

## Chapter 2: The Unassigned Lands

In the late 1800's America was a growing and prosperous nation. Vast expanses of unsettled land beckoned to those yearning for a new life. The land that was once considered so undesirable that it had been given to "heathens" just a few decades before, gradually became more and more attractive to the rapidly growing white population on Indian Territory's northern, eastern, and southern fringes. Harboring great hopes and dreams for a prosperous new life, adventuresome and hardy folks began to put pressure on the government to open the Unassigned Lands for settlement.

Eager and determined pioneers known as "Boomers" began to congregate at the Kansas border making repeated attempts to colonize the land, --only to be expelled anew by the government. President Rutherford B. Hayes vigorously resisted efforts to illegally settle the land. Even though unpopular, the Hayes administration steadfastly maintained that the Unassigned Lands were ceded to the government by the Creek and Seminole tribes exclusively for Indian habitation. Not to be deterred, Boomers kept returning in ever increasing numbers.

White ranchers as well eyed the rich and fertile ranges of the Unassigned Lands. During the Civil War, Union occupation of Arkansas had cut off access to rail links to the East and North. In order to reach markets, Texas ranchers were forced to move their cattle from ranges in Texas to railroads in Kansas. This required that cattle be driven through the heart of the Unassigned Lands. Untold millions of longhorn cattle were herded northward on the Chisholm Trail. The Chisholm Trail, in fact, was not a single path but a network of cattle paths that criss-crossed the Unassigned Lands. One of these historical paths cut across the eastern side of what is The Village today. Old homestead maps of Britton Township show the trail extending from the intersection of Britton and Waverly and crossing in a northwesterly direction through land now occupied by Casady School, the YMCA and the Meeker Addition. The trail then exited The Village at the intersection of Penn and Hefner.

Ranchers who traversed Oklahoma via the Chisholm Trail soon realized that the land was not only well suited for raising cattle but was also closer to the railroads. Gradually, cattlemen began to occupy the Unassigned Lands without legal authority, dividing the range, building fences and corrals, and grazing their livestock over its fertile prairies.

Overtime, the availability of these Unassigned Lands became a controversial issue. Widely published news articles throughout the West helped to mount pressure on the government to open the vacant lands to homestead. Finally, on March 2, 1889, President Benjamin Harrison signed legislation opening the "Unassigned Lands" to white settlement. Surveyors were soon dispatched to plot the land into 160-acre homesteads. On April 22, 1889 the land

was opened to settlement in what would become one of the most colorful and celebrated events in western history, --the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889.