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Minnesota History Vignettes - James Dickson

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Oh to be King

"Introduced for the first time to General Dickson who, privately, informed me of his plans … relative to the intended expedition to the north via the Great Lakes and onwards God only knows where; and where and when it will end."*
Martin McLeod
June 22, 1836

History is full of great political plans that have died in the graveyard of reality. Probably one of the most bizarre of these political plans died in the cold stark reality of a Minnesota winter in 1836. "General" James Dickson's background and origin is full of mystery. Most speculated he was from England and he carried himself with a distinguished bearing of an English nobleman. He apparently had some doings in Texas where he developed an ill will towards the Mexican government in that this tale occurs prior to the creation of the Texas nation. It was from the knowledge he gained from his time in Texas that the seeds of a most fanciful political plan were germinated.

Dickson was never a true general of a formal government-sanctioned army to anyone's knowledge, but rather of his own mercenary force known as "The Liberator of the Indian Nations". He had great visions of being a leader -- a king to be exact -- of a glorious nation stretching from Santa Fe to the California coast. He would be the Liberator of the grateful tribes of northern Mexico from the oppressive Mexican government. His plan oddly enough was to first raise an army of Indian liberators amongst the notoriously fierce Métis warriors who resided in and around the Red River Valley of Minnesota.

Around 1836 the Red River Valley was, for all practical purposes, the dwelling place of a nation of the Métis, descendents of the common practice of intermarriage between French and English fur traders and the Indian communities their trade depended upon. These Métis people never quite fit into the Indian culture nor the refined eastern culture of their parentage. As a necessity for survival these individuals gathered together in a community and learned the ways of the wilderness with an attitude. The Métis of the Red River Valley were very skilled in the fur trade business and extremely feared in wilderness combat.

It was from these people that Dickson intended to raise an army of whom he would be the commander. Once the army of a couple hundred fierce Métis warriors was organized, the plan was to march southwest across the prairie to come upon Santa Fe by surprise from the north. Once Santa Fe was secured, they would reach out to the oppressed Indian tribes as their liberators to raise additional forces to march on to the California coast to establish their glorious nation.

In order to reach the Red River Valley, Dickson recruited 60 young adventurers from Montréal with promises of glory, many of who were also of mixed-race marriages. They were all given official papers designating high ranks within the liberation army. Soon after setting sail in the fall of 1836 from Buffalo, the whole expedition began to unravel. They endured a shipwreck on Lake Erie; they were arrested in Detroit because the American fur traders thought they were spies for the Canadian fur trading competitors; they were unable to obtain needed provisions at wilderness posts because their credit was denied by the Canadians who feared they were agitators hired by the American fur trading company heading to the Red River Valley to disrupt their long-standing relationships with the Métis. By the time they reached the small settlement of Fond du Lac near present-day Duluth, Dickson had lost the majority of his force due to desertion. The few remaining "Liberators" began a perilous trip across northern Minnesota in the late fall as lakes and rivers began to freeze.

Dickson finally stumbled into a Métis settlement on the Red River Valley just before Christmas with only a handful of men, starving and nearly frozen to death. The great liberator, having been separated accidentally from his men, actually staggered into the community first with the remainder of his frost bitten and lost lieutenants stumbling into town over the next few days -- not a very impressive entry for the would-be king of the Southwest. Needless to say, the fierce warriors on the Red River were a little skeptical. None in the Métis community were the least bit tempted by the concept of becoming liberators of the

Southwestern tribes. There is an old Canadian Métis folk song relating the story of Dickson leaving the Métis community in the springtime with great fanfare accompanied by just one other on his way to Santa Fe. He was never to be heard from again.

This bazaar scheme would have been lost to Minnesota history but for the diary and correspondence of Martin McLeod. The young Montréal clerk was one of the volunteers in Dickson's army and one of the last to break ties with Dickson in the Red River Valley. Using his knowledge of the fur trade, he set off for St. Paul with a guide that same winter. Nearly dying in a snowstorm on the trip, he eventually made it to St. Paul. He became a prominent Minnesota citizen and a territorial legislator. He was so respected that today a Minnesota county bears his name. For more information on this bizarre story I would suggest:

*Grace L. Nute, "James Dickson, A Filibuster in Minnesota in 1836," in Mississippi Valley Historic Review, (September, 1923). It is available for $19 at this website.
Anytime you can find Grace Nute articles or books, I would suggest reading them if you're interested in early Minnesota history.

There is also a great summary of the diary of Martin McLeod, 1836 to 1851 at Minnesota Historical Society website. (A big PDF that takes time to download)

Merle Potter also retells this story in his book, 101 Best Stories of Minnesota. He was the former history writer for the Minneapolis Journal back in the 1920s and 30s. This book published in 1931 is now out-of-print, but if you can find it at a used-book store or on the web it is a treasure trove of short stories on Minnesota history. (My thanks to friend and homeschooling mom Sherry Richardson for recommending the book to me.)

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