

Sex incidents startling to readers at turn of century

Though sex is a part of life, our forebears with Victorian attitudes preferred not to discuss it, particularly not in public. Newspaper articles about local sexual incidents were especially startling.

Two articles — one before the turn of the century and one just after — are cases in point. Neither had any resolution the reader could deal with in the context of moral principles.

Monroe County readers of Feb. 25, 1896, edition of *The World* were startled to find on the front page an article about an alleged attempted rape near Ellettsville. The case involved a James Massengill and Mattie Martin, age 14.

According to Mattie, she was on her way out into the country on an errand when she was attacked by Massengill. Her screams were heard by a Mr. Figg and his wife, who rescued her, and Massengill



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

ran away.

Mattie's clothes had nearly been torn off. She described the young man to Ellettsville officers, who found tracked Massengill down somewhere out in the county. The newspaper described what happened next. "When arrested it was said that he did not have on the gum boots or the clothes described by Miss Martin, and he was taken to his home and compelled to disrobe and dress in the suit she (Mattie) said was worn by him at the time of the assault."

Massengill was then put in a crowd of about 35 boys and men, and Mattie was asked to look them

over. "Without hesitation she pointed out Massengill, identifying him as the culprit."

The young man was arrested, but it occurred to the officers to take a precaution in regard to his safety. Continued the *World*, "The officers hurried him to the depot and took the afternoon train for this city (Bloomington), and succeeded in safely placing their prisoner behind the bars of the Monroe County jail. The officers stated that he would surely have been lynched if he had been kept at Ellettsville over night..."

The other case had all of the elements of a real scandal, because it was a paternity suit that involved a minister of the gospel. Young Mary McCoy had been elected secretary of the church, and that apparently involved helping the minister, a Rev. Rodgers, with his sermons.

She went to his rooms for sever-

al months during the fall of 1901 — more specifically, during the months of August through January. In the latter month gossip about her being pregnant was circulating in Bloomington. Rev. Rodgers paid a visit to Miss McCoy at her grandfather's house. According to the *Bloomington Courier* of June 14, 1901, Rodgers gave the McCoy's a piece of advice. "He left McCoy's house and told the family to not talk so much until they knew what they wanted to do."

What Miss McCoy wanted to do was accuse Rodgers of being the father of her child. There was a complication. It seems that she had first accused a man by the name of Israel Roberts of being the father.

Meanwhile, Rodgers had his congregation discharge Miss McCoy and her family from church membership, which seems a rather vindictive thing to do. She testified

that Rev. Rodgers had suggested the best thing for her to do was to "have her relieved of the child and further told her that he had done the same thing with a dozen girls."

Rodgers was eloquently defended by the Honorable Ira C. Batman, a very able local attorney. "He said that it was the duty of the state of Indiana to find who is the father of the child, but my client is presumed to be innocent until he has been proven guilty by a preponderance of the evidence."

Prosecution did not happen in either case. There is no record of Massengill being tried for rape or attempted rape in Monroe County. Rodgers was not found guilty of fathering Miss McCoy's baby.

The *Courier* quoted Batman as having said in the courtroom, "The poor girl does not know who the father of her child is — she made her own bed and she must lie in it."

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