

Backgrounds of Indian Traditions

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BACKGROUNDS OF INDIAN TRADITIONS

In the period of the removal of the Indian tribes from Illinois and Wisconsin to the west of the Mississippi River both business and religion were working at cross purposes. Gen. Joseph M. Street, while sub-Indian agent at Prairie du Chien, had been indispensable to maintaining the alliance of the Winnebagoes with Black Hawk in 1832. His influence with the Winnebagoes was established through his deep religious nature and his consequent sympathy. He induced the Rev. David Lowry, a consecrated minister of the Presbyterian faith, to accept the post as missionary to the Winnebagoes, and for his service there was established on the Yellow River, as also on Turkey River, both in pursuit of the treaty with the Winnebagoes in 1832, buildings and equipment for effectual religious and educational work.

General Street was transferred to the agency of the Sac and Fox nation first at Rock Island, then removing with the Indians and continuing in the service until he died at the Agency, now in Wapello County, Iowa.

We present a letter General Street indited to Reverend Lowry, which is the best index to a number of obscure transactions in respect to the treaties with both the Winnebagoes and Sacs and Foxes settling them upon lands now in Iowa and for the relinquishment of their claims thereon.

Rock Island! 7 Nov. 1836.

Dear Brother,

You must excuse my negligence as a correspondent, not entirely though because I have been busy or my mind too much engaged on other subjects, for truth compels me to confess that such apology cannot in justice be made, & yet my duties and necessary engagements you must know, from what has been effected here with the Indians under my charge, have been great; but out of your friendship for me. I once thought to shelter myself under this cover,—but when I looked at it, I could not feel to do it, though the heart is ever prone to seek shelter under some refuge, and I can only praise the Lord for saving me from this, as I hope his grace has & will yet save me from many more sins and iniquities, for it is only in his strength I can hope to stand in the day and hour of temptation. Frequently your letters, and

¹We follow the style in punctuation, spelling, and capitalization used by General Street.—Editor.

their deep import, have risen unbidden in my mind, and as frequently I have said I will attend to bro. Lowry soon—I have not time just now—and have passed on in some other employment. My wife has again and again enquired,—“have you written bro. L.”—No—why do you ask—“only give my love to him & sister L,” and the last enquiry, made yesterday evening, she ended by saying, “why do you not write bro. L.”—I replied, because I do not know what to write—what to say to his enquiries, or how I ought to act in the present state of the Indian affairs, and in my own situation. Do not consider me tedious in these little particulars, it is to explain to you my own deep perplexities that I have entered into these details, I wish to do what is right in the sight of Heaven, if grace shall be given me, for if left to myself I cannot hope to do ought that is pleasing to God.

In my first efforts to improve the condition, and ameliorate the situation of the Winnebagoes, I was influenced by ardent desires to enable them to become a civilised people and to imbibe the truth of the Gospel, mingled with a desire to be the instrument of effecting this change,—not alone—but the active agent who had commenced it. Possibly my selfish pride in this respect, is to be corrected, and that hence great and unforeseen difficulties have flowed in upon the attempt. Under this feeling I have laboured since 1833, and it seems difficult to dismiss it.

I have been deeply weighing all you urge in relation to my return, and the providences that seem to be clearing away the difficulties that have held back the improvement of the Winnebagoes, and hope is induced that the Indians may yet be saved from destruction. Yet I am almost afraid again to throw myself in the breach, to endeavour to arrest a ruin into which they seem to be completely deluded. Since 1833, the Sec. of War, acting under the influence of Rolette Douseman and their friends, has so completely thwarted my benevolent plans for the benefit of the Indians, and harrassed me with petty complaints, and the suspension of accounts for singular and unusual reasons, that they have, with occurrences in my own family, pecuniarily embarrassed me, and caused me to sell some very valuable real estate below in Illinois. Now I am nearly dependant upon my salary, upon which, the moving situation in which I have been kept for more than 2 years has compelled me to live entirely, making nothing on a Farm to help me on;—and my stock has been broke up, and is almost a dead loss. Here I had to buy 2 milch cows at 25\$ each, and of all the cattle carried over to Yellow River, have never yet received one cent. Many things that were useful to me were left in my hurried departure, and some forgotten—they have been sold at a loss for mere nominal prices and I now have to replace them at high rates. One article—a small stove was sold to Mr. Gilbert for 16\$ I believe, I sent for it not knowing he cared, as it was on credit—if the price was given up—but could not get it and sent to St Louis and replaced by giving 32\$ for a stove & pipe of 15 feet. I mention these things to enable you to see I am now

so much depressed that I feel at a loss to determine between my duty to my family and my duty towards the Indians — for except yourself, and sister L. in the deepest affliction, and under pecuniary embarrassment none have administered to me, that I had fondly believed, would have done so from motives of Christian love and personal gratitude. But I hint not at these things but to you — and not even to you, only as drawn out by the subject and the circumstances. Under a view of all these things, is it my duty to come? And if yes — Is it a duty to leave my wife whose situation you know must be viewed as delicate, and come this Winter? Rest assured, dear brother, I wish to do all that I can for the Indians, and if I can do them any good without ruin to my family, I am ready, and willing to come.

The Sacs & Foxes through my instigation, asked for Farming advantages, and were refused, and even the way in which it was denied was unfavourable to the plans of civilization, the change being operated by another influence. Yet I wished it in any shape. The Gov.r could not grant it without diminishing the annuities which the adverse interest was able to prevent. And the Gov.r has imbibed all the hostile feelings that interested Traders have ingeniously arrayed against every thing calculated to lessen the annuities in "*Specie*." The Traders look at the Ind. annuities as belonging to them and make all their calculations accordingly, with much more certainty than a Merchant can count on his customers. This is not speculation — it is fact that has passed under my personal knowledge. But these Indians are vastly different from the Winnebagoes — greatly superior in every respect — but have a Trader, of more liberal and extensive views than the Winnebagoes, yet those views all tend to his own pecuniary interest still. His enmity to God, and love of ambition, also act against all attempts to Christianise the Indians; and the hold that he and the Interpreter (who is his factotum) have on the Indians — and the way in which it is kept up, will render it difficult in their lifetime to do anything in a religious point of view with the Sacs & Foxes. He won't sell them Sprits except in the interior of their country, and these, sparingly. He does all in his power to prevent drinking amongst the Indians, and urges the destructive effects upon them, and he won't keep it at his store to sell them. What he has is in his House — and occasionally he will give one or two drinks — no temperance agent could be more urgent to them to refrain. This he explains is his interest — if they drink they loose their Blankets, Guns, traps, clothes & health, and frequently their lives. This is a dead loss to him. A naked Ind. with no Gun or traps, can't be expected to hunt to any advantage and his state of health also renders him listless and inactive. If he dies all he had got is lost, and the profits on the farm of a good hunter. Every year amongst drinking Indians sees a large loss by deaths of the best hunters, and a failure to pay by naked hunters who sold their Blankets and Guns for drink, and with difficulty procured enough to keep them

alive including roots and half starvation. By selling goods of a *superior quality* at a moderate profit, he secures the confidence of the Indians who see he does not try to exact upon them, and the sale is as a cash sale. The Company who supply him know that once a year in the summer he will get 27,000\$ in cash and that he will send it by the first S. B. just as he gets it to them, and they are glad to sell him low all he wants. He knows the moment the Agent hands the money to the Inds. he will get the whole 27,000\$ handed over to him, and he secures it deals so fairly and liberally, and is so kind to them in all his intercourse that they see he is their friend and will deal no where else. A few small accounts are made in the year at a distance by some Indians—these he pays, taking occasion to shew them by the accounts (which they bring) how much cheaper he would sell them the same articles of better quality (for all his goods are of best quality)—By this course of conduct, he has gained an unbounded influence over the Indians, who are convinced he loves them better than any white man in the world, and they will not lightly act different from his wishes. All this is from self interested motives—yet the Indians are benefitted by it, if he would leave them free in religion. But he appears like his master—mad against God. He argues that it is "*cruel*" *very cruel* to meddle with the religious belief of the Indians. They have the religion handed down from their Fathers—they are happy and let them alone—in their peace. It is in vain to urge their error—he believes nothing himself—and even would, it would seem be gratified never to hear of religion or a God himself, and esteems their ignorance of the Christian Religion a blessing not lightly to be removed. Under this view of the situation of the Sacs & Foxes their case seems hopeless to man, but *nothing is impossible with God*, is the assurance of him who spoke as never man spoke, and let not frail mortality presume to set bounds to the power and goodness of God.

I have entered upon much you may deem irrelevant to the subject of your letter, and possibly it is so but I wished to let you see the peculiarity of my situation. For these Indians appear greatly attached to me, and their Trader and Interpreter profess and act as my personal friends. I feel confident the S. & F. would even submit to have an amount equal to my salary paid me out of their annuities sooner than I should leave them, if such a measure was required, and hearing I purposed leaving them to go to Prairie de Chien, they had a talk with me on the subject and solicited me not to leave them. I would come under no obligation, merely replying I would give them notice if I did determine to go, and give them a talk on the subject. Their object no doubt in stipulating in the late Treaty to be paid on the *Treaty* ground opposite Rock Island for ten years, was to retain me, for I had said to them, that if I was directed to go a distance off the Mississippi to live in their country, I should go to Prairie du chien. And directly after they asked Govr. Dodge to make their annuities payable for 10

years at the place where they signed the Treaty. If Mr. D. was out of the way — I have no fear of being able to get a school amongst the S. & F'S. But it will be difficult to do it, unless he can be changed. I now look for another sale of land by these same Inds. in not more than 2 years tho' now they think they will never sell another foot. The pressure of the white settlements, the lawless violence of the frontier Settlers, and the growing *imaginary wants* of the Indians, will induce them to ask to sell and move back.

The foregoing will give you to see the true situation of these Inds — who retain much of the untamed, wild savage character, and greater freedom from the vices of the whites, than the Winnebagoes, Sioux or Menominees. And will enable you also to see how I am circumstanced in relation to them & the Winnebagoes, in relation to their benefit, and the duties I owe to a large and peculiarly situated family.

Now of the Winnebagoes and my return.—An all wise providence, has freed them from some individuals who appeared determined to use them for their own pecuniary interest, regardless of the happiness, or even existence of the Indians, at a moment when I apprehended an attempt would be made to induce them to ask the destruction of the School & Farm, and to be thrown completely into the deadly grasp of the powers who only soothe in order more surely to destroy them. This then would seem to be an opening of an all wise providence for the true friends of the Indians to come forward to their rescue from ruin.—But how?—

I have no doubt bro. Benson would join his strength to ours, for the cause is the same — it is for the same Master we gird on our armour — and I trust, the influence of his Spirit in whose name we hoist the banner; would cause us to harmonise in opinion, and unite in exertions, to break down the influence that is so successfully wielded to the destruction of the poor Indians, and then to build up the ruins of Zion amongst them. I say I have no fear but what missionary aid would be freely extended, yet how is it to be used, and how can I aid it? I obtained an extensive and powerful influence over the Winnebagoes, and the provisions made for the education and civilization of the Indians in the Treaty of 1832, was the beginning of a series of experiments which I purposed to be made under missionary direction for the improvement and gradual amelioration of the Indians; bringing them under the teachings of the ministers of God, and throwing open to them the Gospel of grace. You will witness for me, that my first effort after the ratification of the Treaty, was to obtain the denied Missionary aid. I did not even hope, scarcely, that you from your then situation could be brought to make the sacrifice, but from my acquaintance, and full confidence in you, as a servant of God, I wrote you desiring you to take up the case — consider its importance — and use your efforts to send some person suited to the duties — if you could not engage in it yourself. You at once entered into the same exciting views of the subject, and determined to make the sacrifice yourself, and came immediately on. But

just previous to your coming, the enemies of the Indians commenced their operations against the plans for the benefit of the Indians, and shortly after upon me as the originator of those plans — and under the countenance of the Sec. of War have succeeded in nearly rendering me a beggar, and so trammelling and embarrassing the School and Farm, as to cripple their usefulness and threaten their destruction.

Some of those who "troubled" the work, and seemed to meditate the destruction of all Missionary effort to awaken the Indians to a knowledge of God have been "removed",—yet two are remaining whose influence is more to be dreaded than those who are gone; and without some means can be devised to operate upon the Indians so as to release them from the heavy bondage of these men I have little hope of success in any attempts to ameliorate the deplorable situation of the Winnebagoes. At this time Douseman corresponds with the officers of the Ind. Department at Washington, who impart to him all their plans and those submitted by their Agent at Prairie du Chien, and suffer him to intermeddle with the management of the Winnebagoes, and in my case to influence the removal of the Agent to another place and to other tribes. Besides I do not know of an Interpreter not under their influence. The measures of the Sec. of War in relation to myself have, tended to break down my influence with the Winnebagoes, and to build up the Traders, to destroy the benefits that might have arisen to the Indians by the faithful administration of the benevolent stipulations in the Treaty of 1832, and from necessity to throw the Inds. at the mercy of R. & D. who could starve them into any terms they desired. Without an Interpreter, how is it possible for me to do anything with the Winnebagoes? Or if I can get an Interpreter, will he be free from the influence of these men with only 300\$ pr. ann? They generally expect to pay from 5 to 800\$. There are so many difficulties presented to my mind apart from myself and my own pecuniary difficulties that I need not have adverted to them, tho' candour makes it necessary that I state all to you.

Should you on a view of the whole ground, think it my duty to return, and that good can be done,—say so, and I will set all my powers to work, to effect it, and ask God to help me in the prosecution of the work of endeavoring to save a remnant of these wretched peoples in conjunction with brother Benson and yourself. Such though is the situation of my family that I would not leave this winter, or remove them. I could only make a visit to Genl. Dodge, Prairie du chien, and the School, and return here & remain till Spring. In this, I could correct Govr. Dodges opinions in relation to the School and Farm, and convince him of the propriety of enabling the Agent to take the Winnebagoes out of the hands of the Traders. That the peace and safety of the frontier and the welfare of the Inds. requires, their removal to the West of the Mississippi, as speedily as possible, and the early expenditure of all the Farming stipulations to enable the Inds. to live. And

in the Spring if the denied appropriation were made, I would come up to remain.

The points to be obtained are these;—1 To get a good Interpreter free from the influence of the Traders or their friends. 2 To get Gov. Dodge to visit the School and Farm, to convince him of their importance to the welfare and improvement of the Indians; and to induce him to write on to that effect to Washington. 3 To unite all the missionary efforts in support of these measures, and the Agent against the Traders.

If you can point me to the first, and enable me to be secured in the 3rd — I believe I can succeed in the 2nd if Gov. Dodge can be prevailed upon to visit the School with me.

Then it resolves itself into this conclusion — If under all the circumstances, taken together, you believe I ought to return, and an Interpreter can be had for 300\$ per ann. I will consent to apply to Gov. Dodge. But I am not able to return until Spring, though I would in Company with Gov. D. come up & examine the School. The moment I can get a line from you I will come if Gov. D. will accompany me, and I will by this mail write him to know if he can go up, & when. I will endeavour in my letter to Gov. D. to awaken in his mind an interest on the subjects, and hope he will be so far disengaged from the Legislature as to go up with me by the 10 Dec. at furthest. If I can't prevail on Gov. Dodge to come this winter it will be needless for me to go until he does — for without I can get him to go with me, I can do nothing — and would only lose my time & expend money uselessly.

If the season would permit, and I had a good interpreter, & the backing of the Government; I believe I could now go amongst the Winnebagoes at the Portage and buy all their land on the Wisconsin as high up as they own (including a most valuable pinery) and on the Mississippi 30 miles above Prairie du chien, and running in a true line to a point 40 miles from the mouth of the River Berebous and to a point on the line between the Chippewas & the Winnebagoes 50 miles from the Wisconsin,— this purchase would comprise a strip of land of about 40 miles wide on the North & West bank of the Wisconsin, from its mouth up it about 300 miles — containing not less than 7,680,000 Acres of land. The payment for this land at 10 cents per acre, would, if properly distributed relieve their distress and place them on a better hunting country west and of sufficient extent by adding the *neutral* ground from the Red Cedar to the Des Moines. The amount at 10 cents — is 768,000\$, — to be pd. as follows — viz Land in exchange may be said to be worth in the swap — tho generally made a free gift — \$300,000.

4000 Bushels corn for 2 yrs. deld. West.....	\$ 8000	
100 Bbls Flour do 10\$.....	2000	
50 Bbls pork do 20\$.....	2000	
200 Horses at 50\$ each.....	10,000	
50 Beef cattle @.....	1000	
1000 Hoes @ 50c.....	500	
1000 Guns @ 10\$.....	10,000	
		<hr/>
	\$33,500	33,500
12 Years annuity a 32,000\$ per year.....		384,000
In Blankets, Strouds & Kettles—the first year.....		50,500
		<hr/>
		\$768,000

Here is 7,680,000 acres of land exchanged for 1,280,000 acres of a better hunting and agricultural country for Inds. with clothing for the Nation one year, provisions for 2 years—Guns for each hunter, Hoes for the Squaws, Horses for the hunters of Buffalo—and an additional annuity of 32,000\$ per ann. for 12 years—making their whole annuity 60,000\$ per ann. in money for 12 years.

Such a Treaty wd. save the Inds. with missionary effort & the Farming West—and the U. S. wd. get the Wisconsin piece, and $\frac{1}{2}$ of the Ind. country East of the Miss. paying with an exchange of land 10 cts an acre—or to value the land exchd. and deduct it—12 cents per acre. Giving the Whites all the Wisconsin, and 30 miles up the Mississippi above Prairie du chien.

This would throw off the Inds. from the Whites—settle them West between the Sioux and Sacs & Foxes—give us more than $7\frac{1}{2}$ Mil. Acres of land—a valuable pine country away from any Inds.—and enable Missourians to have a better chance of operating upon the Inds. by moving them further from the Whites into a Warmer climate.

[Pencil notation appearing on the back of the above letter.]

Letter to Rev. D. Lowry about return to Prairie Du Chien 7th November 1836.

The trader here spoken of was Col. George Davenport of Rock Island (murdered there). In many respects a worthy man, but father has drawn his character with the pencil of truth. I would not mention his name but he is a typical trader of the best class in those days as Douseman & Rolette were the worst.

A. W. J.

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