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In the early 1800's when the Irish wolf dog was widely believed to be extinct, one was well-known in the wilds of Minnesota as

the hunting partner of the man who became the state's first governor.

The pair endured blizzards, prairie fires and buffalo stampedes, and the governor spoke nostalgically of his hound, Lion, for many years after a woman came between them.

I came across the story while looking for [wolfhounds in early America](#). Snippets and scraps from old papers say they were here, but laying hold of solid details has been elusive — until I came an 1878 account in The Country Magazine by Mrs. John C. Fremont.

The giant, legendary hounds were brought to America by various wealthy Englishmen to hunt big game here, elk, wolves and even buffalo, but once here, most of them loped off into the murk of history. Lion's story was different — and poignant.

[John C. Fremont](#) was an early American explorer, politician and soldier. In the late 1830s while mapping the upper Mississippi River, he was the guest of [Henry Sibley](#), then a fur trading agent for the American Fur Company. He had a fine stone home on a bluff over the Minnesota River across from Fort Snelling, one of five forts the U.S. built after the War of 1812 to guard against further British invasions from Canada.

Fort Snelling, with its distinctive round tower, loomed over the Minnesota River and controlled river traffic critical on the early frontier. It was the crossroads for several historical figures of the period and a collection point for the booming fur trade in the Northwest Territory.

Mrs. Fremont, besides her husband's recollections, met Sibley

himself years later in Washington and he was still talking about his wolf dog. He owned two, Lion and Tiger, but Tiger was “innately violent, jealous and revengeful,” she said. He once attacked Sibley in his dining room and forced Sibley to shoot him.

Aggression is unheard of in the modern wolfhound, and Lion was the hound we know today, “exceptionally friendly and of a generous nature,” wrote Mrs. Fremont.

Lion was a tawny yellow wheaten, and Mrs. Fremont said, “Both dogs were fine specimens of their noble kind; much larger and heavier than the deer-hound, while equally quick in their motions. They were short-haired.”

Sibley’s two-story home had a porch overlooking the river and the land below. The ‘look out’ was a favorite place of Lion’s, where he “could ascend to enjoy a change of view or take a far look for wolves....with all gravity and satisfaction.”

“While his many other dogs had every provision made for them outside, Lion alone lived in the house. His place was the bear-skin rug in front of the fire. Over the mantelpiece was his portrait, in oils, life size, and well done, by an English artist. It was Lion's home and hearthstone, and he was as peaceable in repose there as he was valiant afield.”

Lion’s special treatment no doubt came from his hunting prowess as well as his sociability. He once brought down an elk by himself while Sibley witnessed.

While Mrs. Fremont writes that Lion and Tiger were given to Sibley by an English friend, other accounts say they were a gift

from [Capt. Martin Scott](#), a frontiersman stationed at Fort Snelling who at the time was as well known as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. Scott was a crack shot and an avid hunter and had a pack of large hunting hounds, apparently including wolf dogs.

One frontier tall-tale about him says that a raccoon treed by Scott shouted down, “Is that THE Captain Martin Scott down there?” Scott said it as and the raccoon replied, “Well I may as well come on down myself before you shoot me down.”

Scott and Sibley roamed wide from the fort, hunting for weeks at a time, and Lion often accompanied. Sometimes Sibley hunted with the Dakota, a tribe on good terms with the local fort.

Sibley later wrote, “I believe my fondness for hunting kept me from becoming demoralized by the temptations which surrounded every man in the Indian trade at that time and were the ruin of many.”

“When not actually engaged in business, I was out with my gun and dogs in pursuit of game.”

Scott was later reassigned and died in 1847 leading his regiment at Molina del Rey in the Mexican War.

Meanwhile in 1843, Sibley made a major change in the household that had a dire impact on Lion. Silbey married Sarah Jane Steele, the daughter of his friend and business partner, Franklin Steele, who ran a store in Fort Snelling and owned land nearby.

Mrs. Fremont wrote that Sarah Jane was a “very lovely little wife being installed as crowning perfection of the home. Lion,

as well as Lion's master, was delighted, but it is not given to every one to understand dogs, and Lion's good will even was full of terrors to this lady. She simply could not accept him as anything but a danger.”

Lion was banished outdoors.

He didn't think his old friend and the new wife could possibly be serious and Lion tried coming back in one day.

“Coming in as usual, he caused a scene of fright, and his master—his own familiar friend !—put him out. Then he disappeared altogether,” wrote Mrs. Fremont.

Sibley soon heard that Lion had taken up residence at the fort, where he was “acting strangely.” Sibley went and found him at Snelling, where Lion greeted him “with every mark of the old affection.”

But when Sibley walked him down to the river's edge and tried to coax Lion into the boat to go home, the wolf dog flatly refused.

“Nor did he ever again cross the river to his old home,” Mrs. Fremont wrote. Whenever Lion came across Sibley at Fort Snelling after that, it was like old times. But he never returned to the place where he knew he was no longer wanted.

Lion lived out his days as a guest of the fort and his story was widely known there. Mrs. Fremont wrote, “Every one loved him and felt for the separated friends.”

Sibley went on to become Minnesota's first governor in 1858, and wrote years later, “My noble Lion! Fleet, staunch, brave and

powerful. Your master will never look upon your like again.”