From the mid-1880s to the mid-1990s, a particular patent culture emerged in the United States which combined a political economy of citizenship, anxieties about the power of industrial combinations, and contention about whether patents represented the public virtue of technological innovation or the private vice of monopoly. Focusing upon the introduction of patent enforcement to a new market—the American Midwest—the paper examines how courts and ordinary citizens navigated their inclusion within the framework of intellectual property protection. Prompted by an onslaught of infringement suits concerning barbed wire, fencing, and wells, farmers in the 1880s established a movement against patent law. Activists deluged Congress with petitions, proposed legislation to limit the ability of patent holders to sue, and created legal defense funds. The paper reconstructs a late-nineteenth century Prairie intellectual property social movement. But, more broadly, it is intended to place this case study within a much larger discussion of how the history of intellectual property should be written at the intersection of legal doctrine, a deeply situated context of technological social practices, and current policy imperatives.