

Mercy called for during accounts of official's death

David W. Browning went out the back door of his home in Bloomington after breakfast on Nov. 19, 1886, and shot himself. When his wife heard a gun shot, she rushed outside to find her husband staggering from the outhouse and dripping blood in the grass.

Browning had been suffering from depression for several months, and that had worried his family. They didn't realize he was contemplating suicide.

Two local newspapers suggested the reason for Browning's depression. He had just turned over the office of clerk of the circuit court, and there were rumors of discrepancies in the office's books. In its first article about Browning's attempted suicide, the *Telephone* (Nov. 19) explained that "He has been up town but little since that time. No cause can be given for the deed of this morning."

The next day the *Saturday Courier* was also somewhat mystified. "Since turning over the Clerk's office to Mr. Fuller last Monday, Wall (Browning) had been complaining of ill-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

ness and remained at home nearly all the time ... The cause for this rash act (the attempt at suicide) is not now known. He may have been mentally affected by some trouble, but usually he was a man of cheerful disposition."

It was on Nov. 27 that the *Courier* came up with a possible reason for Browning's distress. "As soon as the shooting was announced, it was generally surmised that all was not right with the affairs of the Clerk's office. Such proved to be the case. The books show that \$2,100 was turned over to his successor, but there is still a much larger amount due. This amount has been placed by rumor at all the way from \$2,000 to \$8,000, but the true amount is not yet known, or, at least, has not been made public."

Meanwhile, Browning was in a very serious condition, and was under the treatment of Drs. Maxwell, Harris and McPheeters. The bullet, which entered his chest, missed the heart, but nipped off part of a lung and exited beside his spine. (The bullet was found on the floor of the outhouse.) Browning had used a gun described as a "British Bulldog of the old pattern."

The physicians prescribed no visitation, except very limited visits by family members. The doctors' real concern was whether an infection would develop in the wound. According to the *Telephone* of Nov. 23, infection did set in on the third day. Readers of the newspaper were treated to day-by-day reports of Browning's pulse rate — as high as 160 and as low as 82.

It was Dr. Maxwell who reported to the *Telephone* that there was hope for Browning — that if his condition held out as good for the next thirty-six hours, as it had in the twenty-four that had passed, there would be substantial hopes for recovery "... He took nour-

ishment regularly and had a disposition to talk, though this was not allowed."

Both newspapers tended to excuse Browning, an indication that he was well liked in the community. The *Telephone* declared, "What is written above is not for those who exult over the misfortunes of others, but to that brotherhood and sisterhood who, while it would be just to all 'with a soft heart remembers mercy, too'" The *Courier* chose to make light of the loss of money (if any). "The loss will not fall on the county, as it is made up in fees, fines and money belonging to estates. We can hear of no large loss that will fall upon any one person."

Browning did recover from his wound, at least physically. Suspicion about a discrepancy of funds in the clerk's office must have preyed on his mind. According to the *Courier* of Jan. 9, 1900, Browning shot himself to death in an Indianapolis hotel on Illinois Street. His wife and daughters had been living with relatives in Bloomington.

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