Mark,

I think lots of people could write many books about that time period.

The homestead law was passed in 1862, but there was no railroad and not much profit in farming since the wheat couldn’t be taken to a market without the railroad. The railroads (corruption story here) typically got a “charter” to build a railroad and then they received every other section (640 acres) for about 20 miles on each side of the railroad track.

I think the railroad finally got from Fargo to Valley City about 1873. The railroad promoted a lot of “get rich quick” type of schemes in Norway and Sweden to get the settlers here. The way they exaggerated in their advertisements is another story. More stories here…

The land around Valley City along the Sheyenne was taken very quickly. Settling further north along the profitable if the railroads came. Lots of illegal promoters said it was “almost a sure thing” that a town like Mardell would get a railroad, but they never did and sold property at a huge profit then left town when the railroad never came.

I think that the land “technically” had to be surveyed before it could be homesteaded. A page at <http://www.griggscountyhistoricalsociety.com/online/cooperstown_centennial/in_the_beginning/squatters/washburn_township.php> shows the surveyor notes for July 13-23 of 1881.

I think Mr. Cooper bribed the surveyors to list these people as squatters, but it’s best not to mention that to Jan. One example on this page is the Barnards (JQ, LT, MC, GW, SS and Francis). Mr. Cooper’s sister married Bernard Barnard and I believe the rest were fictitious. The Merrill’s (WA, GN, Henry S. and CS) on this page were probably fictitious too. Julia Cooper (Rollin’s niece) married a Wallace Merriell and the rest were likely made up. Julia Cooper and Charles Cooper are listed as squatters. Julia was a sort of high society woman and I don’t think she ever set foot in Griggs County.

Jan gets a bit angry and says that there had to be a “sworn affidavit” before they could take title to the land. For that reason “land agents” and “land offices” came about to try to stop the corruption. A lot of these land agents and land office managers seemed to be friends of Mr. Cooper’s from his hometown of St. Clair, Michigan. I think the Register of Deeds was too. More stories on corrupt land agents…

I really believe there was a lot of fraud in the Register of Deeds office, but Jan doesn’t like to hear it. I might try to investigate, but that would take a lot of time.

They tried to stop some of the corruption in Oklahoma in 1889 by making it illegal to claim before the lands were opened. Didn’t work very good either and land surveyors, railroad employees, land agents and others somehow got the good land. Those claim jumpers were called “Sooners”.

One of the requirements to homestead the land was that “improvements” had to be made on the land. Mr. Cooper could have his men take out a small pile of lumber and put somebody’s name on it and Mr. Cooper’s land agents could say that a house was under construction on the site.

There are stories where a settler left a sign on the property, then went to town to file a claim, then when they got back somebody else had already filed a claim on that land.

There was also the civil war veteran clause. A civil war veteran (provided he fought for the north) could deduct one year off the 5 year residency requirement for each year he served. Mr. Cooper bought a lot of land from “civil war veterans” that he found somehow.

The railroads themselves were corrupt to the farmers, leading to the Non-Partisan League, the State Elevator and the State Bank.