

*Testimony of Charles Bryant.*

WASHINGTON, D. C., *March 20, 1876*

CHARLES BRYANT sworn and examined.

The CHAIRMAN:

Question. State your name, residence, and occupation.—Answer. My name is Charles Bryant; my occupation at the time of my appointment was farming, but the principal occupation of my life-time has been catching whales; my place of residence was Fairhaven, Mass.

Q. Have you any knowledge of the Alaska Commercial Company?—A. I have, as connected with the seal-islands in their district.

Q. Were you at any time called upon to investigate anything in relation to the seal-islands of Saint Paul or Saint George?—A. Lieutenant Maynard, of the Navy, was at the islands in the summer of 1875, making inquiries and investigating the affairs of the Alaska Commercial Company, and I gave him what information I possessed in regard to the matter.

Q. Are you the Treasury agent of the Government?—A. I am.

Q. Stationed on the islands?—A. I was stationed on the island of Saint Paul.

A. When did you go there?—A. I went there first in 1869.

Q. How long did you remain?—A. I went there in April and remained until September.

Q. Have you not been there since?—A. Yes, sir; every successive season of the sealing.

Q. You have been there in your character as Treasury agent?—A. Yes, sir; at first, in the summer of 1870, I went out as special agent to relieve the necessities of the natives and take care of them. In consequence of all trade being interdicted there, and their not being allowed to kill seals, they were in a condition of great want and necessity. I was sent by the Secretary of the Treasury, on the steamer Lincoln, to supply their wants and necessities until such time as Congress took action. At the time I left, Congress had taken no action in regard to the leasing of the islands.

Q. You have been there, you say, each year since?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. During the killing season?—A. Yes, sir; I have been there during the killing season each year, and a greater part of the time through the

entire year. I have been down three times in the winter, when there were no seals on the island, on leave of absence.

Q. Then you are familiar with the islands and with the business there, and somewhat familiar with the transactions with this company?—A. Yes, sir; I ought to be as much so as any other man.

Q. Do you know, or have you reason to believe, that the Alaska Commercial Company, as lessees of the Government, have at any time in any way disregarded or violated the terms of their lease and their obligations under the law in relation to taking fur-seals in those islands?—A. No, sir; I do not know that they ever have.

Q. Have you any reason to know or to suspect that they have at any time failed to report the number of fur-seals taken by them?—A. From the method in which the business is conducted, that would not be possible.

Q. Why do you say it would not be possible?—A. Because the seals are never killed on the islands for any purpose whatever, except through the agency, and under the direction of the chiefs, and by special permission of the Treasury agent in charge of the islands. A chief never assumes to kill a seal, even for food for a working-party.

Q. Any smuggling or illicit killing, or anything of that kind, would necessarily be discovered by the Treasury agent?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did you observe much of the treatment of the natives by this company?—A. Yes, sir; that has come directly within my duty.

Q. State to this committee whether the company observe their obligation to the natives?—A. They have observed them to the fullest extent.

Q. What seems to be the relation between the natives, and the company?—A. The relation between the natives and the Government officers has always been of the most friendly and trustworthy kind. They were accustomed by previous training under the Russian government to look to their governors as a sort of patriarchal protectors or "papas," as they designated them.

Q. Have you ever known of complaint from these natives, and failures on the part of the company to supply their wants or to discharge their obligations to the natives?—A. No, sir.

Q. Do the natives seem to be comfortable?—A. They are comfortable, more so than they ever have been under any previous condition of things.

Q. Are they compelled to work or do they work voluntarily?—A. They work voluntarily.

Q. Who has the direction of the natives in their work, the agent of the company?—A. No, sir; their chiefs. In killing the seals the agent of the company directs the chief, saying to him that he wants him to go ahead and kill seals as fast as he can. It is his custom in the afternoon to tell the chief that the company want as many seals killed the next day as they can get. That is as far as the agent has anything to do with it. The chief, the first and second assistants, act very similarly in capacity to the captain of a ship, the second and third chiefs acting as the two executive officers. The chief of his own accord designates what parties are to drive and what parties are to kill for the following day. That designation is made on the evening beforehand. They then go and drive the seals in. When the seals are on the ground the agent of the Alaska Commercial Company stands by the herd while they are being killed, and after the chiefs have selected such seals as they consider prime they ask the agent of the company if there are

any more in that lot which he wants. If he chooses any of the others they kill them, and those that are left are allowed to go overboard.

Q. Do the natives get their pay certainly, regularly, and fairly?—A. Yes, sir; they have had their pay every year according to their own rules and regulations. The whole compensation for taking the seals is placed at their disposal, and they divide it among themselves according to the established rules.

Q. The wages are paid to the chiefs, and the chiefs divide it among the workers?—A. Exactly. At the termination of the season the account is made up at 40 cents per skip for all the seals killed. In addition to this the natives save the throats of the seals when they have leisure, and also do other work for the company. They save the lining of the throats of the young seals. They are used to make weather-proof garments. They do, as I have said, other work for the company, for which they are paid. The whole amount for the year is reckoned up, and then the chiefs sit down together and make out a list classifying the labor, the chief himself keeping an account of the general average of the men working. They are divided into first-class laborers, who have been well and who have worked regularly all the time, and have also the best standing in the community. They are put down as class number *one*. Those who have worked irregularly, or a portion of the time, are classified as number *two*. Then there are some who are idle and do not always turn out when called upon, whom they put down as number *three*; and the boys, just reaching the first year of the seals, and who cannot do a full day's work, are put down as number *four*. There are then two or three old men and some native laborers who are troubled with rheumatism, and I think there are three of that class, who are put down as *fifth* class. When they are arranged and classified a list is made out, and they come to me with that list and I assist them in making the calculation and dividing that sum, giving to those put down as first class 100 per cent.; second class, 90 per cent.; third class, 80 per cent.; fourth class, 70 per cent.; and to the fifth class, 60 per cent. That is their own regulation. That is done entirely within their own authority.

Q. If there is any unfairness, then, in the distribution, it is with the chiefs and owing to their rules of distribution, and not with the company?—A. Yes, sir; the company's agent never has anything to do with the private affairs of the natives except in paying their accounts and supplying their wants from the stores.

Q. Suppose any of the natives should want to leave the islands, are they kept there against their will?—A. No, sir; they are always at liberty to leave; that is a standing rule.

Q. I suppose these natives are dependent on the company for all their purchases?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. How do the prices compare? Do the company take any advantage of the natives and charge them extravagant prices?—A. No, sir; they never have to my knowledge. There have been two instances in which a native has brought to me his goods from the store, saying that he had paid too much for them; but I ascertained, upon examining the invoices, that they had been charged within the rules of 25 per cent. profit on the cost at San Francisco.

Q. Do you mean the wholesale price?—A. Yes, sir; the wholesale price. The company never charged to exceed 25 per cent. profit on the wholesale price at San Francisco.

Q. You say you are an old whaler; you know something, then, of the

sea and the whales thereof?—A. Yes, sir; I have had a considerable experience.

Q. You know what is a dangerous and what is a kind sea?—A. Yes, sir; I have been at the business twenty years.

Q. Give us some idea of the dangers of navigation in that region of the country?—A. That country is, and must always be, considered as one of the most dangerous, or equally dangerous with the coast of Labrador, from the fact that in the vicinity of most of the islands there are no harbors, but only open roadsteads, in which a vessel has to anchor and often leave within an hour's warning. I have known instances where they were loading the skins on the steamer, the boat would discharge and come to the shore, and before she could be loaded again, or within less than two hours, the vessel would be driven to sea by stress of weather and be gone perhaps thirty-six or forty-eight hours.

Q. The risk, then, in the trade is more than the usual or general risk upon ordinary seas?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. What about the fogs of that country—do they render navigation still more hazardous?—A. The fogs in July and August render the navigation sometimes very difficult, because the vessel might strike the shore without being able to see land; the shores are shallow at many points, with outlying rocks and ledges.

Q. Do you know about any attempts of persons to kill seals illicitly in that country?—A. I do. A schooner came in and anchored near a rock about five miles distant from the main island in September, 1874. I sent a boat, with an officer, on board. There were two seal-skins, or rather two carcasses hanging up on the vessel, but the captain declared that he had shot those seals in the water for the use of his Colosh natives, his crew being made up of Indians. Again, in 1875, on the 22d of July, we discovered the point of a vessel's mast above this rocky island; it is quite high on one side. I sent my first assistant, Colonel George Marston, with a boat and boat's crew, made up of natives and employes of the Alaska Commercial Company, and when they reached the vessel, she was making every effort to escape from the island, but the wind dying out the boat was able to overtake her, took possession of her, and she having been clearly caught taking seals illegally on the island, the officer obliged the captain in charge to bring her up to Saint Paul's Island, where I seized her and sent her down to San Francisco in charge of a prize-master, and delivered her to the district attorney.

Q. What schooner was that?—A. The "San Diego."

Q. How many skins did you find aboard?—A. One thousand six hundred and sixty.

Q. What became of that vessel?—A. The vessel was delivered over to the collector of customs and the district attorney in August, and libeled. I have since heard, indirectly, that the vessel had been bonded, and have been notified that the case of her condemnation was to be tried in court on my arrival in San Francisco, where I am expected as the most important witness for the Government. The case is set for the 4th of April.

Q. And that matter is not yet finally disposed?—A. No, sir; the skins, I have been told, were bonded; in fact, I think the Treasury Department has been notified of the fact that the skins have been delivered under bond and sold. I am very anxious to have the vessel condemned, as it is the first attempt, and it should be made an example of.

Q. Do you know anything about the character of the bond given?—A. No, sir, I do not.

necessity for diminishing. On the other hand, I think that within two years from now it could be increased.

Q. Do you propose returning to the island?—A. I expect to, and am making my arrangements for that purpose.

Q. What is the length of the voyage from San Francisco to the islands?—A. In the vessel formerly used it has taken eighteen days; included in that time is about three days' stoppage at Ounalaska Harbor to recoal.

Q. You have authority over both the islands?—A. I have charge of both the islands. I have three assistants. I remain on Saint Paul for the reason that that is the most important point, nine-tenths of the seals being on that island.

Q. According to that rule you take 90,000 there and 10,000 on Saint George?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. But both the islands are under your jurisdiction?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. Then your testimony in relation to the treatment of the natives applies to both islands?—A. Certainly. The officer on Saint George acts entirely under my direction and reports to me.

Q. As you have sworn to tell the truth and the whole truth, if there is anything on your mind material to this Government on the question of the legality of the lease to this company, or the fidelity with which the company complies with the terms of the lease, I would like to have you state it.—A. I have nothing to state, and, on the contrary, I am very glad to be able to say that they have kept their contracts so far as dealing with the natives is concerned. I have had ample opportunity of knowing. Beyond that they have built, as I understand, of their own voluntary accord, a cottage for each family on the island. When I went to the island there was not a family living in a wooden building. They lived in underground huts, without fuel, where they kept warm by animal heat, sweltering and stifling for want of ventilation, and in filth which engendered scrofula and other diseases, which rendered it necessary, as the records of the Russian population show, to constantly recuperate the working force on the island by people from other islands, and it is not until since they have been comfortably housed, with stoves and coal for fuel, that the population has begun to increase, that the birth-rate has exceeded the death-rate. When I left the islands the buildings in process of erection had been nearly all raised and covered, and a letter from the islands one month after I left states that they are all completed, and that the natives had moved into their houses. There are sixty-four families on Saint Paul's. On Saint George's Island they are not so far advanced to a state of readiness. There are seventeen families on Saint George's Island, and they have twelve houses built, and they expect to build the remainder this winter or spring.

Q. I am requested to ask you as to the regulations of the company to their employes to govern them in their intercourse with the natives. How do the natives know anything about those regulations?—A. They have copies of them, which I have caused to be translated into the Russian language, which is the language in which a large portion of them read and write. I have also had copies made of the act of Congress, and, furthermore, make it a point whenever I go to the islands, as I shall go this spring, to write a letter stating to them the general results of my visit East; and any additional regulations or any change that a change in my instructions renders necessary, are always translated into the Russian language and filed with the chiefs, where they can consult and read them at any time.

Q. Have they full knowledge, then, of all regulations upon that subject and their rights thereunder?—A. Yes, sir.

Q. Do they have schools?—A. We have a school eight months in the year. That affects the younger children mostly. Many of the younger children are reading simple sentences and learning simple arithmetic; but we encounter in the teaching of the English language some opposition from a portion of the natives; or rather a fear exists among them lest by teaching the English language we shall entirely supersede the Russian language, and thereby they shall lose their connection with the Russian Church.

Q. They are very religious, I understand.—Yes, sir. But I am told by the bishop resident in San Francisco that they are preparing and teaching priests to understand the English language, and that there exists no reason why the services cannot be rendered as well in English as they can in Russian. In their religion they believe in 40 days' probation in purgatory, and in the event of any person dying, the friends of that person must have prayers read for the repose of their souls every evening during that forty days. The old people ask us, with a good deal of reason, "Who, when we are dead, will read the prayers over our graves, if our children cannot read Russian?"

Q. Has that company been taking any whisky out there?—A. No sir; the liquor brought up for medical use has been turned over to my care, and I have allowed the surgeon to have it in small quantities at a time.