Church, state at odds in county over alcohol

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Seldom in the history of Monroe County have there been occasions when church and state were at odds with each other. The spring of 1909 was one exception.

It began when the Rev. Thomas A. White, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, spoke at a mass meeting and accused Bloomington Mayor Claude Malott of not doing enough to stamp out the sale of alcoholic beverages in the city. Stung by the minister's criticism, the mayor took his anger to the next city council meeting.

Reported the Bloomington *Telephone* on April 9, 1909, "Branding the statements of Rev. Thomas A. White, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, as utterly false in regard to alleged laxity of city officials in enforcing the law against blind tigers and other liquors violations, Mayor Malott created a sensation in city council meeting last night."

Declared the mayor, the administration had been victims of "a crowd of agitators and one or two men who have apparently not known what they were talking about." Apparently, the Malott had challenged the Presbyterian minister to come up with proof of his accusations that city police were "inefficient."

According to the Rev. White, he had gone to the mayor with evidence that Chief Ed Johns was inefficient and lax in his duty, but the mayor had refused to fire Johns. Continued the *Telephone,* the Mayor had refused to keep his word by having Johns discharged."

Malott retaliated by declaring that the minister had failed to prove anything and "must have known he was making a false statement when he uttered that statement at the mass meeting." Those were harsh words for a mayor who temporarily forgot that politicians are supposed to be the masters of tact.

At the council meeting, Malott found it expedient to shift the blame for the fracas. "The present city administration has paid off $25,000 indebtedness for Bloomington, but the critics seem to forget that, and say they desire all energies exerted in running down liquor law violations."

The mayor could have pointed to the police's efforts in raiding the Wertz blind tiger for the second time on April 5. The raid netted 48 pints of whiskey. Or Malott could have mentioned the cases of men by the name of Meadows and Spencer who also dealt in illegal liquor sales. Still a third case pending in the local court involved charges against Frank Strain of Harrodsburg, a druggist who sold more liquor for "medicinal purposes" than he should have.

Malott told the council, "If that (more rigorous enforcement of the law regarding liquor) is what is wanted, we can only give it efficiently by a special appropriation, and I hereby ask the council for $50 to use as a starter."

Lest anyone think that Malott was trying to be sarcastic in asking for so little, the *Telephone* article went on to explain that the money would be used to pay an undercover person. As the mayor put it, "It is the 'secret police' system — men in private clothes as amateur detectives, who, however, must be paid money for their services in running down tigers."

As if Malott hadn't made his point, he went on to say that the Bloomington Police had never received any credit for their work, and that city officials had closed drinking clubs, stopped the practice of illegal prescriptions in liquor traffic and were instrumental in getting indictments against wholesalers.

He complained, "The Democratic daily paper of the city persistently refrains from printing the work of the police, and persists in putting out garbled accounts of the doings it does record. For their work the city officers receive nothing but condemnation from such a man as Rev. White, who has been in the city but six months, and apparently knows nothing of what has transpired within the last five years."

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