

Bucking the Railroads on the Kansas Frontier: The Struggle Over Land Claims by Homesteading Civil War Veterans, 1867-1876

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Review

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Mack, John *Bucking the Railroads on the Kansas Frontier: The Struggle Over Land Claims by Homesteading Civil War Veterans, 1867-1876*. McFarland, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-7029-7

Exploring How Soldiers Understood the Post-War World

Many titles promise more than the book actually delivers. This is happily not the case with John M. Mack's outstanding study of the settlement of southeast Kansas after the Civil War. The title, *Bucking the Railroads*, does not capture the wide breadth of topics covered in this outstanding work. This is unfortunate, because Mack's work is an important contribution to our understanding of how veterans envisioned and created a society based on their interpretation of the Civil War. Social, economic, Civil War, and Western historians will find much to value in this concise study.

In this wide-ranging book, Mack examines republican ideology, property rights, settlement patterns, gender issues, vigilantism, social organizations, and the frontier legal structure of two Kansas counties. Civil War veterans settled this area believing that they had won the Civil War in order to create a new republican paradise on the frontier. However, as Mack ably demonstrates, the railroads threatened their vision. The legal battle that ensued with the railroads over land claims illustrates how veterans had come to define liberty and freedom in a post-bellum America. Indeed, the fight with the railroads over land claims became, for these veterans, a continuation of the Civil War—with railroad monopolies trying to enslave the settlers.

In the first few years of settlement of the Neosho Valley (Neosho and Labette counties), the railroads circled the new settlement like sharks, but it is only after towns had formed and settlers claimed land that they attacked. As the threat of railroads loomed, these veterans built "homes and establish[ed] communities based on (what they perceived to be) the ideals of the republic for

which they had fought" (p. 33). What these communities looked like and believed is at the heart of Mack's study.

In the first section of the book, Mack examines republican ideology and explains how the idea of Popular Sovereignty still played an important role in settlers' view of land rights and local control long after the Civil War ended. Outside forces, whether the national government or corporate monopolies continued to threaten liberty. Thus, property rights and liberty went hand-in-hand. If the railroads could snatch their lands away from them, why had the Civil War been fought? At the same time, these veteran settlers wanted "ordered communities" that enforced property rights, gender relations, and a strict legal and moral code. Vigilante groups enforced these legal and moral values. Settlers Clubs, Vigilante Clubs, Soldier Clubs are just a few of the groups that hung horse thieves (stealing property) and ran "claim jumpers" out of the area. As a structured legal system emerged, however, these vigilante clubs started to disappear. Interestingly, the leaders of these clubs often became the legal authorities in the area. Further challenges came from women who often refused to conform to men's conceptions of an orderly society. Female settlers formed clubs and pushed for temperance and suffrage much to the chagrin of the men who believed that a woman's place was in the home as a silent helper.

The most important ideal of these veteran settlers' understanding of liberty and an orderly society remained private property ownership. If this became threatened, they believed their whole community would shift from freedom to slavery. Because the land in southeast Kansas had been ceded to the federal government by the Osage Indian tribe, confusion reigned over land claims. As veterans moved into the area they assumed the rights granted in the Homestead Act of 1862, but because it had been tribal land, this assertion became tenuous. Railroad companies wanting to build tracks to south Texas and the cattle industry convinced (bribed?) Congress to muddy the waters by giving railroad companies land claims to the same area. A battle ensued as the railroad companies told settlers that they did not own the land and that they therefore had to buy it from the companies. In some Kansas counties, this led to violence and bloodshed. In the Neosho Valley, however, veteran settlers used the courts to fight this battle. After years of confrontation, the Supreme Court finally ruled in favor of the settlers' land claims. As Mack concludes, "Theirs was the last stand against railroad claims to public land; theirs can also be considered a first battle in the war against monopolies that would be continued in force by the Grangers and the Populists of the 1880s and 90s" (p. 161).

Bucking the Railroads is an important contribution to the historiography of western settlement. This is an extremely well-written monograph that makes for an enjoyable and entertaining read. Moreover, it shows that much more research needs to be done on how Civil War veterans connected the republican ideals of the war to post-bellum society. Mack has given us a good start.

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