

Down on the levee

"Levee: an embankment for preventing flooding; a river landing place; a reception held by a person of distinction on rising from bed." Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.

"Levee" came to have another meaning, possibly related to the dives and haunts usually found near river docks in cities with docks. Bloomington's levee was along Morton Street, and most old-timers use the term in a derogatory way.

If the levee could talk it would certainly give up some interesting stories — some historically significant. It was near the Morton Street station of the Monon Railroad that platforms were set up for the convenience of several presidential candidates as they made their whistle stop campaigns across the Midwest. But the levee was also the scene of tragedy when transients fell beneath the wheels of the Monon or when arguments erupted in the drinking places.

A case in point was a newsworthy event in late November 1914. Curiously the fight began over a dog. A man by the name of John Stewart, age 25, entered the tiny James Campbell restaurant on North Morton Street with the Newfoundland dog belonging to Robert H. Harris, owner of the Harris Grand Theater. A resident of South Madison Street, Stewart had been in considerable trouble with the law in his young life. The Bloomington *Telephone* of Nov. 25 noted that he had been a suspect in the blowing of the safe at the Karzell Mill had served 322 days in jail on a "paternity suit filed against him." Furthermore, only a day before his argument with John Ridley at the Campbell



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

1-3-1987

restaurant, Stewart had been engaged in three separate fights in the area: while parading a billiard cue he had taken from Sam Briscoe, he (Stewart) allegedly knocked down a Monon Railroad man from Stinesville, chased a second man from the levee around the Tapp & Bridwell Mill and then knocked down a black man.

Stewart and Ridley had both been drinking, but it was later determined that neither was really drunk. Ridley tried to tell the other that the restaurant was too small to accommodate the dog, and Stewart took offense. During the ensuing shouting match, both men threatened each other. Ridley was heard to boast that Stewart could not bluff him. Furthermore, said Ridley, Stewart was running the risk of "being shot to ribbons or being cut in two."

It is likely that most of the witness to the argument thought it was just a lot of hot air, but Stewart went looking for a gun. During the next 10 minutes he went scurrying up and down the levee trying to borrow a gun. (The *Telephone* implied that there were many customers in various establishments carrying guns during their night on the town.)

The fight moved to Shaw's Billiard Parlor, where Ridley saw Levee, Back page