

Escaping convicts take wrong turn in 1894

The carefully-planned jailbreak might have succeeded if the sheriff hadn't been tipped off by a letter. The 1894 version of Monroe County sheriff was a man by the name of Adams, and he told a Bloomington *Evening World* reporter on Dec. 11 that something in the letter made his suspicious.

Apparently the prisoners got a turn-of-the-century style "shake-down." The newspaper explained, "He (the sheriff) accordingly marched the prisoners upstairs and gave the men's department a thorough inspection."

All was not as it should have been. To begin with, Adams found "two iron bars, an inch and a quarter thick, sawed through, giving plenty of room for a prisoner to escape."

Since climbing through the bars would have been only the first stage of an escape plan, the sheriff took a closer look at the men's department. The *World* made it clear that Adams was on the right track. "On the



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

outside of the cage he found a pile of ashes that had been taken from the stove. A closer examination revealed the fact that a hole had been cut almost through the 10-inch stone floor, and to avoid suspicion, the guilty parties had filled it with innocent-looking ashes."

The plan included dropping through the opening in the floor to the basement. Added the newspaper, it would have been easy to escape from that area of the jail.

Obviously, the prisoners had not cut through the cell bars and the floor with their bare hands. The sheriff's "shake-down" turned up a mallet and a short drill. Continued the *World*, "The mallet was cov-

ered with a cloth to deaden the sound, and while other prisoners would make a loud noise, one would use the mallet and drill to make the opening in the floor."

There was a serious miscalculation in their plan. As the newspapers related, "The parties made the hole at the wrong place, however, as they made it where stones joined and immediately beneath was a stone wall."

Adams must have considered himself very lucky, indeed, because of the miscalculation. If the prisoners had made the hole 2 feet away in either direction, the hole would have led to their objective, the next floor down. Even worse, there was a strong possibility that they might have gotten away without being noticed at all.

At that point the sheriff probably needed time to reflect not only upon the near success of the prisoners, but also about how the tools were smuggled into the jail. He did a little thinking aloud with the reporter present.

Related the *World*, "Sheriff Adams is of the opinion that the instrument used in sawing the bars was handed to one of the prisoners in some clothes that were sent to the jail a few days ago."

Having made an educated guess about the escape equipment, Adams turned his attention to the prisoners themselves. It is likely that he knew if he interviewed each prisoner separately their code of silence would keep them from "squealing."

But Adams' logic was headed in another direction altogether. The *World* informed its readers, "There are six prisoners, and the sheriff thinks that the fact that he had not been informed of the attempted escape by either one of them is proof that nearly all were connected with the scheme."

Adams might have set up a new rule regarding a careful examination of any visitor or anything brought in from the outside to the prisoners. Instead, he said that no one would be admitted unless he or she had urgent business "and can show the proper credentials."

H-T 2/1/93