

1850: Murder strikes Greene County

The Greene County Courthouse was probably abuzz with more than its usual collection of chronic loiterers on Sept. 23, 1850. The curious had come to see justice done in the case of the State of Indiana vs. Hiram Bland.

As the accused's neighbors would have said, "Hiram was in a whole parcel of trouble." He was reputed to have killed William Walker in broad daylight before witnesses.

No doubt the curious bystanders were eager to hear all of the gory details of the crime, since the murder weapon was a knife. The court records indicate they got their money's worth as the witnesses began to relate their recollections of what happened.

The indictment itself is a little slice of the 19th century way of looking at things. It read: "The Grand Jurors, for the State of Indiana, upon their oath, present that Hiram Bland, not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the Devil, on the nineteenth day of September, in the year of our Lord, on thousand eight hundred and fifty, in the County of Green, aforesaid, with



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force and arms in and upon one William Walker, in the peace of the said State ... feloniously, willfully ... and (with) premediated malice, did make an assault and that the said Hiram Bland with a certain knife of the value of fifty cents, which the said Hiram Bland, in his right hand then and there held and hurt the said William Walker in and upon the right side. . . ."

The prosecution was in the hands of A.L. Rhodes, who probably didn't lose much sleep over his preparation of the case for the state. On the other hand, Bland's attorneys, George G. Dunn and H.L. Livingston, had an entirely different task. The availability of actual witnesses more or less ruled out a case of mistaken identity. The two lawyers concentrated their efforts on saving Bland from the death penalty.

It should be noted that Bland had been smart enough to get himself quality legal assistance. The late James A. Woodburn, an Indiana University professor who wrote a history of IU, commented that Dunn was one of the "ablest lawyers" of his time.

In an account of the case in the Greene County history, there is perhaps a hint that the defendant had a problem with making rational decisions. Against his attorneys' advice, instead of giving them time to prepare his case for a later term of court, Bland insisted on being tried immediately.

On the witness stand Walker's widow related that she was sitting in the doorway of their farmhouse while her husband and children were working in a tobacco patch about 50 yards away. She said that she had heard the defendant and her husband "hallowing" back and forth to each other. "She did not remember what was said; that she saw Hiram Bland coming toward her husband; that the defendant called out, 'Your life is mine.'"

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