

Letter from George Browning to James Brisbin, December 18, 1878

*Fort Ellis, M.T.
December 18, 1878*

Major Jn S. Brisbin
Commanding, Fort Ellis M.T.

Sir:

. . . I have the honor to state that during my thirteen years service in the Indian Country, I have seen considerable of the workings of the Interior Department in connection with the Indians and in that time I have been stationed on two Indian Reservations. My opinion has always been, that there was more or less fraud and mismanagement at the agencies. Since 1870 my only experience has been with the Crow agency which . . . I have visited several times . . . as Inspector of supplies. A large amount of annuity goods are annually sent to the Agency, which are totally unfit for issue to Indians. . . .

In the issuing issued by me in March 1878, there were thousands of dollars worth of such articles as overcoats with velvet collars, Cashmere pants and vests, all of a material too light and fine to be of use to the Indians, and not one tenth part of which were ever used by them, they being almost immediately traded off to Squaw men and other whites at the agency and elsewhere. In the issue of annuities in March of past year, there was an evident attempt to keep back for some purpose a large amount of annuity goods. . . . After the agency had reported to the Inspector, that the annuities were all taken out of the warehouse for distribution, the inspector entered said store-house, and found several thousand dollars worth of blankets, dress goods, cloth, boots and shoes still in the boxes in which they were shipped.

The Inspector had all these goods taken out and distributed. On speaking to the agent in regard to it, he said he thought the annuities with the exception of a small amount for

the "Home" were all taken out for distribution. In the issue of rations to the Indians at the agency during the past year, large issues have been made on paper, when the affidavits of interpreters and others, show that not nearly the number of Indians reported . . . were at the agency. . . . In the reported issues of October 1878, . . . the Agents issue book shows an issue to 300 families, and the affidavit of two interpreters at the post show but about 100 families at the agency. Affidavits of two white men living at or near the agency show that supplies of different kinds, were several times during the past year taken from the agency warehouse at night by themselves and others, under the direction of the Agents employed in charge of the store-house. My inventory of Government property at this agency in November showed that nearly one half of the herd of Beef Cattle, were not branded with the agency brand "ID" and the hay purchased was much of it of an inferior quality. The Agent [has also been] under indictment by the Grand jury of Madison County, Montana, for fraud in the receipt of hay for the agency.

One employee Jn Severn made affidavit in November that he had not been paid his salary in about nine months, although a stub in the agents check book showed the agent had drawn money for that purpose from the 1st National Bank of Bozeman in May, 6 months before. Large sums of money [have] been drawn from the Bank for expenditure for [employee salaries] and . . . not been so applied by the agent. This agent received as presents from the Indians several hundred robes, during the past year.

Geo. S. Browning

Source: James Sanks Brisbin Papers, 1850–1891. Manuscript Collection 39 [box 1 folder 25]. Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 65.