

Cooperstown's Beginnings: The Story Of The Cooper Brothers, Bonanza Farmers

Cooperstown will celebrate the seventy fifth anniversary of its founding in June, 1957. The town began in 1882, founded by the Cooper brothers, bonanza farmers.

To quote the first editor of the Cooperstown Courier, Mr. E. D. Stair, "It is a kind of a cold blooded, matter-of-fact conclusion that Griggs County and Cooperstown without (R.C.) Cooper would be equal to the play of Hamlet, with Hamlet omitted."

We of Cooperstown and Griggs county are deeply in the debt of Mrs. Myrtle Porterville, who has worked for years, finding and assembling documented facts about the early settlers in this community — where they came from, when they came, where they settled, what their homes were like, what their clothes were like, what they ate, what kind of dishes they used, how far they had to go for fuel, water and other supplies, and the countless other details which make the pioneers come alive to the present and future generations.

Mrs. Porterville got her information from various sources — from assessors' lists, mortgage records, old newspapers, photographs, and from dozens of personal interviews with people who could tell her firsthand

about the habits and personalities of the early settlers and about the homes they lived in.

Nearly all of the information to be used in the history book being put together by the jubilee committee comes directly from Mrs. Porterville's notes.

She has generously allowed the Sentinel-Courier to use her material for this series. Much of it has never been published before. Her manuscript, prepared as a scholarly work at the request of NDAC professors, is well documented with footnotes citing the sources of her information. Except where the information in the footnotes is necessary for the sense of the narrative, they will be omitted in this series. This will be the only major departure from the manuscript.

## The Prairie

by Mrs. Porterville

Griggs County. What was it like when the first settlers came? Grass! Grass everywhere! Ungrazed since the buffalo left, there grew on the hills the short and hardy "buffalo" grass, in low places taller grass up to two feet in height, and on the level places more buffalo grass and "needle" grass that





made good hay in a damp season but was too short for cutting in dry years. This grass, which cured when ripe into a hay covered prairie, was not to be found in the wooded, sandy, or rocky soils of the east nor the sage covered states farther west. Wonderful! The soil must be rich and have plenty of moisture to produce such grass. And on this grassy prairie there grew not one tree.

Among the grasses grew a succession of perennial flowering plants — from the woolly first pasque flower of spring, the flaming lily and the delicate orchid colored prairie clover of midsummer, to the goldenrod and prairie asters of fall. Look around the edges of the sloughs in June and July and find the largest and most flavorful of wild strawberries.

Overgrown by the grasses are the old trails in the sod. They had been made by Governor Steven's train, by Fiske's gold seekers' expedition, by Sibley's military wagons, by the Red River hunters, by the Indians, by the Fort Totten to Fort Abercrombie mail carrier, and by the buffaloes. If a prairie fire had recently passed over the land, the trails appeared in the sod, and the whitened buffalo bones would be seen everywhere on the



blackened ground.

Follow any one of these trails, and almost without warning the prairie seems to end, and the Sheyenne Valley lies before the traveler — three hundred to four hundred feet below the level of the prairie, and from one to four miles wide. Here is sweet running water, timber for homes, fuel and protection, and wild fruits for food. This was like home, and here the first pioneers settled.

## **"Bonanza" Farming**

The reason for farming on a large scale seems to have no one simple answer to "Why?" The 1870's saw a severe depression in the Eastern states. Interest rates were low, with few chances for profitable investment there. The rapid movement westward of the population, and the increased immigration from Europe added to the need for wheat. It was over \$1.00 a bushel — high for the times. The harvester and binder had reduced the need for manpower, and had made practical an increased acreage per farm. Wheat raising became a profitable business.

Congress encouraged settlement to the west. Its Homestead Laws of 1862 had been amended





and liberalized to help settle the prairies. "Additional Homesteads" were granted to Civil War veterans who had been unable to get the full one hundred sixty acres the homestead laws had allowed. "Timber Culture" (tree claims) claims of one hundred sixty acres were added, and a "pre-emption" for another one hundred sixty acres allowed any settler to buy it at \$2.50 per acre. He could get one, or all three.

Another reason for the "land boom" was the Congressional land grant to the Northern Pacific Railroad. This included all the odd numbered sections of land extending for forty miles on each side of its right-of-way.

By the late 1870's, this railroad had crossed the Red River Valley and was building westward towards the Pacific Coast. Crews of surveyors opened land for settlement, as they worked on yet another township, working northward from the right-of-way — often finding houses and breaking on the settler's chosen land. The Cooper Brothers bought many section of this railroad land to use — to farm. Others only bought to sell again.

This new land was different from the stoney farm lands of the East that had to be cleared of rock and fertilized for good returns. The wooded sections of

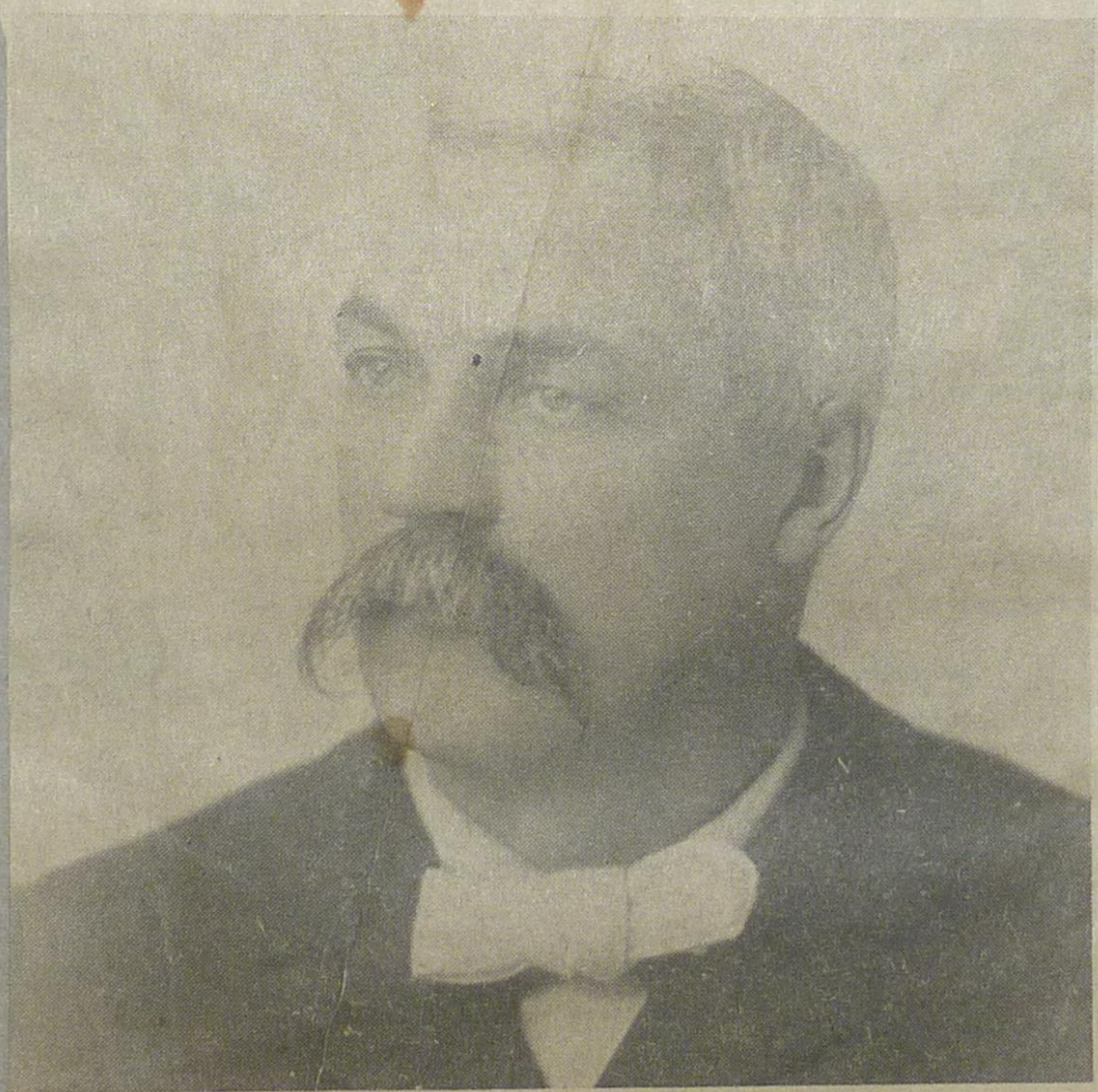
Michigan, Wisconsin, or Minnesota had to be cleared of trees and stumps, and then had left a sandy soil. In the Colorado country the land was dry, had sage brush and little grass except in favored valleys and raised little grain.

But eastern Dakota was often likened to the Nile River Valley. Its land was level. Its rich black loam needed no fertilizer. It had no stumps to be pulled, no rocks to dig and pile. The breaking plow could turn over a ribbon of prairie sod. Many acres could be prepared for a crop in one year.

Elements of all these conditions seem to have influenced the Cooper Brothers. There was Thomas J. Cooper of Chicago, with his Colorado mining profits to invest, not in the East with its low interest rates, nor again in the uncertainty of new mines. Why not try the great new wheat county as a partner of Rollin C. Cooper, his much younger brother, who had experience and genial skill in working with many men? And so it was planned. About five years of careful investigating, planning and organizing seem to have gone before Rollin C. Cooper's first trip to Griggs County in 1880.

(Next week: locating and getting the land.)

Thursday, January 17, 1957



Rollin C. Cooper, for whom Cooperstown was named. This photograph was probably made sometime after 1890, according to Mrs. Myrtle Porterville. When Mr. Cooper first came to this

area in 1880 he wore a full beard. The photograph was given Mrs. Porterville by Mrs. James Hazard, whose father, Charles Houghton, was for many years Cooper's ranch foreman.

by Mrs. Porterville

(In last week's installment Mrs. Porterville told about the prairie when the first settlers arrived here, and the factors which led to farming on a large scale, or "bonanza" farming.)

## Locating

In October of 1880, Rollin C. Cooper had followed the Sibley Trail across Barnes County to the year-old sod house of Ed. Ladbury near Sibley's old Camp Corning. As there was no room for him in the house that night, he slept in the haystack. In the

morning he brushed the frost off that he had slept in, and was ready for another day. And no one suspected that this large genial bearded man of thirty five carried with him, or on his person, \$25,000 to invest in the new land. Such is the story still told of Mr. Cooper's first trip into Griggs county.

Cooper was a rich man. He had no need to settle in the timber of the Sheyenne River Valley for protection. He could build protection for both his men and his teams. He wanted to farm on a large scale—the "bonanza" way. This meant the prairie where those before him dared not locate, but where all the elements of Cooper's plan lay waiting.

Mr. Cooper was different in several ways from the other land seekers of that time. Although he was the richest man to look for investment in Griggs County, he had experience elsewhere in pioneer undertakings.

When he was fourteen to seventeen years of age he had farmed near Red Wing, Minnesota with his father and brothers. After that he had done overland mule-freight hauling from

St. Joe, Missouri, to Colorado. As a partner of his brother Thomas J. Cooper in Colorado he had first hand knowledge of mining, ore hauling by mule teams and railroading in connection with their own ore railroad to their mine. Then in another Colorado venture they had herds of cattle where they found good pasture.

Mr. Cooper knew from his own experience the value of grass, water, fuel and protection.

Before the surveying of section lines in a township, a land seeker, as a "squatter" could select his land, do some breaking and build a house, then file when the survey was completed. This offered the chance Mr. Cooper was looking for, for himself, and his relatives and friends of Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Colorado, New York and Pennsylvania.

He wished to locate within the land grant limit. Here he could buy from the Northern Pacific Railway any of the odd numbered sections of land at less than pre-emption costs, then increase these holdings by buying pre-emptions or "additional homesteads" adjoining his other

land, after their final proof by others. This he did.

Mr. Cooper had found the land he liked best near the geographical center of Griggs County. At the southeastern part where it had entered the county, the Sheyenne River had high steep, rocky hills and a narrow valley with a thin stand of timber. The prairie soil on both sides of the river is thickly studded with glacial rocks for several miles back from its course.

About fifteen miles north of the southern boundary of the county the rocks became few in the Sheyenne Valley, the hills, or the prairie and the valley itself became wide and had a heavy stand of timber. Here, on the prairie, he found good farm land stretching in every direction, numerous meadows for hay for mules and cattle, and water to be had from ponds or shallow wells. Here also was a glacial hill, high enough that its southern slope offered a protected building place for the "Boarding house" for his men and for the barn for his mules. (Perhaps he thought of his mules first!)

In finding the location of this land he had started at the land



farthest north that had been surveyed. Then with a marker on a wheel, and using a compass he drove to where he wished to locate. Charles L. Cooper, son of T. J. Cooper and nephew of Rollin C. Cooper, rode the buggy and counted the turns of the marked wheel. Upon being surveyed, it was found to be only a few rods from the surveyor's line.

## Getting The Land

Cooper knew exactly where he was going when he set out that fall day to see his land and build his barn. He had talked with the surveyors of the township lines, (only township lines had been run before 1881) and knew exactly what he was getting. He located his own homestead and his brother's tree claim, on homestead lands which his brother was to buy for cash at \$2.05 per acre. The deed to these lands was issued November 27, 1880, only a month after R. C. Cooper came to his farm and began building his barn and his "boarding house" for his men. He located them on the land taken by Thomas J. Co-

Cooper as his tree claim. He owned all the railroad land surrounding the ranch buildings and his own homestead. This land was selected by someone who knew the district well. Those who were mere land speculators bought whole sections. Cooper did not buy the less desirable of the railway lands. He selected an East half, or a south half, etc., that was best suited to farming, and also some railway lands among the Sheyenne Valley timber. He needed fuel. Several of the young men who came with Cooper took pre-emptions on good land on even numbered sections adjoining Cooper's railroad lands. They worked for Cooper. For these Mr. Cooper paid from \$500 to \$800 and their pre-emption cost of \$400 per 160 acres.

Another way was also used to get good homestead land which alternated with his railroad sections. Thomas J. Cooper's son Charles L. Cooper, had secured power of attorney to obtain "additional homesteads" for a veteran, or his widow, all duly described in the document, issued before the townships were sec

(Continued on page eight)

tionalized. One was dated August 24, 1878, and five in 1880 from January 21, to September 14, all before Cooper had seen the land.

## The Start

The buildings of the Cooper Brothers differed from those of the average homesteader. Until the Coopers came the only settlers' buildings in Griggs County were in the valley of the Sheyenne River, because it was a common belief that no one could live on the open prairie. Their houses were of log, or sod, or were "dug outs"—a part basement or cave, the rest being of logs or sod, or a combination of both.

But Cooper had planned to farm on a large scale, on the prairie, and he had the money with which to buy and build. His first need on the prairie was for proper buildings.

"Cooper Brothers loaded today and started for their ranch thirty-five miles due north of Sanborn. Seventy-five teams with lumber, general supplies, merchandise and so on, and they have fifteen carloads of lumber shipped to that point, and daily expect six carloads of oats from Minnesota. They are enterprising, energetic and thorough business men, and they are doing a great deal for the prosperity and development of this part of Dakota.

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"They pay forty cents per hundred pounds for hauling to their ranche, which the farmers nearby all improve the opportunity to earn a few dollars, by making a few trips north before the winter sets in. Cooper Brothers have just finished their building 20x40 on Main Street." (From the Daily Argus of Fargo, Dakota Territory of Nov. 11, 1880, quoting Sanborn Progress of Nov. 8, 1880).

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"They have about finished the hauling of a hundred and fifty thousand feet of lumber for building." (Daily Argus, quoting Sanborn Progress of Nov. 15, 1880).

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"This same fall Cooper bought 1000 bushels of oats from Ole J. Moe who lived thirteen and a half east of Sanborn. Mr. Cooper's freight line came and took it all up in one trip." (told by I. J. Moe, son of Ole J. Moe.)

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Mr. Cooper outfitted first at Fargo, for his earliest freighting, with tents for protection of his men and mules. As Mr. Cooper's big shipment of Missouri mules did not come until the spring of 1881, there seems little question but that part of his lumber and supplies of 1880 were hauled for him by the early settlers near Sanborn and Valley City.

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"At the same time they built a long shed stable (30x100 feet) in the vicinity of the present

town of Dazey. It might have been on the townsite itself, but I would not say positively. It was not far from a frame house that was called the 'Mack Place' at that time. This house was there the first I saw the place in 1881. I was one of about a dozen young men who came from Michigan with a view of homesteading, and we went to work for Cooper Brothers to begin with.

"We landed in Sanborn during a fierce blizzard. There was no place for us to stay except in the schoolhouse, a new building, nearly completed, but not plastered, none too warm, and no conveniences whatever. Several carloads of farm implements and other equipment arrived in a few days and also about eighty

mules from Missouri. Freighting this stuff to Cooperstown (to the Cooper farm—there was no Cooperstown in 1881) began at once. You may judge as to the climate when I tell you that sleighs loaded with this heavy material passed over drifts several feet high, leaving only the smallest trace of a mark where the sleigh runners went.

“On the 23rd of April we got a “chinook” wind that took the drifts very fast and flooded the prairie with water. For the four weeks previous I had the honor to be the watchman at the “halfway house,” as it was called. I kept the fires going and made coffee and fried bacon and eggs when the freighters put in an appearance. The bread was bought at Sanborn and brought by the freighters. It was a day’s trip from Sanborn to the ‘half-way house,’ when loaded, but if the teams had no load they went through to the Cooper farm in one day.

“This ‘half-way house’ was used until the railroad reached Dazey, and for some time afterwards. I occupied the place only during the spring freighting the first year.” (William Glass, told to Clair Jackson.)

It has been said that the foundation stones of this “Half-way house” have been located

in a field south of Dazey where Highway No. 1 turned east on the north side to go around a

large slough which held water the year around.  
(next week: Cooper's buildings)



Buildings on Cooper's "home ranch," probably the first lumber buildings in Griggs county. The barn was started in 1880 and the house in 1881, for his men. Small building in foreground was used by the men as a washing house. Bearded man on horseback in center foreground is probably Mr. Cooper. Large woodpile is behind him. At least forty horses and mules are on this photo. This picture was probably taken in 1883 or later. Originally the entire house had vertical siding. Present owners of this place are Mr. and Mrs. Max Arndt. The barn still has the original shingles and vertical siding.

## Granary On Townsite

(Quoted from William Glass of Big Timber, Montana) "The granary that was used for a County office immediately fol-

lowing the November 1882 election, was the only building on the townsite and stood just about opposite the entrance to the present court house block. It was built to store the grain that grew on the townsite in 1882. I think it must have been at least seventy feet long and about sixteen wide. It was constructed with heavy dimension lumber in order to carry the weight of



the grain when filled. It was sheeted on the inside of the studding with shiplap, but there was no covering on the outside. It had a gable roof and was shingled. It was built for use and not for show. When Cooperstown was declared the new county seat we had to have an office quick, so we partitioned off about sixteen feet at the east end of the granary, putting in a small window, and a door made with inch boards, and fastened with a 25c lock. It was the plan to occupy it only a few weeks while they were constructing a new and commodious building two or three hundred feet to the north, which was later known as the "Dakota House."

Mr. Cooper and others from Michigan and Canada built their first granaries with studding material on the outside, and sheeted up smooth on the inside. They reversed their building methods when they built new ones, or they sheeted up the outside and removed the inside lumber.

Dakota conditions seem to have caused the change. Methods of grain handling of eastern United States, Michigan, or Canada were forced to adjust to the

rapid handling of much grain from the large threshing machines of Dakota.

Sacked at the threshing machine in the first years, it was hauled to the granary and dumped from the sacks into the grain bins through openings made between the studding. These were usually placed twelve to fourteen inches apart. It was then shoveled into the bins through the openings for that purpose. But the studding gave trouble.

It was hard to get close enough to the bin to shovel from the straight sided grain tanks through the openings at the far side of the studding without much spillage, for the large shovel could scarcely get between the studding to the opening.

In getting close enough to the bin, the hubs of the wagon wheels often would strike the studding, damaging the wheel, or studding, or both. Planks were then placed at the height of the hubs on the outside of the studding to protect both the building and the wheels. (Edwin Bolkan, source.) An improved grain tank which came into general use at about 1900,

