

'Divorce Day' attracted full house in court in 1897

"'Divorce Day' in the circuit court Saturday attracted a full house, a prurient curiosity-seeking prompting the attendance. At times some of the incidents and testimony were laughable, but there was more of pathos than fun characterizing the proceedings."

Bloomington Telephone, Jan. 12, 1897.

Most of the time divorce is serious business, but it is easy enough to tell from his article that part of the time, at least, the *Telephone* reporter was having a hard time keeping a straight face in the courtroom. The first case — Sarah Ray vs. William Ray — had its serious moments.

There was not question about which of the participants had the reporter's sympathy. He began, "Mrs. Ray is evidently a plain, earnest, honest woman, with a strong love for her five children. At one time her love was also strong for her husband."



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Their farm was in the north part of Monroe County, and they had been married for some 20 years. Life had been relatively good to them, as will be seen later in the testimony.

Enter "the other woman." Continued the newspaperman, "By and by the husband was lured by the blandishments of an evil-disposed siren, to whose allurements he yielded, and to whose captivating songs he listened." (Obviously, the reporter had studied his Greek mythology.)

Anyway, Ray became so enamored of the woman, whose name was Nettie Chrisman, that he moved her from Bloomington and

installed her in a house on one of his farms. They were not as discreet as they might have been. Ray spent most of his time at that particular farm.

Apparently, Mrs. Ray discovered Chrisman's existence because of a letter written to Mr. Ray. The reading of it in court must have been embarrassing for everyone. As the reporter put it, "One of her letters to Ray created a general amusement on account of the ardent terms of endearment used for the beguiled and recreant husband."

Mrs. Ray's attorneys must have been delighted with the young Miss Ray. She had thoughtfully copied the letter, preserving it for their day in court.

News of Ray's affair leaked out to persons who made it their business to keep the rest of the world on the "straight and narrow." Ray and Chrisman were visited by White Cappers, who whipped them

"soundly" and burned the house down.

Mrs. Ray informed the court that her husband had mistreated her, and that she had lost all of the love she had once had for him. The *Telephone* elaborated at this point. "The woman's face was pale as she went on with the mournful recital, and at times there were tears under her voice, but her feelings were too strong and overpowering to find a vent in that way."

Mr. Ray countered that he had pleaded with his wife to take him back and hinted that he would commit suicide. Some time during the trial it was noticed that he had a revolver "bulging out under his coat from a hip pocket."

The judge was not at all pleased. Explained the newspaper, "After the noon adjournment, Judge Martin directed the sheriff to file an affidavit at once against him for carrying concealed weapons, which was done, and the court

stopped proceedings long enough to try and fine him on that charge."

The little drama was not over. Ray's attorney could have received the Academy Award for emotion, if the awards had been given at that time. "And then another pathetic scene was witnessed, for by this time Mr. Batman, the attorney for Ray, became worked up and made an appeal to the court for mercy, and in giving the details why leniency should be shown him, affected himself and Ray to tears, and the faces of many auditors showed that they, too, were strongly moved in their sympathies by the thrilling appeal for the sinning, though deeply penitent and sorrowing man at the bar."

Batman may have earned his fee, but the judge ruled in favor of Mrs. Ray.

Next week: Other cases.

H-T 10/10/94