

## HENRY H. SIBLEY, PIONEER OF CULTURE AND FRONTIER AUTHOR

One of the most striking facts about frontier Minnesota is the high cultural level represented by its leadership, coupled with individual capacity to adapt that leadership to changing times and conditions.<sup>1</sup> Sibley, Ramsey, Dr. Neill, Flandrau, Goodhue, Wheelock, and many other frontier leaders were pioneers of culture. They were agents in a transit of civilization from East to West. All frontiers have their rough aspects, but one does not have to go far in studying Minnesota's youth before he realizes that there were sturdy cultural forces at work in that period. These forces made themselves felt in the early organization of an historical society, the planning of a state university, the launching of colleges, the creation of a public school system, the appearance of an intelligent journalism, the vigorous grappling with economic and political problems, the atmosphere of social and intellectual enterprise. At almost every point one meets Sibley and Ramsey and their associates—men of background, men of a wide range of interest, men who considered a long future and cared for more than their own generation. They wove into the fabric of Minnesota something of their character and interests; and in the transition from the frontier to a modern commonwealth, they adapted their leadership to new situations with skill and confidence.

Someone has interpreted the Sibley family in terms of the American westward movement. Henry H. Sibley was the son of New Englanders who pioneered in the old West after

<sup>1</sup> This introduction is, in part, a condensation of a talk on "Henry Hastings Sibley: Pioneer of Culture" given by the editor at the Sibley centennial luncheon held in St. Paul under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society on October 28, 1934.

the Revolution. His mother, Sarah Sibley, a lady of gentle culture, was the daughter of one of Washington's colonels who migrated to the Ohio frontier; and her grandfather was Commodore Abraham Whipple, a noted Revolutionary naval officer who also pioneered in the Ohio country. Henry's father, Solomon Sibley, migrating from Massachusetts, went first to Marietta, then to Cincinnati, and finally to Detroit just after its release to the Americans under Jay's treaty. He rose to be mayor of Detroit and eventually chief justice of the Michigan territorial supreme court.

Henry Hastings Sibley, with two years of training in Greek and Latin, two years' study of law, and a practical schooling in the business of fur trading, represents in his migration from Michigan to Minnesota another step in the family identification with the westward movement of culture. In his private as well as in his public life, Sibley gave expression to deep and broad cultural interests. One of his early letters to New York, written in the fur-trade period, includes an order for such books as Prescott's *Ferdinand and Isabella* and *Conquest of Mexico*, Hallam's *Middle Ages*, Thiers' *French Revolution*, and Froissart's *Chronicles*. An interpretation of Sibley as a pioneer of culture finds added confirmation if one considers him as a writer and recorder of life and character in the Northwest. He is the author of a series of portraits, graphic character sketches, of some of the unusual figures of the early Northwest—such men as Hercules Dousman, Jean Baptiste Fari-bault, John Otherday, Joseph Nicollet, and Gideon H. Pond. In an extensive work he detailed the life and adventures of Jack Frazer, a notable Scotch-Sioux hunter and warrior of the Northwest. He told a part of his own story in his *Unfinished Autobiography* and various papers of reminiscences.<sup>2</sup> He was generous in his tributes to associates.

<sup>2</sup> Sibley's "Life and Adventures of Joseph Jack Frazer: A Mixed Blood of the Dakota Sioux" was published under the pseudonym "Walker-in-the-Pines," in sixteen chapters in the *St. Paul Pioneer* from

Classic almost is his memoir to Dousman, "friend of my early and riper years — my associate in business for nearly a quarter of a century — who directed my steps for the first time to what is now Minnesota, and to whom I was fervently attached." He characterized the Prairie du Chien magnate as "kind-hearted, high minded, and public spirited" and supported the characterization with a wealth of detail. His descriptions of the voyageurs were vivid and discerning. He knew and understood these colorful figures of the fur trade better than most. Among other things he touched upon the hostilities, and the chivalry, that marked the dealings of voyageur with voyageur. Through all Sibley's writings runs a characteristic strain of affection for Minnesota and of faith in the state and its people. It was a "land where Nature has lavished her choicest gifts." The "sun shines not upon a fairer region."

In one of Sibley's letters, written in 1839, he sent to New York a subscription to the *Spirit of the Times*, a leading magazine of sport;<sup>3</sup> and in the columns of that magazine were printed from time to time articles from his own pen on hunting and on Indian customs and warfare. In signing these contributions to the literature of the frontier West, Sibley used the pseudonym, "Hal—a Dacotah." What the editor of the *Spirit of the Times*, William T. Porter, thought of Sibley's contributions to his columns may be judged from the following comment, which appears on the editorial page of the issue for April 11, 1846:

We heartily commend to each of our readers an original article . . . in to-day's paper. For twelve years past the writer has been residing on the west side of the Mississippi, during which period he

December 2, 1866, to March 17, 1867. *The Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley, Together with a Selection of Hitherto Unpublished Letters from the Thirties* was published by the Voyageur Press of Minneapolis in 1932.

<sup>3</sup> The letter, which was written to Ramsay Crooks, president of the American Fur Company, on December 21, 1839, is published in full in the *Unfinished Autobiography*, 71.

has spent a great portion of his time hunting Buffalo and other game on the boundless prairies between that river and the Rocky Mountains. He is a most accomplished gentleman, a ready writer, and enthusiastically devoted to field sports. Our friend dates his last letter from St. Peters, near the Falls of St. Anthony; it will be read with thrilling interest. Referring to a promise made us when we last had the pleasure of seeing him, he writes: "You know I only promised to sound my trumpet when the music of the finer instruments should have ceased." We have no idea of his getting off under this plea; we don't recollect anything about this reservation to which he alludes; moreover, what does he mean by "finer instruments?" We insist upon it that no one has written upon the subject of Buffalo Hunting and Prairie Sporting generally, better than himself, and he might as well make up his mind at once that *the readers* of this paper have a claim upon him which *we* intend to look after. We shall do it, too, by hook or by crook, if we have to chase him with a sharp stick among a roving band of Sioux.

Whether or not Porter found the carrying out of his threat necessary has not been recorded, but the fact remains that for a number of years following 1846 readers of the *Spirit of the Times* continued to enjoy thrilling reports of frontier adventure by "Hal—a Dacotah." The centennial of Sibley's arrival in the frontier land that he described so vividly makes appropriate the reprinting of one of these little-known articles in MINNESOTA HISTORY. The account of a buffalo and elk hunt that called forth the editorial comment quoted above is reprinted in the pages that follow.

THEODORE C. BLEGEN

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ST. PAUL

[From *The Spirit of the Times*, 16: 73 (April 11, 1846).]

### A BUFFALO AND ELK HUNT IN 1842

BY HAL—A DACOTAH

*Dear "Spirit."*—It is a fact much to be regretted that the game on the Western Prairies is rapidly diminishing in number. A residence of twelve years on the West side of the Mississippi, during which time I have made very many hunting excursions, has satisfied me that the larger animals are fast disappearing, and will soon be

exterminated. Upon the plains which were the scene of my sports in former years, where the Elk and Buffalo were to be found by hundreds and by thousands, the hunter may now roam for days together, without encountering a single herd. Nor is this surprising, when we reflect that of the Indians west of the Mississippi, at least a hundred thousand subsist entirely by the chase, and the improvidence of these people is so great, that often ten times as many cattle are killed as can be consumed by a camp, either by being driven over precipices, or by other methods. What will become of these starving thousands when buffalo shall have failed altogether, is a question which I am unable to solve. Present appearances indicate with much certainty, that ere twenty years have elapsed, but few buffalo will be found, and those only on the immense plains of New Mexico, or on the distant prairies which skirt the base of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>4</sup>

In the month of October, 1842, I took with me eight horses and carts, in charge of five Canadians and one American, and with my old hunting companions, ALEX. F[ARIBAULT] and JACK FRAZER, wended my way towards the buffalo region.<sup>5</sup> We expected to find these animals at or about the *Minday Mecoche Wakkon*, or Lake of the Spirit Land, a distance of a hundred and fifty miles.<sup>6</sup> The first few days we amused ourselves with shooting grouse, ducks, and geese, of which there were a great abundance. One of the party knocked over twenty ducks at a single shot, nineteen of which were secured.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the opening paragraph, this sketch is reprinted also in Peter Hawker and William T. Porter, *Instructions to Young Sportsmen . . . to which is Added the Hunting and Shooting of North America*, 265-273 (Philadelphia, 1853).

<sup>5</sup> "Alex. F." probably was Alexander Faribault, a well-known fur trader in the Minnesota and Cannon River valleys after 1822, for whom the city of Faribault was named. Since he was a clerk for the American Fur Company, he was closely associated with Sibley in the fur trade, and later the two men were connected in various business enterprises. Although Faribault was born at Prairie du Chien, the fact that he was the son of a French-Canadian trader, Jean Baptiste Faribault, doubtless caused Sibley to look upon Alexander as a Canadian. See Grace Lee Nute, "Alexander Faribault," *ante*, 8: 177-180. Joseph Jack Frazer, or Fraser, was the son of a Scotch trader and a half-breed Sioux woman. He lived with his mother's tribe until he was more than thirty years old; later he became a fur trader, and he acted as a scout during the Sioux War of 1862. For a reference to a biography of Frazer by Sibley, see *ante*, note 2.

<sup>6</sup> Spirit Lake is in northwestern Iowa, touching at one point the southern boundary of Jackson County, Minnesota.

Of course we did not lack for provant. As we advanced farther inland, where we hoped to find elk, a veto was put on all discharges of fire arms at small game, as the report of a gun will set the keen-eared animals in motion at the distance of miles. On the seventh day out, Jack Frazer reported that he had seen some game, but whether buffalo or elk he could not tell, as they were too far off. Our glass being put in requisition, we soon found them to be a small herd of the latter, lying down at the base of a hill about six miles off. Notwithstanding the excitement which warmed us at the prospect of a chase, the beauty of the scene which broke upon our vision from the height whereon we stood, attracted the attention of the most thoughtless of the party. A large lake, which might have been taken for the "Glimmer Glass" of COOPER, stretched itself out at right angles with our course, about a mile beyond where the elk lay. The prairie, clothed in its variegated autumn garb, appeared to rise and fall like the undulations of the ocean, and in all directions might be perceived points of woodland giving forth all the different tints and hues peculiar to an American forest. A thin belt of lofty trees encircled the lake, showing through their intervals the bright sheet of water, which lay, unruffled by a breeze, in all its glorious beauty. It seemed almost a sacrilege against Nature thus to invade her solitudes, only to carry with us dismay and death. But other, and certainly not more holy thoughts, soon dissipated in us all sense of the magnificence of the scene. Our measures were taken to circumvent the elk.

Alex., Jack Frazer, and myself, as the only experienced hunters, were to approach and fire, while the others of the party mounted their horses, and were stationed under the cover of the hill, except one man, who remained in charge of the carts and baggage. With this man I left my hunting horse, ready saddled, with instructions to mount as soon as he heard our guns, and come with all speed to my stand. These precautions taken, and having stripped ourselves of all superfluous clothing, we commenced the delicate operation of approach. A few yards brought us in full view of the herd, which, unsuspecting of danger, were lolling lazily in the sunshine. Throwing ourselves flat upon the ground, we wormed ourselves along with Indian stealthiness, under cover of the short grass. We had proceeded thus about half a mile, when we came to a marsh, which it was found we must necessarily pass. The water here was two feet

deep, and the exertion of crawling through the knotted grass, and of securing, at the same time, our guns from moisture, while we kept ourselves concealed, was excessively severe. By dint of unremitting efforts we passed silently through this serious obstacle, and emerged upon dry ground within sixty yards of the game. We here examined our arms, renewed our primings, and sprang upon our feet, not wishing to fire until the elk rose. As these magnificent creatures bounded off in great confusion, our double barrels were discharged, and three elk fell dead. Jack F., who sported a single barrel, made a clean miss, as usual. In fact, he was a miserable shot. With an eye like an eagle, firm nerves, and active withal as a wild cat, it was not one of Jack's "gifts" to shoot well. Unfortunately, Alex. F. and myself had aimed our second barrels at the same large animal, which came to the ground riddled with balls and buckshot, otherwise we might have secured a fourth without doubt. As the remaining fifteen or twenty fled at full speed, we could hear the shouts of the horsemen as they discharged their pieces. They failed, however, to hit a single elk. My horse was presently at my side, and as soon as I was mounted, the noble animal entering into the spirit of the chase, set off at racing speed. The elk were now a mile ahead, and I passed successively each of the Canadians on their jaded horses, vainly struggling to keep with the chase. Wright, the American, who was well mounted, was thrown headlong from the saddle, and when I overtook the herd after a run of six miles, I perceived his horse running side by side with the elk. I had left my double barrel behind, trusting to a revolving pistol to do execution. But my hands were so benumbed by long immersion in the cold water, that I could not pull the trigger. Shifting the revolver to my left hand, I managed to discharge it at a large female elk, at a distance of not more than ten feet. The ball took effect *a posteriori*, and the animal was so much wounded that she plunged headlong into a wide boggy stream, through which, after incredible efforts, she succeeded in passing, leaving me no other alternative than to abandon the chase, the nature of the ground rendering it impossible to cross.

I succeeded in securing the runaway horse, with which I returned to my companions, who had already made preparations to encamp on the border of the lake. Here we spent one day in preserving the meat of the slain elk, which was accomplished by cutting it into thin

slices, when it was spread out upon a scaffold, and a fire kindled under, which soon dried it thoroughly.

The next morning there were myriads of ducks and geese in and about the lake, and the discipline of the camp was so far relaxed as to allow a few shots to be fired among them, which afforded us an ample supply.

Continuing our course southwestwardly, we reached Lac Blanc, a fine sheet of water, which bore upon its surface swan, geese, and ducks in great numbers, which we did not disturb, as there was fresh "sign" of elk and traces of buffalo. From this point we followed a small stream which ran through very swampy ground, and which was literally covered with wild-fowl. These poor creatures were not at all shy, giving evidence of their utter ignorance of the arts of the great destroyer, man. In fact, geese, mallard, and other wild ducks, were innumerable, and I doubt not that either good shot of the party might have destroyed a thousand in a day. But we were in search of nobler game, and not a single discharge of a gun was permitted.

The day after we struck the stream, and while we were still following it, Jack Frazer was going along in the high grass at a little distance from the party, when he threw himself suddenly from his horse, and appeared to seize hold of some object at his feet, at the same time calling for assistance. There was a general roar of laughter when we reached him. He had seized two large racoons which were sleeping quietly in the grass, each one by the tail. Startled at this unexpected assault upon their nether extremities, the coons made a joint effort to nab our friend Jack, who, with tail hold fairly fixed, endeavored to evade their bite by jumping about in all directions. He was so expert with his sudden pulls and twitches, that he escaped without injury for a little time, until, encumbered with the weight of his victims, he ceased hopping, and at that moment one of them got Jack by the leg, when he incontinently gave up the battle. With a desire to see fair play, none of us would interfere while this farce was being enacted, but seeing our *compagnon* so badly treated, we revenged him by knocking the coons on the head.

The accidental discharge of a gun by one of the men caused me to lose a shot at three buffalo. They had been quietly feeding on the low grounds along the stream, when, hearing the discharge, they dashed away over the open prairie. After holding a *conseil de guerre*,

we concluded not to follow them until the next morning, as the day was already far spent. Selecting a favorable spot, we encamped, and the arms of the party were put in order for the expected sport. A large buck came out of the woods at the opposite side of the stream, without perceiving us. We could not allow him to be fired at. The next morning Jack Frazer was despatched with the most active of the Canadians to reconnoitre. In a short time they returned, and reported that three buffalo were lying down in one of the low places in the prairie. Two men were then placed in charge of the carts, with directions to proceed slowly along at an angle slightly deviating from the line to the buffalo, while the rest of us, seven in number, mounted our horses and prepared for the chase.

Approaching the bulls within three hundred yards, we charged down the hill upon them at full speed. The first flight of the buffalo is comparatively slow, but when pressed by the huntsman, the rapidity with which these apparently unwieldy animals get over the ground, is amazing. Alex. F. and myself having the fleetest horses, each of us singled out a victim, leaving the third to be dealt with by the remainder. We were shortly alongside, and our double barrels told with deadly effect, the huge beasts rolling on the ground in death, within a hundred yards of each other. The other horsemen followed the remaining buffalo, discharging numberless shots at him, but notwithstanding each man swore that he had hit him, the bull got clean off, and his pursuers were brought to a sudden halt by the sight of a large herd of cattle, which they were unwilling to disturb until we joined them. Meanwhile the prairie had been set on fire by some Indian to windward of us, and as the wind blew violently, the flames came down upon us with such rapidity that we had not even time to secure the meat of the two buffalo killed. It was decided to attempt a passage through the flaming barrier, leaving the men with the carts to get to some shelter ere the fire reached them. Five times did we approach the raging element, and as many times were we repulsed, scorched and almost suffocated, until, by a desperate use of whip and spur, we leaped our horses across the line of fire, looking, as we emerged from the cloud of smoke, more like individuals from the lower regions, than inhabitants of this earth.

It took some time to recover from the exhaustion attendant upon our enterprise when, being fully prepared at all points, we went off

in search of the buffalo. We shortly discovered them on the top of a hill, which was bare of grass, and to which the fire had driven them. Alex. F. and myself made a large circle to gain the rear of the herd, and the rest placing themselves out of view, waited for our charge. When about half a mile distant, the huge mass set itself in motion, and the herd, composed of several hundreds, took to flight. We were soon among them, and the discharge of fire-arms from all the horse-men was incessant and well-sustained. Alex. F. and myself had each shot two cows, and others of the party had succeeded in bringing down an animal or two, when we all bore down en masse close to the heels of the affrighted buffalo. Jack Frazer's horse stumbled over a calf, fell, and threw his rider headlong from the saddle. Merely casting a glance to ascertain that Jack's neck was not broken, away we sped, until horse after horse gave out, and in a short time I found myself alone with the herd, the nearest of my companions being a quarter of a mile in the rear.

There was a very fine fat cow in the centre of the band, which I made several attempts to separate from the others, but without effect. She kept herself close to an old bull, who, by his enormous size, appeared to be the patriarch of the tribe. Being resolved to get rid of this encumbrance, I shot the old fellow behind the shoulder. The wound was mortal, and the bull left the herd, and went off at a slow gallop in a different direction. As soon as I had fired I slackened the speed of my horse to enable me to reload, determining to pursue the retiring mass, trusting to find the wounded animal on my return. Unfortunately I changed my mind, and rode after the bull to give him the *coup de grace*. I rode carelessly along with but one barrel of my gun loaded, when, upon getting near the buffalo, he turned as quick as lightning to charge. At this critical instant I had risen in my stirrups, and released my hold on the bridle rein. At the moment the buffalo turned, my horse, frightened out of his propriety, gave a tremendous bound side-wise, and, alas! that I shall tell it, threw HAL clear out of the saddle, and within ten feet of the enraged monster! Here was a predicament! Imagine your humble servant face to face with the brute, whose eyes glared through the long hair which garnished his frontlet like coals of fire—the blood streaming from his nostrils. In this desperate situation I made up my mind, that my only chance for escape was to look my enemy in the eye: as any at-

tempt to run would only invite attack. Holding my gun ready cocked to fire if he attempted a rush, I stood firmly, although I must confess I was awfully frightened, and thought my last hour had come! How long he stood there pawing and roaring, I have now not the least idea, but certainly thought he was a long time making his decision what he should do. At last he turned slowly away, and I gave him a parting salute, which let out the little blood left in his body. He went a short distance and fell dead.

I did not fail to render due homage to that Almighty Being who had so wonderfully preserved my life. The frequenter of Nature's vast solitudes may be a wild and reckless, but he cannot be essentially an irreligious man. The solemn silence of forest and prairie—the unseen dangers which are incident to this mode of life, and the consciousness that Providence alone can avert them; all these have the effect to lead even the thoughtless man, occasionally, to reflection.

The only one of the party within view now came up. I was so near the buffalo when dismounted, that he thought I had struck him with the barrels of my gun. I despatched him in search of my horse, which, as is usual in such cases, had followed the herd of buffalo at full speed. I now felt much pain in one of my feet, which had received a serious blow when I fell. I had to use my hunting knife to free me from sock and moc[c]asin, and in ten minutes I was unable to walk, or even stand without support. Knowing the man who had gone after my horse to be a mere tyro in woodcraft, I feared he would not be able to find his way back to me, and being ten miles from camp, with no fuel to light a fire, and clad in scanty Indian costume, the prospect of spending a cold October night where I was, was any thing but agreeable. I had no other alternative than to load my gun heavily with powder, and discharge it in quick succession, hoping that some of my comrades would hear the reports and come to my aid. After a short time spent in this pleasant exercise, I perceived Jack Frazer, who, having recovered his horse, was looking for the rest of the party, when my gun attracted his attention. I despatched him after the missing man, and he soon returned with him and my horse. When I mounted it was with difficulty I could support myself in the saddle.

On our way to camp, we discovered a single buffalo cow feeding. Jack started off in pursuit, and I had the pleasure of witnessing a most

beautiful chase, albeit unable to take part in it. The cow made for the height of land opposite, and as she reached the summit Jack overtook her, when she turned and charged him furiously. I thought it was all over with him, for the animal was within three feet when he discharged his gun. I saw her fall before the report of his gun reached my ears: the ball had broken her neck. Had it taken effect in any other part, Jack must have been seriously injured, if not killed.

When we got to the camping ground, all the party were assembled. The injury I had received was of too serious a nature to allow of rest. I passed a sleepless night, and being satisfied that it was necessary to have surgical assistance as soon as possible, I determined to return home — offering to leave four men with Alex. and Jack, if they were disposed to continue the sport. The disappointment was a serious one, but my hunting companions refused to leave me, and it was arranged that the next day should be employed in securing the meat of the buffalo killed, and the day following we should leave for home.

In the morning, while the men went in search of the meat, we rode over to get a view of “Minday Mecoche Wakkon,” or “Lake of the Spirit Land,” already mentioned. This beautiful sheet of water has an island in it, which the Sioux Indians never venture upon — as they believe it to be the residence of demons. Their traditions say, that in days of yore, several of that tribe landed upon the island from a canoe, when they were instantly seized and devoured. Hence the name. We saw several others disporting themselves in the Lake, apparently not much afraid of us, or of the spirits of the island.

When all was ready for our departure homewards, I told my companions that as our progress would be necessarily slow with the loaded carts, they would have time to scan the country on either side of us, and perhaps find buffalo, and they could easily rejoin us at night. This plan suited them well, and they were off bright and early, while we retraced our trail — myself on horseback, leading the procession. About noon I perceived, directly in our line of march, a large herd of elk, and I made a signal to the men to halt. I then despatched them to give the elk a volley, bidding them to be very careful in approaching, while I, with my game leg, rode to windward to endeavor to get a shot as they passed. Having ensconced myself snugly in ambush, I presently heard a rustling in the bushes, and a huge buck came bounding out close to me. I could have keeled him

over with a load of No. 6, but I forbore to pull trigger on him, lest I should spoil the sport of my party, and he got safely off. In two minutes after the whole herd of elk went dashing past, but at too great a distance for me to shoot. The men, as I feared, made a bungling attempt to get near the elk, and had been discovered. There must have been a hundred or more in this band, and we watched their movements with lively pleasure as they bounded over the prairie. Alex. F. and Jack Frazer joined us in the evening, having three buffalo tails pendant at their belts—trophies of the number slain.— They had fallen in with several large droves of buffalo, and might have killed many more, but, as the meat could not be taken, they very properly abstained from useless slaughter.

We hastened homewards as fast as our trammelled condition would allow, only now and then shooting a few ducks or other wild fowl, wherewith to make a *bouillon* in the evening. On the 22d day after our departure from home, we reached our domicils, having in the interval killed 16 buffalo, 3 elk, 8 raccoons, 12 wolves, 7 geese, 244 ducks, and 80 grouse, besides sundry other small snaps not worth recording.

When I next go on a buffalo hunt,

“May you be there to see.”



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