

Water supply once critical

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In Bloomington's growing years few issues have moved residents to enthusiasm or hostility more than our water supply.

PIONEERS WHO POURED into newly created Monroe County didn't regard it as a problem, because they merely felled trees and built their cabins along such creeks as Bean Blossom, Indian, Kerr, Clear, and that one with the outrageous name — Jack's Defeat.

It was not until the county seat town of Bloomington became pretty well populated that water became a popular topic of conversation. In those days local residents got by with wells and cisterns. Many a substantial home had as a standard fixture the back-yard pump with its pail and dipper.

The Courthouse square had a town pump located at the northwest corner. Generously shaded by stately trees, it was only a stone's throw from the hitch rack, where Monroe Countians tied up their buggies or wagons while they shopped or conducted their business in the Court House.

FEW IF ANY BLOOMINGTONIANS regarded the wells as a health hazard, and the cool underground spring water could be mighty satisfying on a hot, muggy July day.

It should also be noted that in its early years Bloomington had no drug stores, and doctors were in short supply. Local residents kept whiskey on hand as a cure-all and also their version of preventative medicine.

Meanwhile it was enterprising Joe Howe and James Small who got the idea that a well and pump near their dry goods and hardware stores would be a drawing card for customers. Initially their "gimmick" did indeed draw crowds on that day in 1870 when they hired "water witch" Andrew Parks to tell them where to dig. Armed with a forked peach tree stick he paced up and down College Avenue until he halted in front of Howe's store. Sure enough, 36 feet below his feet the diggers struck an underground stream with enough cool, clear water to refresh any parched throat.

OTHER MERCHANTS FOLLOWED suit, but when typhoid cases started cropping up State Health Commissioner John M. Hurty suspected the wells. In fact Indiana University botany professor George Pierce had analyzed the water and found a lot of deadly bacteria swimming around in it.

Hurty suspected the downtown wells and said so, but the skeptical merchants and others pooh-poohed his theory. Not to be contradicted, the commissioner strolled over to the Courthouse outhouses on the northwest corner of the lawn and poured some concentrated chemical dye into them. Sure enough hours later the colored water was pumped out of the wells. Hurty had proven his point and put a scare into the city fathers.

BLOOMINGTON'S FIRST water supply evolved in the 1890's. Located 2½ miles west on the Stanford Road it soon became a hot issue. The small lake couldn't take care of Bloomington's growing population for long. Dependent on a gravity flow, the system didn't produce enough pressure for water to find its way into bathtubs and sinks.

The summer of 1899 brought a severe water shortage. Tempers flared on the days when water wasn't available and city officials had to resort to a rationing system. Bloomingtonians also suffered in the summers of 1901, 1908, and 1913, despite additions to the original plant, utilizing several small springs and additional dams.

IN 1903 IU GEOLOGIST E.R. Cummings told a meeting of town and gown concerned citizens that the stone formations west of town were the cause of low pressure. He pointed out that the dam water was pouring through the porous limestone, a geological fact that had escaped the notice of the city fathers.

It was the 1908 water scare that prompted IU to build its own

(Continued on page 2, Col. 7)