

Peace on earth? Not outside that prayer service

Folks in Brown County probably said the Wednesday night prayer service at the Axom Branch Church was never the same after that night in December of 1909 when the Rev. Joseph Skinner's sermon was rudely interrupted.

Since the Christmas season was coming soon, the congregation may have been pondering the ideal of "peace on Earth." Not so some of the loiterers in the churchyard during the service.

The headline of a story datelined Dec. 2, which appeared in the *Bloomington Weekly Courier* of Dec. 3, was enough to catch the attention of even the most casual scanner of



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

the newspaper. It said, "Monroe and Brown Counties Mix in Fight."

That headline was perhaps deliberately misleading, since it reflected a healthy rivalry going on between the two counties. A closer look reveals that only two persons were involved in the fight.

The article said they were

Emmett Helensburg of Polk Township, Monroe County, and Sampson Axom of then Johnson Township, Brown County. According to the *Weekly Courier*, several men habitually loitered in the churchyard during the service, and "The men were engaged in jumping when Helensburg and Axom got into a dispute over the distance one of them had leaped."

Unfortunately, the argument escalated to the point of no return, and, "After exchanging a few words, each drew his revolver from his pocket and began firing."

Apparently, there was no question about who got off the first shot.

Helensburg fired five more bullets. Axom, on the other hand, got only one shot. As the newspaper explained it, "After Axom fired one shot the cylinder of his revolver refused to work. He tried so hard to discharge the weapon that the trigger broke."

Meanwhile, the churchgoers were acutely aware of the fracas outside. Continued the *Weekly Courier*, "While the shooting was going on the members of the Rev. Skinner's congregation climbed over seats in the church to get to places of safety."

There is a possibility that the minister had put up with such

interruptions before. In the dispatch from Nashville, he is quoted as having told the congregation to keep their seats, and that, "the affair would not interfere with the services in the least and that if a dozen men were killed on the outside he would not stop the services."

One of Helensburg's bullets had felled Axom. As he was being carried to a nearby farmhouse, he was heard to say, "If my revolver had played fair it would have been the other man you are carrying, not I."

According to the newspaper, a

see Looking Back, page C2