

Gambling, 'girlie' show at county fair caused a stir

"Midway' in all its glory held forth in the Ross block, Saturday night in fifteen minute shows."

—Bloomington World, Sept. 23, 1895.

The events at the Big Bloomington Fair Association did not go unnoticed by the more staid members of the community. Prior to the following Sunday the Rev. S.R. Lyons of the United Presbyterian Church had announced the topic of his sermon.

It was plain-spoken — "The Gambling and Immorality of the County Fair." Needless to say, the topic drew a larger crowd than usual in the church pews.

Lyons led off with a couple of passages from Nehemiah and then proceeded to rip into the directors of the Bloomington Fair Association. The newspaper described the minister's moral dilemma.

"He began his sermon by stating that no one regretted more than he did that circumstances were such that it was necessary to speak on this subject. In doing so, he must refer to men who were his personal friends, and yet he felt that the public good demanded



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

that a full and fair statement be made about all persons and circumstances."

According to the Rev. Lyons, the gambling brought by the professional itinerant fair people was illegal in the State of Indiana. Furthermore, said the minister, the fair board knew about the law when they signed a contract with the carnival.

"This (the gambling) they have done in defiance of the law of the state of Indiana, in utter disregard of public morality, and in continuous violation of their own word of honor to the people of this city and county, and this they do for a money consideration."

The reverend quoted from annual fair catalog which said in plain English, "no gambling or betting would be permitted." Apparently

there was some "pool selling," and Lyons had something to say about that. "Do not be deceived by the talk that pool selling is not gambling. It is simply ordinary gambling reduced to a science."

The crisis did have its champions. Lyons mentioned in his sermon that fair director W.W. Wicks had taken a stand. Continued the *World*, "He stated that W.W. Wicks was one of the men who was opposed to the gambling and immoral shows, and that he (Wicks) was instrumental in causing some of the most objectionable features to be removed from the ground."

Another champion of the "right thing to do" was Nat U. Hill. Lyons said that the man "by use of emphatic English" caused a man who was selling liquor to leave the fairgrounds.

Lyons told his congregation that he had left town for a few days and returned to learn some distressing information. "Dr. Lyons said that he had left the city in the early part of the week, and that on his return Thursday afternoon one of his friends called at his home,

and told him of the condition as it existed at the Fair grounds."

The Rev. Lyons couldn't bring himself to describe the "girlie" shows included with the carnival. That would have been too much for the delicate sensibilities of the females in the congregation. He noted that "there were immoral shows of unspeakable character — affairs that no man would dare describe to his children. ..."

The *World* had some qualms, as well, if their description of the sideshows was any indication. Here are a couple of excerpts. "High kicking was indulged in quite frequently that caused howls of satisfaction to come from sweltering crowds of 'men only' who had to stand during the entire show, as there were no seats. The muscle dancer was there in all her glory..."

Lyons accused the fair committee of "treason," since he believed that they were deliberately flouting the law. It is likely that the fair for 1896 had been considerably cleaned up.

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