

V.F.W. - Civic Service - Knights of the Forest  
4-18-1916  
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# Secret Society of The Early Days in Mankato

M.R.

## "The Knights of the Forest" Organized Here in the Winter of 1862, but Now Out of Existence--- Interesting History of Lodge Written by Mr. Chas A. Chapman one of the Members

Shortly following the execution of the thirty-eight Sioux Indians at Mankato during the winter of 1862, there was organized in this city a secret society known as "The Knights of the Forest," whose object and purpose was to secure the removal of the Indians from Minnesota, and it is stated by those who were here at that time as well as those belonging to the organization, that the taking away of the Indians from this section by the government was largely due to the influence and efforts of this society or lodge. Later, at a number of different cities in the state similar lodges were organized, all working for the same purpose and wielding a great influence towards that end.

### Ritual Still in Existence.

The ritual is still in existence, and the greatest of secrecy surrounded this little book and the lodge. It seems the meetings were not always held at the same place, but at different ones, the designated place being kept a secret to all excepting members. Great care was exercised in soliciting members, to conceal the fact that such an organization existed from all not belonging.

The prospective candidate was

carefully sounded, so that he might not even know of the lodge should he back down. The meetings, too,



Mr. C. A. Chapman  
Who Was a Member of "The Knights of the Forest,"

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were guarded so that not the slightest information could leak out.

The lodge had its ritual or guiding book, the same as do the secret societies of today, the members were in possession of signs, passwords, grips, etc., and to become a member a "solemn and binding" obligation was administered.

### Members Still Living Here.

There are a few living in Mankato today that will remember the exist-

ence of such a secret organization, and a still fewer who belonged to it. Mr. C. A. Chapman was a member, being initiated at a meeting held in the frame carpenter shop of Charles Gunstrom which stood at the corner of Front and Jackson streets, where the American Express Co.'s office is now located.

Mr. A. C. Barney was another member, being initiated into the lodge at Garden City. He recently referred to this lodge to the Daily Review, suggesting that a history of the same by one familiar with it would prove of great interest to our present day readers.

### The Knights of the Forest.

The history of this early day organization as written by Mr. Chapman follows:

"This was a secret society organized in Mankato about the time of the hanging of the thirty-eight Sioux Indians in December, 1862. Other lodges of this order were established that winter in several towns of southern Minnesota.

"The Winnebago Indian reservation then occupied six and a half townships in Blue Earth county, covering the portions now known as McPherson, Medo, Decoria, Beauford, Rapidan and Lyra, and the southern tier of sections in LeRay, Mankato and South Bend.

"At the time of the Sioux war in 1862 the Winnebagoes were supposed to be friendly to the Sioux, and many believed that they would have joined the Sioux if the sieges of Fort Ridgely and New Ulm had been successful. There were rumors that they were evidently preparing for some hostile demonstration.

### Mankato in Precarious Condition.

"Mankato was therefore in a very precarious situation; for with the Sioux on one side and the Winnebagoes on the other, it would have been almost impossible to defend the town. Volunteer companies were however, enlisted and a cordon of log forts built around the outskirts. Our people believed in preparedness.

"When the Sioux war was ended we saw that our safety from future massacres required the removal of all Indians from our neighborhood. Besides being a constant menace, they were occupying and rendering useless 234 square miles of the best farming land in Blue Earth county.

### Ritual Still in Existence.

"Hence arose the order styled Knights of the Forest. The ritual that was used in these lodges is still in existence. It gives the opening ceremonies and those of initiation. The presiding officer was called worthy chancellor; the second officer worthy vice chancellor, and the other officials were the usual secretary, treasurer, conductor and sentinel.

"The candidate for initiation was obliged before being admitted to promise that he would 'sacrifice all political and other preferences' to

(over)



accomplish the object of removing all Indians from the state, and that he would do all in his power to 'elect to office such men only as will favor such removal.'

#### **The Obligation.**

"Having given these promises, he was admitted to the lodge where the objects of the order were explained to him. He then received the obligation, which as it reveals the purposes of the order is given here in full:

"I, ....., of my own free will and accord, in the full belief that every Indian should be removed from the state, by the memory of the inhuman cruelties perpetrated upon defenseless citizens, and in the presence of the members of this order here assembled, do most solemnly promise, without any mental reservation whatever, to use every exertion and influence in my power to cause the removal of all tribes of Indians from the state of Minnesota.

"I will sacrifice every political and other preferences to accomplish that object. I will not aid or assist in any manner to elect to office in this state or the United States any person outside of this order who will not publicly or privately pledge himself for the permanent removal of all Indians from the State of Minnesota.

"I will protect and defend at every hazard, all members in carrying out the objects of this order. I will faithfully observe the constitution, rules and by-laws of this lodge, or any grand or working lodge of Knights of the Forest to which I may be attached. I will never in any manner reveal the name, existence or secrets of this order to any person not entitled to know of same; and in case I should be expelled or voluntarily withdraw from this order I will consider this obligation still binding. To all of which I pledge my sacred honor.'

#### **The Instructions.**

"After taking the obligation the candidate was instructed in the signs, grips and pass words. He then received instruction relative to the working of the lodge, and finally the worthy chancellor proclaimed 'Then in the name of the Grand Lodge of Knights of the Forest, I proclaim this person a worthy knight and he is entitled to all the right guaranteed by our constitution and by-laws. Trusting you may become a worthy knight of our fraternity, I now welcome you to our circle.'

#### **Was Truly Secret Society.**

"It will be seen by the wording of the obligation that this was a true secret society, for even its existence was forbidden to be revealed. Great care, therefore, had to be used in obtaining new members. The usual method was as follows: When one was known to be in sympathy with

the objects of the order he was approached by a member who in the course of conversation asked him casually what he would think of the formation of a society for the purpose of procuring the removal of the Indians. If he appeared favorable he was then informed that some of the citizens were going to hold a meeting that night to discuss this proposition, and he was invited to attend.

"At the appointed time he was waited upon by this friend who escorted him to the secret place of meeting. Not till he was questioned by the committee sent out for that purpose did it dawn upon him that he was entering an established lodge, and many did not realize it till they came to take the obligation.

#### **Caused Removal of Indians.**

"It is very probable that the existence of this society was an important factor in procuring the early removal of the Winnebago Indians. Notwithstanding the oath of secrecy, hints of the organization got out and went even to government circles in Washington, exaggerated, of course, as they traveled until the U. S. government began to take notice, for many in congress believed that a general uprising of the people of southern Minnesota was imminent, for the purpose of massacring the whole tribe of Winnebagoes.

"This tribe was removed from the state in 1863. They were shipped from Mankato to Rock Island in steamboats, and on the night before their embarkation they had a grand scalp dance near where the Hubbard mill now stands."