

Sleeping sickness strikes in Bloomington in 1921

"William Willian, 46, living at 1223 W. Seventh St., succumbed at 11:45 last night after a grim three weeks struggle with the malady of sleeping sickness."

— *Bloomington Evening World*, Jan. 29, 1921.

For the past two years, according to William Willian's doctor, the man had not been well for a couple of years. Dr. J.E. Moser told the *Evening World* that he had been treating Willian for neuritis and mastoid infection.

The ailments had certainly curtailed his work. The newspaper reported that Willian was head hooker at the Consolidated Stone Company.

According to Moser, the man's body was "full of infection." That made him very vulnerable to the viral infection known as menin-

gitis. Explained the *Evening World*, "He first



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

complained of lightning-like pains in his arms, shoulders and neck, which increased in severity. The patient then became drowsy, and it was only with difficulty that he could be aroused to take nourishment."

There is no question but what Dr. Moser was alarmed about Willian's condition. The forms of viral brain inflammation also include rabies and polio.

The newspaper informed its readers that Willian was in a stupor most of the time until he died. He did wake up occasionally to take some nourishment.

For a time there was some hope that he

would recover. The *Evening World* article reflected that optimism. "It was thought he was somewhat better yesterday morning, but late in the afternoon he seemed to suffer a relapse, and death came quickly."

Willian was not the only case of encephalitis Dr. Moser was treating. The newspaper article contained the information about the other patient. "Dr. Moser has another case of the same disease. This patient is Carl Jobstvogt of this city, who has been asleep for the past 21 days, arousing only at intervals to take food. However, this patient seems better today, recognizing members of the family and asking for a cigar."

Jobstvogt's apparent recovery prompted Dr. Moser to tell the newspaper reporter that "about one out of every seven who contract the disease dies, and that it is not considered contagious."

The *Evening World* suggested that Willian

had carved out his own niche in Bloomington history. He became "the first victim of sleeping sickness in this community."

The man was survived by his widow and five children, one only 10 months old. The children were Mrs. Henry Prince of Bloomington, Harry, Raymond, Arnett and Clyde. Clyde was in the Marine Corps stationed at Quantico, Va. His commanding officer gave compassionate leave for the funeral.

The newspaper noted that the service was held in the Modern Funeral Home, and the Rev. Joseph Campbell conducted it. Pallbearers were chosen from the Woodmen of the World lodge to which Willian belonged.

Willian must have had a first wife, Josephine, who died in 1918. He is buried beside her in Rose Hill Cemetery. Mary (1849-1918) and Walter Willian (1850-1916), also buried there, are probably his parents.

H-T 1/15/96