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Alaska Commercial Company

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ALASKA COMMERCIAL COMPANY.

JANUARY 23, 1888.—Referred to the Committee on Rules and ordered to be printed.

Mr. WOODBURN submitted the following

RESOLUTION:

Whereas A. P. Swineford, the governor of Alaska Territory, in his report to the Secretary of the Interior for the fiscal year 1887, arraigns the Alaska Commercial Company for a flagrant and outrageous abuse of the powers and privileges conferred upon it by the Government of the United States in the manner following, to wit:

The fur trade of Alaska is practically monopolized by the Alaska Commercial Company, a non-resident corporation, which does not confine its operations to the seal islands leased to it by the Government, but holds and possesses most of the Aleutian chain and the greater part of the mainland as a principality of its own, over which it exercises undisputed sway and control. Clothed by the Government with a monopoly of the seal fur trade, by which it has profited to the extent of many millions, it has, octopus-like, thrown out its great tentacles and gathered to itself about all there is of value in the fur-trade of the whole Territory. It has, by the power of its great wealth, driven away all competition and reduced the native population, wherever its operations are not supervised by Government officials, to a condition of helpless dependence, if not one of absolute and abject slavery. Unhindered by a healthy competition it offers and compels acceptance by the natives, on pain of starvation, such beggarly prices for their peltry that it manages invariably to keep them in its debt and at its mercy. In order to more effectually monopolize the trade in furs, it at one time marked and mutilated the coin of the United States and refused to receive any other from the natives in payment for goods necessary to their comfort and well being. Its insatiable greed is such that it is not content with robbing the poor native in the price it sets upon the product of his dangerous toil, but it robs him also in the exorbitant prices it exacts for the goods given in exchange. And there is no appeal; no alternative. There are no other trading stations in all that vast section, and the natives must pay the price asked and accept that which is offered—the first a hundred per cent. advance on the amount at which the same goods are sold to the whites, and the last low enough to add still another hundred per cent. to the company's profit. As, for instance, there is no timber on the Aleutian Islands, and the native who goes out to hunt the sea-otter has no time to provide himself with fuel by gathering driftwood from the shores, as many are able to do. He must have fuel for the winter, and the company generously takes his sea-otter skins at half their real cash value and pays him in coal at \$40 per ton—coal of the same quality as that which it sells to the few white residents for \$20. The native who dares to sell his furs for cash to others than the agent of the company finds that his money has no purchasing power at perhaps the only trading station within a distance of several hundred miles, and is thus starved into submission.

While all this and much more is true concerning its treatment of the native people, instances are not lacking where it has boycotted and driven away from the islands Government officials who, intent upon the honest, faithful discharge of their duties, have incurred the displeasure or refused to do the bidding of its agents. In fact, it possesses the power to compel compliance with its every exaction, and wherever it has obtained a foot-hold neither white man nor native can do more than eke out a miserable existence, save by its sufferance. Without mail communication other than that supplied by the corporation, which is their master, the native people of the sections thus dominated are effectually walled in by the great waters which lie between them and the most advanced outskirts of trade and civilization, and in the absence of all competition are forced to sell their furs at whatever rates the agents of the

company may be pleased to offer, and accept payment in goods at prices which no community of people not entirely helpless could or would tolerate. Its paid agents and lobbyists are kept at the national capital to oppose any and every effort that may be made to promote the welfare of Alaska through such legislation as will encourage immigration and the enlistment of capital in the development of the natural wealth hidden away in her forests, streams, and mountains; its every aim and effort is in the direction of prolonging its existence and strengthening its tyrannical hold by a blocking of the wheels of progress; and to its pernicious influence is due the fact that Alaska is not to-day largely populated with an industrious, enterprising, prosperous people; that millions, where there are now only hundreds, have not long ere this been invested in the development of her many varied, and, as I honestly believe, incomparably great natural resources. I have positive information of flagrant violations of the law and executive orders in relation to the importation and sale of breech-loading fire-arms by its agents; its oppression and robbery of the natives is notorious; the partial responsibility, at least, of the Government for the wrongs to which the inoffensive native people of the Aleutian Islands and the whole of north-western Alaska have been and are still being subjected can not be ignored or denied.

If it can not legally be rescinded, the lease to, and contract with, this company ought not to be renewed. It is not, in my opinion, necessary to the preservation of seal life or the seal fur industry that the islands on which the rookeries are located should be leased to any corporation or individual, but if it be held that I am wrong in that regard, then I do not hesitate to aver that it would be better for Alaska, better for the Government, and above all, far better for the enslaved Aleuts, that every fur seal in Alaskan waters should be exterminated at one fell swoop, than that such a blighting monopoly should be perpetuated. It is manifestly the duty of Government to protect the weak against the strong, to shield the poor and helpless from wrong and oppression; yet here we have thousands of the latter class, who, by solemn treaty stipulation, were guaranteed enjoyment of "all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States," practically enslaved, and a professedly free and liberal Government not only creating, but actually protecting, their oppressions, and that, too, against a restless spirit of enterprise which, unhindered, would people the best portions of Alaska with a thrifty population, and add untold millions to the wealth of the nation.

I have said that the leasing of the seal islands is not necessary to the preservation of the industry; neither is it, as so persistently claimed, and as I was at first inclined to believe, essential that a fur-seal monopoly should be maintained in order to secure the largest revenue to the Government. Manifestly, the natives of the seal and adjoining islands have the first and best right to profit by an industry which may truly be said to have come to them by inheritance. They are not Indians, but a peaceful, honest people of much natural intelligence, and capable of transacting business for themselves. They can nearly all read and write in their own or the Russian language, and if most of the younger men and women on Saint Paul and Saint George are not fairly well educated in English, the fact can only be accounted for on the theory that the Alaska Commercial Company has not complied faithfully with that provision of its contract which requires it to maintain schools on those islands for at least eight months in each year.

Instead of practically enslaving them by farming out to others that which is theirs by right of inheritance, it seems to me that the Government should secure to them at least a fair share of the profits, and that its duty is to protect and, if possible, perpetuate the seal fisheries for their benefit, and not in the almost exclusive interest of organized greed and corporate monopoly. To accomplish this it is only necessary that regulations be promulgated by the proper department prohibiting the killing of seals on the islands of Saint Paul and Saint George by any but natives, prescribing the number that may be killed in each year, the mode of killing, and imposing all the other restrictions now in force. It would require no greater number of agents to supervise the killing by natives than are now employed to watch and guard the interests of the Government, if as many. The skins could then be sold in open market by the natives themselves, in the presence of, or by a Government agent acting in their behalf, and whose duty it should be made to collect from purchasers a Government tax of not less than \$5 on each skin sold. By such a plan a much larger permanent revenue would be assured to the Government, the natives secured in the free enjoyment of their rights, and a monopoly wholly inimical to the best interests of the Territory shorn of a large part of its tyrannical power. Conceived (as there is abundant evidence to show) in corruption, born in iniquity, and nurtured and grown strong and insolent on ill-gotten gains wrung from a hapless and helpless people, this giant monopoly, which rests like a blighting curse upon the progress and welfare of this great Territory, should be shorn of its corruptly-secured, much-abused franchise with no more delay than may be absolutely necessary.

The mortality rate as compared to the number of births furnished me by the authorities of the Greco-Russian Church indicates the gradual extinction of the nativ-

people, particularly the Aleuts on Unalaska Island, the population of which was 1,065 in 1882; 326 deaths have since been recorded, while there have been only 158 births. During the past summer an epidemic carried off a large number of people at Belkofsky and on the Shumagin Islands; a very heavy rate of mortality is also reported from Kenai and Bristol Bay, occasioned by pulmonary diseases, to which the natives, owing to exposure and want of proper precaution, are generally subject. In my opinion, if some effective measures, are not taken to ameliorate their condition the complete extinction of the native inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands and on some parts of the main-land will be a question of comparatively short time only. A removal of the disabilities imposed by the grinding monopoly which has destroyed their every ambition, and made them reckless of lives scarcely worth the living, would give them new hope, and tend to an indefinite prolongation of their existence as a people. The civil government is powerless in the premises, having as yet been unable, by reason of the absence of mail communication or means of transportation, to extend to them the poor protection of its qualified, limited, and altogether doubtful authority. To a higher governmental power, one they do not know in their present deplorable condition of abject dependence how to reach and if they did would not dare appeal to, must they look for a redress of wrongs which would not for so long a time have been quietly endured by any people anywhere in the slightest degree less patient and helpless.

And whereas the foregoing statements are substantially corroborated by other officers and citizens of the Government having knowledge thereof; and

Whereas the charges therein contained involve the rights, liberties, and property of American citizens, the development and prosperity of one of the most important Territories of the Union, and the character and honor of the nation itself, the obligations of duty resting upon the administration now in power, as well as upon Congress, to the American people, demand that Congress investigate at once the truth of the statements hereinbefore recited from the report of Governor Swineford, to the end that if found true the extraordinary powers and privileges heretofore granted by Congress to said company be promptly rescinded, and such provisions made as will protect the property of the Government and the rights of American citizens in the Territory of Alaska: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Speaker of the House of Representatives be, and he is hereby, authorized and instructed to appoint a committee of five members of the House, whose duty it shall be to inquire into the truth of the statements hereinbefore recited, and whether the lease under which said company is now operating is conducive to the best interests of the Government of the United States, and whether it would be just and expedient for the Government to terminate the same, and to take charge of the said islands and to take upon itself the care and custody of the seal-life on said islands and of the waters of the Alaska Territory; and that said committee shall, when so constituted, be authorized to employ a stenographer, with full power to send for persons and papers, books, and vouchers, and report thereon with all convenient speed to this House.