

Rotarians shed their 'dignified' images for burlesque

"It does the heart of the old town good to see dignified business men occasionally 'come down off their perch' and indulge once more in the frolic of youth," *Bloomington Weekly Star*, Dec. 20, 1919.

The *Star* called it a "private theatrical performance," but the newspaper was certainly intrigued by the cast of characters. They were a dozen well-known Bloomington men from the business sector, who cavorted for their fellow Rotary Club members.

Their "production" was a burlesque on the story of Romeo and Juliet. All of the parts were taken by the male club members.

Rhetorically speaking, the *Star* asked its readers, "Who can imagine the dignified form of Postmaster Oscar Cravens draped in the flow-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

ing robes of a coy Juliet, with head adorned by a blonde wig and tiara of silver? Or who can imagine pompous Alex Hirsch wearing long red curls, a straw sailor and the green middy-blouse of a coed? And what could be more unbelievable than unassuming Lewis Hughes, lumber magnate and church pillar, dressed in a ballet skirt of chiffon with a low-necked bodice that might be the envy of a Ziegfeld chorus?"

It was obviously not the usual Rotary Club fare as far as meetings go. Explained the *Star*, "The perfor-

mance followed a holiday dinner given by the Rotarians and their wives at the Eighth Street Methodist Church." What the entertainment had to do with Christmas is a little difficult to imagine.

The *Star's* front-page article was not exactly a review, in the entertainment page sense, but it came close to downright enthusiastic praise. "While Postmaster Cravens murmured the words of Juliet, with Arthur Berndt, Robert Hamilton and Fred Seward in the supporting case, Alex Hirsch, Wood Wiles, Dick Barrett, Logan Coombs, Lewis Hughes, Jim Blair, Dr. Homer Woolery and J.W. Raub tripped about the stage in the roles of chorus girls."

Apparently each member of the cast had some feminine coaching in regard to his costume. Wiles had on

a lavender dress, while Coombs wore the red dress of a modern "vamp." Barrett had golden curls, and Blair appeared in the burlesque as a brunette.

Not every Rotarian was entirely suitable for a part in that particular performance. Their physical appearances did present problems for some of them.

The *Star* described a couple of problems that no makeup artist could overcome — "... J.W. Raub a 'heavyweight beauty,' and Dr. Woolery in a silk 'Billy Burke' and night cap made a cunning damsel (except for the mustache)."

Unfortunately, the newspaper did not disclose whose idea the whole thing was. Though vice presidents are usually responsible for coming up with programs, it is unlikely

that he put this particular program on the year's schedule.

Maybe the Bloomington businessmen needed a diversion that year. The *Star* reported that there had been a proliferation of shoplifting. The newspaper, incidentally, differentiated between professional thieves and those persons who were afflicted with kleptomania.

Whatever the motives for the Rotarians shedding their professional dignity to cavort across the stage in the Showers Auditorium, it seemed to have potential for some future good works in the community. Suggested the *Star*: "Such a performance at a local theater would undoubtedly draw several thousand dollars for any benefit, and the shame of it is that all Bloomington could not have seen this democratic frolic of local businessmen."