

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

SIBLEY AS A WILD GAME CONSERVATIONIST

When Henry H. Sibley arrived in Minnesota in 1834, he found himself in a hunter's paradise. The lakes and streams were alive with aquatic fowl, the prairies abounded in upland game birds, the woods were full of deer and small game, and over the plains a short distance to the west roamed great herds of buffaloes. The only human enemies of all these wild creatures were a handful of soldiers and traders living at or in the vicinity of Fort Snelling, occasional hunters from the East, and the red men, who depended largely upon game for food. Twenty-two years later, when Sibley wrote the following article, the situation had changed radically, for Minnesota had become the territory that he pictures, with a growing white population and thousands of resident hunters. That they slaughtered game without regard to the season or their needs was looked upon by Sibley, who was one of the most enthusiastic of Minnesota's pioneer hunters, as a subject for legislative action.

It is significant that in March, 1858, less than two years after Sibley wrote this appeal for the conservation of wild life in the West, the first Minnesota game law was passed.¹ In the interval he had been elected governor of Minnesota, though he did not take office until after the admission of the state on May 11, 1858. He doubtless had a hand, however, in the drafting of the law, which prohibited the killing of deer and elk between February 1 and September 1, and of grouse, prairie chickens, partridges, and quail from February 15 to July 15. Not until 1871 was the killing of upland game birds "except by shooting them with a gun" forbidden, and no protection was provided for aquatic fowl until 1877.

¹ Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1858, p. 40.

[From *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, 1:126 (October 25, 1856).]

GAME IN THE WEST

Written expressly for "Porter's Spirit."

By one of the "Old Guard."

MENDOTA, Minnesota Ter., *August 28, 1856.*

MY OLD FRIEND PORTER:—

I have it from undoubted authority that you are about to sever your long connection with the old "Spirit," with a view to the establishment of another sporting paper to meet the peculiar wants and wishes of that fast animal "Young America." As one of your old friends and correspondents, I greet you heartily, and wish you a full measure of success in the new enterprise; and although many long months have passed since Hal a Dacotah, last paid his respects to your readers, he must now occasionally lay aside the cares of business, and dress up for "Porter's Spirit" some of his experiences in the field.²

It is high time, indeed, that our sporting friends, who in days of yore, were wont to commune together through the medium of the "Spirit of the Times," should do their part in restoring field sports to their ancient popularity, and unite with their brethren of the trigger throughout the country, in putting down the miserable pot-hunting practices, which, unless soon repressed, will result in the extinction of the game of America. True, the onward march of civilization—the heavy and ceaseless tramp of the tens of thousands of white men who are seeking a home in the "Far West," necessarily results in forcing the larger animals, such as the buffalo and elk, farther and farther towards the Stony Mountains, to be met and finally exterminated by the pale faces from the Pacific; but so much more desirable is it, therefore, that the deer and smaller quadrupeds, and the feathered game, should be protected from wanton slaughter, by stringent laws enforced by an enlightened public opinion. It is disgusting to every lover of fair play to witness the ravages committed by the pot-hunter, who coolly murders the deer by torch-light from a dug-out or canoe, during the summer months, or who entraps the grouse and the

² Sibley had been a frequent contributor to the *Spirit of the Times*, writing under the pseudonym here used, "Hal a Dacotah." The first issue of *Porter's Spirit of the Times* appeared on September 6, 1856, with William T. Porter, to whom Sibley addressed this communication, as associate editor.

quail in his villainous nets, for the sake of filthy lucre. Let the game in the proper season be open to every one alike, to be destroyed in a legitimate way, for I am in favor of the largest liberty in that respect, and opposed to all enactments in favor of any privileged class; but no member of the community should be permitted to slaughter wild animals, the flesh of which, when in season, is designed for the food of man, at a period of the year when it is unfit for that purpose. I charge you, friend P., "an[d] you love me," to rebuke and denounce the whole tribe of pestiferous animals, who sport with the lives of little birds merely to gratify a propensity for useless shedding of blood, and who crawl stealthily upon a covey of grouse or bevy of quail, which are huddling closely together on a fence-rail, on a cold December day, merely to boast of having massacred a dozen of his shivering and unsuspecting prey at a single shot. If chronicled at all, such a performance should be stigmatised as a disregard of manly sport, and as displaying on the part of the actor, a total want of kindly and humanizing instincts.

Having now vented my wrath, which has been long bottled up for a proper occasion, *Je reviens a mes moutons*. In our happy and beautiful Territory, where we have no bloody Kansas scenes to deplore, there yet roam the buffalo and the elk, but they are gradually retiring before the avalanche of white settlers who are precipitating themselves upon us. It is probable that many of your readers have but a faint perception of the process, by which the mighty north-west is transformed from a wilderness into a populous State, in an incredibly short space of time. Let them picture to themselves a magnificent prairie, studded with fine lakes, and interspersed with lux[ur]iant groves of oak and other timber, with a camp composed of conical skin lodges in the distance, and a troop of daring Dacotah horsemen, accompanied by a single white man, (your friend Hal,) urging the chase of a herd of buffalo—let them regard that as a true scene of 1850, and even later—and then ask them to call up before them the same landscape of 1856, and from the picture will have vanished Indian men, women, and children, buffalo, dogs and lodges, leaving the solitary white man to gaze with amazement, not untinged with melancholy, upon thriving villages, countless farms, teeming with laborers engaged in securing the abundant harvest, and all the other evidences of happiness and comfort which characterize the settlements

of juvenile America. Let them conceive the whole vast area of more than 160,000 square miles, a very small part of which they have looked upon, as containing six thousand whites, all told, in 1850, and of that same area six years later, with a population of two hundred thousand of the prime men, women, and children of the whole land,³ and they will be able to realize, to some extent, how Minnesota has been changed as by the wand of a magician, and how it is that the infant communities of the "Great West" spring into full strength and manhood almost as instantaneously, as armed Minerva from the head of Jove.

To an old hunter like myself, accustomed to the solitude of forest and prairie, these changes are, as I have before hinted, not unattended with the lingering regret which we feel, when some fair but wild vision disappears suddenly from our enraptured view. The Indians with whom I lived and hunted for so many years, where are they? The powerful and haughty tribe of Dacotahs who possessed the fair land, and boasted that they were, and ever would remain its only masters; what is their fate? Turn to the history of the Six Nations, and of the other bands whose graves are numberless on both sides of the Alleghanies, and you will need but little aid from the imagination to enable you to reply correctly to such interrogatories. Broken treaties and unperformed promises on the part of the government, and the presence of a power which the Indians feel their inability to resist—these are but a repetition of the old story, and the humbled and degraded Dacotahs can look for no redress of their grievances on this side of the "spirit land." Their country has passed into the possession of a race who can appreciate its beauties and develop its riches, and my only regret is that the government and its agents have failed to use the opportunities presented to them, to place the poor Indians in a position to be treated kindly and fairly, and to be protected in the possession of the rights secured to them by solemn treaty.

But I will no longer pursue a strain so lugubrious. Let us leave the settlement of these questions in the hand of the Great Father of all.

Since the removal of the larger game from my old hunting-grounds, I have been obliged to content myself with less exciting

³ Sibley's estimate of the Minnesota population in 1856 is double the figure given by Dr. Folwell in his *History of Minnesota*, 1: 360 (St. Paul, 1921).

sport. I am now paying due attention to the grouse, which are full-fledged and numerous. As they are deprived of life, *secundum artem*, I imagine the poor things pass out of existence with a feeling of consolation that they have been dealt with scientifically and artistically, and not been subjected to the tender mercies of the mere pot-hunter. The season for deer and for water-fowl is fast advancing, and I hope I shall be about when the time comes. Ducks of almost every variety are abundant in this region in the spring and fall. I recollect, when I was in your sanctum on one occasion several years ago, that some wiseacre insisted, in my presence, that no veritable canvas-backs were ever to be found so far inland as the Upper Mississippi. I intimated, in my civil way, that the gentleman was mistaken, and when I returned home I took some pains to prove my assertion by knocking over a few individual canvas-backs, and forwarding to our friend "Frank Forester" a male and female, duly prepared, and it is quite possible they are still to be found at "the Cedars."⁴ If you hereafter have the question mooted in your hearing, whether we have or have not the Simon Pures, please refer the doubters to "Frank," who will carefully exhibit the proofs.

But this rambling epistle has already been extended beyond proper limits, and I close by repeating my hearty wishes for the full success of "PORTER'S SPIRIT."

Thine as of old,

HAL A DACOTAH.

N. B. — Since the foregoing was committed to paper, I have received the first number of "PORTER'S SPIRIT," and have perused its clear and well-printed pages with great satisfaction. Really it "out Herod's Herod," and I almost shrink from thrusting myself forward into so brilliant a galaxy of correspondence, with "Frank Forester" at the head.⁵ However, my modesty goes to the wall for the nonce, and I must try to do better by and by. "Cor de Chasse" is *some* for digging out the brains of a live panther, by thrusting a buck-horn into his right eye! Whew!

⁴ "Frank Forester" was the pen name used by Henry William Herbert when writing about American field sports. He was the foremost writer of his day on this subject. His home, "The Cedars," a cottage in a wooded retreat on the Passaic River near Newark, was built in 1845.

⁵ The opening installment of a romantic tale entitled "Omémees, The Young Pigeon of the Ojibwais," written by Herbert and published under his own name, appeared in the first issue of the new periodical.



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