

Theft that raised a stink brings year in state prison

Of all of the trials in the Monroe Circuit Court before the turn of the century, there was one that had a distinctive air about it. A report of the proceedings was front-page news on Dec. 20, 1895.

To set the scene, Judge Robert W. Miers was on the bench. A native of Decatur County, he had succumbed to the attractions of Bloomington and remained here after receiving two degrees, in 1870 and 1871. He served in a variety of positions, from prosecuting attorney to a U.S. congressman.

But on the day of the rather unusual trial, it was Miers who was sitting in judgment upon those who



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

were unlucky enough to be accused of something unlawful. Grant Wantland was such a person.

He was described by the Bloomington *Courier* as a young farmer living south of the city. The charge was larceny.

Explained the newspaper, "He was accused of stealing two skunk

hides and also one mink hide from the barn of Thomas King who resides on the Blakely farm near Clear Creek."

It would be interesting to know what the going rate was for hides in those days. King said they were worth \$6.

Presumably the defendant had opted for a "jury of his peers." The *Courier* reported that the trial had begun in the morning.

Physical evidence is usually crucial to the prosecutor's case, and the Wantland case was no exception. What better evidence than the hides themselves.

The newspaper did not list the names of the jurors, but their day in court certainly gave them something to talk about later. According to the *Courier*, "Those same 12 men sat in the jury box later in the day with handkerchiefs to their noses as the skunk hides were being examined for identification."

It should be noted that Wantland was not without champions during his day in court. No less than Col. John R. East, who may have felt that his march with William Tecumseh Sherman to the sea during the Civil War brought a lot less discomfort than the smell of a skunk hide in a closed room, and Richard

A. Fulk, who had a law degree from Indiana University.

A man by the name of Edmondson represented the state in the case against Wantland. It was he who brought the hides to court. The *Courier* did not explain how or where they were found.

Nevertheless, their presence had a distinctive effect on the occupants of the room. Noted the newspaper, "A good deal of mirth was mixed with the prevailing scent throughout the trial."

The jury retired to a skunk-free room at 3 p.m. to decide about

see Looking back, page C2