James Fisk let two expeditions through this area. The first one was in 1862 and the second one was in 1863, the same year that General Sibley was here.

There were a lot of reasons for these expeditions, including both political and economic issues. Minnesota had become a state just four years earlier in 1858. Their new legislative votes in Washington were needed for lots of legislative issues. In return, the Minnesota politicians wanted the resources to extend their influence westward from Minnesota as far as possible.

The federal government was very hard pressed financially at this time, but the Minnesota politicians did secure $5,000 in federal funds to enable Fisk's group to go from Fort Abercrombie, north of Wahpeton to Fort Benton, northeast of Helena, Montana. The official purpose was to help promote the extraction of gold from Montana which could greatly help the federal government's finances.

The Minnesota politicians also had a secondary motive. They wanted to try to secure federal funds to build both a road and a railroad over this area to the west coast. They knew financing would probably not be possible until after the war ended, but they wanted to have more records showing all the great resources available along this route and how easy it would be to build both a railroad and road through this area.

The term "Manifest Destiny" had started in the 1840's and lots of Americans believed that the United States was predestined to expand to the Pacific Ocean. The Minnesota delegation's request for funds to do further exploration of this northern route was fairly well received in that many Americans had a strong belief in their Manifest Destiny.

The Fisk Expedition would follow the general route of Isaac Stevens who had surveyed this route in 1853. Stevens had recently been killed in a civil war battle, and Minnesota had lost a much respected advocate of the northern route who had always campaigned tirelessly for it. They were hoping that James Fisk could take over as this proponent.

The 1862 Fisk party left St. Paul on June 16 with a total of "117 men, 13 women, 53 wagons, 168 oxen, 17 cows, 13 saddle horses, 14 team horses, and 8 mules". He had spent quite a bit of money advertising for people to sign up for this expedition. Nevertheless, his party consisted of about 50 soldiers and only about 80 emigrants.

His description of Lake Jessie is completely accurate, but it has to be kept in mind that for the entire journey he would embellish almost all of the positive things found along the way and not write very much about anything negative. Of Lake Jessie he said "Lake Jessie is a beautiful sheet of water, five or six miles in circumference, surrounded by a belt of timber."

Later he said that "We discovered a spring a little less than a mile to the westward, which, after being improved with a few moments' digging, yielded us pure cold water for culinary purposes" "…The grass is very abundant here, and is fresh in consequence of gentle showers, which we have recently had. We saw large herds of buffalo after leaving the Sheyenne, and selected a fat cow for our larder, and our experience of the superiority of this meat over the buffalo bull will prove the death-warrant of many of the former and the further lease of life to many of the latter." A few days earlier he had written that they had chased a buffalo bull for many miles before they were able to kill it. The meat had been so tough they could barely eat it.

He didn't say anything inaccurate, but many of the later settlers that had to spend the winter here described it a lot more harshly.

Part 1 of 3

Start of part 2

James Fisk was an undisciplined soldier and a pretty wild frontiersman. He had many adventures between the time he reached Fort Benton in 1862 and got back to Washington before his 1863 trip. He and his men were accused of being drunk, disorderly and chasing after the wives and daughters of the stagecoach station masters along the way.

One commander wrote that Captain Fisk and his men were drunk, took complete possession of every station they visited, turned company mules out into the storm and put their own horses into the stables. They took eight hams for their own use and they and their horses consumed eighty-six meals, seventy-five bushels of corn and five tons of hay, wasting fully as much of the last as they used and they committed other smaller depredations. He said that Fisk had "grossly insulted the wives and families of several company agents."

He had pretty much ignored the $5,000 allotment he had been given for expenses. He would routinely write checks on behalf of the federal government and ask the recipients to hold them for a few months and then just send them to Washington and somebody up there would have to make them good.

Papers in Washington D.C. were served against him, but a clerk mistakenly sent them to San Francisco thinking they would probably just get forwarded as needed. His defense to some of these claims were that no living man had ever seen him 'drunk' or rendered unfit for responsible duty by the use of intoxicating liquors. He said that they were most particular "not to waste a mouthful of food, a spear of hay or a kernel of corn". He said that even if a quarter of the charges against him were true that they would have been "gluttons on elephants and none of them could have survived the trip.

He said that everyone knew that not a drop of spirits was allowed in any of the stations and where else "in the midst of winter on the wild plains would a party of men have found whiskey?" Many of the station masters along the stage line had already been accused of being "a shelter, receptacle and employer of renegade disloyalists". They weren't supposed to have any alcohol on hand and weren't about to admit that they had all been selling this whiskey to Fisk. He also went on to say that "No wife or daughter would ever be found to perjure herself by confirming such an allegation against Captain Fisk!"

He spent most of his time between the 1862 and 1863 expeditions in Washington D. C. fighting these charges, other charges for not having a proper pass (Washington D. C. was under tight security at this time), not reporting to military headquarters, not following other military procedures and from banks that were left holding some of his worthless notes. A performance review from one of his commanders said that he was "too reckless and too ignorant to be trusted." Nevertheless, during that time the Minnesota delegation secured $10,000 for him and his 1863 Expedition.

Part 2 of 3

Start of part 3

Because of the 1863 Indian uprisings that Mark described in the previous Sibley articles, Fisk was only able to gather 62 people for the 1863 Expedition and many of these were men on his own payroll. In spite of the small number of people, his backers did not want him back out because such action would imply a fear of the Indians or a lack of confidence in the route.

His journal this time says of Lake Jessie that they found shale out-crops at the edge of the lake and one of their party discovered coal. He said that both of these lakes (Lake Jessie and Lake Addie) were both very beautiful, surrounded by bold bluffs and well timbered. He went on to say that "In the wood at the back of camp we heard an incessant noise of birds, and we found the trees full of nests; it was a perfect rookery; there were cranes, crows, gulls, storks, shite-pokes etc. They were camped just a few miles away from the forces that General Sibley had left at Camp Atchison and he was very pleased when Sibley's officers invited him and his men to dine with them.

The most infamous incident on this expedition was when …