

Major Fridley's Kingdom of Manomin

Former Indian Agent Ruled Over the County
of Manomin in the Manner of an Absolute
Monarch. The Eighteen Sections of
Land in His "Kingdom" Now Part
of Anoka County

By Merle Potter

THEY called the Honorable Abram M. Fridley "Major," but actually he was about as powerful as a king.

At any rate he had what practically amounted to a kingdom within the public domain of Minnesota, where he ran things with a high hand and was monarch of all he surveyed.

The major had less than a thousand subjects, but there was once talk that he would lead his armies against the forces of the sovereign state of Minnesota, and for days the papers were filled with accounts of his warlike preparations. Any day, according to these papers, his troops might be expected to come tramping into Minneapolis and St. Anthony, terrifying the populace and spreading destruction.

He was king for 13 years, and then he gave it up. His kingdom got to be a sort of "white elephant," and besides he was rather bored with the whole reigning business anyway.

The Fridley dynasty lasted from 1857 to 1870—lasted while the territory of Minnesota became a state, went through the Civil war and the Indian wars of 1862 and might have been going until this very day if the Fridleys hadn't gotten tired of the expense of keeping up a feudal state in the democratic west, where the people didn't appreciate the honor of having royalty in their midst.

The kingdom was rather small—it had only 18 sections of land, but it had a palace and there was a large enough retinue to satisfy anyone's demand for glory. The kingdom comprised what is now Fridley township in Anoka county, and the "palace" is occupied by C. C. Wilbur, assistant supervisor of the Minneapolis water department.

From this seat of government, Major Fridley directed the affairs of his dominion and today the building shows less evidence of decay than some of the historic palaces of Europe. No one questioned his authority, which must be accepted as evidence that he was a beneficent ruler. Some of these subjects were half-breeds. Others were violently disposed pioneers who had departed the east by invitation of keepers of the public peace, and so the major must likewise have been a man of considerable force of character or he would never have been able to keep his monarchy in order. He did hang a man once but that was perfectly legal in every way and will be taken up later in this story.

Major Fridley's official title was "Chairman of County Commissioners for Manomni County," but that didn't alter the situation any. He was king by whatever name you chose to call him. There never was any doubt about that. He was called "Major" because once he was Indian agent at Long Prairie for the Winnebagoes. It was the custom in those days to call Indian agents "Major." Besides this, he was sheriff for Ramsey county, frequently a member of the state legislature, a regent of the young University of Minnesota, prominent democrat and held many offices of consequence.

Foundations were laid for the Fridley kingdom when Henry Mower Rice appeared in Minnesota, an energetic young man from Vermont, who had come to Michigan to help survey the canal at Sault de Ste. Marie, had spent some time in Iowa, where he was sutler at Fort Atkinson, joined the American Fur Company and finally settled at Mendota to begin a career important to the destinies of the territory and state.

Before establishing himself at Mendota, however, he went to the present Fridley township where he built the "palace" and prepared to interest himself in the affairs of the community. He purchased a large tract of land and put much of it under cultivation. This was in 1849-50.

Like many others, Rice, bought hundreds of acres through the use of what was commonly known as "Whisky Scrip." Veterans of the Revolutionary war, the War of 1812 and the Mexican war were given certificates that entitled them to land in the western possessions of the United States as a form of compensation for their military services. These certificates were negotiable and the former soldiers often disposed of their rights for nominal sums. A few dollars was frequently sufficient to induce the owners to transfer their scrip and sometimes, according to the story that has been handed down and generally accepted, nothing more precious than a drink of whisky served as the consideration, which led to calling the papers "Whisky Scrip." Later half-breed scrip given in payment for Indian lands was sometimes called by the same name.

The Rice mansion was truly a palace for Minnesota in 1850. Most of the settlers were satisfied with log cabins or even less pretentious dwelling places, so the Rice place became a famous residence and was pointed out with pride. It was built in stately style, large and commodious and it was a source of wonder and a sign of affluence that the bricks used in its construction were brought up the river by barge from distant St. Louis.

The story of why Rice left this comfortable home, like many other tales that have been handed down to us, might need some authentication before it could be prudently included in the history books, but it can be given here as well substantiated by hearsay and the testimony of early settlers in Fridley.

The story goes that after Rice completed his house, he lived in it for a time, and then sent east for his bride. On the night of her arrival, to appropriately celebrate her arrival and introduce her to the community, Rice is said to have given a party to which he invited some of his half-breed friends, trappers and other uncouth attaches whose bolsterous and unrestrained frontier manners so unnerved the young bride, that next day she announced firmly and positively that she, for one, would never live in such surroundings, and so the Rices moved the next day.

Whether we care to accept this account is an indifferent matter, but it remains true that the Rice entourage

departed the residence almost immediately after it had been built, and so gave Abram M. Fridley the chance of buying it and establishing his line there, and of precipitating himself into the affairs of the region.

Fridley first attracted attention in Minnesota territory when, largely through the instrumentality of Rice, he received the Indian agent appointment at Long Prairie. He had been born in Steuben county, New York, on May 1, 1817. It is recorded that before he set out for the west young Fridley became a deputy sheriff.

Wherever he was, whatever he did, in whatever sort of enterprise he interested himself, Fridley always managed to get himself in the center of a controversy. It was a difficult task, keep-

ing the Winnebago's in order, because they didn't like the land the white man had set aside for them. Fridley reported to Governor Ramsay that his charges refused to do much farming, and that when they had to go a great distance to get their annuities, they never failed to spend all their money for whisky on the way back. The agent who followed Fridley charged him with nepotism, said he was "base and ungenerous" and alleged other uncomplimentary things.

Later on, when he was a member of the legislature, Fridley was accused by his political enemies of various offenses against the public interest, but none of the charges were ever substantiated.

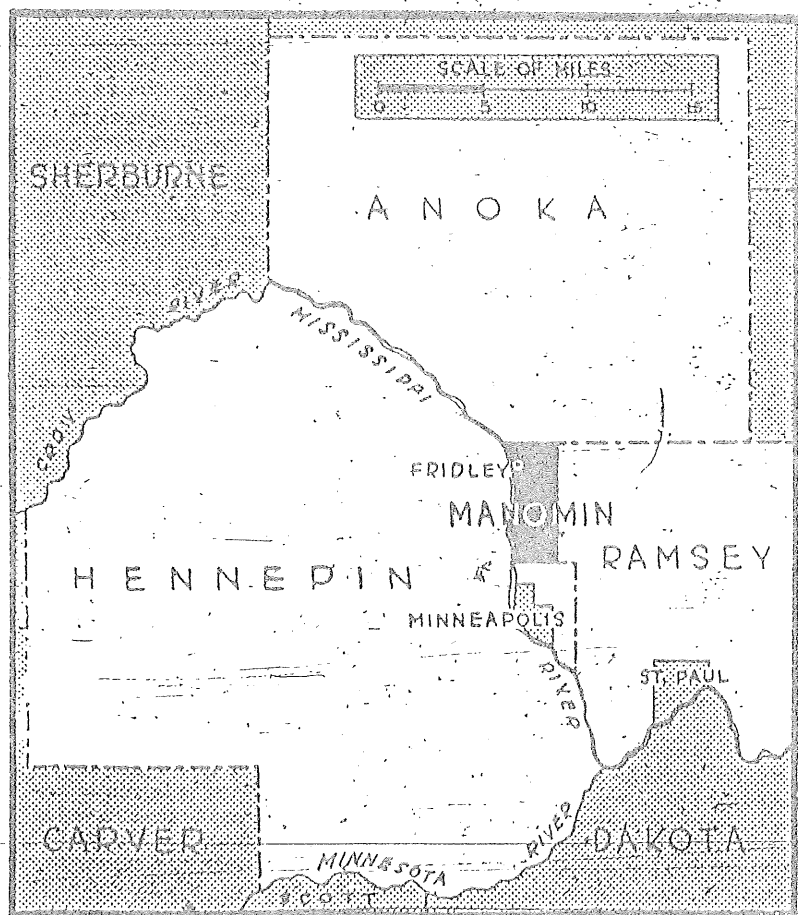
His duties as Indian agent ended, Major Fridley found himself chosen to be sheriff of Ramsey county, a county that then embraced many times as much territory as it does today. The Honorable H. H. Sibley moved to have him expelled on the ground that he couldn't be sheriff and a member of the state legislature at the same time, but that move accomplished nothing.

The chief thing of importance in connection with the reign of Fridley as sheriff was his execution of an Indian for murder, supposed to be the first legal execution ever conducted in the

territory of Minnesota. There had been many killings, but they were outside of the law.

The occasion for this execution developed when a party of whites was fired on by Indians near Little Rapids. One of the whites was killed and an Indian named Yue-Hey-Zo was quickly apprehended, tried and convicted of the crime. This was in 1852, but because of the law's delay he wasn't executed until January of 1853.

On January 3 of that year, Sheriff



Major Abram M. Fridley Map Showing Where Manomin County Was Located in Its Heclic Days

Fridley took the prisoner from the jail in St.-Paul to a point a mile from the city, near the St. Anthony road, where the unlucky Bloux was dispatched.

According to one authority the crowd that assembled to witness the execution behaved in a most unseemly fashion, by inference a reflection on the sheriff. "Liquor was openly passed through the crowd," the paper reported, "and the last moments of the poor Indian were disturbed by bacchanalian yells and cries. The crowd revealed the instincts of brutes and was composed of ruffians. A half drunken father could be seen holding in his arms a child, eager to see all; giddy, senseless girls and women chattered gaily with their attendants, and old women were seen competing with drunken ruffians for a place near the gallows."

As soon as he was possessed of the former Rice mansion, Major Fridley set resolutely about making himself king in fact if not in name. His first move was to have a part of Ramsey county set up for his kingdom. It was, as has been said, only 13 sections. According to a special act of the territorial legislature in 1837 the present township of Fridley was "constituted and organized into a separate county under the name of the County of Manomin," and it was given all the rights and privileges of other organized counties of the territory "and the seat of government shall be at the town of Manomin."

The act included other provisions, but the whole object of the measure was to make Fridley supreme in the selected area. There were provisions for local officials, but everyone understood that Fridley would run things as he chose. Manomin, incidentally, was the Chippewa name for wild rice.

His domain having been duly defined and established, Major Fridley began to consolidate his position. He got himself named chairman of the board of county commissioners and if he needed any one to perform an office, he didn't bother about going through formalities of an election, he issued an off-hand order and there was his man, with sufficient credentials, to fill the office.

Thomas Coleman, who came to Minnesota in the early days of the state, remembers something of Major Fridley's methods. He now lives on the Anoka road about nine miles from Minneapolis, on a farm once a part of Manomin county.

"I went to Major Fridley's one day when I was about 20 and was told I was to be Sheriff of Manomin county," Mr. Coleman recalls. "I said that was all right with me. The major gave me some papers to sign as sheriff and I did it. Then the major gave me two dollars and told me I wasn't sheriff any more. Major Fridley was always doing things that."

Aside from his interest in public affairs, the supreme director of Manomin's destinies found time to concern himself with business opportunities in the territory and state.

His name is numbered among the incorporators of the Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad Company, one of the early transportation systems in the northwest and later absorbed by merger with networks of rails consolidated under the wizardry of James J. Hill.

He also was interested in river traffic, for in those days commerce from Manomin north and south was largely by way of the Mississippi, and steamboats and barges constantly plied the rear of his estates, while the famous Red River carts rumbled and squeaked their yowling way along the trail in front of his mansion.

Major Fridley continually busied himself with politics. He saw to it that Fridley men were unfailingly elected to office. He went to the state legislature whenever he wanted to and was active there. It has been placed to his credit that he introduced a bill for woman suffrage in Minnesota. His bill passed both the house and the senate but never became a law.

Major Fridley was a democrat in politics at a time when Abraham Lincoln was appearing on the national horizon, and when the newly formed republican party was rapidly rising to power in Minnesota. Despite the interest in the new party, which was largely founded on the aversion of Minnesota to the spread of the traffic in slavery, the "King of Manomin" kept a firm reign over his subjects, downed ruthlessly incipient rebellion and dominated the ballot box. So effective was his sway that when the presidential elections were held, Lincoln did not receive a single vote in Manomin county! No modern boss ever beat or even tied a record like that.

This, of course, was immediately preceding the outbreak of the Civil war, and yet Major Fridley, in a hotbed of republicanism, spoke out fearlessly in support of the democratic party. His zeal aroused much illfeeling, and the anti-slavery leaders and the anti-slavery papers went after him vigorously. It was rumored that in case of war Major Fridley would support the cause of the secessionists, and force his "empire" to do the same.

The controversy grew so acrimonious that on December 22, 1860, the Falls Evening News at St. Anthony and Minneapolis published the following startling headlines and news:

Startling News by Pony
Express
DISSOLUTION

OF THE UNION!
Tremendous Excitement at
Manomin!!
Secession Movement on
Foot!
Government Officers All
Resigned!
Gov. Fridley Has Called a
Convention!
Republicans Ordered to
Leave the County.
FORT SNELLING
THREATENED!
War Expected!

As we were just going to press, we received by the Pony Express, intelligence of the most startling character, from Manomin. Secession sentiments are spreading into the North. Manomin county has already determined to secede before the first of January. It will be remembered that this county at the late election cast its full vote for Breckenridge. Gov. Fridley has called a mass Convention to meet on Christmas day, to take final action; whether to form a new government, or to be annexed to South Carolina. A monarchical form of government is strongly favored by the masses, the Federal officers have all resigned except the Postmaster. Preparations are now making to take Fort Snelling, as soon as the new government is formed. Republicans have been all ordered to leave the county forthwith. Gov. Fridley has ordered the army to be increased to one hundred thousand able bodied men, in case of war.

LATER

The Mississippi has been blockaded opposite the city of Manomin. Steamers belonging to other States, are not allowed to pass that port.

The Ferry Boats have stopped running. Great excitement among the people. Two abolitionists hung by a mob. A military post established at Pleasant Creek. The exportation of native rice stopped for the present. The rails on the Pacific Railroad track have been torn up in the excitement, and all intercourse with other States entirely cut off.

Old Abe Lincoln burnt in effigy at Rice Lake. There appears to be no opposition to the secession feeling, and large delegations from different parts of the State are expected to meet at the City of Manomin on Christmas day, when a State Constitution will be adopted.

STILL LATER

As these are exciting times we have kept our paper back, to lay before our readers the latest news. Great preparations are still making for the secessionists to dissolve the Union. Property floating on the Mississippi is by no means safe at this time. Gov. Fridley has issued a proclamation, forbidding any one from navigating the river opposite the city of Manomin, before the first of April, without permission from His Excellency. The steamer H. M. Rice is undergoing a heavy expense to fit her for the Lumber Yard; Commodore Harmon will command her, in case of war. . . . Saltpetre has advanced two hundred per cent in the last twenty-four hours. The Banks have all suspended for the present. A large crowd assembled last evening in the Public Square; speeches were made and the

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city illuminated with gas. Pork is declining rapidly.

[Extract from same paper, December 24, 1860, p. 2]:

SECESSION BY MANOMIN—We have nothing later from Manomin since Friday morning, owing to the non-arrival of the Pony Express. The exciting and inflammatory news caused great excitement in this city. It is reported that commissioners from this city will be sent to the convention at Manomin tomorrow, for the purpose of ascertaining whether that county cannot be dissuaded from precipitate action.

There is a rumor that Pembina and Todd are discussing the propriety of sending commissioners to Manomin to concert a plan for a Northern Confederacy.

[Extract from same paper, December 31, 1860, p. 2]:

[Reported for the News.]

LATEST NEWS FROM THE NORTH,

By the Pony Express.

Mass Convention at the Capital of Manomin—Peace Commissioners Present from St. Anthony—Speeches by Gen. Farnham, Capt. Townsend and Commissioner Lewis—Peace Continues Rejected—First Hostilities—Attack by Gen. Wolf, &c. &c.

The Pony Express arrived this morning, with the latest News from Manomin; Hostilities had already commenced, Gen. Wolf had marched his force across the Manomin Line. As soon as the news came to Gov. Fridley, he ordered out Capt. Claves's Company, which marched to meet the enemy, with unusual dispatch. After hunting for Mr. Wolf for some time, they at length saw his tracks crossing the disputed boundary of the new State. Capt. Claves ordered his company to fall back and charge their pieces with shot or Wolf's bands, which they obeyed, and held themselves in readiness to fire or run as the case may be.

In compliance with the call of Gov. Fridley, a mass convention met on Christmas day at Manomin. When the proper time arrived the city was overflowing. The meeting was organized by placing Col. Banfield in the chair, and Mayor Peck, Secretary. Col. Bunker offered a resolution adopting the Rules and Regulations of the City Council of St. Anthony, to govern them in their deliberations, which was agreed to. Notice was then given by the chairman that the meeting was now organized for the purpose of forming an independent Government out of that portion of territory now belonging to the county of Manomin, and claimed as a portion of the State of Minnesota.

"Upon you, gentlemen of the Convention, devolves the responsibility of our future greatness, as an independent Nation, and I hope that good order may be observed during the deliberations of this Convention." Capt. Claves then moved that the Fourth of July be stricken out of existence, and the First of January substituted, which was agreed to. Col. Banfield then gave notice that there were three commissioners present from the City of St. Anthony, with authority from the City Council, to prevent secession if possible and agree on some plan of compromise. He moved they be admitted to seats in the Convention, which was agreed to. Then Messrs. Farnham, Lewis and Townsend took their seats amidst tremendous cheering. Gen. Farnham then rose and said: Gentlemen of the Convention, I am here today, clothed with authority from the City Council, to settle the existing difficulties between the two great rival powers. He said that the time had arrived for serious reflection, and for his life he could not see any basis for Mr. Lincoln's election producing so much dissatisfaction among the Cotton States. He advised the people of Manomin to await until Old Abe had violated his oath of office.

Col. Lewis then followed in his usual style of eloquence, urging the Convention to disperse without taking any action, reminding them of the consequences of war, if Gov. Fridley did not immediately raise the blockade of the Mississippi, and allow boats to pass without difficulty.

Capt. Townsend stated that he was opposed to secession, and considered it unconstitutional, and an open declaration of war, against the city of St. Anthony, and that the right of way on the Mississippi should be free to everybody.

Major Peck then followed in some severe remarks on the Republican party, charging them with treason against the South, and hostility to the meaning of the compact entered into by the framers of the Constitution. He requested the commissioners from St. Anthony, that their presence is no further wanted by this Convention and that when the proper time arrives, we will give them sufficient notice to agree on terms of friendly relations between us, as separate powers;

at the same time trusting that a good feeling may always exist between the two Governments.

Col. Bunker observed that the time had arrived to adjourn, and he was informed that the Small Pox was raging to an alarming extent at Pleasant Creek, and thought it advisable to adjourn the Convention over until the first of January, in the hope that the calamity may somewhat subside, and the minds of the people be better prepared to act on the dissolution question. He, Bunker, was satisfied that the people of Manomin were unanimous in favor of secession, disregarding all consequences; but the formation of a new Government required great deliberation.

The Convention adjourned till the first of January.

[Extract from same paper, January 1, 1861, p. 2]:

LATEST BY PONY EXPRESS

We are indebted to the Commissioners from the city for still later news from the projected Government of Manomin. The prospect of a compromise is doubtful. The Commissioners had a private interview with Gov. Fridley, which lasted about six hours, without accomplishing anything definite. When the H. M. Rice was on her downward trip to Manomin, she was fired into at the mouth of Crow

river, by Capt. Paul Goodwin's wood boat, and sunk to the hurricane deck in two minutes and a half, in two feet of water, the loss of life was principally confined to the big bugs that were in their berths at the time the disaster occurred. The boat was crowded with people to the Manomin Convention, among which were a large number of Commissioners from Pembina, Todd and Washington Territories, all of which escaped. Commodore Harmon was the last to leave the deck of the ill-fated steamer.

STILL LATER

A short time after our paper had gone to press, the news arrived that Maj. Gen. Reynolds, Commander in Chief at Fort Snelling, had received orders from James Buchanan, to surrender up the Fort to Gov. Fridley, as soon as he, Reynolds, was sufficiently charged upon with a Regiment of Bassett's best whisky. Surgeon Murphy, from this city, had a private interview on yesterday, with Maj. Gen. Reynolds, which lasted about three hours. He assures us the Maj. has agreed to abandon the Fort on the discharge of the fourth round of Bassett's forty rod whisky. . . . We understand that Capt. Tapper has filed an injunction on the Mississippi river, to prevent blockade from interfering with his charter; he claims the exclusive right to the Missis-

about one mile each way, and by some strange process has thus far prevented Gov. Fridley from entirely interfering with his toll gate.

STILL LATER

About the time our paper was ready to be distributed, we were placed in possession of still later advices from Manomlin. Gov. Fridley has instructed Secretary Brown to purchase the steamer Enterprise of Capt. Moulton, and pay him with drafts on the Manomlin State Bank; the large steamer Pilot is also to be at the disposal of the new Government.

The Fort at Pleasant Creek was, after a most sanguinary resistance, surrendered up and afterwards burnt to ashes. Burbank & Co., are trying to stipulate with Gov. Fridley to allow the Hudson Bay Co.'s goods to pass that point without duty or detention. The Government was broken into this morning, and stripped entirely of money and United States drafts. It is reported that Gen. Scott will resign as soon as Manomlin secedes. Native rice is accumulating rapidly in the hands of the speculators; the river still remains in a state of blockade; extensive preparations are making for the first of January, when a new Constitution will be adopted, and the flag of Manomlin thrown to the breeze. The

small pox is somewhat subsiding under Surgeon Johnson's treatment, and the general health is improving.

Naturally, this was all a bitter assault on Fridley, who seems to have answered nothing at all by way of rebuttal. Needless to say, all claims that Manomlin intended to secede and that the major intended to resist the national government, were fictions created by some imaginative political rival.

Shortly after, the talk about the loyalty of Fridley and Manomlin was forgotten sight of in the actual starting of hostilities between the north and the south, and the bickering of local statesmen was lost in the more important fraternal struggle, during which the major supported the federal cause.

From the first Major Fridley found that running a kingdom was not without its annoyances, and that the profits and emoluments were not all one might have expected from reading famous romances and profound histories. When the war was over, he rapidly tired of so much responsibility, that of being the sole dictator of an entire Minnesota county, even a small Minnesota county, and was soon heard saying that he and his family had a "white elephant on our hands."

The major owned a large part of his "Kingdom" and he sought some way of disposing of it when affairs of state became too onerous. Besides, his efforts to establish a monarchy hadn't been appreciated very much anyway.

At last a way out was found. In April, 1870, a petition was signed by most of the subjects, and gratefully acquiesced in by Major Fridley and his family, which requested that the state legislature make Manomlin county a part of Anoka county. The petition was granted and a few days later the Fridley rule officially ended, to the great relief of the major, who ended his reign by persuading the state legislature to change the name of his former domain to Fridley township.

Today the mansion, built so pridefully 70 years ago by Rice, the "palace," the courthouse, the county seat from which Abram M. Fridley directed the destinies of his frontier "kingdom," is the only visible remnant of the one time grandeur of the only touch of anything resembling absolute monarchy Minnesota ever had.

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