

# 1896 city council got steamed over street roller issue

*"It would have repaid the most distinguished taxpayer in the city of Bloomington tenfold if he would have attended the council meeting Tuesday night. Those that came were well satisfied with their visit to the council chamber in the city hall."*  
*Bloomington World, June 4, 1896.*

Initially, readers of the *World* may have thought the newspaper was about to hand the Bloomington City Council a compliment for its efficiency and thoroughness. Not so. The meeting had proved to be a knock-down, drag-out fight among some prominent citizens.

The *World* described the disagreement in rather polite terms: "For the first time within the history of the present council, the even tenor of their session on this occasion was sadly interrupted."

Apparently the controversy began some two weeks before the meeting. Salesmen for several companies that manufactured steam



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

rollers had come to town and begun to tout their respective products, promising that the machines were the answer to all of Bloomington's rough street problems.

It should be noted that only some streets were paved with brick, the others covered with macadam or small pieces of gravel. The idea of using a roller to give the gravel a more even surface was a relatively new one.

With a certain amount of caution during the meeting, Councilman R.C. Foster moved that the question of buying a steam roller be tabled

until city officials had had the opportunity to check the budget to see if there was any money available for such a purchase. The motion was still pending when ex-councilman Fred Fess (for whose family the street was named) told the council he had made a fact-finding trip to New Albany where a steam roller had been in use on the streets.

Related the *World*, "He said they were in excellent condition and that the city (New Albany) had some of the best streets in the state made by a steam roller." Fess added that the city's engineer was also very happy with the results of their purchase.

The ex-councilman was so enthusiastic that he further stated he was "in favor of the city council purchasing one and as a taxpayer he would be willing to pay an extra tax, that one might bought." He apparently hadn't reckoned on any real opposition.

Enter H.C. Duncan, a Bloomington attorney, who also held the title of senator. Although he was a little late in arriving at the so-far peaceful deliberation, he managed to stir up enough controversy for a dozen meetings.

Duncan was not above displaying his dramatic ability in the courtroom, and the council meeting was no exception. Said the *World*, "Addressing the mayor, he (Duncan) asked if the consideration of purchasing a steam roller was before the council and being informed that was the case, he tossed his straw hat upon the floor and said, 'Your honor and gentlemen of the council, I am here as a taxpayer and representative of several taxpayers not in the capacity of an attorney, but as an individual who protests against the purchase of this machine.'"

Underscoring his point, he contin-

ued, "Every man on this council in this city room knows the city of Bloomington is hopelessly in debt beyond the constitutional limit. Yet men come here and tell you that we need this machine, that it is the thing to place our streets in repair, and nothing else but this machine will do it. I tell you when Mr. Fess or any other man tells you such a story it is nothing but hogwash." Duncan went on to point out that "The citizens of Bloomington are burdened enough with taxes that are already too high."

If the local steam roller supporters in the room thought that was all Duncan had to say, they were mistaken. The senator had had his ear to the ground regarding the salesmen's pitches and was only getting warmed up for the debate in council.

*Next week: The continued debate and resolution.*