



Masses of red clay and boulders of white gypsum ornament the slopes of the Narrowneck, at the Big Salt Plain—Jefferson's Salt Mountain

Finding Jefferson's Salt Mountain: George Champlin Sibley and the Exploration of the Central Plains

by
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He fails the initial test of our historical imagination. George Champlin Sibley is no Leatherstocking hero, buckskin-bedecked, nor is he a tortured soul, like Meriwether Lewis. As he emerges from the historical record, he seems more at home in a genteel drawing room than on the plains. As, I believe, Sibley was--he with his silk vests, his manservants, his tidy journals, and, when he was on his own time, his leisurely breakfasts at nine. Sibley not only seems dandified if compared with such contemporaries as Daniel Boone, whom he met at Fort Osage in 1816, but even with his biographer today, an arthritic old history professor who nevertheless takes to the open prairies with relish. I believe I would be more comfortable than Sibley mixing with such associates as Old Bill Williams or Joseph Reddeford Walker with whom his activities brought him into working relationship, and I am certain I am better competent with firearms than Sibley was. Perhaps, however, our disappointed expectations result more from the failure of our imagination than from the qualities of Sibley. Today I invite you to join me in expanding our conception of what constitutes a frontiersman, as we review the exploits of George C. Sibley, explorer of the Great Plains of North America.

I invite you, too, to rethink with me the whole enterprise of exploration, and what it means to be an explorer, in the 19th Century and in the 21st. More than three decades ago I set out, intellectually and physically, to trace the explorations of Sibley on the plains, and I published the results, to the best of my knowledge, then. Today I revisit

¹ This essay was presented as a lecture in the Kaw Councils 2011 educational program series, sponsored by the Friends of Kaw Heritage, Inc., and the Kansas Historical Society, at the Kaw Mission State Historic Site, Council Grove, Kansas, on 18 September 2011. My thanks to Mary Honeyman, curator of the Kaw Mission site, for the invitation to revisit my longstanding research interest in George C. Sibley.

that research, with the benefit of additional field investigation. I find that now I have different things to say. While Sibley has rested in his grave in St. Charles, Missouri, I have traveled far and lived much. The historical documents are the same; the secondary literature appearing since the 1970s has only filled in details and not altered the fundamentals of the story; the sites are still much the same, too; what has changed, of course, is me. An obvious point is that back then I could dunk a basketball, and now I cannot, but this is not the pertinent point, because I am still quite capable of replicating Sibley's physical journeys.

No, what is different is that I am at a different place in life, personally and intellectually. Back then I had investigative zeal. I still have that, but now I possess a more reflective capacity, to understand Sibley as he was—or was he? Because one of the things that comes with this reflective capacity is an admission of fallibility—and a comfort with that, even an appreciation for our limitations as historians to replicate the past, however completely we may investigate and reenact it. So I am not here today to answer all the questions and solve all the mysteries about George C. Sibley. I am here to explore him, and to learn from the journey. Come with me. It is a fine day for traveling.

This place in Morris County, Kansas—Council Grove—owes its name to the gentleman explorer, George C. Sibley. On 5 August 1825 Sibley, his slave manservant Abram (Sibley held slaves through most of his life), his two colleagues (Thomas Mather and Benjamin Reeves), and their employees on the survey of the Santa Fe Trail arrived at a point on the “Nee Ozho River” where they found “most excellent pasturage, and a Large & beautiful Grove of fine Timber.” They settled in for a few days to await the arrival of the chiefs of the Osage, with whom they expected to negotiate a treaty providing for safe passage of American traders to New Mexico. Over the past few days, en route from Fort Osage on the Missouri River, Sibley had been traveling by night on account of intolerable attacks by green flies. “Very few flies here,” he wrote of the camp on the Neosho, his relief evident. And then he wrote,

As we propose to Meet the Osage Chiefs in council
Here, to negotiate a Treaty with them for the Road &c
I suggested the propriety of naming the place “Council
Grove” which was agreed to, & Capt. Cooper directed to
Select a Suitable Tree, & to record this name in Strong

and durable letters--which was done.²

The temptation at this point, given our venue, is to say, “The rest is history,” but that would shortchange not only my hosts but also my subject, Sibley. He was indeed the one person most responsible for completion of the survey of the Santa Fe Trail, 1825-27, incidental to which task he named Council Grove, as well as that other notable landmark just west, the Diamond of the Plain. Sibley was chosen one of the trail survey commissioners because of his experience with trade, travel, and diplomacy in the larger region of the central plains border, experience he acquired mainly as factor, or government trader, to the Osage Indians at Fort Osage, 1808-22. His experience also included a notable junket across present-day Kansas and Oklahoma in 1811 whereby he proved not only his ability to travel competently on the prairies and among their Indian tribes but also to write lucidly about the land and its peoples. It was this 1811 journey, which extended to two fascinating historic sites in northern Oklahoma—the Great Salt Plains, called by Sibley the Grand Saline, and the Big Salt Plain, which Sibley called the Rock Saline, and referred to by President Thomas Jefferson as the Salt Mountain—that drew my initial attention to Sibley in 1975.³

Here is the story of that encounter by a young historian with a young explorer. A farm boy from Barton County, and a graduate of Bethany College, I landed in Stillwater, Oklahoma, to do graduate work in History at Oklahoma State University. Research seminars in History at OSU were aimed directly at publication, and so, in a seminar led by Dr. Joseph A. Stout, I was assigned to write a chapter for a book, eventually published by the Oklahoma Historical Society and entitled, *Frontier Adventures: American Exploration in Oklahoma*.⁴ Sibley’s

2 Kat L. Gregg, Ed., *The Road to Santa Fe: The Journal and Diaries of George Champlin Sibley Pertaining to the Surveying and Marking of a Road from the Missouri Frontier to the Settlements of New Mexico, 1825-1827* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1952), 57.

3 For biographical material (much of which also appears in my earlier publications on Sibley) I rely heavily on the PhD dissertation of Charles T. Jones, “George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan (1782-1863),” University of Missouri, 1969, and republished (under the same title) in a limited, typescript edition by the Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, 1970. See also the Sibley biographies enumerated two paragraphs below.

4 Joseph A. Stout, *Frontier Adventures: American Exploration in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1976). Two journal articles elaborated on the work commenced for the anthology: Thomas D. Isern, Ed., “Exploration and Diplomacy: George Champlin Sibley’s Report to William Clark, 1811,” *Missouri Historical Review* 73 (October 1978): 85102; Thomas D. Isern, “Jefferson’s Salt Mountain: The Big Salt Plain of the Cimarron River,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 58 (Summer 1980): 16075.

excursions into present-day Oklahoma, I quickly determined, were two: his expedition to the salines in 1811, which traversed eastern and central Kansas en route, and his survey of the Santa Fe Trail in 1825-27, which took him along the established trail and thereby across what would become the Panhandle. Of these two, the 1811 expedition to the salines was the more pertinent to my purposes. I trailed Sibley not only through the documents but also into the field, determining his expedition route in a way that previous, more distinguished historians had failed to do.⁵

This fellow whom I tracked, Sibley, was a not particularly likable, but nevertheless intriguing fellow as I came to know him then, and still more intriguing as I reexamine him now. He has, other than me, three biographers: Charles T. Jones, author of a dissertation on Sibley done at the University of Missouri in 1969; Kate L. Gregg, professor of English and curator of the Sibley papers at Lindenwood College, St. Charles, Missouri, who edited his Santa Fe Trail journal and diaries; and Jeffrey E. Smith, who edited his journals and letters from Fort Osage.⁶ Sibley and his wife, Mary Easton Sibley, were instrumental in the founding of Lindenwood. Other works, such as the biography of Mary Easton Sibley written by Kristie C. Wolferman, treat him only incidentally.⁷ The only work on Sibley that has achieved significant currency is that of Gregg, and that on account of the popularity of works on the Santa Fe Trail.

Born in 1782 in Massachusetts, of old Puritan Yankee stock, George C. Sibley was the son of Dr. John and Elizabeth Sibley. Mrs. Sibley was the daughter of the prominent Congregational minister Samuel Hopkins, who proved influential in his grandson's upbringing, on account of the frequent absences of Dr. Sibley and the early death of Elizabeth. During George C.'s early years his father was gone to Fayetteville,

5 Muriel Wright first brought Sibley into the annals of Oklahoma by publishing extracts from his diary of 1811: "Extracts from the Diary of Major Sibley," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 5 (June 1927): 196-218. A generation later George R. Brooks anchored historical interest at the other end of Sibley's journey, in Missouri, by publishing his journal: Brooks, Ed., "George C. Sibley's Journal of a Trip to the Salines in 1811," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 59 (April 1965): 167-207. Historians of the expedition of Nathan Boone in 1843, which went over much of the same ground, also referred to Sibley and likewise failed to determine their subjects' perambulations on the ground: W. Julian Fessler, Ed., "Captain Nathan Boone's Report," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 7 (March 1929): 58-105; Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "Nathan Boone: Trapper, Manufacturer, Surveyor, Militia-Man, Legislator, Ranger, and Dragoon," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 19 (December 1941): 322-47.

6 *Seeking a Newer World: The Fort Osage Journals and Letters of George Sibley, 1808-1811* (St. Charles: Lindenwood University Press, 2006).

7 *The Indomitable Mary Easton Sibley: Pioneer of Women's Education in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

North Carolina. Two years after Elizabeth brought George C. and her other children west to join their father, she died, in 1790. George received a good academy education in North Carolina, apprenticed in a countinghouse, and then followed his father west again, this time to Natchitoches, Louisiana, where Dr. Sibley was an Indian agent. By his father's influence in a Jeffersonian Republican administration, the younger Sibley in 1805 received appointment as assistant to the factor at Fort Bellefontaine, near St. Louis.

At Fort Bellefontaine Sibley and his boss, Rudolph Tillier, had a falling out over the way Tillier kept the books (mixing government and personal accounts), resulting in Tillier dismissing Sibley. That was a mistake, as Sibley rode horseback to Washington, laid charges against Tillier, gathered testimonials, and evidently made a good impression on the superintendent of Indian Affairs. The upshot was the Fort Bellefontaine factory was closed, a new factory was built farther up the Missouri, specifically for trade with the Osage, and twenty-six-year-old Sibley was appointed factor in charge. Thus commenced his fourteen-year tenure as factor at Fort Osage, a position of significant influence in US relations with the Osage and their neighbors and of considerable salience on the Missouri Valley frontier.

Dr. John Sibley, so influential in his son's life despite his continual absences, epitomizes the fluidity and intrigue that characterized life in Louisiana early in the 19th Century. He was an agent of influence on behalf of American interests, attempting to win the friendship of western Indians and turn them against the Spanish. He went beyond his authorized duties in aiding American filibusters scheming to seize chunks of Spanish territory for themselves. In St. Louis, the man who would become Sibley's father-in-law, Rufus Easton, had suspicious ties to Brigadier General James Wilkinson and to his imperial conspiracies involving Aaron Burr. George Sibley had private meetings with Zebulon Pike, whose actions during his 1806-07 expedition to the southwest are certainly suspicious when viewed in light of his subordinate relationship to Wilkinson, and the most dubious individual in Pike's expedition has to have been Dr. John Robinson, a confidant of Wilkinson, who also happens to have served as agent to Osage Indians in 1809-10, when Sibley was factor at Fort Osage. Indeed, since Sibley was still single at

the time, he boarded with Dr. and Mrs. Robinson.⁸

Having pored through Sibley's writings and sorted out his relationships, I am not convinced he was implicated in any illegal, disloyal, or even questionable activities on the plains border. Sibley cannot have been blind to or ignorant of the intrigues of his associates, which were entrepreneurial bordering on treasonous, but he was himself, according to all evidence, perfectly scrupulous and intensely loyal to the United States. He sought public service both because it paid well and because it put him in the position to look out for the main chance on the frontier, but duty and propriety were important to him. There were times when political operators assailed Sibley as some sort of grafter, and those darts stung, but Sibley adhered to duty.

In fact, Sibley as a young man was an ardent nationalist, a western expansionist, and a War Hawk. His early years at Fort Osage were filled with rumors of wars and, eventually, war with Britain, which was expected also to precipitate conflict with Spain. Should that happen, Sibley expected the United States to take advantage of the opportunity to acquire Spanish New Mexico, and he expected to take part in the effort. In January 1809 he wrote to a relative that he anticipated Fort Osage "will be a rallying point from which to attack Santa Fe, we could march there and seize their Rich Mines in less than twenty days. And I have no doubt if we have a war but seize them we shall."⁹ As with other ambitions of the War Hawks, Sibley's prediction proved over-optimistic. The War of 1812, in fact, which went so badly for American interests across the frontier, compelled the temporary abandonment of Fort Osage.

Sibley's admiration for Henry Clay of Kentucky survived the war, as did his passion for national development. He became an active Whig, running several times for office in Missouri, always unsuccessful. Sibley was inept as a politician. He lacked either the network of friends

8 Key studies of Dr. John Sibley and Dr. John Robinson, those shady patriot physicians of the Mississippi Valley frontier, include G. P. Whittington, "Dr. John Sibley of Natchitoches, 1757-1837," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 10 (October 1927): 286-301; Julia Kathryn Garrett, Ed., "Dr. John Sibley and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1803-1814," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 45 (January 1942): 286-301; 45 (April 1942): 378-382; 46 (January 1943): 272-77; 47 (July 1943): 48-51; 47 (October 1943): 160-61; 47 (January 1944): 325-27; 47 (April 1944): 388-91; 48 (July 1944): 67-71; 48 (October 1944): 275; 48 (April 1945): 547-49; 49 (January 1946): 399-431; 49 (April 1946): 599-614; 49 (July 1945): 116-19; 49 (October 1945): 290-292; Harold A. Bierck, "Dr. John Hamilton Robinson," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 25 (July 1942): 644-69; David E. Narrett, "Liberation and Conquest: John Hamilton Robinson and U.S. Adventurism toward Mexico, 1806-1819," *Western Historical Quarterly* 40 (Spring 2009): 23-50.

9 George C. Sibley to Samuel H. Sibley, 18 January 1809, Library, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

or the common touch on the campaign trail that might have brought him political success. In manner, Sibley was cool and correct. One night while Mary was out of town, he took the girls from the boarding school to a circus performance, returning late. He fretted in his journal about this indulgence, it seemed not so much because of any impropriety but rather because he had too much fun.

What got Sibley into trouble for a decade or so of his life was personal ambition. He invested in land in the Missouri River valley, not extensive holdings, but picked parcels near Fort Osage and also close to St. Louis. Moreover, when the government closed Fort Osage parcel to the discontinuance of the factory system of Indian trade in 1822, he bought out the inventory of goods. In both cases he expected to profit with the development of the country, which would appreciate his landholdings and demand his goods, but development was slower than he anticipated, leaving him financially embarrassed. When he received his appointment as surveyor of the Santa Fe Trail in 1825, he was able to obtain a stay on collection of his debts while he was in government service, and his earnings from the survey helped to extricate him from his financial morass.



The author on the Big Salt Plain, the Narrownneck in the background, with Buffalo Creek flowing in from the left of view, the Cimarron River from the right

Another element in the Sibley biography that raises eyebrows among 21st century readers is his marriage, in 1815, to a fifteen-year-old girl, Mary Easton, the daughter of the would-be frontier capitalist Rufus Easton, of St. Louis. George was more than twice Mary's age. He might have been perceived to have prospects in 1815, but they were mostly of the blue-sky variety. He was handsome and well-spoken, however. Mary, for her part, had a boarding school education and musical talent for the piano. She was a looker, pretty as a girl and handsome as a lady. She was strong-willed and precocious, I would venture to say, a handful for her parents. To all appearances, the marriage of George and Mary was a love match, pure and simple. She immediately came out to Fort Osage with him, encumbered by a keelboat of baggage and effects; entered happily into frontier life; and charmed Osage visitors with her piano playing. (The compelling image of the vivacious Mrs. Sibley playing piano for the Indians found its way into James Michener's historical novel, *Centennial*.)¹⁰

The two of them never had children, although they adopted some, formally or informally, and enjoyed a surrogate-parent relationship with scores of young girls in the school they founded in St. Charles, Missouri. During the 1820s George Sibley established himself as a sort of gentleman farmer in St. Charles, a village of some promise. This was a role he continued, always puttering in his orchards, until his death in 1863. A help to him in shedding his debts was the decision of Mary Sibley, following a religious conversion to Presbyterianism in the early 1830s, to found first a day school, then a boarding school, for girls. It was only modestly successful, and eventually had to close due to lack of boarders. In the meantime Sibley, previously an agnostic, came over to his wife's faith and became a pillar of the church. This helped the cause when he and Mary sought to have the Presbyterian Church take over their property as a denominational college. Their success in this appeal led to the founding of Lindenwood College, the beginnings of which were modest indeed, but which today is a university enrolling some 14,000 students. George and Mary Sibley both are buried in a little cemetery on the university grounds.¹¹

This, then, is the George Champlin Sibley who explored the Great Plains in 1811 and set out down the Santa Fe Trail in 1825, naming

10 James A. Michener, *Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1974), 207-08.

11 Lindenwood University, <http://www.lindenwood.edu/>; "Mary Easton Sibley," Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=21637271>.

Council Grove in the process.

In several ways Sibley fits the template of explorers of the American West, as described by historians. From Coronado on such men were agents of empire, charged with advancing the interests of their sovereigns on the open plains and among their Indian inhabitants. As the historian William Goetzman has observed, American explorers in the 19th century introduced another element to the explorer profile, a post-Enlightenment preoccupation with scientific inquiry.¹² Sibley possessed and demonstrated both a concern with geopolitics and an attentiveness to natural history. An example of the latter, the interest in natural history, Sibley wrote in his journal on 23 August 1825, during the Santa Fe Trail survey, this description of the country where I was born and raised—the Arkansas River valley west of Cow Creek.

I . . . fell into a beautiful & very extensive Rich Valley or Meadow, having two small streams running through it, and numerous herds of Buffalo grazing in every direction. The soil in this Valley is very rich. The Grass very thick & Luxuriant of the kind called Buffalo Grass, which never grows tall . . . and looks like an immense field of Blue Grass. The soil of the High lands is much inferior to this in the Valley . . . in the course of my ride among the Hills I saw some very pretty flowers, a Small herd of goats, a Hare, a Hawk, a Dog Town, several Buzzards, several wolves, and two bea[u]tiful Water Birds resembling somewhat in shape & manner what we commonly call The Plover, but larger & nearly White. I also saw some Killdeers, and a small species of Hawk that is peculiar to the Dog Towns in which they reside. In one of these Towns I saw several large Rattlesnakes. I spent nearly an Hour in one of them, which is more than a league Square, I think, observing its curious inhabitants.¹³

Now, what does all this have to do with marking out an efficient route for wagon travel across the plains? Nowhere in his instructions

12 William Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

13 Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe*, 67.

as surveyor is Sibley charged to catalog the features of natural history. He was, however, a man of his times. Likewise, in regard to his 1811 expedition on the plains, by which he reconnoitered the salines of present Oklahoma, it might be noted that Sibley had a treatise on mineralogy in his personal library at Fort Osage. Lest we assume therefore that Sibley was some sort of scientific dilettante, remember the commercial importance, in general and especially on the Missouri frontier, of salt. Sibley in 1811 envisioned possibilities of commerce and a personal fortune in salt—just as, during his later survey of the Santa Fe Trail, he was alert to opportunities for investment in the Mexican trade. Although not fortunate in his personal investments, Sibley shared the common elements of 19th-Century frontier capitalism and infused them into his explorations.

All this fits with what American historians have told us about our Western explorers, but as I consider Sibley today, I also bring to bear ways of thinking about exploration deriving from the work of scholars in other countries—specifically that of the historian of Australian exploration, Paul Carter, in his brilliant and exasperating book, *The Road to Botany Bay*.¹⁴ Sibley's description of the Arkansas River valley, in addition to marking his preoccupation with natural history, also is an example of the panoramic style of observation and expression exhibited by explorers and critiqued by Carter. The explorers sought to make order of the landscape by viewing it as through the eye of an omniscient God. During the Santa Fe Trail survey Sibley made it his habit to be an outrider, zigzagging to heights on either side of the main party, attempting to achieve the sort of vision described by Carter, to fit the watercourses and physical features into a coherent whole. In fact, the whole survey, in pursuit of such vision, sometimes diverged significantly from the customary and practical route of the Santa Fe traders across the plains. This predilection must have driven Kate Gregg, who edited Sibley's journals for publication, to distraction as she tried to match Sibley's notes to known landmarks on the trail.¹⁵

In the end, however, Sibley, like other explorers, and I would add historians, might purport to an omniscient and ordered report on the

14 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (Faber & Faber, 1987).

15 As a result of presenting this paper in Council Grove, I made the acquaintance of L. Stephen Schmidt, who with Richard E. Hayden has sorted through the documents and gone over the ground to trace Sibley's actual route during the 1825-27. See their work here: <http://www.santafetrail.org/about-us/scholarly-research/sibley-survey/index.html>.

land, but in fact their writings are matters of tunnel vision. It is the nature of exploration, as Carter notes, that it produces not a map but rather a triptick of the land, a description of a narrow corridor of the landscape from which extrapolations are made.

Sibley's mode of operation in the field and his rhetoric of reportage indicate that he expected something to come of his efforts. He desired that his explorations would bring him renown and advance his standing. In the case of the 1811 expedition, his timing was bad, for although some of his writing about it appeared in the popular press, and Sibley believed the country to be on the cusp of an expansionist initiative in which he would figure, in fact the ensuing war with Britain was to precipitate a temporary collapse in American frontier enterprise. In the case of the Santa Fe Trail survey, although Sibley was the hero of the survey party, carrying through on the work when others had quit, nobody knew about that or read his reports, some of which even were lost. By the time he was done with the survey, Congress no longer was interested, the reports were not published, and it took years of struggle for Sibley to get his expenses paid. All this explains why today I am speaking to you about a rather obscure historical figure, rather than an acclaimed pathfinder. We are bringing to light a man and actions that were little appreciated in their own historic time.

Like many of you here today, I was born and raised along the old Santa Fe Trail. Our family farm is in Barton County, and we own sandhill property around Plum Buttes, a nooning spot on the trail. For many years it was my habit to pick sandhill plums from this historic place on the Fourth of July and to enjoy their iridescent jelly throughout the year. I retain a powerful historic interest in the old trail, and am the keeper of one of its secrets. My wife and I have located, on the trail and not far from the place of my birth, an inscription rock dating, the physical evidence appears certain, from William Becknell's passage through the area in 1821. We are still sorting out what to do about this, and in the meantime, the site rests in the safety of obscurity.

Back in 1975, therefore, I chose Sibley as my seminar topic because of his work on the Santa Fe Trail, but the new material that came to light had more to do with his 1811 expedition. The investigation brought into the foreground the wondrous landscape features visited and described by Sibley, comprising both the salines and also what we call the Red Hills, or more commonly the Gypsum Hills, which the explorer traversed en route to and from the salines. It also brought out in me a certain

predilection as a researcher, in fact a set of core values as a research historian, that have served me well ever since.

Research historians with long careers have a problem with stuff. They accumulate too much of it. Some of it, mementoes and trophies, you want to keep around you to the end, but most of it is documentation, kept for informational rather than artifactual value. When my accumulation of such informational stuff, all under intellectual control through the compilation of shelf lists but threatening to take physical control of our living space, exceeded 120 document boxes, I negotiated a deposit with the Institute for Regional Studies at North Dakota State University. I expect to continue making accretions to this collection for many years. In the meantime, then, in re-researching Sibley for this essay, I had to go to the archives and request my own research files be delivered to the reading room.¹⁶

This was a surreal experience. As I re-opened the files, I imagined, at least I think it was just my imagination, I heard Jerry Jeff Walker playing somewhere. The first thing I noticed in the boxes was: 3x5 cards. In the 1970s, we historians still did a lot of research using 3x5 cards, the way Frederick Jackson Turner had done it, the way we were still taught generations later. In the mix also, however, were photostatic copies of documents and even a few photocopies; the times they were a-changing. More extended research notes were on legal-size lined paper I recognized as the same sort of paper I wrote my first classroom lectures on about the same time.

Gosh, I was a regular ferret when it came to archival research in those days. Here are sources from the Gilcrease Institute manuscript collections, the Indian-Pioneer Papers of the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Alfalfa County Register of Deeds, and a number of other repositories. Pretty good research methods, too, as the citations and locations are in good order—I could track all these documents down again today. Evidently I got some good research training somewhere along the way.

Then there is the other type of research notes, the handwriting often poor, as if written in awkward places, and the citations descriptive rather than formulaic. These notes, in turn, sent me back to the published volume, *Frontier Adventures*, for which I was writing the chapter on Sibley in 1975, and here is what I observed. Of all the authors in that

16 The finding aid to my papers deposited in the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo, is not yet online.

anthology—and I am trying to state this clinically, but a certain pride creeps in—of all the authors, it appears I was the only one to go into the field and physically retrace the perambulations of my assigned explorer. I don't think anyone told me to do that. I suppose that to me as a farmer, and a bird hunter, it just seemed natural to go into the field. This same predilection makes me akin to all the Santa Fe Trail buffs of my acquaintance, who frequent the watering holes of such places as Council Grove. We are not mere armchair historians.

Other distinguished historians before me—historians such as Grant Foreman and Muriel Wright, legends of Oklahoma History—had published on Sibley, but as armchair historians, they had failed to clinch Sibley's exploration route to the Big Salt Plain. A callow master's student, simply by taking to the field in a Dodge Dart, succeeded where they had fallen short. Indulge me as I read a bit from my field notes in northern Oklahoma, following Sibley into the Great Salt Plains, or as he called them, the Grand Saline.

Country along 11 Highway west from Blackwell to Medford & on west jibes very well with Sibley's description. Flat land, with creeks & draws. [Sibley] would have crossed Deer, Polecat creeks between Blackwell & Medford. Then Pond and Crooked creeks. All red, steep-banked, timbered. Country almost all wheat land now. Cross Sand Creek just about a mile before reaching 32 Highway. After this country changes from red clay to sand and sandhills—as Sibley said. Sand Creek is probably Sibley's last camp before the Grand Saline. . . . Just where Sibley first viewed the Grand Saline is hard to figure. . . . Sibley . . . says he entered from the south or southeast. He must have crossed the Salt Fork some 4-5 miles above the present dam, then gone west. He speaks of topping a last hill, with before him 2-3 miles of prairie, a grove of cottonwoods and a "small river," and beyond the salt plains visible. At first I thought the last hill might have been what is now Ralston Island in the lake. But it would have been right on the edge of the salt plain itself. I think now Sibley must have been on a hill north of Jet—either 1 ½ [miles] north where the

cemetery now is, or 2 ½ N & 1 E on a similar rise. These both fit the description fairly well. The salt plains would have been first visible on the ascent of either one.

A little later, following Sibley on west to the Big Salt Plain, which he called the Rock Saline:

Drove to Big Salt Plain from east. Country approaching place is gypsum hills, a little cropland mixed into pasture, wheat. Turning off highway it is all pasture. Gypweed, short bunchgrass, prickly pear, yucca, occasional mesquite.

The listener will observe that now I have fallen into the habits of the explorer, noting details of natural history, even if they have no particular utility to the immediate task.

I still do this. And as I teach young historians, lots of them, how to conduct historical research, I teach them, first, to be assiduous to the point of redundancy, and second, to bring together documentary research and fieldwork so as to achieve an understanding of how things unfolded that cannot be accomplished with just one or the other. The motto I give them is, “Butts in the archives, boots on the ground.”

George C. Sibley set out from Fort Osage on 11 May 1811 accompanied by seven companions: five Osage Indians, led by the illustrious war chief Sans Oreille; a Francophone interpreter; and Sibley’s Irish servant, name of Henderson. As he had been charged by his immediate superior, William Clark, Sibley held a council with the Kaw at their village on the river named for them. From there he proceeded north and west to council with the Republican Pawnee, living on the Loup Fork. All this was prairie diplomacy, as Americans sought to establish cordial relations with the Indians of the border, in case war with Britain should precipitate.

After this Sibley continued his travels in freelance mode; he paid his own expenses. Sibley was aware of the commercial potential of salt, as established by the Boone clan operating its salt works in Howard County, Missouri. William Becknell, the eventual Father of the Santa Fe Trail, also engaged in this business. Sibley somehow had obtained intelligence he thought would lead him to a legendary deposit of salt on

the plains, one so vast it had been called by President Thomas Jefferson a “Salt Mountain.” The Choteau family of traders in St. Louis knew about the site, but considering Sibley’s less-than-cordial relations with these private Indian traders, it is unlikely his information came from the Choteaus. More likely he got his information directly from the Osage, who traveled to the salt deposits every summer.

This Salt Mountain, described by President Jefferson in a message to Congress on 14 November 1803, has been the subject of much sport from that day right on down to the present. Partisan Federalists at the time cited the reference as evidence the President was, if not foolish, at least credulous. In calling for funding of the purchase of Louisiana, Jefferson observed,

One extraordinary fact, relative to salt, must not be omitted. There exists, about one thousand miles up the Missouri, and not far from that river, a salt mountain. . . . This mountain is said to be one hundred and eighty miles long, and forty-five in width, composed of solid rock salt, without any trees, or even shrubs upon it. Salt springs are very numerous beneath the surface of this mountain, and they flow through the fissures and cavities of it.¹⁷

Given the solubility of sodium chloride, the idea of a mountain of salt is ludicrous, Jefferson should have known better, but still we might ask, how was he misled? Remember that in 1803, American intelligence about the West came from Spanish or French sources. In either Spanish or French, it is impossible to render the phrase “salt mountain” without inserting a preposition that converts the phrase into a “mountain of salt.” In English translation, then, the meaning shifts from a mountain having something to do with salt to a mountain literally composed of salt. Prior to 1803, the army explorer Zebulon Pike had written of a “mountain of salt”--note the exact phrase--and reported he had seen bushels of salt mined from it in St. Louis.¹⁸ Somehow Jefferson came to think the

17 Jefferson’s remarks are reproduced in Jedidiah Morse, Comp., *The American Gazetteer* (Boston: Samuel Etheridge, 1804), 631, available online at <http://archive.org/details/ofthecivildivisi00morsrich>.

18 Donald Jackson, Ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, with Letters and Related Documents* (2 vols., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), Vol. 2, 227.

Salt Mountain lay far up the Missouri, a misconception that occurred because intelligence came mainly from St. Louis.

Sibley, sorting out the reports, set out with his Osage guides to reconnoiter this great saline resource. Traveling rather directly south across present-day Kansas, he arrived first at the Great Salt Plain, which he called the Grand Saline and knew was not the so-called Salt Mountain. This saline, estimated by Sibley as thirty miles in circumference, was composed of hard-packed red sand through which brine wicked to the surface via capillary action. Evaporation formed a crust of salt, which might be several inches thick. Sibley, mounted on a fine white horse given him by the Pawnee, gave fruitless chase to some buffalo on the white plain. His pistols were ineffectual, but the arrows of his Osage companions brought down fresh meat.

Today, although portions of Sibley's Grand Saline have been inundated by the Great Salt Plains Reservoir, large tracts of the Great Salt Plains remain accessible to the public, in the Great Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge. In fact, visitors can drive right onto the flats to dig selenite (crystalline gypsum) that forms below ground even as the salt crust forms on the surface. Enough of the salt flats remain that visitors of historical bent easily can visualize Sibley's buffalo chase across the glistening expanse.

Sibley and his guides had ventured deep into Comanche country, and so before continuing west to the Rock Saline—the site Sibley had determined was Jefferson's Salt Mountain—they returned to the main Osage hunting camp, on Medicine Lodge Creek, for reinforcements. Then, with a larger party, Sibley made the trip to the Rock Saline, what we know today as the Big Salt Plain of the Cimarron River. His route lay through the Gypsum Hills, a picturesque region that simply entranced the normally reserved Sibley. His party traveled Indian style, keeping to the ridges as much as they could, descending declivities into the valleys only when necessary. Sibley described the journey through the Gyp Hills to the Rock Saline.

The whole of this distance lay over a country remarkably rugged and broken, affording the most romantic and picturesque views imaginable. It is a tract of about 75 miles square in which nature has displayed a great variety of the strangest and most whimsical vagaries.

It is an assemblage of beautiful meadows, verdant ridges and rude misshaken piles of red clay, thrown together in the utmost apparent confusing yet affording the most pleasing harmonies and presenting in every direction an endless variety of curious and interesting objects. After winding along for a few miles, on the high ridges, you suddenly descend by an almost perpendicular declivity of rocks and clay into a series of level fertile meadows, watered by some beautiful rivulets, and here and there adorned with clusters of thirsty cotton trees, Elms, and cedars. . . . Standing in one of these meadows one might almost be led by the contemplation of the objects around him to imagine himself surrounded by the ruins of some ancient city, and the plain in which he stands had been sunk by some convulsion of nature more than one hundred feet from its former level. For these divisions in the vallies are composed of huge columns of red clay, some of which rise to the height of near 200 feet and are capped with rocks of gypsum, which the hand of time is ever crumbling off and throwing in beautiful transparent flakes along the declivities of the hills glittering like so many mirrors in the sun. . . . It is actually worth a journey from Philadelphia to see the buffaloe in the morning, pouring from the hills into the meadows.¹⁹

Kansans well might recognize Sibley as the first white traveler to register description and appreciation of what is today considered one of the most picturesque regions of their state. Drivers of back roads here encounter countless scenes just as he described them.

Finally arriving at the Rock Saline, which Sibley described as 500 acres in the valley of the Cimarron River, but which actually was more like 5000 acres, Sibley brought his western expedition to a climax—a climax of danger, the Osages most fearful of Comanches they thought were nearby, and also a climax of geologic and commercial interest, for here were massive deposits of salt laid down in a way that made it plain how the phrase “Salt Mountain” had originated. It was not, of course, a mountain of salt, but was a mountain, of sorts—a steep escarpment—on

19 Isern, Ed., “Exploration and Diplomacy,” 99-100.

the south bank of the Cimarron River, at the point where Buffalo Creek joins it from the south. The declivity between the two streams became known to later settlers as the Narrowneck—their term for Jefferson's Salt Mountain. Saline springs flowed from its base, spread out, evaporated, and left heavy deposits of halite, crystalline salt, on the surface of the ground.

Today the salt deposits of natural occurrence are greatly diminished. A commercial solar salt factory operated by a division of Cargill Corporation pumps brine from beneath the Big Salt Plain into evaporation pools, producing granular salt for winter use on highways and other purposes. The Big Salt Plain, near Freedom, Oklahoma, is a historic site and natural curiosity of the first magnitude, and it remains a compelling site, but visitors have to use their imagination to visualize the masses of salt available there in Sibley's day. Even when I first encountered the site in 1975, much greater natural salt deposits were present on the ground than can be seen today.

I cannot close without sharing a final lesson learned from reiterating my retracing of the explorations of George Champlin Sibley. Like Sibley in 1811, I in 1975 enlisted a native guide to help me find that which I sought. My appeal for help in determining sites around the Big Salt Plain was answered by a gentleman named Otis Bickford, an old rancher and history buff from the locality. When I corresponded with him, he said he "would be more than glad to make a date . . . and cover the area." Going back into my field notes, I see that Mr. Bickford was immensely helpful. He did cover the area with me, going into the field to point out landmarks, he answered my questions patiently and to the best of his knowledge, and he took the time to produce typewritten information sheets for me. For a time there in northwest Oklahoma we were an investigative team, I the kid with the documents from the archives, he the crusty but kindly old hand possessing the knowledge of experience.

Now here's the thing: I cannot, even after reflective reconsideration, conjure in my mind today an image of Otis Bickford. I have forgotten him. Now, as a historian in the 21st Century, I am fully aware of the vagaries of memory, and so I will not state the obvious about that. No, here is the more startling recognition that dawns on me: with the lapse of living memory, my exploration of the Big Salt Plain in 1975 is fully as distant, fully as historical, as that of Sibley in 1811. Each episode today must be reconstructed in exactly the same way, through consultation of

the written record generated by the explorer on the ground, coupled with fieldwork. I did that fieldwork twice, once to retrace Sibley's journey, then again to retrace my own.

It is things like these that make me thankful to have had, and to be continuing, a long life as a research historian. Some insights come only through the accretion of decades of experience. God willing, there are more yet to come.