Law and Disorder in O'Brien County

Charles and Caroline Ingalls notwithstanding, some of our pioneer forbearers regularly ran afoul of the law, even though they were the law, the only law.

Once the federal government declared the land of the Yanktons, the land beneath my feet, was no longer the Yanktons and therefore open for settlement, the first white faces to make their way here were shysters. No one like them on *Little House*. All they cared about were the empty spaces this country might fill up in their own ledger books.

Finders keepers--if you were first to cut a log for a cabin, you could walk away with your pockets full. No sleight of hand either.

“Finders keepers” meant you could determine yourself who would be the next bunch of settlers—and the next, and the next. You didn’t even have to live here. Most the crooks hung out in frontier Sioux City. In 1860, gangs of good ole boys headed out into the wilderness of northwest Iowa, voted each other into office, then doled out salaries and fees to each other for jobs they never did.

Two boys built a bridge across some creek, cut logs to span the flow, a few more for cross-pieces, took what they cut to a mill in Peterson to get them sawed into planks, got it all done in two days for which they were paid well—two bucks a day. Total price—eight dollars, for which the county paid one of its own $500. Great markup.

Now ask yourself, what good is a county without a courthouse? O’Brien County’s swindlers built a log house, 12 by 16 feet, for which they paid themselves richly, then made into a residence because who needed a court when there was no law?

“A court house implies a great deal,” an old historian wrote in the *History of O’Brien County*. “Generally, that emblem of justice, a blind-folded female holding in equipoise the scales of justice, stands prominently elevated. . .to tell the people that here the wrongs of the world are righted.”
Not this courthouse. O'Brien county’s first was “a sacrilegious travesty upon jurisprudence.” It was as if “that blinded female was weeping in shame, and her attitude that of a devotee at the throne of justice whose heart was crushed with remorse.”

There. Now you know. No *Little House on the Prairie*.

In O'Brien County, two gangs of crooks vied to control money coming into all that prairie land with a steady stream of newcomers. Rather than fight, soon enough they settled up. There was, after all, enough loot for the lot of them.

Was there noone righteous in those earliest of early days out here?

One, a bachelor named Fred Feldman, someone called “Old Dutch Fred,” stayed the heck out of the mess and told people so often it became a figure of speech, “I am der peoples, der rest all be officers, don’t it?” No graft, no corruption, just hard work.

Old Dutch Fred, living alone, took sick in 1873. Those who knew him made insisted the man needed to see a doctor, a day’s travel away. Old Fred told his friends *nobecause* he’d lived well and if his time had to come to die, he would. So he did.

Don’t look for his grave either. It’s long gone.

But Hannibal Waterman’s isn’t, and he’s another hero out on the banks of the Little Sioux. All he ever wanted was a place for his family. When the land-grabbing crooks tried to enlist him, he said no. When they grabbed his land, he fought back.

Take a ride someday, follow highway 10 through Primghar, keep going east until you sink beautifully into the valley of the Little Sioux. For a moment, you’ll think you’ve been airlifted into the 1870s, right there between prairie hills so royal you’ll want to pull over and make a U-turn back west to take in all that open prairie one more time.

Hannibal Waterman isn’t there, nor is his wife Hannah, the county’s very first school teacher. They’re buried in Sutherland, if you’d like to pay your respects.
They deserve it.

But if you want to honor their memory, a man and a woman who came here in 1853, when the only neighbors were Yanktons or Santees, a couple who didn’t buckle but stayed when all the rest of the jerks high-tailed it, then get out of your car at the Waterman prairie. Take a walk and you’ll be doling out the kind of honor the Watermans deserve and would likely appreciate. Stop by sometime, right there on their majestic land.

Hannibal and Hannah Waterman, O’Brien County, Iowa—the two of them deserve at least a couple episodes of *Little House*. 