

# Sideshow accident upstaged circus in July, 1917

The children of Monroe County must have been excited when the John Robinson circus came to town in July of 1917. The *Bloomington Daily Telephone* of July 25 described the entertainment.

There were to be shows at 2 and 8 p.m. that day, and earlybirds could go to Seventh and Morton streets to watch the circus animals unloaded from the train.

It was a sideshow that captured the headlines the next day. The headline said, "Dr. T.J. Slinkard, 'High Pitch' Doctor on John Robinson Show, Killed in Spankers Branch."

Before the 8 p.m. show, Slinkard was driving in the vicinity of South Lincoln Street. As he backed the Ford he was driving, the gear stuck, and the car careened backwards, striking a footbridge and turning turtle in two feet of water.

Slinkard's passenger, a "24-hour man with the circus," escaped relatively unscathed. Not so the "doc."

The *Telephone* told its readers: "It was at first thought — when Slinkard was released from under the machine, that he had been



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

drowned, so a hasty run was made with the pulmotor and Drs. C.E. Harris, Rodney Smith and Fred Batman used it. But 'Doc' Slinkard was dead with his neck broken and a half a dozen ribs crushed in on his heart."

Slinkard's work on the circus trail was pitching and selling a patent medicine. As the *Telephone* put it, "Doc's days of selling medicines concocted of 'roots, herbs, barks and berries' to circus crowds were over."

There was an additional description of the deceased. "Doc Slinkard in the slang of the sawdust ring, is what is known as a 'high pitch' doctor — that is, he traveled with a circus and sold various patent medicines on the downtown streets on circus day."

Slinkard was about 50 years old and traveled from town to town in his Ford accompa-

nied by a woman believed to be his wife. She had been in a local hotel at the time of the accident.

So far the story was not all that unusual, although the accident was tragic enough. But on July 30 the story took a radically different turn. Slinkard's son arrived in Bloomington to take care of some urgent legal work. He filed affidavits against the woman who was with his father.

The *Telephone* explained, "Edward Slinkard says that the woman was not his father's wife, that she obtained money by forgery and under false pretenses and that the real wife is living at Nashville, Tenn."

Immediately after Slinkard's death the whole thing looked usual enough. His body had been taken to the Allen Funeral Home and was prepared for shipment to Nashville. The supposed Mrs. Slinkard accompanied the body on the train.

Doc Slinkard's son-in-law met the train in Nashville, but the woman was nowhere to be found. What came to light was that she had been following Slinkard around from circus to

circus for about 20 years. In the winters she lived in Nashville and was unknown to Slinkard's family.

After the accident, the woman was tidy, if not honest. The *Telephone* revealed to its readers, "When the Doctor was killed he had \$199 in his pockets, and the Ford car which he had was sold to the Graham agency for \$150. She took the money, paid all the funeral expenses, which left her something like \$150."

Slinkard's son, at least, knew about the other woman. He told the *Telephone* he had been tempted to follow the circus and shoot both of them. By Aug. 1 the *Telephone* had learned the woman's name: Bessie Plotts. The son pressed charges against her.

The police were skeptical. Explained the *Telephone*, "He says he will return here and press the case, but the local officers rather believe the case has blown up and that young Slinkard will not come up. While here he entertained the police headquarters by hair-raising stories of his doings down in Tennessee and among other things told how he had sold liquor illegally."

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