



# RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY



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*ON THE COVER: Samuel Pond's old mill at Shakopee. After years of service to the Dakota Indians in Minnesota, the pioneer missionary was living here in 1869 when his son, Samuel Pond, Jr., a student at the University of Minnesota, wrote the letters used in this issue. Gideon Pond lived across the Minnesota River in what is now Bloomington.*

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## Norman Kittson and the Fur Trade

*Historians have called Norman Wolfred Kittson one of the most significant men in Minnesota history. Yet, he is largely forgotten today. Even during his own lifetime, he was overshadowed by such giants as his good friends and business partners, James J. Hill and Henry Hastings Sibley.*

*The following story about this remarkable Minnesota pioneer is based upon two basic sources; a fascinating article by Dr. Clarence W. Rife, professor emeritus of history at Hamline University, St. Paul, and now a member of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Editorial Committee, and an unpublished manuscript by Holly Walters, a Macalester College student, who wrote it in 1968 as part of her interim project. Dr. Rife's article appeared originally in the September, 1925, issue of Minnesota History, the quarterly magazine published by the Minnesota Historical Society.*

*As a student, Miss Walters wisely drew heavily upon the work of Dr. Rife, an established historian of stature, but both writers, of course, used primary and secondary sources.*

**N**ORMAN Wolfred Kittson was born in Chambly, a military center near Sorel, Lower Canada, on March 5, 1814, a descendant of a family which played an active part in the history of what is now Canada. His grandfather had served under Wolfe at Quebec and, after his death, his grandmother married the great explorer, Alexander Henry.

Kittson's parents were George and Nancy Tucker Kittson, but his uncle, William Morrison, a retired fur trader, exerted a powerful influence in his young life — so much so, apparently, that in 1830 at the age of 16, Norman Kittson and his brother, John, joined the American Fur Company as three-year apprentices and headed west with a group of voyageurs.

Mackinac Island, which lies in the straits between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, was then the great center of America's fur trade in the North. There Norman Kittson met Henry Hastings Sibley who was stationed at Mackinac as upper clerk for the American Fur Company.

The sketch at the top of the page is of the fur trading post at Pembina which Norman W. Kittson, right, maintained as his base of operations for more than 10 years.

Sibley was just three years older than Kittson and the two men formed a friendship and a business association which was to last throughout the rest of their lives. Sibley signed on Kittson and for the next few years, Kittson represented the company at a number of posts in the territory which now is Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>





IN 1834, Kittson completed his term of service. For the next four years, he was a sutler's clerk at Fort Snelling, and between 1839 and 1843, he was a fur-trader around Fort Snelling. Sibley, meanwhile, had moved to what is now Mendota as chief agent for the American Fur Company. That year, following company custom, he admitted Kittson as a special partner, allotting him territory that included the valleys of the Minnesota River and the Red River of the North, to the point where the river entered British possessions.

The agreement, which became operative July 1, 1843, established the partnership as "Kittson's Outfit" and placed Kittson in full charge, with Sibley supplying the trade goods at a 10 per cent advance on cost.<sup>2</sup> Headquarters were at Big Stone Lake.

Later that year, Kittson journeyed down the Red River to Pembina, a small settlement just south of the international boundary. He had realized that the fur trade frontier was receding northward, and he found the Pembina area rich in valuable furs: mink, otter, beaver, fisher, martin, muskrat and fox. However, the Hudson's Bay Company each year drew large amounts of furs from the American side of the boundary. Kittson planned to stop the company's siphoning off of trade from United States territory by establishing a post at Pembina.<sup>3</sup>

He gave up his southern posts — Sibley transferred them to other partners — and built a string of posts which eventually extended from the Mouse (or Souris) River and Turtle Mountain posts on the west (which supplied him with buffalo robes and pemmican) to the Red Lake, Rush Lake, Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods posts to the east. The Lake of the Woods post was of particular importance because the Indians met there annually to fish.

His Pembina headquarters were described in 1851 by J. Wesley Bond in his book, *Minnesota and Its Resources*:

"THE HOUSES are built around an open space and the square courtyard (so to speak) is filled with a miscellaneous crowd of half-breeds, Indians, of all sizes with their lodges of bark and skins, together with horses, cattle, carts, dogs, etc., in great variety and numbers. The houses are built of logs, filled with mud and straw; the roofs thatched with the latter, and some covered over with bark.

Around the angles of the yard are various warehouses, an icehouse, blacksmith-shop, and the trading-house, or store, which is covered completely over with large squares of bark, and looked like an entire bark-house. In front, toward the river, are barns and stables, haystacks, etc., with numerous horses and cattle feeding, and a general appearance of thrift, comfort, and industry, pervades the scene."

Although Kittson's plan was to stop British encroachment on the fur trade south of the international boundary, it must be admitted that he also had in mind luring traders trapping on British soil into crossing the border and depositing their peltries at his posts.

This, of course, was not lost upon the Hudson's Bay Company, but there was another factor of which Kittson apparently was unaware. A long-standing secret agreement existed between the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company whereby the American company, in return for an annual subsidy of 300 pounds, ceased to compete with the British company along the international border. Further, both companies agreed to work together to crush independent traders who entered the area.

INEFFECT, Kittson was in the unenviable position of competing with his own employers and his company was faced with having to trample upon one of its own.

If Sibley, Kittson's partner, knew of the arrangement, he seems to have regarded it as not binding upon Kittson, who was, at least, a semi-independent trader.<sup>4</sup> However, trade war continued to wage.

Kittson had other problems, one of the most formidable of which was how to transport his furs to Mendota and, later, St. Paul. He adopted for his purposes the carts which were in wide use among the Indians in the Pembina area for buffalo hunts, and thus the famed Red River ox cart became associated with Kittson's name and was used by other traders.<sup>5</sup>

These were strange vehicles. They were made entirely of wood with leather fastenings and they had two wheels fixed on wooden axles devoid of oil or grease. When in motion, a caravan could be heard for miles.<sup>6</sup> Each cart was drawn by an ox.

THERE IS the story of the St. Anthony preacher who, one Sunday morning, had just





Ox carts and their drivers in St. Paul. The carts, used first by the Indians, were adopted by Kittson.

announced his text when the squealing of an approaching train of Red River carts was heard. The trail ran near the church and the minister, knowing it would take some time for the train, with its slow, plodding oxen, to pass, announced: "The sermon will be delivered next Sunday," and hastily dismissed the congregation.<sup>7</sup> (Kittson, however, used a western trail which ended at Traverse des Sioux where the cargo was transferred to river boats.)

The oxen were fastened to the carts with thongs of buffalo hide. One driver guided several carts simply by guiding the head ox; the heads of the oxen pulling the following carts were tied to each preceding cart.

The carts cost about \$15 and carried from 600 to 700 pounds. They could travel no more than 15 miles a day, which meant that they covered the route from Pembina to St. Paul in 30 to 40 days. Each cart usually would last through three trips.

While the carts were interesting, and certainly functional, their drivers were fascinatingly flamboyant. Most of them were part Indian and part white. They were called "bois brules," and they wore a costume that has been described as a strange mingling of "civilized garments and barbaric adornments. They were usually clad in coarse blue cloth with a profusion of brass buttons and a red sash girt about their waists. They presented also a curious mingling of races, the old Scotch, English and French settlers having married with the Crees and Chippewas and crossed and recrossed until every shade of complexion was to be seen and a babel of tongues was the result."<sup>8</sup>

IN 1850, 102 carts carried \$15,000 worth of furs to St. Paul and returned with \$10,000 worth of supplies. By 1857, there were 500 ox carts in the service of various traders.

The last train of Red River carts threaded its way down Summit Avenue, St. Paul, in 1869.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the late 1840's and the early 1850's, competition with the Hudson's Bay Company intensified. In 1846, a man named Fisher, a Hudson's Bay man, set up a trading post just a few hundred yards from Kittson's front door. Kittson suspected, and rightly, that the man's license to operate in American territory was fraudulent and he appealed to the government in Washington. But Pembina was far away, the government had more pressing concerns than rivalries along the international border, and nothing was done.

For their part, the British felt that Kittson had been trapping in their territory. The Hudson's Bay Company brought suit. There is no record of the disposition of the case, but eventually a business relationship was worked out which did not diminish, however, the raging trade war over peltries.<sup>10</sup>

By 1850, Kittson had four clerks, including a capable assistant, Joe Rolette, Jr.; 10 voyageurs and a capital of \$12,000. To attempt to increase trade, he provided his hunters and trappers with trade goods so that they could "play at trading." He also hoped this would build the good relationships he would need when the major trading season began.<sup>11</sup>

Kittson, however, also was sincerely concerned with the problems of the Indians and he has left vivid descriptions of their plight.

"THE POOR DEVILS are so badly provided that it is wonderful how it is possible for them to kill anything; they have not a single trap, most of them [are] without ammunition; and probably one out of 20 may have an axe; and thus they have to spend the winter, their sole dependence being fish for their subsistence."<sup>12</sup>

The Indians also were being exploited by illicit traders, many of whom dealt in liquor. On September 11, 1851, Governor Ramsey, appointed by the federal government to negotiate one of several treaties with the Indians, arrived at Kittson's house in Pembina, accompanied by an escort of dragoons. On September 20, a treaty was signed which would have eased many of the problems; the Senate, however, refused to ratify it. In a letter to Sibley dated September 23, Kittson expressed his disappointment:

"It has been to me a scourge [sic] of great annoyance, situated as I am between so many



conflicting interests; petty and worthless ambitions to allay, ignorant and unprincipled characters to contend with and above all, the defeat of long and many expectations."<sup>13</sup>

Kittson's helping of the Indians, and the ever-present struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company finally proved too great a strain on "Kittson's Outfit." In 1852 Sibley reported that Kittson made only \$10,000 on a capital of \$25,000; in 1853, Joe Rolette took over the business, though Kittson kept his financial interest in it for several years.<sup>14</sup>

He had other enterprises, and it was these which provided the basis for his future fortune. In 1851, he had established a firm, the "St. Paul Outfit," with William H. Forbes. Located at Third and Robert Streets, the company specialized in supplying Red River carts which were heading north.<sup>15</sup>

BEFORE GOING to Pembina in 1843, Kittson had purchased the old Clewett claim, later called Kittson's addition, and by 1848 he had increased his real estate holdings to include part of what is now St. Paul's downtown area. The tract extended from the Mississippi River north to Twelfth Street, and from Neill Street on the east to Market Street.

**This is the mansion Kittson built in 1882. It stood on the present site of the Cathedral of St. Paul.**



James M. Goodhue, St. Paul's pioneer newspaper editor, wrote that, "Kittson's is laid off in smaller lots than any of the other additions, and its streets make no sort of coincidence with other streets in town."<sup>16</sup>

In 1858, Kittson, the Democratic Party's nominee, was elected mayor of St. Paul. He was not a newcomer to politics. He had served, rather reluctantly though elected by a 33-32 vote, in Minnesota's Territorial Legislature from 1852-1855. Kittson and the other representatives, Joe Rolette and Antoine Gingras, usually traveled to the sessions by dogsled, but on more than one occasion they were forced to strap on snowshoes and walk 500 miles to St. Paul. By 1855, Kittson had moved to St. Paul.<sup>17</sup>

Since Kittson possessed invaluable knowledge of northern Minnesota and the fur trade, it was not long before the Hudson's Bay Company was attempting to add his name to its payrolls. Eventually, he was appointed general purchasing and forwarding agent in St. Paul.

THE COMPANY continually sought more rapid and economical modes of transportation. With the advent of the inland steamboat, the firm hired a line of steamers from the Burbank Stage Company. Kittson was put in charge of the line, and thus came to be known as "Commodore." It was in this capacity that, in 1860, he first met James J. Hill, who also realized the value of the steamboat in transportation.<sup>18</sup> Hill built the "Selkirk" to challenge Kittson's line. However, the men soon realized that there was not enough business for two lines. In 1864, Kittson bought out the Burbank Company and he and Hill formed the Red River Transportation Company.<sup>19</sup>

Some 10 years later, Donald Smith, the Canadian governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, asked Kittson for information on the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad. Smith had heard the line was in financial difficulty and hoped to buy it out to form a line from St. Paul to Manitoba. Kittson knew little about railroading and referred Smith to his partner, James J. Hill, who found that the line was, indeed, going bankrupt. Four men, Kittson, Hill, Smith and George Stephens, a Canadian financier and railroad magnate, formed a partnership and waited for the opportune moment.

Soon, the Northern Pacific Railroad bought out both the St. Paul and Pacific and the





The stables owned by Norman Kittson stood at about where Snelling and University Avenues are now. The stables were built in the form of a Greek cross, 248 by 180 feet. The \$60,000 building had 64 box stalls.

First Division lines, but floundered, and the four partners seized control. The outgrowth of this transaction, first called the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Company, was the Great Northern Railway, a line with 8,275 miles of track and nearly 16,000 employees.<sup>20</sup>

By 1882, Kittson had constructed the Globe office building, the Astoria Hotel, a \$40,000 addition to the Clarendon Hotel and a huge mansion on the site of the present St. Paul Cathedral.

However, his pride and joy was Kittsondale, a million-dollar stable and racetrack located in the Midway area of St. Paul, at what is today Snelling and University Avenues. He also owned Erdheim, a world-famous horse farm outside of Philadelphia. Iroquoise, the first American horse to win the British Derby, was raised and trained at Erdheim. This stable, though no longer in Kittson's family, is still in existence.

Most of the buildings and firms associated with Kittson have disappeared, but his name became a lasting part of Minnesota's geography when, in 1878, Kittson County in the northwestern corner of the state was named for him. (Many people believe that Norman county also was named for him but, according to county records, it was named for the Scandinavians or "Nor(s)men" who had settled the area.)<sup>21</sup>

Kittson's business career eclipsed his personal life. He is known to have had two Indian or half-breed wives before marrying Mary A. Kittson, who was from Fort Gary. Some sources, however, refer to four wives. In his will he mentions eleven children, five of whom were by Mary Kittson, but, according to a genealogical chart made by a grandson, he actually fathered twenty-six children.

Kittson died May 11, 1888, somewhere between Chicago and St. Paul. It seems appropriate, somehow, that a man so concerned with transportation should come to the end of his life in a railroad car.

He was described as he was in his fifties by T. M. Newson, in *Pen Pictures of St. Paul*, as a "sprightly, fine-looking man; cleanly and really elegantly dressed; hair just turning gray; eyes bright, with a quiet, pleasant voice; genial in nature and a man of excellent characteristics."

## Footnotes

1. Clarence W. Rife, "Norman W. Kittson," *Minnesota History*, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, September, 1925, Volume 6, Number 3, Page 226.
2. *Ibid.*, Page 227.
3. *Ibid.*, Page 228.
4. *Ibid.*, Page 233.
5. J. A. A. Burnquist, *Minnesota and Its People*, Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1924, Volume 1, Page 529.
6. Henry A. Castle, *Minnesota, Its Story and Biography*, Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1915, Volume 1, Page 430.
7. J. A. A. Burnquist, *op. cit.*
8. Henry A. Castle, *op. cit.*
9. *Minnesota — A State Guide*, Federal Writer's Project of the W.P.A., New York: Hastings House, 1938, Page 336.
10. Clarence W. Rife, *op. cit.*, Page 235.
11. *Ibid.*, Page 230.
12. *Ibid.*, Page 239.
13. *Ibid.*, Page 244.
14. William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1922, Volume 1, Page 164.
15. Warren Upham, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, The Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908, Volume IV, Page 311.
16. J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul and of the County of Ramsey*. St. Paul: The Minnesota Historical Society, 1876, Page 330.
17. Edward D. Neill, *History of the Minnesota Valley*, St. Paul: The North Star Publishing Company, 1882, Page 272.
18. William Watts Folwell, *op. cit.*, Volume III, Page 452.
19. Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota, A History of the State*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1963, Page 300.
20. *Ibid.*, Page 301.
21. *Minnesota Historical Society Collections*, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1920, Volume 17.





*Photo by Henry Hall*

### THE GIBBS HOUSE

*Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society, 2097 Larpenteur Avenue West, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings. In the basement beneath the school building, the Society has its office, library and collections. In 1968, the Society acquired from the University of Minnesota the use of the white barn adjoining the Society's property. Here is housed a collection of carriages and sleighs which once belonged to James J. Hill.

Today, in addition to maintaining the Gibbs property, the Ramsey County Historical Society is active in the preservation of historic sites in Ramsey county, conducts tours, prepares pamphlets and other publications, organizes demonstrations of pioneer crafts and maintains a Speakers' Bureau for schools and organizations. It is the Society's hope that through its work the rich heritage of the sturdy men and women who were the pioneers of Ramsey County will be preserved for future generations.