every one of them he had been a thorn in the side of Rolette and the company. As the company trader stationed nearest to the agency, Bailly had borne the brunt of this antagonism, and he had returned it with interest. The enmity had escalated through several incidents of confiscated whisky and resulting lawsuits and had culminated in a threatened duel between the two men. Little as Crooks liked Taliaferro, he knew that such extremes of bitterness, especially when they involved a government official, were bad for business. Having failed in repeated efforts to get Taliaferro removed, he was eager to replace Bailly with someone more conciliatory.<sup>14</sup>

The decision to do so had obviously been made before Bailly's district was offered to Sibley, but carrying it out was left to the devices of Rolette and Dousman. The chief difficulty was their fear that Bailly, if simply cut loose, would remain in the country and offer successful competition to the new outfit. Bailly himself made their course easier by choosing that summer to

try again running whisky past the watchful Taliaferro. When Rolette returned from Mackinac to Prairie du Chien in August, he learned that the liquor had once more been seized.

Heading immediately for Fort Snelling, Rolette engaged in a wary interview with Taliaferro in which each man protested his good will and desire to cooperate. Instead of defending Bailly, Rolette maintained that the trader had acted against company policy. With a show of resignation he accepted Taliaferro's edict to deny Bailly a trading license on consideration that the whisky be returned to the company and that there be no prosecution. Back at Prairie du Chien, Rolette wrote gleefully to Crooks: "—of this last arrangement between Mr. Taliaferro and myself I was Satisfied as it will give us a Chance of getting rid easily of Mr. Bailly."<sup>15</sup>

It proved more difficult that Rolette had thought, however. Taliaferro having departed for a winter's leave in the East, Bailly promptly applied for a license to Major John Bliss, the army commander at Fort Snelling. Bliss was aware of Taliaferro's decision, but after some hesitation he granted Bailly permission to continue trading through the winter and wind up his affairs without loss. Armed with this trump card, Bailly appeared at Prairie du Chien in late October to meet

his would-be successor and confer with his erstwhile associates.<sup>16</sup>

SIBLEY, MEANWHILE, had traveled from Mackinac to Green Bay and up the Fox River to the point where a two-mile portage trail connected with the westward-flowing Wisconsin River. It was the well-established route to the upper Mississippi followed by Père Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet in 1673 and used by most travelers and traders since that time. On the Wisconsin River Sibley found a tiny sternwheeler about to head downstream, and five days of dodging snags and pushing the boat off sandbars brought them to Prairie du Chien.<sup>17</sup>

The Prairie of the Dog—so named, tradition said, for an old Fox chief who had established his village as a neutral trading ground there—lay a mile or two above the actual mouth of the Wisconsin. Here the majestic flood of the Mississippi was broken into a maze of islands and channels. Along the eastern bank the bluffs swung back from the river, leaving a broad, level plain that had been the site of trading rendezvous and treaty councils for more than a century.

When Sibley arrived, the business center of the town was still on a low-lying island separated from the eastern shore by a narrow lagoon. Beside the crumbling log stockade of old Fort Crawford, dating from 1816, there stood a row of cabins and houses, the largest of which, along with an assortment of log warehouses and outbuildings, belonged to Rolette. Others served as hotels, taverns, an Indian agency, a sutler's store, and the homes and businesses of several of the older French settlers. Here and there abandoned chimneys and empty foundations spoke mutely of the flight by some of the community to higher ground away from the Mississippi's periodic floods. High and dry also, well back from the river, stood the new Fort Crawford, built of stone and nearly completed by 1834.<sup>18</sup>

Sibley, like most other visiting traders, was probably made comfortable in Rolette's home, for hospitality and expansive generosity were the other side of the tough little Frenchman's complex character. In the years since 1804, when he came west as a junior partner of the trader Murdoch Cameron, Joseph Rolette had become Prairie du Chien's leading citizen. It was not only that he owned a good share of the town (he was said at one time to have paid seven-eighths of the real estate taxes); he was a driving force, an innovator, a

Lawrence Taliaferro



<sup>15</sup>Rolette to Crooks, Sept. 18, 1834, AFC Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Bliss to Bailly, Sept. 20, 24, 1834, Bailly Papers.

<sup>17</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Lawrence Scanlan, *Prairie du Chien: French, British, American* (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Pub., 1937), 195.



*View of Prairie du Chien, from a watercolor by Seth Eastman, about 1846*

seizer of opportunities. He had several farms and had imported the first hogs and sheep and built the first sawmill in the region. He was vain of his reputation for

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<sup>19</sup>Contract between Joseph Rolette and Murdoch Cameron, April 20, 1805, original in the notary records of James A. Gray, National Archives of Quebec at Montreal, photocopy in MHS; Scanlan, *Prairie du Chien*, 105, 189; James H. Lockwood, "Early Times and Events in Wisconsin," and Bernard W. Brisbois, "Recollections of Prairie du Chien," both in *Wisconsin Historical Collections* (Madison, 1856, 1882), 2:132, 173–175, 9:293–294, hereafter *Wisconsin Collections*.

<sup>20</sup>Mrs. E. M. Dessloch, "Jane Fisher Dousman," in *Famous Wisconsin Women* (Madison, 1972), 2:4–10. Jane was the widow of Joseph Rolette; her life and her romance and subsequent marriage to Hercules Dousman have been fictionalized in two novels by August Derleth, *Bright Journey* (New York: Scribner, 1940), and *The House on the Mound* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1958).

enterprise, and on occasion he was gullible, but he had a probing, active mind that moved like quicksilver. No one, it was said, could calculate sums as fast as he. Nor could anyone move faster, once a decision to act had been taken.<sup>19</sup>

The hostess who welcomed Sibley to Rolette's modest mansion was not the least of the trader's valuables. In 1819, when she was barely 15, Jane Fisher had become the bride of the 40-year-old Rolette. Her mother had died at an early age, and her father had taken his sons and his trading business to the British possessions after the War of 1812. Jane was left in Prairie du Chien to the care of her aunt and uncle, Domitelle and Michael Brisbois. Educated in a Cincinnati convent, Jane was beautiful, cultured, lively, and strong-willed enough to prove herself in time a match for her formidable husband.<sup>20</sup>



Jean Joseph Rolette,  
as he looked about 1860

Sibley might already have heard the story of how some travelers had met Rolette once as he was returning to Prairie du Chien after a number of weeks' absence. Several of the party had just come from the Prairie, and the trader inquired eagerly about his crops, his mill, and his favorite horse. As they were paddling away, he turned back and called as an afterthought: "Wait a minute—how are Madame Rolette and the children?" Yet Rolette was not without family feeling. He maintained contact with relatives in Canada and St. Louis and for years financed a luckless, alcoholic brother in the fur trade. His two children had been sent East in 1833 for schooling under the paternal eye of Ramsay Crooks, who visited them periodically and reported on their progress.<sup>21</sup>

Stories collected around Rolette like fleas on a dog, and Sibley no doubt heard many of them as he waited in Prairie du Chien for the arrival of Bailly. Rolette's fear of water was legendary. When riding in a canoe he tied his pocket handkerchief to one of the ribs and never ceased to clutch it. Dousman may have told Sibley of the time when he and "Don Jose" (as the two privately called their senior partner) had been threatened by

floating ice on the Mississippi. Terrified, Rolette crossed himself and solemnly declared that he would build a church in Prairie du Chien if only God would spare them. They reached the shore, and with one foot on land Rolette gestured toward heaven. "Collect it if you can," he called. "You haven't got my note for it!" But there was a witness, and Dousman gave him no rest until he paid.<sup>22</sup>

There were other accounts of his cowardice and bravado. One early trader recalled a fracas with the Dakota at the mouth of the Minnesota River during which Rolette at first refused to come out of his room, then trembled so hard that he broke the ramrod in his gun. Another anecdote concerned his military career in the British cause during the War of 1812; it was climaxed when he carried to Mackinac news of the capture of Prairie du Chien. Asked for the tidings, he announced in a solemn tone that there had been "A great battle—a sanguinary contest." When his hearers anxiously demanded to know how many were killed, he answered "None." Nor had any been wounded. With cheers and laughter they welcomed him ashore. Yet despite these tales, men feared Rolette, they scarcely knew why. When fire threatened his warehouse, he succeeded in bullying a crew of voyageurs into carrying his powder kegs to safety while never approaching the building himself.<sup>23</sup>

BAILLY REFUSED to give up the business until his contract expired the following summer, but he did agree to take Sibley with him to the mouth of the Minnesota and introduce him to the people, the country, and the far-flung operations of the Dakota trade. It was not what the partners had wanted, but they had to settle for it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Mrs. John H. [Juliette Augusta] Kinzie, *Wau-Bun, the Early Day in the Northwest* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), 32; Crooks to Rolette, Jan. 12, 1835, Jan. 7, 1836, AFC Papers. All correspondence from Crooks cited here is in letter books of the AFC. Correspondence with Rolette in the Mackinac Letter Books contains frequent references to his family connections and especially to his brothers Hypolite and Laurent. For the latter, see also Donald Dean Parker, ed., *The Recollections of Philander Prescott: Frontiersman of the Old Northwest, 1819-1862* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 150; "The Fur-Trade in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Collections* (Madison, 1911), 20:197n.

<sup>22</sup>Parker, ed., *Philander Prescott*, 129; Brisbois, "Recollections," 294.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas G. Anderson, "Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson," 9:180-181; John H. Fonda, "Reminiscences of Wisconsin: Early Wisconsin," 5:237; and Augustin Grignon, "Seventy-two Years' Recollections of Wisconsin," 3:279—all in *Wisconsin Collections* (Madison, 1882, 1868, 1857).

<sup>24</sup>Dousman to Crooks, Oct. 14, 1834, AFC Papers; Sibley to Crooks, Nov. 1, 1834, Sibley Papers.

As a young newcomer Sibley had scarcely been consulted in the plan, but he must have felt that it reflected no credit on those involved, even after the passage of years. In penning his autobiography, he drew a curtain across the whole episode, writing: "I was fortunate enough to fall in with Alexis Bailly Esquire, a gentleman who was in charge of four trading stations, that were within my district. . . . Mr. Bailly's destination being the same with my own, we formed a party of five."<sup>25</sup>

It was on a cold day in late October that Sibley and Bailly, accompanied by two Canadian voyageurs, a 16-year-old, mixed-blood boy who wanted to rejoin his relatives near Fort Snelling, and a Winnebago guide, set out by horseback on the 300-mile trip upriver. The first day brought near disaster and a dismal ducking in the Mississippi. As they crossed to the west bank a little above Prairie du Chien, their clumsy dugout canoe overturned. All reached shore safely, but the rest of the day was spent in drying out their baggage and themselves and retrieving their horses.

Bad luck continued, for three days later the guide disappeared, leaving them lost on the Iowa prairies. So they backtracked toward the Mississippi, which they knew had to be east of them, losing nearly two days by the detour. Though longer, the route up the Mississippi followed well-established trails and was marked at each stage by picturesque bluffs and hazy autumn vistas of water and islands. The only break in the journey was at the house of old Augustin Rocque, located on a broad prairie just below Lake Pepin. For many years Rocque had traded with the Dakota who lived in the vicinity and were known as the Wabasha band after a line of chiefs bearing that name. Sibley remembered that Rocque had comfortable beds, plenty of provisions, and a pretty 16-year-old daughter.<sup>26</sup>

In the course of the journey he also got to know the man with whom he was to spend the next six months. Alexis Bailly, like so many others in the country, was a son of one of the mixed-blood families that had come to dominate the fur trade. His father, Joseph Bailly, who had traded for years in Mackinac, Lower Michigan, and Indiana, could claim descent from the French co-



*Alexis Bailly, as he looked in 1858, from a portrait by Canadian painter Théophile Hamel*

lonial aristocracy of Canada; his part-Ottawa mother was connected with a tribe that for generations had controlled the trade between the upper Great Lakes and lower Canada. Bailly was stocky, handsome, a bit of a dandy, and disconcertingly well educated. He was informed on current affairs, had a nodding acquaintance with the law, spoke (and wrote) faultless English, although his native tongue was French, and was fluent in several Indian languages as well as Latin.<sup>27</sup>

But it was no doubt his stories of the country that interested Sibley most. As a romantic 19-year-old student in Montreal, Bailly had volunteered to carry dispatches for Jean Douglas, Countess of Selkirk, to her husband, who was isolated during the winter of 1816–17 at Fort William on the far shore of Lake Superior. Returning from the perilous thousand-mile journey, the young courier received, he said, a kiss from the valiant and beautiful lady herself. In 1821 he had again served the interests of the Selkirks when he drove a herd of cattle from Prairie du Chien up the Mississippi and Minnesota valleys and down the Red River to the disas-

<sup>25</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 27.

<sup>26</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 28–29.

<sup>27</sup>John O. Bowers, *The Old Bailly Homestead* (Gary, Indiana, 1922); Edward C. Bailly, "The French-Canadian Background of a Minnesota Pioneer—Alexis Bailly," manuscript collections, MHS; Elizabeth Therese Baird, "Reminiscences of Early Days on Mackinac Island," *Wisconsin Collections* (Madison, 1914), 14:43. Bailly's familiarity with law, current events, and languages is apparent from a scanning of his papers.

ter-stricken colony founded by the earl in the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>28</sup>

The cattle drive had been Bailly's first employment for Rolette. Four years later, in 1825, he had located a post at the mouth of the Minnesota River across from Fort Snelling on a point of land, which had been the first encampment site of the troops who built the fort in 1819. They had called it "New Hope"—a name touched with bitter irony after nearly a third of them died in the first winter.<sup>29</sup>

In 1826 Bailly married Lucy Faribault, who, like himself, was the child of a French trader and a mixed-blood mother. Her father, Jean Baptiste Faribault, had traded for years among the Dakota, and with the marriage Bailly acquired deep roots in the country—roots that now resisted transplanting. He talked freely with young Sibley—what had he to lose?—recounting his grievances against Rolette and pointing out the way in which the American Fur Company squeezed its small traders dry, then dropped them like useless rinds. He had, he estimated, cleared some \$200,000 for the company in his ten years at New Hope, and now he was a ruined man.<sup>30</sup>

ON OCTOBER 28 the party arrived at its destination. It was from a bluff known as Pilot Knob that Sibley first saw the broad valley of the Minnesota River at its junction with the Mississippi. The grandeur of the view combined with his own conscious sense of history to keep the moment fresh in his memory: "When I reached the brink of the hill overlooking the surrounding country," he recalled, "I was struck with the picturesque beauty of the scene. From that outlook the course of the Mississippi River from the north, suddenly turning eastward to where St. Paul now stands, the Minnesota River from the west, the principal tributary of the main stream, and at the junction, rose the military post of Fort Snelling perched upon a high and commanding point, with its stone walls, and blockhouses, bidding defiance to any attempt at capture."<sup>31</sup>

Riding down the steep trail into the valley, he found that the post of New Hope, or St. Peters as it was more often called, consisted of a collection of sagging log huts clustered along the southeastern shore of the Minnesota and facing a broad, sandy island that divided the mouth of the stream into two channels and hid from view the swifter flowing current of the Mississippi on the other side. The valley was nearly bare of trees, and the walls of Fort Snelling could be plainly seen on the far bluff, directly across from the trading station.

The largest of the log houses belonged to Bailly, and another was occupied by the family of his father-in-law, the trader Faribault, who had already left for his wintering post at Little Rapids, some 40 miles up the Minnesota. The rest of the buildings included cabins

for a blacksmith and a carpenter and for the voyageurs employed by Bailly, as well as storehouses for goods and furs. The house to which Lucy Bailly welcomed Sibley was so dilapidated that he made a mental note to replace it as soon as possible and included an urgent request for new buildings in his first letters to New York and Prairie du Chien.<sup>32</sup>

WITHIN A FEW DAYS Bailly seemingly changed his mind about selling and asked Sibley to make him an offer. Unwilling to act without the consent of his senior partners, Sibley immediately wrote to Rolette and Dousman. He also told Crooks, who replied with enthusiasm, hoping that the bargain would be promptly closed. Crooks in turn urged Rolette and Dousman to make terms immediately with Bailly, for "we never can consider ourselves safe so long as he has any control over the trade of any of our people."<sup>33</sup>

The suspicious Rolette, however, saw only trickery in Bailly's proposition. He noted that the trader had come around only after he had advanced goods to his Indian customers on credit for the winter. "After mature reflection of Mr. Dousman and myself," Rolette told Crooks, "we wrote to Mr. Sibly [*sic*] to decline purchasing Mr. Bailly who refused to sell last fall—previous to the Credits being made—You well know that the Indians will not pay well any other person but the one who has trusted them, as to binding him by Contract I considered that no instrument would bind him as he had nothing to pay if he was desirous of forfeiting any Contract made." And nursing his old grudges, Rolette concluded that had Bailly's motive "not been a bad one he never would have proposed to Sell out to Mr. Sibly—I know him too well."<sup>34</sup>

So Bailly stayed on until spring. He and Sibley had planned to make together the round of posts in the

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<sup>28</sup>Henry H. Sibley, "Reminiscences; Historical and Personal," in *MHS Collections* (St. Paul, 1902), 1:383. The story of the Fort William trip was told in a reminiscent account by Bailly, quoted in Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, *Transactions* (1888–89), No. 33, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup>Included in Bailly's papers is an "Account against Red River Expedition for Joseph Rolette," which lists "Goods Supplied Mr. Alexis Bailly at the Forks—1821." Authorization from Colonel Josiah Snelling for Bailly to build "a warehouse, or store, and a house for his own residence" on the military reservation, April 13, 1825, Sibley Papers.

<sup>30</sup>Bible records from the Bailly family; Alexis Bailly to Joseph B. Bailly, Mar. 2, 1835 (typewritten copy) in the Bailly Papers.

<sup>31</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 29.

<sup>32</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 30; Sibley to Crooks, Nov. 1, 1834, Sibley Papers.

<sup>33</sup>Sibley to Crooks, Nov. 1, 1834; Crooks to Sibley, Dec. 19, 1834; Crooks to Rolette, Dec. 20, 1834, AFC Papers.

<sup>34</sup>Rolette to Crooks, Jan. 20, 1835, AFC Papers.

district, and they actually set out on December 1, 1834, going up the Minnesota River some 70 miles, as far as Traverse des Sioux. An unusually long and severe winter was already closing in, however. They found the snow so deep on the plains that they were forced to turn back.<sup>35</sup>

Crooks was philosophical about the partners' decision on Bailly. "Your passing this Winter together I deem of great advantage to you," he told Sibley, "for by observing closely his system of management you may learn to adopt what is really useful, and avoid the errors of his practice." Then, pontificating a bit, he advised the younger man: "Be just and firm in all your dealings, and you will soon obtain the confidence of

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<sup>35</sup>Blegen, ed., *Unfinished Autobiography*, 31; Sibley to Crooks, Dec. 1, 1834; Rolette to Crooks, Jan. 20, 1835, AFC Papers.

<sup>36</sup>Crooks to Sibley, Dec. 19, 1834, AFC Papers.

<sup>37</sup>Crooks to Solomon Sibley, Dec. 19, 1834, and to Samuel Abbott, Dec. 20, 1834, AFC Papers.

everybody, and the attachment of your own people will soon follow.—Conciliate the good will of the officers of Government, especially the Indian Agent; and your Situation will soon be free from much of the trouble which has heretofore beset the incumbent of New Hope."<sup>36</sup>

It was clear, even during Sibley's first months in the upper Mississippi country, that his employer was pleased with him. In a reassuring letter to Solomon Sibley, Crooks reported: "Your worthy son [is] prosecuting his new undertaking much to my satisfaction. . . . He seems to go about his business with all the familiarity of the experience of years." Summing up his observations, the fur company president wrote to Samuel Abbott with satisfaction that "Mr. Sibley seems quite 'au fait' already and will prove I daresay a first rate man for our business."<sup>37</sup>

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