

## THE OMAHA INDIANS FORTY YEARS AGO

BY JACOB VORE, AGENT

I was nominated by President Grant for agent of the Indians in December, 1875, but through the selfish political influences of the Nebraska senators, Hitchcock and Paddock, my nomination was not confirmed until the following July, I believe. I was from Indiana, and the senators wanted the agent to be a citizen of Nebraska. I received my appointment in August and immediately took charge of the agency. At that time there were about 1,100 Indians in the tribe. I saw at once that to produce any material improvement in their condition and to bring them to a state of comfortable self-support and the adoption of more civilized ideas and habits would require earnest labor and diligent and persevering effort, not only in the office but out of it and amongst the Indians, in order to encourage them through my presence and advice to more active habits of industry and a better knowledge of their own interests. I tried to show them that I felt an interest in working for their good, and I wanted them to be willing to, and to feel an interest in working with me, for by doing so they would be improving their condition and adding to their knowledge of how to do the best for themselves. Many of them appeared to understand and in some measure appreciate my advice; but to accept it gradually in practice, the more intelligent were ready to adopt it.

The chiefs appeared less inclined to adopt habits of civilization, for that would lessen their influence over the tribe, which they held to be of first importance to them, and which even then was becoming precarious. The tribe was divided at that time into two parties, the chiefs' party

and the young men's party; and they were nearly equally divided, but the young men claiming the preponderance in numbers; but as they had no offices, nor officers to nominate or elect, nor any money in the treasury, there was no active strife among them.

To show the industrial progress of the Omaha: I had the threshing of the wheat crop of 1876 to do soon after I took charge at the agency. The crop of that year amounted to 5,000 bushels, the largest, it was said, they ever had raised. The next winter I had 40 harrows made for them against 10 the preceding year. In the spring of 1877 I furnished them 100 double shovel plows, against none before, a good supply of breaking and stirring plows, harness, and a large number of wagons, as well as I can recollect, 75, but it may have been 100, which gave them material encouragement. And in 1878 I made them another liberal issue of implements and wagons. And when the wheat crop of 1877 was threshed it yielded a little more than 12,000 bushels as against 5,000 the preceding year. Their other crops were increased, but not to the same extent. The wheat crop of 1878 reached 20,000 bushels of choice wheat, and they broke up over 350 acres of new prairie with their own pony teams. The agent of the Winnebago told me that in the same year he found it difficult to get his Indians to break 200 acres, although he paid them one dollar per acre and the Indian department had issued them 100 horses, two years before. In 1879 the Omaha had an increase in acreage of wheat, but the season being unfavorable for ripening, the crop was about 1,000 bushels less than the preceding year.

During the three years I was with them the Omaha improved so perceptibly that it became a matter of some notoriety, so that the newspapers, especially the Sioux City papers and the *Omaha Herald*, frequently remarked favorably about it, so that visitors from Omaha and other places in the surrounding country visited the agency to see for themselves, and expressed surprise at the improvements

the Indians had made in a few years in habits of industry and self-dependence, with some advancement in civilized manner of dress. My predecessor had given them encouragement by moderate supplies of implements, as he thought adapted to their present disposition to use them, and otherwise encouraged them by advice and just and honest treatment, and thereby secured their confidence. And when I took charge they were in a condition to improve more rapidly than before, but the change was mostly of gradual growth, and was largely dependent on judicious counsel and the earnestness of example set by the agent and his employees. Where employees are moral and industrious and show an interest in the service they can do much for the advancement of the Indians. But to accomplish success the agent must set and continue the example and oversight. I found that the Indians were pleased when I visited them at their work and said encouraging words to them.

In November, 1876, the time came for the annual annuity in money to be paid them, which had been about \$8,000. Believing as I did that the less they depended on annuities the more they would strive to help themselves and the less they would depend on extraneous assistance, I estimated for \$5,000, and stated my views on the subject to the commissioner of Indian affairs, which were approved, and I was authorized to pay them that amount. The chiefs and a few of their followers complained at being cut down in their annuity expectations, but I told them that was the amount the Indian department allowed me to pay them that year, that the commissioner thought they were getting able to support themselves and they ought to save their money for future needs. They were generally satisfied, or did not complain. The white trader at the agency appeared to be most dissatisfied. After they received their annuity a large number of the Indians determined to go on their annual winter hunt for buffaloes and would not be dissuaded from it, mostly taking their families and about all their subsistence with them. The

winter proved an unusually severe one, and the buffaloes were getting scarce and further off on account of the more western tribes killing them and driving them farther west, so that the Omaha had very poor success in hunting. And the snow being unusually deep and the weather very cold they found returning so extremely difficult that they could make but little progress. Their supplies becoming exhausted, they were on the border of starvation, and their ponies, in but little better condition than they were themselves, could help them but little. Their condition was such that army officers on the west interposed and induced the Indian department to render them relief. They came home late, after losing two men and two or three children, as I now recollect it. On their return they were impoverished, as they had left nothing at home to supply their wants on their return, and were dependent on those who stayed at home, which was a serious burden to them. Knowing their condition I asked and received authority to issue \$3,000 to the tribe in cash to support them until they could raise a crop, which was the last annuity I paid them. After resting a short time they went to work with a will that was really creditable to them, and raised much the largest crop they had ever raised. That experience put an end to their hunting expeditions.

The Omaha were much annoyed and injured for many years by the Winnebago stealing their ponies. They reported 125 stolen and several were stolen afterward. The Omaha never retaliated in the same way, and the Winnebago tantalized them with being too cowardly to steal from them. They resented the insinuation and said it was not because they were afraid but it was dishonest and mean, and they did not want to do like the Winnebago. But when the last raid was made on the Omaha ponies the Indians came to me and said the stealing must be stopped, that they had stood it as long as they would and if the agents didn't stop it they would take the matter in their own hands and that would make trouble between the tribes

and likely bloodshed. I then went to see the agent to try to induce him to take more prompt action with his Indians in order to prevent a collision, but he told me as he had told the Omaha, that he didn't believe he could stop the stealing, that the ponies, when stolen, were run across the Missouri into Iowa, and that his policemen would not pursue or arrest the thieves, but would rather help them to escape. I then proposed, as his Indians had committed the depredations, that he appeal to the Indian department for means to employ a capable white officer to discover and break up their rendezvous for the sale of the stolen property. He replied that he thought that would be useless as he did not suppose the department would take any notice of his application.

I then appealed to the commissioner of Indian affairs, myself stating the situation and the trouble likely to arise if the Omaha were not protected in their property and asked for a hundred dollars for the purpose of employing a competent white man to serve as a policeman, to pursue and break up the den of pony thieves and their confederates. The commissioner promptly responded, allowing me to use that amount. I at once employed an energetic white man who traced them to the place of concealment and sale of ponies at or near Spirit Lake, Iowa. That broke up pony stealing from the Omaha while I was there, and five years after I visited the agency and was told by the Indians that there had not been a pony stolen since I left.

I have written the above to show the more than usual civilized patience and forbearance of the Omaha under trying circumstances.

I have written in a somewhat fragmentary manner, just as memory has been pleased to come to my aid, with a pretty clear perception of the correctness of what I have written.

The Omaha are peaceable and honestly disposed, with a higher sense of morality, backed by industrious habits, than

any of the tribes I had any acquaintance with, except the Ponca, who were formerly of the same tribe; and between those two tribes there was kept up a friendly correspondence and interchange of presents.

The Omaha chiefs and their tribal relations, which it seemed to be their object and chief purpose to maintain, were the most apparent obstacle to the more rapid advancement of the tribe in civilization and the adoption of the customs of the whites. The chiefs had long considered themselves the heads of their tribe and highly valued their tribal authority and influence and did not willingly relinquish them; indeed but little more so than partisan politicians do their positions and influence in more civilized and intelligent forms of government.

I understood that prior to the time that my predecessor was appointed agent it had been usual for Indian candidates for policemen for the tribe to appeal to the chiefs for their endorsement, and that the candidates who could offer the most liberal bonus in ponies to the chiefs generally secured their endorsements. Whether the aborigines learned that art from civilization or civilization from the aborigines, or whether both classes had the will and inclination inherently I will not attempt to decide.

My predecessor had exerted some influence over many of the Indians by showing them the disadvantages of their tribal habits in comparison with more civilized modes of living, and wherein their conditions would be materially improved by giving up their tribal relations and customs and embracing the white man's ways of living and dressing. And so far as I observed the chiefs did not appear to exert any arbitrary authority over the tribe, nor any encouragement to improve or progress, but by appealing to their ancestral lives and customs with the view of persuading them to maintain their standing and identity as a tribe among the Indian nations, which with civilized peoples would hardly be considered unpatriotic.

But being surrounded by civilized life and customs and

the evidences of plenty and comfort through moderate industry and economy, it only requires patience, perseverance and just dealing, with good example, to convince the tribe, young and old, that civilized life with its inviting advantages is not only much preferable to their former lives, but desirable to strive for. The chiefs said they were too old to change, but the young men could change if they wanted to. But their advancement will depend much on their teachers, on the energy and good judgment of agents and those having the oversight of them. And that requires extra labor and vigilance, and that without any extra compensation and frequently with less than thankfulness, both from the department and interested whites.

In 1885, I believe, about 50,000 acres from the west portion of the Omaha reserve were sold, as I understood for near \$500,000, and the proceeds annually distributed to the tribe, which I have been informed has not operated as an incentive to many of the Indians to work and provide for themselves, but on the contrary seems to have induced a return to their old habits of indolence and dependence.

After the spring of 1877, when the Omaha returned from their unfortunate hunt, until the fall of 1879 when I gave up the agency, I paid no annuity. The first year the chiefs complained some, mostly through the counsel of one of the traders, who I learned was holding counsel with them late at night to induce them to believe that I could get them annuities if I would. When I discovered that, I called on the trader and told him what I had learned and that he was going too far and that if he did not change his course and correct the impressions he had tried to make on the chiefs it would be necessary for him to look out for another trading post.

I was troubled with the chiefs but little afterwards; indeed, considering that I was as firm as I was, although I aimed to treat them respectfully and becomingly, I thought it was remarkable that I appeared to have their confidence

and good will as I did; but I found they respected that spirit.

To illustrate their feeling I may say that when I was about to retire from the agency I called a council of the Indians at which the chiefs were all present and on my informing them that I was about to leave them the head chief addressed me about as follows:

Major, we are sorry that you are going to leave us, we want you to stay with us because we have got to know your ways. For a while after you was agent we did not understand your ways. Your ways were different from other agents' ways, and we did not understand them for a good while, and we didn't like you very well; but when we got to understand your ways we found they were good ways, and now we like them and want to follow your ways, and we are afraid if another agent comes his ways will not be like your ways and our young people will go back like the Winnebago.

Several of the other chiefs expressed the same feeling. In conclusion, I may say that I had no trouble with the Indians. I never enjoyed myself more than when I was faithfully laboring for the improvement and the interests of the Indians.

#### EXPLANATORY ADDENDUM BY THE EDITOR

Mr. Vore, a member of a Society of Friends, assumed the office on September 21, 1876, succeeding T. T. Gillingham, also a Friend. How Indian agents came to be chosen from these particular people is related in the report of the commissioner of Indian affairs for 1872, as follows:

For the year preceding the passage of the act of July 15, 1870, all superintendents of Indian affairs and Indian agents, with the exception of those for the States of Kansas and Nebraska, were officers of the Army assigned to duty under the orders of the Indian Office. In the two states named, however, the superintendents of Indian affairs and Indian agents had been for somewhat more than a year appointed by the Executive upon the recommendation of the two Societies of Friends, the appointees being in all cases recognized members of one or the other of those religious bodies, and, while duly subordinate and responsible in all official respects to the Indian Office, maintaining close correspondence with committees of their respective societies appointed for that purpose. So fortunate were the results of this system of appointment in Kansas and Nebraska considered, that when, under the provisions of the 18th section of the act of July 15, 1870, it became necessary to relieve officers of the Army from this service, it was decided by the Executive that all the agencies thus vacated in the re-

maining States and the Territories should be filled by appointment upon the recommendation of some religious body; and to this end the agencies were, so to speak, apportioned among the prominent denominational associations of the country, or the missionary societies representing such denominational views; and these associations or societies were thereupon requested to place themselves in communication with the Department of the Interior, to make nominations to the position of agent whenever a vacancy should occur within the list of the agencies assigned them respectively, and in and through this extra-official relationship to assume charge of the intellectual and moral education of the Indians thus brought within the reach of their influence. The reason formally announced for this somewhat anomalous order of appointment was the desirableness of securing harmony between agents and missionaries, complaints having become general that, in the frequent change of agents, no missionary efforts could long be carried on at any specified agency without encountering, sooner or later, from some agent of different religious views or of no religious views, a degree of opposition or persecution which would necessarily extinguish such missionary enterprise and even destroy the fruits of past labors. When it is remembered that efforts of this kind must, to achieve valuable results, be continued for many years, confidence being a plant of slow growth in savage breasts, and the hope of the missionary being almost universally founded on the education of the rising generation, while, in fact, Indian agents were under the old political regime changed every few months, or every two or three years at the longest, it will readily be seen that the chances of missionary enterprises being cut off in the flower were far greater than the chances of continuance and success. Such indeed had been the general history of these efforts among the Indians of North America, and it may fairly be said that almost the only enterprises of this kind which have secured a permanent footing are those which preceded the Government control of the Indians, and which had founded themselves on the confidence and sympathies of the natives too strongly to be shaken by official hostility or neglect.

While, however, the importance of securing harmony of feeling and concert of action between the agents of the Government and the missionaries at the several agencies, in the matter of the moral and religious advancement of the Indians, was the single reason formally given for placing the nominations to Indian agencies in the hands of the denominational societies, it is, perhaps, not improper to say that the Executive was also influenced by the consideration that the general character of the Indian service might be distinctly improved by taking the nomination to the office of agent out of the domain of politics and placing it where no motives but those of disinterested benevolence could be presumed to prevail.

The Hicksite Friends have in their charge 6 agencies, with 6,598 Indians; Orthodox Friends, 10 agencies, with 17,724 Indians; Baptists, 5 agencies, with 40,800 Indians; Presbyterians, 9 agencies, with 38,069 Indians; Christians, 2 agencies, with 8,287 Indians; Methodists, 14 agencies, with 54,473 Indians; Catholics, 7 agencies, with 17,856 Indians; Reformed Dutch, 5 agencies, with 8,118 Indians; Congregationalist, 3 agencies, with 14,476 Indians; Episcopallians, 8 agencies, with 26,929 Indians; the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1 agency, with 1,496 Indians; Unitarians, 2 agencies, with 3,800 Indians; Lutherans, 1 agency, with 273 Indians.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1872*, pp. 460, 461, 462.

Section 18 of the act of 1870 adverted to prohibited officers of the army from holding any civil office.<sup>2</sup>

The commissioner of Indian affairs, in his report for 1876,<sup>3</sup> apologized for the shortcoming of the service as follows:

The great want of the Indian service has always been thoroughly competent agents. The President has sought to secure proper persons for these important offices by inviting the several religious organizations, through their constituted authorities, to nominate to him men for whose ability, character, and conduct they are willing to vouch. I believe the churches have endeavored to perform this duty faithfully, and to a fair degree have succeeded; but they experience great difficulty in inducing persons possessed of the requisite qualifications to accept these positions. When it is considered that these men must take their families far into the wilderness, cut themselves off from civilization with its comforts and attractions, deprive their children of the advantages of education, live lives of anxiety and toil, give bonds for great sums of money, be held responsible in some instances for the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and subject themselves to ever-ready suspicion, detraction, and calumny, for a compensation less than that paid to a third-class clerk in Washington, or to a village postmaster, it is not strange that able, upright, thoroughly competent men hesitate, and decline to accept the position of an Indian agent, or if they accept, resign the position after a short trial.

Section 4 of the act of Congress of April 10, 1869, making appropriations for the expense of the Indian department, authorized the president to organize a board of commissioners of not more than ten persons, "who may, under his direction, exercise joint control with the Secretary of the Interior over the disbursement of the appropriations made by this act or any part thereof that the President may designate. . . ."<sup>4</sup> President Grant promulgated regulations for the guidance of the board June 3, 1869.<sup>5</sup> This board is still in existence. It at once assumed authority under the act creating it to farm out the appointment of Indian agents to the several religious organizations. The northern superintendency, comprising the six agencies in Nebraska, were allotted to the Hicksite denomination of the Society of Friends, who acted so promptly, perhaps it should be said, with such avidity, that within a very few months all the Gentile agents and the superintendent had been superseded by their own sectaries.<sup>6</sup>

But this strange recrudescence of theocracy was of course short-lived, and by 1881 a Gentile had succeeded to the superintendency, and all of the sectarian agents but one had been ousted by unregenerate politicians. This notable exception

<sup>2</sup> *U. S. Statutes at Large*, XVI, p. 319.

<sup>3</sup> Page iv.

<sup>4</sup> *U. S. Statutes at Large*, XVI, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1869*, p. 486.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1869*, p. 5.

was Isaiah Lightner of the Santee agency. He successfully withstood Republican besiegers but was finally overcome soon after the change to a democratic administration in 1885.

In his first report—for 1877—Carl Schurz, secretary of the interior under the Hayes administration, sharply criticized the inefficiency and dishonesty of the sectarian organization of the Indian bureau, and in his second report he said: "The Indian service has been reorganized in several of its branches. It was found necessary to remove a number of agents on account of improper practices or lack of business efficiency, and great care has been taken in filling their places with new men."<sup>7</sup> These statements by Mr. Schurz are entitled to credence.

In the report of the board of Indian commissioners for 1881<sup>8</sup> it appears that "Gen. Grant was led to ask for and to secure the legislation that created this board"; that without any special conference with the religious bodies some member of the board, perhaps its secretary, Vincent Colyer, proposed to divide up the agencies among the different denominations; that Colyer had much to do with the original assignment of agencies; that the secretaries of some of the religious societies were summoned to Washington where it was agreed that the agents should be nominated by those bodies; that the president and the secretary of the interior (Jacob D. Cox of Ohio), who were present at the meeting, there asked to be relieved from the pressure of politicians: "So it went on without any special rule, and since that date most of the agents have been nominated by these religious bodies"; that the Hayes administration cooled the scheme; that under Garfield's administration no agents were nominated by religious societies; and that Arthur's administration gave the theocracy its quietus. At the Mohonk Lake conference of "friends of Indian civilization", in October, 1885, it was sadly said that "The present system allows the selection of an agent with no reference to the Indian whatever, but to political considerations and political rewards."<sup>9</sup>

Local newspapers had long been charging the administration of the Nebraska agencies with speculation and incompetency under the purely spoils system which preceded the Quaker regime. The change doubtless brought some improvement, and the superior capacity, both mental and moral, of Secretary Schurz, still more.

By the treaty between the United States and the Omaha Indians, dated March 16, 1854, in consideration of the cession

<sup>7</sup> *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1877, p. XII; 1878, pt. I, p. iv.*

<sup>8</sup> Page 87.

<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1885, I, 823.*

by the Indians of all their lands in Nebraska except their reservation, it was provided that they should be paid forty thousand dollars annually for three years, thirty thousand dollars annually for ten years next succeeding the three years, twenty thousand dollars annually for the fifteen years next succeeding the ten years, and ten thousand dollars annually for the term of twelve years next succeeding the fifteen years. The twenty thousand dollars per annum was being paid while Mr. Vore was agent. It was discretionary with the department of Indian affairs to pay these installments all in money or partly in goods or other benefits.

Under the acts of Congress of August 7, 1882, and March 3, 1885, the 50,157.27 acres lying west of the right of way of the Sioux City and Nebraska Railroad Company were sold in 1885. The appraised value of this part of the reservation so sold was \$512,670.24.