When children across the nation received puppies or ponies for Christmas this year, one of the first questions they asked was “What shall we name it?” (Meanwhile, their parents were earnestly laying down the rules for care and feeding). Once we’ve named something we tend to lay great importance on that name—certainly a child will never forget his first puppy’s name.

However, sometimes we will forget the origins of a name—sometimes names tend to lose their original importance and distant generations have no idea why something is named what it is indeed named. For instance, there are probably very many of us (including myself before I did the research) who have little idea who the “Griggs” is in Griggs County. Because it seems strange to me that we wouldn’t know the origins of a name which rolls off our tongues so frequently, I’m setting out to shed some light on those origins.

In 1881, when Dakota was still a fledgling 20-year-old territory (slowly on its way to becoming the states of North and South Dakota in 1889) there was a great deal of naming to be done. The land was being divided into counties and townships (and like the puppies at Christmas time) all of those political subdivisions needed names. Names of individuals were often applied to counties and towns. These individuals were selected for a number of different reasons including their political persuasion, their wealth and prestige, and their significant accomplishments (to name just a few). However, it’s safe to say that the names selected weren’t necessarily selected because that person had significant local meaning or had a direct involvement with the specific political subdivision.

The territorial legislature of 1881 determined that our county would be named after Alexander Griggs. You may not have heard of Griggs but he was certainly well known in 1881. By then, Griggs had been in the territory for 10 years and had established a critical steamboat transportation line between Winnipeg and Grand Forks. Griggs was known as the “Father of Grand Forks” after entering his land claim in 1871 and naming the city after the confluence, or fork, of the Red and Red Lake Rivers. From river boats, to banks, to gas works, to mills, to railroads, to postmaster, to mayor, to bridge-builder, Griggs carved success. Griggs had accomplished enough and carried enough significance that the territorial legislature felt it proper to name one of the new Dakota Territory counties after him. (If you’d like to get a look at “him”, a statue of Griggs stands outside the Grand Forks County Courthouse).

Like all history, there is much more complexity to Alexander Griggs than what I’ve presented here. However, more information is right at your fingertips—you can easily find a copy of the “Griggs County Centennial Book” and the “Cooperstown Centennial Book” at the museum or the library—those books are full of detailed information about our local history. Additionally, you can visit the Griggs County Historical Society’s website where you can find more information: [www.griggscountyhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.griggscountyhistoricalsociety.com)