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Letter from the Secretary of War, transmitting information in relation to Alaska and its resources, the Alaska Commercial Company, the conduct of Mr. Bryant at Saint Paul's and Saint George's Islands, and the colonization of Icelanders.

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L E T T E R

FROM

T H E S E C R E T A R Y O F W A R ,

TRANSMITTING

Information in relation to Alaska and its resources, the Alaska Commercial Company, the conduct of Mr. Bryant at Saint Paul's and Saint George's Islands, and the colonization of Icelanders.

APRIL 12, 1876.—Ordered to lie on the table and be printed.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
April 11, 1876.

The Secretary of War has the honor to transmit to the United States Senate, copy of memoranda furnished General O. O. Howard, commanding the Department of Columbia, by Mr. G. H. Atkinson, taken from verbal statement of Capt. J. W. White, revenue-marine service, on Alaska and resources, Alaska Commercial Company, and the conduct of Mr. Bryant at Saint Paul's and Saint George's Islands. Also in relation to colonization of Icelanders in Alaska.

ALPHONSO TAFT,
Secretary of War.

PORTLAND, OREG., *February 29, 1876.*

DEAR SIR: The following items respecting Alaska were gleaned last week from Capt. J. W. White, during our trip up the Columbia. I give them to you as valuable data.

Very respectfully,

G. H. ATKINSON.

General O. O. HOWARD, U. S. A.

In a pleasant conversation respecting the purchase of Alaska, with Capt. J. W. White, revenue-marine service, and superintendent of construction of revenue-cutter at Albino, the following valuable facts were stated:

To the question: What is the value of the purchase? Reply: It was a present; count the fisheries, the furs, the lumber, the mines of coal, iron, and gold, the varieties of fruits and vegetables that can be raised, with its political value as a military station. The Yucon River is navigable for steamers fourteen hundred miles. It spreads out into five mouths, inclosing a level cottonwood region or delta of seventy miles, covered with grass. On Oonalaska the grass is 6 to 8 feet high, and so thick that it must be parted to get through. It is so on Kodiak. The small Russian cattle that live entirely upon it are as fat as seals. They live on it all the year, needing no shelter but the ravines. The wild-pea vines

grow 6, 8, and even 12 feet long; furnishing choice food for stock. The shores are rough and mountainous. We know but little of the outlines by our common maps, which are guesses, not surveys.

Having been ordered thither by the Government in 1867, with instructions, I spent more than two years coasting and visiting all ports from Fort Wrangel, Sitka, Aleutian Islands, Behring Sea, to the Behring's Straits.

There are no proper icebergs in those seas. The warm Japan current divides at the southwest point of the Aleutian Islands, part going north through Behring's Straits, which are too shallow for anything but field-ice to pass, and only a narrow polar current passes down near the Asiatic coast, as the one from Greenland passes down near the Atlantic shore. Ice floats off the shores in winter and spring, and soon dissolves with little danger to shipping. The region is chilly, even in summer, in the ravines hid from the sun, but parts open to the sun, though frosts and snows are on the mountains produce luxuriant vegetation, and fruits like blackberries, larger than the Lawton, and whortleberries, abound in their season.

What of the cod-fisheries? Some gentlemen in the business say that the Okhotsk Sea has the better codfish banks, but as the food of this fish comes up on the southern arm of the vast Japan current that sweeps past under the Aleutians; why are not good cod-fishing grounds under Alaska? Answer: There are. I sounded the shores seven hundred miles by log northwest of Sitka, and found the entire length a codfish bank, (with plenty of halibut also.) The smaller codfish are in the shallower waters, nearer the shore of 20 or 30 fathoms, but the best fisheries are farther out in 70 or 80 fathoms. For example, one day when sounding south of Kodiak, wishing to lay in a store of codfish, I ordered the sails set back and the lines prepared.

What bait? I had a barrel of Puget-Sound clams salted for me with this purpose. I took my lead-line, as large as my thumb, attached five hooks above the lead, with a clam on each, and fastened to the davit; soon the bites—one, two, three, often five—were felt. I threw the line over the pulley and put four men to pull, and up would come two, three, and sometimes five cod, weighing 30 to 40 pounds apiece. We had out about 20 lines, and caught 250 fish in two hours. I met some fishermen and asked why they did not fish farther out, instead of catching the smaller ones of 5 to 15 pounds each near the shore? They replied that the deep-water fishing was "too hard work."

What of the coal-fields? Answer: I have seen coal-veins over an area forty by fifty miles, so thick that it seems one vast bed. It has excellent steam quality; leaves a clear white ash. It comes out in cube blocks, bright and clean. It does not coke. The quantity seems to be unlimited. This bed lies northwest of Sitka, up Cook's inlet or bay, which extends to nearly 61° north and broadens into a sea in some parts. But our geographers plot it as an unimportant arm of the sea? They are wrong. It is a large body of water. Its shores, though in part mountainous, reveal valleys and plains and forests with large and various resources.

Did you see fur-traders along the coast trafficking with the Indians? Yes; they are everywhere gathering up furs. Do they deal in whisky? Yes; and in tobacco, blankets, &c. A whisky-distiller was tracked nearly up to Behring's Straits. He thought he had got out of reach, but a vessel found him and broke up his business. They make desperate efforts to secure the furs.

Will the Aleuts trade for whisky? Yes; they will drink themselves drunk if they can get it. They live for the most part on the Aleutian

Islands and vicinity, and probably descended from the Japanese. They are a quiet, honest people.

The Kalosh are another race of Indians, shrewd and warlike, who live on the mainland mostly of Alaska proper. You must show your power and they will respect you and do what you say, or what they agree to do, exactly. When some of them came on deck I showed them over the ship. They watched everything, and a little jocosely said, "Our guns are better than yours." They had Hudson's Bay smooth-bore muskets. I said, "Ah, well."

I ordered a gun set, put in a shell, and aimed at a clay bank on the face of an island one and a half miles off. I knew the distance; having been sounding it recently. The shell hit within ten feet of the center, scattering the dust and dirt. At first the smoke hid the object and they laughed at the failure; but as it cleared and they saw the dust fly, they threw up their hands in wonder, and made no more jokes about my guns.

The old chief asked me without my guns the next morning. We went, taking the precaution, of course, of having revolvers on our persons, and Henry rifles in the boat in care of a dozen sailors.

We went up to his house and entered a room about twenty feet square, covered with the finest bear-skins, with a raised seat or ottoman for us, covered with the richest fox, mink, and fur-seal skins that could be imagined. He rose as we entered and waved every one to a seat with as much politeness as a courtier. We talked a while about trade. He finally asked if we would drink something, saying: "When I was on your ship you showed me your house, and some wine was offered, and now I want to offer you mine." He then brought out a bottle of the finest Hudson's Bay brandy.

The traders sometimes complain of ill-treatment by the Indians. One reported a sad story of his wrongs to General Davis, and wanted the tribe punished. The general spoke to me about it. Knowing there might be two sides to the story, I said to the general: "I am to be near that tribe soon to survey, and I will learn the facts." On sailing near the village of the tribe not an Indian was to be seen. In a day or two I found one from another tribe, and learned that they had fled, knowing what ill reports the trader would carry to the fort. I sent this man to tell the chief that I wanted to see him. He came with his attendants. I told him the reports, and wanted his story. He said: "I will come to-morrow at 9 o'clock, and bring my witnesses and tell you." He came promptly, and as he related it I wrote it out.

The trader had come and offered tobacco and blankets, &c., for furs at the common rates, and the bargain was made. When they laid down the furs, he charged double rates for tobacco and blankets, and, by the way, they were *three-point* Hudson's Bay blankets; martens at \$1 in trade, worth \$5, he would give only 50 cents for; otters at \$1 in barter, yet worth \$5, he would give only 50 cents for; so with foxes, &c. We would not trade in that way and gathered up his goods and our furs and went home.

Did you know that was wrong? Yes, but he was wrong first, and our young men got angry. My son was with them. We have not used one of his things. I had them sent back to him. Captain W. said, I then told the chief to report himself to General Davis at the fort. He went, and I sent my letter with the statement by him to the general. When I went back this chief met me on the wharf with General D., who said he told the story exactly as I had written it, and brought all the goods except one plug of tobacco. The general had the trader arrested,

and the collector took charge of him for smuggling, thus avoiding a war. This chief became our warm friend, but he said he would not trade with such men, but he would with honest men. He would give me mink for \$1, fox for \$1, and an otter for \$1; every one of these skins is worth \$5, thus giving the trader from 400 to 500 per cent.

Do Messrs. Hutchinson, Kohl & Co., or the Alaska Commercial Company, now styled, who have leased the fur-seal fisheries on Saint Paul's and Saint George's Islands, take one seal per year more than the agreement allows? No, it is not for their interest to do so. For illustration: I was sent to Alaska by the Government to reconnoiter, protect its interests, and make surveys, and was there in 1867, '68, and '69. I found four or five fur companies, Messrs. Hutchinson, Kohl & Co. among them, killing seals on those islands as fast as they could hire the Aleuts to do it. One eastern firm, who were too religious to work on the Sabbath, did, with others, sell whisky to the Aleuts in pay for furs, and these poor people had nothing for their work. I knew, when the ships were gone, they would be left without food. The great slaughter of the seals would soon destroy all of them. Following my general instructions to care for our country's interests, I put a stop to the slaughter, broke every whisky-barrel and poured it on the ground. The Aleuts thought I did wrong. They were so eager to get it, that some of them laid down and sucked the ground and puddles of it, and got drunk. But I saved them, and I would not (allow?) the traders to kill any seals except such as the Aleuts selected, the two years' old males, and to a limited number; I required all of them to pay the Aleuts in provisions, clothing, and other needful articles, but not one drop of whisky. I reported my action to Secretary Boutwell, and my course was approved.

The vast catch that year reduced the price of skins to \$3 each. The next year comparatively few seals came to the islands, but after this fur company got the sole right, they having bid the highest for it, caught only 100,000 per year. The seals came back numerous the third year. That company have the lease of the two Russian Islands—Bahrenoff, on the coast of Kamschatka, which furnish 30,000 per annum, and thus they have practically all the sources of supply, and have control of the European market, which gives them now \$16 per skin. They pay the Government \$2.25 or \$2.50 per skin. They pay the Aleuts 40 cents each for killing, and extra for salting, and have some other costs.

The Aleuts on those islands have good, comfortable houses put up by them, and a good school. Most of their children can read and talk English. Three or four of them are in San Francisco at school. They are fairly treated, all are doing well, and some have funds in the San Francisco savings banks.

Had all the companies been allowed on the islands, they would have destroyed the business and the Aleuts also. It is not for their interest as a company to kill more than the agreed number. The market is limited and easily glutted. They can regulate the supply and keep up the prices and make the most money in this way.

Mr. Bryant, the United States Government agent there, takes the account of the skins from the Aleuts' day-books, also counts them himself, and has his clerk count and keep the number put on board the ships. The Government inspector at San Francisco does the same, and thus the exact tally is checked off.

Do this company also trade in furs along the coast? Yes; that is open, free ground and they go in with the rest, and of course have the finest chance.

Yet the fur business is only temporary. It is the mere surface pro-

duct of Alaska. When we develop the coal and gold and fisheries, there will be grander results for labor and commercial enterprise. When the forests of Oregon and Washington are gone, Alaska will be our permanent supply.

From Sitka over the mountains east is the nearest route to the Cassiar mines, instead, as now, by the Stickeen River route. Gold is in those mountains, the Indians say, perhaps the head supplies of the Cassiar, but the Indians will only reveal what they know to their friends, and a company cannot go over unless able to defend themselves, and well provisioned to remain awhile and test the region.

The best way for our Government to care for Alaska, is to have two revenue-cutters all the time in those waters, coasting about, well armed, supplied, and manned. If the Indians should combine they could easily take the fort and destroy the garrison. They have no vessel for defense or attack. Two armed vessels could protect commerce and control the Indians in a very economical way.

Do you not think that it would be good country for the Icelanders who are leaving their country; and they not be our best means of developing the resources of Alaska, and of rightly dealing with and elevating both the Aleuts and the Kolosh Indians? Yes; the very best defense we could have, and the best colonists to save the country and the people. The sober, industrious Icelanders would soon make a Territory, and ultimately a State, of great value to our American Union. To move ten or twenty thousand of them there, would be the grandest enterprise of the nation, and grant them lands and a home free.

[Indorsement.]

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT COLUMBIA,
Portland, Oreg., March 2, 1876.

Respectfully forwarded to the Adjutant-General of the Army.

The following memoranda has been furnished me by Mr. George H. Atkinson, of this city, taken from the verbal statement of Capt. J. W. White, of the Revenue Marine Service, superintendent of construction of revenue-cutter at Albina.

He was in Alaska in 1867, 1868, and 1869, on Government service. His report is favorable to the Alaska Commercial Company. He commends the Government official, Mr. Bryant, very highly, for his carefulness in checking accounts at Saint Paul's and Saint George's Islands. He believes with the post commander of Sitka, Maj. J. B. Campbell, Fourth Artillery, that the settlement of Alaska with the Icelanders who are seeking to colonize, will be the best thing for the Government, for the Aleuts, and for the Indians. Undoubtedly, every possible facility should be given to the colonists who come well prepared to develop the resources of that country, and who would soon afford us a steady and reliable basis for a territorial government.

O. O. HOWARD,
Brigadier-General, Commanding.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
ADJUTANT-GENERAL'S OFFICE,
April 8, 1876.

Official copy:

E. D. TOWNSEND,
Adjutant-General.