Beyond the Frontier
Exploring the Indian Country

By Stan Hoig

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Also by Stan Hoig

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Sibley and the Salt Mountain

According to the Osages, they regularly visited a salt prairie as well as a salt mountain. Around the start of the nineteenth century, Missouri fur trader Jean Pierre Chouteau had persuaded a large portion of that tribe under Chief Big Track to move from southwest Missouri to Three Forks, where the Verdigris and Grand (or Neosho) rivers joined with the Arkansas.¹ The Osages annually visited a hunting camp to the west near a great salt prairie. Some forty miles on, they said, was a high bluff or mountain composed of a solid mass of fossil salt, at the base of which issued a large salt spring. The Indians would scrape away the thin cover of earth and then break the salt into fragments to be carried home on their horses.²

The story of the salt mountain was heard by Amos Stoddard from an old French trapper living at Vincennes, Indiana. He said he had once pursued the peltry trade on the Arkansas. During the winter of 1871-1872, he had ascended some eight hundred miles up that river, entering a branch of it that he said was
Red sandstone cliffs along the Cimarron mark the supposed site of Jefferson's salt mountain. Today a modern salt plant operates just to the north across the river. (Author photo)

as red as vermillion and as salty as the ocean. Stoddard repeated the story in his descriptive essay to President Thomas Jefferson on the region of the Louisiana Purchase. As such, Stoddard's story gave rise to the myth of "Jefferson's salt mountain." Or was it an exaggeration? No one but the Indians seemed to really know.

In 1811 George C. Sibley, the Osage factor at Fort Osage, Missouri, became intrigued by the idea of Jefferson's salt mountain. He wished to be the first white man to visit and officially report on this mystery of the far, unexplored West. But the mountain was supposed to be deep in dangerous Comanche country. Even the Osages said that it was not safe to go there without a force of at least one hundred men.

Two years after Pike and Wilkinson visited the Osage villages in Missouri, the United States established Fort Osage (also known as Fort Clark, or as Fire Prairie by the Osages) on the Missouri River forty miles east of
present-day Kansas City. As factor, George Sibley was responsible for both the Kansa and Osage tribes. He initiated a treaty with the Osages whereby they ceded all claims to land east of a line from Fort Osage southward to the Arkansas River and all of the land north of the Missouri River. The Osages who were located on the Verdigris River of present-day Oklahoma were not in attendance at the Fort Clark treaty council conducted by Osage agent Pierre Chouteau. Led by Chief Clermont, they were taken to St. Louis, where on August 31, 1809, after Missouri governor Meriwether Lewis had personally read and explained the treaty papers to them, they also signed the treaty.

There is little doubt that trappers were working the fertile streams of Oklahoma by this time. Two trappers, John Shaw and William Miller, are believed to have trekked westward from Missouri to the Rocky Mountains along the Kansas-Oklahoma border in the spring of 1809. Others are known to have traveled from Missouri to Santa Fe by unrecorded routes. It was 1811 before another chronicled visit was made, this time by George Sibley. He was the son of Dr. John Sibley of Louisiana fame and the grandson of Reverend Samuel Hopkins, a prominent Congregational minister. Undoubtedly influenced by his father’s activities, Sibley gave up his work in a counting house to enter government service on the Missouri frontier. After helping to establish Fort Osage, he was assigned to the post as factor and Indian agent. Like his father, he was intrigued with exploration of the new lands that President Jefferson had recently purchased and, like other Americans of his day, the potential of U.S. expansion beyond.

Sibley became so intrigued with the salt mountain that he arranged a tour into Indian country to investigate. He departed Fort Osage in May 1811 escorted by elderly Osage war chief Sans Oreille, ten other Osages, two guides, and an Irish servant. Sibley first visited a Kansa village on the Marias Des Cygnes River of
Kansas. The Kansa and Osages, whose languages were much the same, were at this time on friendly terms. The Kansa had once been the scourge of French traders, often beating and robbing them and, on one occasion, burning several to death. Their small but fierce warrior force, numbering about 250 men who were noted for their daring, was feared by most other Indians in the area. The Kansa demanded high prices for the beaver, otter, bear, raccoon, fox, elk, and other
animal pelts they proffered. Sibley found the Kansa village abundant in horses, mules, dogs, and children.

From here Sibley's party of fifteen, now augmented with five Kansa warriors, rode northward to the Platte River of Nebraska to where the Republican River Pawnees under Characterish had relocated since Pike's visit. Also, he discovered, they had been joined by the Pawnee Loups and Skidi bands for protection from the Kansa. Sibley's was the first American visit to the Pawnees since Pike, whom the old chief remembered with affection.

Sibley, having become ill, was well treated by the Pawnee chief. After reasserting American-Pawnee friendship, Sibley headed south to a prearranged rendezvous with the Little Osages on the Arkansas River. En route he met a Kansa hunting party that had just killed upward of one hundred fat buffalo. "Feasting and merriment were the order of the day and of the night, too," Sibley noted. On the day following he found the camp of the Osages, who had just made a kill of around two hundred buffalo.

Sibley had been wanting to witness the spectacle of an Indian entourage—men, women, and children with horses, dogs, and movable effects—traversing the prairie and enjoying a summer's hunt. He had his chance as he fell in with the Osage band as it moved southward toward the Grand Saline, as the Salt Plains near present-day Cherokee, Oklahoma, were then known. Sibley also hoped to be the first white man ever to visit this popular Plains Indian site. But he had been warned that it was well in Comanche range. It would be hazardous, he was told, to go there without a sizable escort.

After crossing the Arkansas somewhere just west of present-day Wichita, Sibley accompanied the Little Osage village thirty miles southwest to a stream that was probably the Ninnescah. Wishing to visit other Osages to the south as well as the Grand Saline, Sibley
and his small party left the Little Osage band here. With some difficulty, he arranged to rejoin this group at an appointed site, whereupon the band would provide him escort to the salt mountain.

Traveling on for some thirty miles to the southeast, Sibley reached the Osage hunting camp of Chief White Hair close to the present Kansas-Oklahoma border. Sibley presented White Hair with an American flag. After spending the night there, the frontier tourists continued on some twenty miles to the camp of Chief Clermont west of present Blackwell, Oklahoma. From there the party rode almost due west forty miles to the Grand Saline, the last eight miles being over a range of barren sand hills. On the way the travelers paused to enjoy the tasty sand plums from bushes scattered among the dunes. The Fort Osage agent was much impressed with the Grand Saline.

I found myself on a level hard sandy plain, the southern side or extremity of the Grand Saline and I had leisure quietly to contemplate the wonderful scene before me, far surpassing anything that I had ever pictured to my mind from the descriptions I had obtained from the Indians. It is a perfectly smooth and nearly level plain of red sand, so hard on the surface that our horses made no impressions with their hooves, except on the thin crust of salt with which it was entirely covered.\textsuperscript{10}

Small herds of buffalo sprinkled the salt plains. Sibley could not resist the temptation to give chase at one herd of thirty or more. He underestimated the distance, however, and it took much longer to overtake the buffalo than he had thought. He fired his pistols without effect, while a young Osage gracefully downed two of the animals.

Unknown horsemen had been spotted in the hills to the southwest. Thinking they could well be Padoucas
(Comanches), old warrior Sans Oreille advised Sibley it was time to leave. From the salt prairie, the party traveled some thirty-six miles in a northwesterly direction to rejoin the Little Osages on a stream that was probably Medicine Lodge Creek of southern Kansas. Here the Osages planned to spend several weeks, living on fat buffalo meat, tongues, marrow bones, hominy, dried pumpkins, and plums. “All was mirth and merri-
ment,” Sibley wrote. “I never witnessed so much ap-
parent happiness so generally pervading an Indian
nation.”

As prearranged, a war party had made itself ready to escort Sibley to the salt mountain. Although he was determined to see it for himself, Sibley had some doubts about the reports he had heard. He reasoned that they may have been exaggerated by white men in telling of the wonders of the far unexplored West. He would soon find that his suspicions were not unfounded.

On June 28 Sibley, Sans Oreille, and an interpreter set out on horseback with their escort of Osage warriors. The warriors were all on foot, as was their usual warring style. For two days the three horsemen and their escort of trotting Osages traveled southwest through harsh, ravine-slashed country that seemed “thrown together in utmost apparent confusion.” At times they wound along high, rocky ridges; at other times they passed through lush meadows cut by meandering, tree-lined streams. But most awe-inspiring to Sibley were the towering, rock-capped plateaus, which made him feel he was amid the ruins of an ancient city around which the earth had sunk away.

As they approached the Cimarron River, the grass-
land gave way to sandy hills of silver-green sagebrush. In the bottomland of a small, high-banked rivulet feeding into the Cimarron from the north, the travelers came onto a sight that excited them even more than the picturesque country they had just seen. They found
themselves looking down on a herd of some thirty thousand buffalo that were grazing and watering along the stream.\textsuperscript{13}

It was not an opportunity that the Osages would simply pass by. Surrounding the herd, they began pelting it with rifle fire. The mass of buffalo stampeded down the valley, the thunder of their hooves rumbling against the red sandstone cliffs. Two of the Osage warriors were injured in the affair, which netted twenty-seven animals.

What Sibley looked down upon from a hilltop overlooking the Cimarron River was not a salt mountain but another saline. Although not so large as the other—Sibley estimated it to be some five hundred acres—it greatly impressed the Osage agent nonetheless. The saline lay like a broad expanse of flat red land spotted with white cone-shaped hills that had built up around four salt springs. Eventually it would become known as the Rock Saline because of the thick layers of rock salt that could be found there. Known today as the Big Salt Plain, it is located a few miles west of Freedom, Oklahoma, where the Cimarron River borders Woodward and Woods Counties. Commercial salt processing has been in operation there off and on since 1919.

The Indian guides told Sibley that normally the area was a solid mass of salt several inches thick but that rains had recently washed the land clear. Sibley used his tomahawk to chip off some chunks of salt from the cones to take home as evidence. He was convinced that normally the entire saline was covered with a solid rock of salt from four to twenty inches thick. In the future, however, Sibley no longer talked of a salt mountain.\textsuperscript{14}

Again Comanches were reported to be prowling nearby. Although the Osage warriors hoped to take a few of their enemy's scalps, Sibley insisted on heading back. After a frustrating journey in which he lost his
favorite riding horse in a bog, the agent returned to Fort Osage on July 11. He had been in the field for two months.

Sibley's trip to the salines of northwestern Oklahoma excited some interest among other explorers of the West. He even visualized a commercial potential in carting the salt by wagon to the Arkansas River and floating it downriver to market. In the end, his discovery would have little effect on the course of history. Nevertheless, his was the first Anglo-American intrusion into a heretofore unknown region of the West. It pulled back the curtain of mystery about the area and provides history a record of life there we would not otherwise have.

Sibley would return to the soil of present-day Oklahoma again in the fall of 1825. As one of three commissioners appointed to survey the historically significant Santa Fe Trail, he traveled with surveyor Joseph C. Brown and a surveying party from Fort Osage across Kansas and the western tip of the Oklahoma Panhandle to New Mexico. In an entry on October 7, Sibley's diary recorded a visit to a famous camping place on the trail: "Here we found, Situated amidst huge rocky cliffs The Upper Semerone Spring, affording abundance of excellent Water, and the long narrow Valley that its water supplied us with plenty of Wood for fuel & pretty good pasturage for our Horses." It would be over a year before Sibley returned to Fort Osage, his journal and diaries once again providing graphic descriptions of the western world he saw.