

RAILROADS OF COWLEY COUNTY

By Foss Farrar

Prologue-Railroads Expand Into Kansas

The railroads played a major role in the displacement of Native Americans and the expansion of white settlement in Kansas. The U.S. government encouraged railroad expansion through the Great Plains, including Kansas. It had determined that a transcontinental railroad was necessary. The government provided land grants covering huge amounts of acreage to the railroads, and the railroads sold adjacent land to farmers who paid big prices for the land so they could have easy access to ship their products to market.

President Millard Fillmore signed the first railroad land-grant act in 1850. From that date on, railroad transportation was the most important factor in the development of the western part of the United States. (Kansas Department of Transportation)

According to the Kansas Historical Society, the government provided the survey of public lands and divided them into one-mile square sections. The government kept a portion of the sections, offering the railroads alternate sections, in a kind of checkerboard pattern. The government lands could be offered for homesteading or sold for a profit. Land grant supporters surmised it would be a win-win deal for all the parties. Between 1850 and 1870, seven percent of the land in the United States was given to 80 railroads, mostly in the west. (Kansas Historical Society)

By the early 1850s, the issue of slavery in this country played a role in practically every matter that came before the U.S. Congress, according to Louis F. Burns, author of a history of the Osage people. Burns notes that both the Northeast and the South wanted a transcontinental railroad because it appeared to be possible by then:

“The Gadsden Purchase of 1853 gave the South a feasible path by following the old Butterfield Route (Ox-Bow Route) to California. Not only did this route have forts along the way for protection, but it also passed through organized territory.” (Burns, p. 248)

Burns writes that the “organized territory argument” was seized upon by Northeastern railroad men who demanded that Nebraska Territory be organized. This prompted Congress to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. A purpose of the act was to open the country to the transcontinental railways to connect the east with the west.

The last and largest Native American reserve in Kansas before the removal of the Osage, in 1870, was eight million acres of Osage tribal land. The Osage had settlements and trails in southeastern and south-central Kansas, including Cowley County.

According to historians Craig Miner and William E. Unrau, the Osage people ceded more than four million acres of land in the Osage treaty of September 29, 1865. Their remaining land was known as the Osage Diminished Reserve. “While this was being ratified, William Sturges,