Grafting A New Government in Sioux County

That it was a government *in absentia* was not unusual. Several freshly-born northwest Iowa counties were run from afar in the 1860s, if *run* has any meaning.

Sioux County's first government declared such jobs as bridge-building and road-construction to be their work and paid themselves royally for their labor, even if there wasn’t any. Government was a hoax, a racket, a fraud, a scam--but if you were part of it, you could pocket some cash.

Four guys, if history tells the story straight, voted themselves in as Sioux County’s first Commissioners. They knew hordes of easterners would soon be descending on ground every white man thought his for the taking. Whole crowds of Euro-Americans would be arriving, just as they already in every other corner of Iowa.

In 1859, four seedy entrepreneurs sitting around a card table in some Sioux City dive got together and called themselves Sioux County Commissioners. They tracked up here along the Big Sioux River, even spent a winter or two in the courthouse/cabin. They didn't really live here. They didn't have to, not to make bucks. All they had to do was build something, then *claim* to live here. Who'd 'a checked?

If a couple of gamblers could smell out a willing judge to authorize the graft, cunning shysters like these four original commissioners could rake in good money for doing nothing but issuing warrants.

They'd put bogus warrants up on the market for speculators, monied interests who were buying what they could to get rich on the upcoming and ongoing transformation of the region--from Sioux to sodbuster. Banks were buying, as were fat cats who'd pay good money to speculate.

Sioux County may well blush to think of their government being run out of a Sioux City tavern, but that's what happened: a table of conniving card sharks, a friendly judge, and a printer turn out some documents that looked official, warrants to be peddled until the population of county was sufficient to create taxation, and finance what all governments needed to do in frontier times--clear roads and build a bridge or two. That was the work those poker buddies amply compensated themselves for doing, whether or not the work got done. Who'd check? The only human beings anywhere close were the trappers and the Yanktons, and most of them were on the run, given all those white people a’coming and the neighborhood going to pot.

One of the commissioners kept a diary that’s somewhat helpful in determining what went on in the very earliest days of white Sioux County. But what he wrote can't always be believed any more than phony census rolls they wrote up, filled with names of people who never did live here, some relatives from Connecticut.

Those characters knew good money was going to be made for a few years, but no more. It was fly-by-night, and they made sure they had wings.

Why on earth am I retelling this old tale? You won’t believe it.
One of the first Sioux County Commissioners took his share of the loot and hiked back east to Des Moines, where he created a huge Des Moines business, Equitable Life Insurance, then got into real money in the boom industry of the era, railroads. Eventually, one of Sioux County’s first commissioners, along with his family, lived in Iowa's showplace mansion, Terrance Hill, home of the governors. That Sioux County Commissioner’s name was Frederick Marion Hubbell.

Mr. Hubbell started gaining his fortune in a cabin just outside of Hawarden, Iowa (well, when he wasn’t in Sioux City). Soon enough he became one of Iowa's most well-heeled financiers.

Now get this. As we speak, another Fred Hubbell, Frederick M's great-grandson, is running for governor of the state. You may have heard the name.

Here in Sioux County, where I live, noone remembers his long-gone grandpa’s checkered past. And, as everyone knows, there's no county in the state more solidly Republican than the one his illustrious great-grandpa once ran.. sort of, long distance, long ago.

So, I'm thinking that if this great-grandson Fred Hubbell somehow loses his shirt in Sioux County, which is very likely to happen, at least no one will blame it on his grandpa.