

# BIG GAME HUNTER,



JOHN T. FLANAGAN

ON APRIL 15, 1843, William T. Porter published the following notice in his *Spirit of the Times*, a New York weekly dedicated to the theater, the turf, and outdoor sports in general: "*Hunting Excursion to the Red Cedar*. — In another page will be found a spirited and graphic account of a Hunt in the Far West, over 2000 miles above New Orleans, and 500 miles from *any where else?*" Our gifted correspondent, who holds a high station under Government, frequently makes excursions many hundreds of miles beyond the farthest confines of civilization, and his sketches therefore not only abound with incidents of a thrilling nature, but they serve to show the sort of life some of our gallant officers (of the Army) lead in the remote wilds of the West. There has been a long interval between the receipt of these sketches, as may be imagined, when we inform our readers that our correspondent is hunting, not unfrequently, eight hundred miles from a post office! His last letter is dated St. Peters, near the Falls of St. Anthony, on the Upper Mississippi, from

whence we hope soon to receive another epistle."<sup>1</sup>

The "gifted correspondent" in question signed himself "Hal, a Dacotah" and was, of course, Henry Hastings Sibley, fur trader, military officer, and the first governor of Minnesota. His public career is well known; his exploits as a big game hunter are perhaps less familiar.<sup>2</sup>

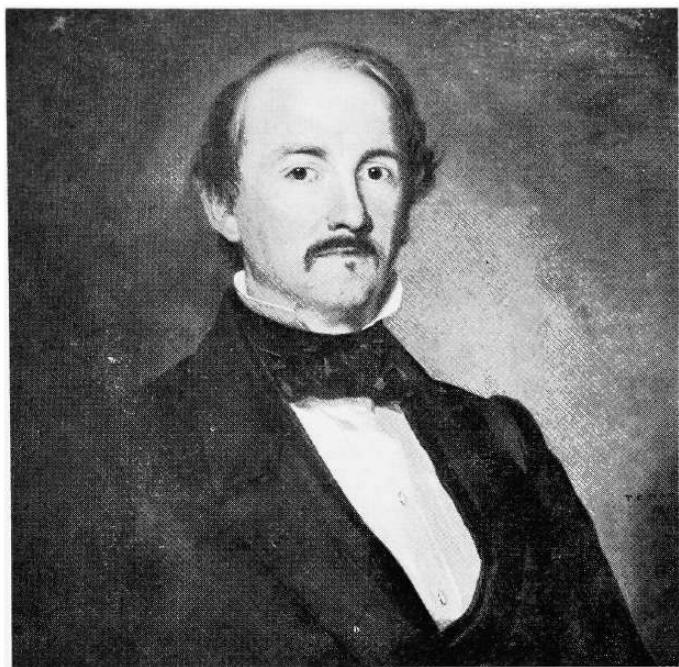
Sibley was a frequent contributor to Porter's periodical. Nine separate letters appeared in the *Spirit of the Times* from 1842 to 1851, and two additional articles were published in a sequel to the first journal, *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, in 1856 and 1857. These narratives concern Sibley's hunting expeditions in central and southwestern Minnesota in the 1840s when he was for a time an agent of the American Fur Company in partnership with Hercules L. Dousman

<sup>1</sup> *Spirit of the Times*, 13:73 (April 15, 1843). Another editorial note had appeared in the previous issue, 13:61 (April 8, 1843): "H.H.S. — Your second dispatch, via Fort Snelling, will appear next week. We are gratified that when hunting a thousand miles from civilization, you did not forget 'the Tall man of the Spirit.'" For a full account of Porter and his publications, see Norris W. Yates, *William T. Porter and the Spirit of the Times* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> An excellent brief summary of Sibley's career appears in Theodore C. Blegen, "Henry H. Sibley, Pioneer of Culture and Frontier Author," in *Minnesota History*, 15:382-394 (December, 1934).

---

Mr. Flanagan, professor of English at the University of Illinois and a long-time contributor to this magazine, is currently working on an anthology of travel writings on western waters as they appeared in *Spirit of the Times*.



Henry H. Sibley,  
from an oil painting  
by T. C. Healy, 1860

and Joseph Rolette and stationed at Mendota with particular responsibility for the Indian trade north of Lake Pepin.<sup>3</sup>

Periodically Sibley would engage in safaris across the western prairies, often joining Sioux hunting parties or even attaching himself to nomadic Indian villages. As a consequence, many comments on Indian life and customs creep into his dispatches to the New York periodical, but primarily they are accounts of big game hunting. In the century and a quarter that have passed since Sibley followed the spoor of the larger quadrupeds, buffalo and elk have disappeared from the Minnesota scene except for zoos, and the duck and deer population has decreased.<sup>4</sup>

Sibley's first letter to the *Spirit* appeared on April 16, 1842, and refers to a trip taken in the fall of 1839. The hunting party included eight men, five "gentry" (to use Sibley's term) and three French Canadians, who went along chiefly as horse wranglers and cooks. Besides Sibley himself there were his frequent hunting companion, Alexander Faribault, a fur trader with the Sioux in the Minnesota and Cannon River valleys; Joseph "Jack" Frazer, the half-Scot, half-Sioux scout

also known as "Iron Face"; and Lieutenant John C. Frémont who had accompanied Joseph N. Nicollet's 1839 scientific expedition and joined the hunting party as therapy for ill health.<sup>5</sup> Another hunter, identified only as "W" in the style typical of the *Spirit*,

<sup>3</sup> An incomplete list of Sibley's contributions appears in Selma P. Larsen, "Sporting Magazines," in *Minnesota History*, 16:187-191 (June, 1935). Sibley subscribed to the *Spirit* as early as 1839. Blegen, in *Minnesota History*, 15:384. See also Erling Jorstad, "Portrait of the West: The Adventure Stories of Henry Hastings Sibley," in *Tradition*, October, 1960, p. 26-37. Dousman (1800-1868) became a clerk in 1826 and later chief agent of the American Fur Company at Prairie du Chien; Rolette (1781-1842) preceded Dousman at that post. *Dictionary of Wisconsin Biography*, 107, 305 (Madison, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> On deer population, see Minnesota Department of Conservation, *The White-Tailed Deer of Minnesota*, 1 (*Technical Bulletin* No. 5 — St. Paul, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> *Spirit*, 12:73 (April 16, 1842). On Frazer, see Theodore C. Blegen and Sarah A. Davidson, eds., *Iron Face* (Chicago, 1950). Frémont says that an entire Indian village accompanied the party. John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, 37 (Chicago, New York, 1887). Two letters written by Sibley seem to bear this out. See Sibley to Frederic B. Sibley, April 21, 1839, and to Solomon Sibley, November 5, 1839, original letters in the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit (photocopies in the Sibley Papers, Minnesota Historical Society).

was William C. Forbes, one of Sibley's clerks at Mendota who later became the postmaster of St. Paul.

The party was well armed with short, heavy rifles, double-barreled guns, single-barreled flintlocks, tomahawks, and hunting knives. Two Irish wolfhounds accompanied the hunters; one of them, Lion, had been presented to Sibley by Captain Martin Scott, a famous army marksman who was stationed at Fort Snelling for a number of years and eventually was killed in the Mexican War.<sup>6</sup>

Sibley described his route as about one hundred miles westward from the Falls of St. Anthony and then about twice as far southwest to the territory of the Red Cedar River. This stream, now known simply as the Cedar River, rises in Dodge County and joins the Iowa River. Game was plentiful. Sibley described the method of travel and added that despite his express prohibition of liquor the French Canadian George had brought along a keg of "good old fourth proof cognac" which was gradually disposed of.<sup>7</sup>

A discussion of various hunting practices follows, and Sibley observed that the Indians of the Northwest did not normally engage in still hunting for deer. Rather, "They plunge into the thickets at full speed, and when a deer is roused from its hiding place his escape is almost impossible, for if unsuccessful by the first shot, he can proceed in no direction without running the gauntlet of the outlyers, who skirt the prairies in all quarters." In winter, on the other hand, the method differed. Sioux hunters would normally circle a thicket into which they had

trailed a deer to be sure he had not passed through it. "Being satisfied on this point, he [*the hunter*] continues to run round the thicket, making as much cracking of branches as possible, and gradually contracting the circle until he can perceive the deer in its hiding place, and is sufficiently near to be certain of his aim." The hunter must never stop his circling and must be ready to shoot instantly.<sup>8</sup>

Sibley commented on a camp rule whereby the successful hunter appropriated the skin and a portion of the meat of the animal after which the rest was divided. The party killed two elk but took only the marrow bones and a few pounds of flesh from the carcasses. One midnight a sudden prairie fire enveloped the camp, and the hunters had to kindle a counter blaze in order to protect themselves. Sibley ended his letter with the statement that fur company business necessitated his presence, along with that of Frazer and Frémont, at Prairie du Chien.

THE SECOND SKETCH, published on April 15, 1843, chronicles the trip to the Mississippi. En route the party killed a bear that was so large it reminded Sibley of the "Big Bear of Arkansas," the subject of a famous frontier tale by Thomas B. Thorpe which had appeared in the *Spirit* on March 27, 1841. The hunters also encountered two Winnebago Indians who invited them to visit their camp. Providentially Sibley's group declined. It was learned later that a marauding band of Fox Indians had fallen on the unsuspecting Winnebago and killed some twenty-two of the party. The letter terminates with the arrival of the hunters at Painted Rock near Prairie du Chien.<sup>9</sup>

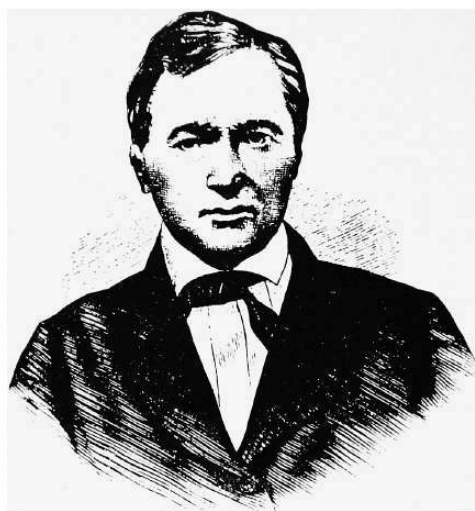
The next installment of Sibley's narrative about his trip to the Red Cedar area of Iowa Territory was published in the *Spirit* on June 17, 1843, and included Sibley's praises for the endurance of the Canadian voyageurs who accompanied him. The Indians with whom he was hunting killed approximately a thousand deer. Sibley also reported

<sup>6</sup>The frontier tall tale about a raccoon which offered to climb down a tree rather than face the hunter's gun is usually told about Scott. J. F. Williams, "Memoir of Capt. Martin Scott," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:180-187 (St. Paul, 1880). Sibley says that the dog Lion was "half Irish wolf-dog and half Scotch grey-hound." Sibley to Fred-eric Sibley, April 21, 1839, in the Sibley Papers.

<sup>7</sup>*Spirit*, 12:74. Sibley must have meant "south-east to the territory of the Red Cedar River."

<sup>8</sup>*Spirit*, 12:74.

<sup>9</sup>*Spirit*, 13:79 (April 15, 1843).



Alexander Faribault

seeing an enormous herd of elk, six to seven hundred moving in a column half a mile long. The party killed some of the elk but soon discontinued shooting, Sibley claimed, since "it would have been unsportsman-like, to say nothing of its inhumanity, to have continued the slaughter of these splendid creatures."<sup>10</sup>

The final account of hunting in the Red Cedar area, an expedition which apparently lasted five months, appeared in the *Spirit* of November 25, 1843. Sibley this time started from his Mendota home, accompanied by a large band of Sioux with whom he had some kind of working agreement. At a barbecue before departing he spoke to some 150 to 200 men, explaining his plans and exacting promises to remain with him during the winter. Six white men were involved — Sibley and his friend Alexander Faribault and four French Canadians (two of them named George and Gamelle). Sibley was careful to establish definite rules. Since the expedition included women and children as well as hunters, progress was slow. Eight days were required even to reach hunting territory. A system of "soldiers" was set up to police the camp properly and to see that game was not destroyed heedlessly. Even so, the slaughter was enormous. On October 26, 1839, the party killed ninety-three deer, six elk, and

two bears. "Of hundreds of deer destroyed, only the skin and a few pounds of the best parts of the flesh were taken by the hunters." The soldiers were strict and faithful in their roles, Sibley said, and did not permit irresponsible hunting or excessive pursuit of game.<sup>11</sup>

Sibley told several anecdotes. One concerned an Indian youth named Rocque who successfully pursued a mother bear into her den and killed her. Another described Sibley's own peril when a mortally wounded elk charged him and he barely escaped the animal's horns. Perhaps the climax of the narrative came when a few hunters encountered a large herd of elk but agreed not to attack the animals because the hunting party itself was scattered. For a long time the Indians and the white sportsmen watched the elk. "It was a glorious sight. The column of these animals must have extended at least a mile in a straight line, and consisted of more than a thousand." That night, unfortunately, a violent storm broke, scattered the herd, and even obliterated most of the tracks. Next day it was impossible to overtake the animals.<sup>12</sup>

SIBLEY'S best-known account of a hunting expedition appeared in the *Spirit* of April 11, 1846.<sup>13</sup> Porter appended an editorial note in the same issue of the periodical: "A Buffalo and Elk Hunt in 1842. — We heartily commend to each of our readers an original article under this head in today's paper. For twelve years past the writer has been residing on the west side of the Mississippi, during which period he has spent a great portion of his time hunting Buffalo and other game on the boundless prairies between that river and the Rocky Moun-

<sup>10</sup> *Spirit*, 13:187 (June 17, 1843).

<sup>11</sup> *Spirit*, 13:457 (November 25, 1843).

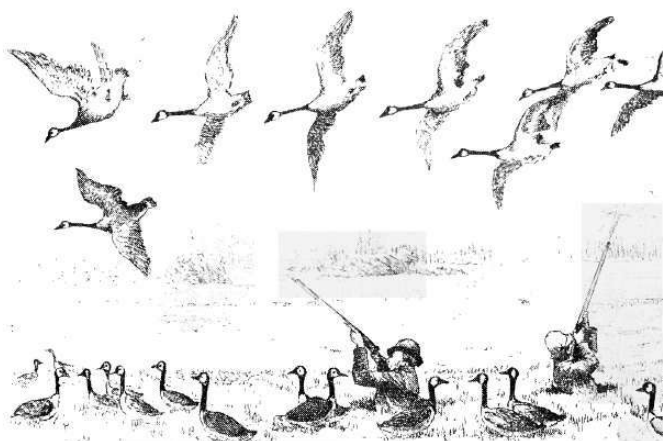
<sup>12</sup> *Spirit*, 13:458.

<sup>13</sup> This sketch has been reprinted several times. See, for example, Peter Hawker, *Instructions to Young Sportsmen, in All that Relates to Guns and Shooting*, 265–273 (Philadelphia, 1853); Blegen, in *Minnesota History*, 15:385; and John T. Flanagan, ed., *America is West*, 150–157 (Minneapolis, 1945).

tains. 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."<sup>14</sup>

Sibley began his story by alluding to his twelve years of hunting experience on the western prairies. During this period, he asserted, the big game herds had been decimated, particularly by the improvident hunting methods of the Indians who killed many more animals than they could use. Even in 1846 he predicted the eventual disappearance of the buffalo except perhaps in New Mexico and in the foothills of the Rockies. This note of dismay over the imminent extinction of big game hunting he would sound again in later writings.

BUT HIS TRIP of three weeks in 1842 was eminently successful. Once again his hunting companions were Alexander Faribault and Jack Frazer, while five Canadians were in charge of eight horses and carts with supplies. The party traveled southwestward to buffalo land in the vicinity of what Sibley called the Lake of the Spirit Land, the modern Spirit Lake of northwestern Iowa.



*Hunting geese*

Sibley was strongly impressed by the beauty of the lake, which he compared to the Glimmerglass (Lake Otsego, New York) of James Fenimore Cooper's fiction. Waterfowl proved abundant and furnished incidental sport and provisions en route. "One of the party knocked over twenty ducks at a single shot, nineteen of which were secured." The expert marksman was undoubtedly Sibley himself since little is said of Faribault's skill with firearms and Frazer was celebrated as a poor shot.<sup>15</sup>

After seven days of travel the hunters spotted several elk, which they approached with extreme caution. First they wormed their way toward the quarry with Indian stealth, but after about a half mile the prairie became marshy. "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." Finally the hunters reached a spot within sixty yards of the elk, at which point they rose and fired, killing three. Sibley and Faribault each killed an animal with a first shot; the two both shot at a third. "Jack F., who sported a single barrel, made a clean miss, as usual." Without bothering to butcher the animals, Sibley remounted his horse and pursued the balance of the herd. After a chase of six miles he was able to discharge his revolver at a

<sup>14</sup> *Spirit*, 16:78 (April 11, 1846).

<sup>15</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.



female elk only ten feet away. The animal, although severely wounded, escaped. Only then did the hunters desist from further killing and turn their attention to cutting the meat into thin slices and curing it by means of a fire.<sup>16</sup>

Other game was available, too. "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." Indeed at a body of water which Sibley termed Lac Blanc the party saw innumerable waterfowl. Geese, mallards, and swans were in such great supply that Sibley avowed a good shot could have killed a thousand a day. But the hunters were in quest of still bigger game and shot only enough birds to supply the table.<sup>17</sup>

Somewhat later the party came across three buffalo. Riding the fleetest horses, Faribault and Sibley each killed one buffalo, but the third bull escaped. Unfortunately the meat of the animals could not be secured, since Indians had ignited the prairie and the fire quickly became menacing. Sibley's words are vivid: "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." Even a prairie fire did not impede the pursuit of other buffalo, however, for Sibley and Faribault soon caught up with a herd of several hundred and each killed two cows.<sup>18</sup>

Then came two incidents in rapid succession which eventually ended the hunt. Jack Frazer's horse stumbled and threw its rider, effectively putting him *hors de combat*. Sibley, having wounded an old bull he called the patriarch of the tribe, followed with the intention of dispatching him. At a critical moment the bull turned on his pursuer, frightening Sibley's horse. Like Frazer in-

stants earlier, Sibley was tossed out of the saddle and catapulted to within ten feet of the buffalo, "whose eyes glared through the long hair which garnished his frontlet like coals of fire—the blood streaming from his nostrils." Sibley had not thought to reload both barrels of his gun. For a long moment he stood petrified, fearful that the bull would rush him. But eventually the buffalo turned, and Sibley killed him with his remaining charge.<sup>19</sup>

In the fall from his horse Sibley had injured his foot, and medical attention seemed imperative. Reluctantly he decided to forego further hunting and return to Mendota. His associates had located additional buffalo and might have killed more animals, but Sibley observed that "as the meat could not be taken, they very properly abstained from useless slaughter." Even so the booty of this truncated hunt was impressive. In three weeks, including travel time, the party had killed "16 buffalo, 3 elk, 8 raccoons, 12 wolves, 7 geese, 244 ducks, and 80 grouse, besides sundry other small snaps not worth recording." Sibley would not again have the chance to be so lethal a marksman.<sup>20</sup>

ABOUT A YEAR later Sibley contributed to the *Spirit* a more general article entitled "Hunting in the Western Prairies."<sup>21</sup> Here he wrote chiefly of his experiences with a hunting party of Sioux whom he had temporarily joined. This time he was impressed with the methods employed by the Indians to avoid excessive slaughter of game animals. Again "soldiers" were chosen and given arbitrary authority. Boundaries were established beyond which there could be no hunting, and penalties for violators were harsh. The soldiers could seize or mutilate the weapons of the transgressors, slash the

<sup>16</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.

<sup>17</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.

<sup>18</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.

<sup>19</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.

<sup>20</sup> *Spirit*, 16:73.

<sup>21</sup> *Spirit*, 17:87 (April 17, 1847). This account was reprinted in Hawker, *Instructions to Young Sportsmen*, 393–423.



*Peter Rindisbacher's version of a buffalo hunting technique*

lodges, or even beat the offenders with sticks or bows.

Sibley himself, following his dog Lion on the tracks of a wounded deer, inadvertently went beyond the prescribed area and was detected by a soldier. He retained his gun only by good chance but was deprived of his fur cap in freezing weather. Later Sibley, in a reversal of roles, also acted as a soldier, apprehended a violator, and broke off the ramrod in the man's gun. Incidentally he described his personal armament at this time as a rifle, a double-barreled gun, and a brace of pistols.

"Sketches of Indian Warfare," published in the *Spirit* on March 11, 1848, does not concern hunting but deals with the Sioux-Chippewa hostilities in 1839 when a large assemblage of both tribes was camped at Fort Snelling. After relatively peaceful ath-

letic contests, such as foot races on which the braves gambled vigorously, bad blood developed and a Sioux war party not only followed the departing Chippewa to the Rum River region but launched a murderous attack. Sibley claimed that he saw the triumphant Sioux return "bearing with them full a hundred scalps."<sup>22</sup>

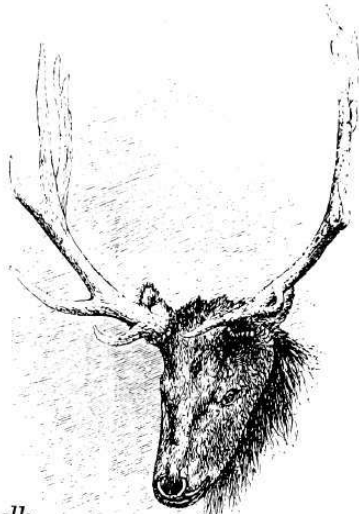
One of Sibley's richest articles in its details of prairie travel and hunting procedure is "Hunting in the Northwest," which appeared in the *Spirit* on April 1, 1848. Accompanied by seven men (he names as his companions Oliver F., Desmarais, and several Canadians), Sibley strictly limited his supplies and planned to live off the country. His route took him west of the Mississippi River and across the Crow River (as he put it, north of the forty-fifth parallel of latitude). At one point the party crossed the Red River oxcart trail. Once again Sibley's group overtook a large Sioux hunting party from whose number he recruited Dowan, or Singer, to act as a guide. The sportsmen camped near the Indian wigwams and found nocturnal rest was not always quiet since their ears "were much affected by the outrageous confusion of loud sounds inseparable from a large Indian camp, made up in

<sup>22</sup> *Spirit*, 18:25 (March 11, 1848). Sibley mistakenly gives the year as 1840. See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:154-157 (St. Paul, 1956); Edward D. Neill, "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2:138 (St. Paul, 1889); and Samuel W. Pond, "Indian Warfare in Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:131 (St. Paul, 1880).

part of the wailing of women for their dead friends, the crying of numberless children, the howling of dogs, and last but not least, the hoarse voices of those male adults who were engaged in their peculiar religious exercises. These were continued through the live long night, and we arose early from our hard couches, entirely un-refreshed by sleep, and anxious for a speedy departure from so clamorous a neighborhood.”<sup>23</sup>

Sibley observed that the moist rich soil was unfavorable for the pursuit of elk and buffalo; on the other hand, he was aware of the trek of various bears through the region since the animals had broken off oak limbs and bushes in quest of acorns and wild plums. Hunting was sporadically successful. Once Sibley shot four geese at a single discharge. A herd of forty or fifty elk was sighted, but the animals proved restless and not easily approachable. Later, when Sibley drew up within range of a stag and attempted a shot, his gun missed fire. Sibley discharged both barrels at a female elk and wounded her mortally, but the animal disappeared into a thicket and could not be secured. At night, with no substantial meat in camp, the hunters had to kill ruffed grouse for food. Substituting number four shot for balls in their guns, they quickly shot fifteen of the foolish birds from the tree branches where they were roosting. This killing embarrassed Sibley as being unsportsmanlike although necessary: “we richly deserved cobbing for so vile a departure from the prescribed rules, which should govern all true-hearted sportsmen.” A little later the party shot a bear and made good use of the meat during a snowstorm which immobilized them. Oliver F., Sibley reported, made away with the meat on five whole ribs at a single meal.<sup>24</sup>

Sibley’s vain attempt to reach the herd of elk led him to comment on the agility of these animals and on the qualities required of horses used in prairie hunting. Elk were fleet, and only horses of good speed and endurance could keep up with them, whereas the ordinary horse was ade-



*An elk*

quate for the pursuit of buffalo. “Another peculiarity of the elk is, that they emit an odor which is extremely offensive to untrained horses, so much so, that the hunter who is not accustomed to this sport, will be surprised to find that his good steed, which will run alongside of buffalo without betraying any symptom of terror, cannot by any persuasion be forced near a herd of the former. This is particularly strange, as the elk is far less formidable in appearance and in fact, than the buffalo.”<sup>25</sup>

In general, big game was less abundant than the party had anticipated. The hunters gradually worked their way northwest until the woods merged with the prairie region. Sibley referred to a kind of broad approach to the Red River of the North which the Indians termed the Gate or Passage. An anecdote at the end of the article reveals some of the difficulties of big game hunting on the prairies. Sibley had spotted a large herd of elk in a location where cover for the hunter was sparse. It was first necessary to make a semicircle of some three miles. Sibley proceeded cautiously. “Worming myself along with as much rapidity as due caution would permit, over elevations of ground, and at other times through swamps containing a foot or more of water, it took me at least an hour to reach a spot where I could

<sup>23</sup> *Spirit*, 18:66 (April 1, 1848).

<sup>24</sup> *Spirit*, 18:67.

<sup>25</sup> *Spirit*, 18:67.



exchange my prostrate position for one better adapted for celerity of approach." At length within fifty yards of his quarry Sibley arose to shoot, but before he could aim his gun the guide Dowan, who had also been stalking the game, suddenly leaped out from a neighboring cover and fired wildly. The elk fled. Sibley, in a towering rage, pursued the fleeing Sioux for a quarter of a mile but could not overtake him. Later, his ire having cooled in camp, he "let him off without inflicting other injury than a sound rating, interlarded with not a few Sioux terms of abuse, of which very fortunately, I was perfect master." Sibley added a wry corollary to this incident: "never allow an Indian to precede you in approaching game, but keep him attached to your person by a stout cord."<sup>26</sup>

Sibley terminated his narrative by reflecting on the fascination of hunting in the wilderness and by alluding to the unbroken silence, the vast space, and the occasional danger. No man who ever yielded to such a lure, he claimed, "can disenthral himself from the seductions of this mode of life at his pleasure, and return to the more sedate occupations of civilized society, with any prospect of real enjoyment."<sup>27</sup>

Sibley's final contribution to the *Spirit* was actually a translation of a French priest's hunting story and an account of butcher-

ing and preserving of meat. The Reverend Georges A. Belcourt had long been stationed in the Pembina area and was well acquainted with the métis of the Red River Valley.<sup>28</sup> In a covering letter to William T. Porter, dated from Washington on December 28, 1850, Sibley explained the circumstances: "*My dear P.*—I promised, when I met you in Gotham on my way hither, to renew my contributions to the '*Spirit*,' which have only lately ceased, because of a want of time on my part to devote to that object. In lieu of inflicting upon your readers farther details of my own wild adventures in the Western prairies, I now enclose you a hasty and free translation, made by myself, of part of a letter in the French language, which I found appended to a public document printed for the use of the present Congress, and which contains many of the minutiae of buffalo hunting, never before given to the public."

Sibley continued to say that he was aware that the article might be overly prolix and that Porter was free to delete or to reject it entirely. He also affirmed his personal acquaintanceship with Father Belcourt and praised the athletic abilities of the half-breeds with whom the article dealt: they were "an athletic, powerful race, and are among the best horsemen, and most skilful hunters, in the world." Sibley closed his letter with an inquiry after the health of Frank Forester and signed himself as usual, Hal, a Dacotah.<sup>29</sup>

IN 1856 Porter lost control of the sporting weekly which he had edited for some twenty-five years and immediately began a sequel which he published until his death. To this magazine, *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, Sibley contributed two additional articles. One, entitled "Game in the West," appeared in the issue of October 25, 1856; the other, entitled "The Three Dacotahs, A Chapter from an Unfinished Work on 'The Early Days of Minnesota,'" was published on January 31, 1857. They are quite different in nature.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Spirit*, 18:67.

<sup>27</sup> *Spirit*, 18:67.

<sup>28</sup> *Spirit*, 20:546 (January 4, 1851). The priest is given as "Rev. M. Belcourt," but the error may have been Porter's, for the name is parenthetically inserted in Sibley's printed letter. See *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:193 (St. Paul, 1902).

<sup>29</sup> *Spirit*, 20:546 (quotations). Sibley's service as delegate to Congress from Minnesota Territory from 1849 to 1858 required his frequent presence in Washington and left him little time either for hunting or for writing about it. Frank Forester was the pseudonym of Henry William Herbert, an English-born journalist and prolific writer on sporting topics. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 8:570 (New York, 1932).

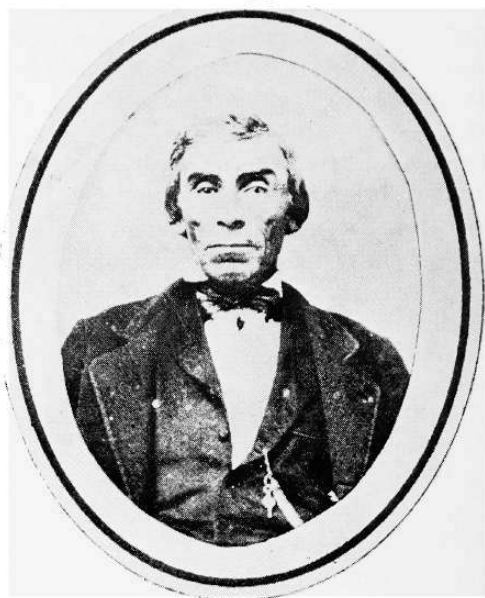
<sup>30</sup> *Porter's Spirit of the Times*, 1:126 (October 25, 1856), 1:345 (January 31, 1857). "Game in the West" was reprinted as "Sibley as a Wild Game Conservationist" in *Minnesota History*, 18:415-419 (December, 1937).

Sibley began his discussion of "Game in the West" by saluting "My Old Friend Porter" on the resumption of his magazine publishing and later praised Porter's brilliant galaxy of correspondents, especially Frank Forester. But the article is less an account of actual hunting than a lament over the disappearance of big game on the prairies and a diatribe against the ruthless killing by market hunters. By 1856 Sibley the hunter had become a staunch conservationist as opposed to unregulated hunting as Judge Temple was to the indiscriminate deer shooting of Leatherstocking. He protested against the killing of game in seasons when the flesh was bad; he reviled pot hunters who killed deer from dugouts or canoes by torchlight in summer and who captured grouse or quail in nets. It was not only poor sportsmanship but equally poor conservation of natural resources which permitted hunters to approach a covey of upland birds huddling against a fence during a winter storm and annihilate the covey.

Since 1850, Sibley pointed out, conditions in Minnesota had changed remarkably. The 160,000 square miles of the territory then had some six thousand white people; six years later he stated that the population had increased to about 200,000 (probably an inflated figure). Elk, buffalo, and Indians had all moved westward and the range of big game had been severely constricted. For him only the grouse season remained, although fortunately ducks were plentiful. Sibley insisted that canvasbacks were still to be shot in Minnesota. He maintained careful records of the game he himself shot. In one three-year period he killed 1,798 ducks.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to compare this achievement with the wild fowl regulations which obtained for the state of Minnesota in the fall of 1968. A duck hunter was allowed only three ducks daily and only six in possession; in addition the taking of certain species was sharply curtailed, with only one mallard and one canvasback to be included in the daily bag.<sup>32</sup>

The last article contributed by Sibley to



Joseph "Jack" Frazer

a Porter periodical has unusual interest, although it has little to do with hunting. Indeed, Porter included a curious editorial note in the previous issue of his magazine in which he praised the article but preserved the author's pseudonymity.

"THE THREE DACOTAHS. — Our inimitable correspondent, HAL A DACOTAH, of the Old Guard, after having been snowed up in Minnesota for some time, gives new signs of life. We are in receipt, by mail, of a chapter from an unpublished novel by his pen, which we shall publish next week, and which equals, in thrilling interest, any Indian incident we ever read. Should the whole work be sustained in the same way,

<sup>31</sup> The population in 1857 was 150,037, according to Joseph A. Wheelock, *Minnesota: Its Place among the States*, 125 (Minnesota Bureau of Statistics, *First Annual Report* — Hartford, Connecticut, 1860). Minnesota's first game law restricted hunters of big game and upland birds to fall and early winter seasons. Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1858, p. 40. On Sibley's game records, see Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State*, 138 (Minneapolis, 1963).

<sup>32</sup> Minnesota Department of Conservation, 1968 *Hunting and Trapping Regulations*, 2n (St. Paul, 1968).

it will have no superior among all that have been produced in this country.”<sup>33</sup>

Porter, unfortunately, was wrong on two counts. Sibley's final contribution to *Porter's Spirit of the Times* was not fiction nor was it part of a longer imaginative work in progress. Indeed, with only a few verbal changes, “The Three Dacotahs” became chapter four, “Dark and Bloody Ground,” in Sibley's biography of Jack Frazer, *Iron Face*.<sup>34</sup>

“The Three Dacotahs” is the account of a raid which three Sioux braves from the Red Wing band made upon the Chippewa living along the river of the same name in Wisconsin. Sibley originally named the warriors Chaskey (first-born), Dowan (singer), and E-ta-pé-tah (fire-face). But in *Iron Face* he changed the identity of two of the three: Chaskey became Hapan (second-born) and, more importantly, E-ta-pé-tah, known for his intrepidity, was revealed as Jack Frazer. At the beginning of the narrative the Sioux hunt elk and deer in Chippewa territory without incident. But becoming more venturesome and more determined to get scalps, they travel further eastward and eventually kill a single Chippewa warrior. Their deed is observed by a large hostile war party, however, and only the fact that a deep ravine separates the two groups gives the Sioux temporary safety. The three cross open prairie into a thick copse where they hide themselves at strategic spots. The Chippewa pursue them but do not charge their stronghold. When a single Chippewa ventures too close he is killed by Chaskey (or Hapan). Under cover of darkness Chaskey scalps his victim, and then the Sioux make good their escape, assured of a jubilant welcome in

their own village. “The scalps, in accordance with custom, were delivered into the possession of two ancient crones, who had recently lost relations in battle, to be by them decorated and painted for the scalp-dance.” It is clear from both narratives that Jack Frazer, the half-breed Sioux, led the foray.<sup>35</sup>

SIBLEY'S LATER CAREER as governor, general, and businessman left little time for field sports even though his passion for hunting remained with him. An incident in his unfinished autobiography clearly reveals how much the sportsman's life appealed to him. Early in 1835, he recalled, he and Alexis Bailly had wandered along the Minnesota River Valley looking for wild fowl. Shortly they spotted five geese on the ice some distance ahead. They attempted to call the geese but had no luck; the distance, 250 yards, made any shot of dubious success. But Sibley was undeterred: “I took a careful aim at the head of the leader, a huge gander, believing that the ball would be depressed in traversing so long a line of sight, and might possibly strike the body of the fowl.” His marksmanship was unexcelled even by Daniel Boone. The gander fell to the ice, its head neatly severed from its body. Sibley then proceeded by means of a pine board, which he pushed ahead of him over the thin ice, to retrieve the bird although he suffered a cold immersion in the process.<sup>36</sup>

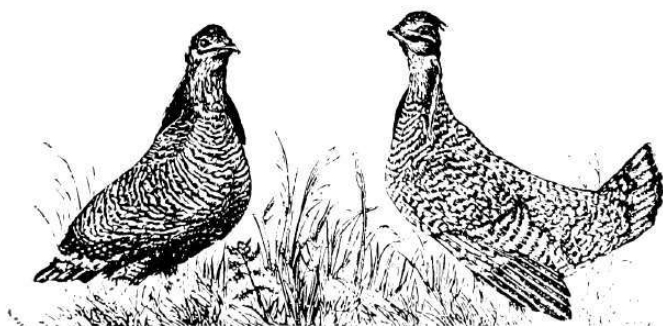
It is also clear, on the other hand, that hunting toward the end of Sibley's life was less attractive than it had been fifty years earlier. In a reminiscent narrative not pub-

<sup>33</sup> *Porter's Spirit*, 1:337 (January 24, 1857).

<sup>34</sup> Blegen and Davidson, eds., *Iron Face*, 35–44.

<sup>35</sup> *Porter's Spirit*, 1:346.

<sup>36</sup> Bailly (1798–1861), Sibley's predecessor at Mendota, was a part Ottawa, part French trader and territorial pioneer. Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 28 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14 — 1912). Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *The Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley*, 33 (quote) (Minneapolis, 1932).



lished until 1880 he drew a nostalgic picture of hunting conditions as he remembered them when he arrived in Minnesota as a young man in the 1830s. "The bear, the deer, the fisher, the martin [*sic*], and the raccoon, were the tenants of the woods; the beaver, the otter, and other amphibia, such as the mink and the muskrat, were to be found in the streams and lakes, while the prairies were dotted with countless herds of the bison and the elk, accompanied by their usual attendants, wolves and foxes, which scarcely deigned to seek concealment from the eye of the traveler. The numerous lakes and marshes were the breeding places of myriads of wild fowl, including swan, geese and ducks."<sup>37</sup>

But even in 1856 Sibley was aware that game was scarcer and less accessible, daily

bags were necessarily reduced, and it was apparent that conservation legislation was needed to avoid the total extinction of both animals and wild fowl. Sibley obviously did not wish the buffalo and the elk to go the way of the passenger pigeon. For at least two decades he had found Minnesota a vast hunting ground at a time when sportsmen were few, rifles and fowling pieces had reached lethal efficiency, and game was legion. This time no man would see again.

---

<sup>37</sup> Sibley, "Memoir of Hercules L. Dousman," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3:194.

THE PAINTING on page 223 is owned by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University; the wildlife etchings on pages 224 and 227 are from W. E. Webb, *Buffalo Land* (1872). The painting on page 218 is a recent gift to the society from Sibley's great-grandnephew, Sibley Flandrau Stuart.

---

## Urban Crisis, 1857

*LONG BEFORE air pollution, crime in the streets, and urban redevelopment were household words, St. Paul editor Thomas Foster had strong opinions on them. On May 21, 1857, in the pages of the Daily Minnesotian, he had this to say:*

LOOK TO IT!—The approaches to the lower levee are very unpleasant. It is an unpleasant neighborhood. The grading of the streets have made numerous ponds, ditches, canals, &c., all filled with a green, slimy, stagnant, poisonous water. When the hot suns of July and August shine upon it, wo unto the inhabitants who are crowded into the dirty shanties along those cess pools. The heated, seething, putrid pools, festering and smoking in the sultry noons of summer, and exhaling their poisons on the cool midnight airs, will breed pestilence deadly and universal. The malignant Typhus will not only be there, but a dozen other fatal diseases, to depopulate the neighborhood. Under any other climate than that of Min-

nesota, it would have been so before now. But even here, where men can expose health, and risk life with greater impunity than anywhere else, almost, so certain a penalty cannot be much longer avoided. . . .

Disease, death, and a familiarity to suffering and mortality, produce invariably hardened and brutal indifference to it among those most in contact with it. Brawls, fights, riots, murders, &c., together with all crimes in the catalogue would abound after a season of sickness and death, all experience proves this; men become reckless, hardened, criminal. That neighborhood has hitherto, strangely enough, borne a good character. But under such influences as we mention, it may become a disgrace to the city, and crime, violence and bloodshed be as frequent and unnoticed as in some similar localities in eastern and western river cities known by such classical names as "Rat Row," "Bloody Row," "Hell's half acre," &c., &c. We hope not, but let those whose duty it is, LOOK TO IT!



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).