

Early 'labor dispute' settled with silver and gold

For the people of the Stanford area of the county it was a near thing. But for the calm determination of Monroe County Sheriff Pete Thrasher, the disagreement at the railroad work camp could have turned into a bloody confrontation.

In February of 1904, a crew of Greek workmen had a grievance. They felt they had been shortchanged on their pay by the foreman at the site of the Stanford tunnel. The Greeks had managed to stop everyone else from working, too.

According to the *Bloomington Telephone*, the foreman had demanded that the Greeks be arrested. Sheriff Thrasher thought there must be a better way to resolve the dispute. The threat of violence was so serious that Thrasher had gone to Indianapolis to talk to Gov. Winfield Durbin.

The impasse had been taken seriously on all sides. A representative of the Indianapolis and Southern Railroad had also conferred with the governor and demanded that the already-issued warrants for the arrest of the Greeks be served. He had been accompanied to Indianapolis by Monroe County Prosecutor Robert Miller.



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Explained the *Bloomington Courier*, "It is thought that Sheriff Thrasher will serve the warrants today (Feb. 16). In case they are unserved the Springfield rifles promised him by the State are available. The governor reminded the visitors of this, and the matter will rest with the Monroe County authorities."

When Thrasher went back out to the railroad workers' camp, he insisted upon seeing the Greeks' leader, whose name was Stoin. The man would not come out of a temporary wooden building, and the sheriff went inside, instead. He and his companions were quickly surrounded by some 20 angry Greeks.

Thrasher immediately told the Greeks that he had not come to arrest them. He had come to listen to their grievance. An interpreter was present, and the Greeks said they wanted only what money was coming to

them. When they got it, they would leave the county. And, incidentally, they wouldn't take any checks of "orders," whatever they were. The workers wanted cash.

Thrasher then heard the management point of view. It was spelled out in the Feb. 16 edition of the *Bloomington Telephone*. "The contractor (whose name, appropriately, was Head) stated that the Greeks had been offered their pay yesterday, but absolutely refused to leave the camp, and not only would not work themselves, but prevented others working, and by constant shooting and threats to kill anyone who interfered had terrorized the community."

The Greeks' response was that if they were paid, they would depart. Monroe County Judge James Wilson decided to take them at their word. So Head went to the Citizens' Trust Company of Bloomington and withdrew \$1,100 in silver and gold. He returned to Stanford and disbursed the money.

The *Telephone* indirectly credited Thrasher with not allowing the situation to get out of hand. "The conflict with the Greek workmen at the Stanford tunnel has created much interest, and it is only by carefully managing

the situation that there has not been serious trouble."

The authorities had good reason to take the dispute seriously. On Dec. 8, 1903, the *Courier* had described some trouble at another railroad work camp under the supervision of a man by the name of Spiegel. The camp was in Owen County.

Two young men arrived on Sunday and asked for work. Spiegel hired them, and they ate three meals — lunch and dinner on Sunday and breakfast on Monday morning. Shortly after that they left the camp.

The *Courier* described what happened next. "...Mr. Spiegel mounted a horse, starting down the road to look for them. He found the young fellows and demanded 75c for their Sunday meals. After some talk they paid, and Mr. Spiegel started back to his camp.

"When he was about 50 yards from the men, he states they began to shoot at him. He turned on them and also opened fire. One of the bullets from Spiegel's revolver took effect in the neck of one of the men and killed him instantly."

It was a high price to pay for a couple of meals.

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