

Whiskey gets the blame for 1881 ruckus, accidental shooting

What happened in Bloomington on Nov. 5, 1881, used to be called by the quaint name of "an affray." Some people might have said it was much ado about nothing.

The Bloomington *Saturday Courier* of Nov. 12 took a light approach, using a seven-line headline to attract the attention of its readers: "PISTOL POPS! A SERIOUS SATURDAY NIGHT AFFRAY. BAILEY BORED BY A BULLET. A LIVELY FISTICUFF MATINEE RIGHT UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE UNIVERSITY. A WARNING TO FIFTEEN-CENT WHISKEY DRINKERS! TO BE A CITY, WE MUST DO AS CITIES DO."

According to the newspaper, "The trouble began in John Stockwell's saloon, and the cause was reputed to be 'fifteen-cent whiskey' and whether a customer should



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

have any more of it. The latter chose not to suffer in silence and leave the premises.

Enter the city marshal, who tried to calm the ruckus. Somehow Stockwell got involved on the wrong side of the issue, and, as the *Courier* put it, he "was pushed out of the house and the door closed."

Unused to being thwarted when he was doing his duty, the marshal drew his revolver. When someone grabbed his arm, the gun discharged, and a bullet entered the

groin of an innocent bystander named William Bailey.

Later, staring at the note pad in front of him, the *Courier* reporter expressed his frustration by writing, "The affair was considerably mixed, and it has been a hard matter for us, in the discharge of our duty as a news gatherer, to get the straight of it."

What he put together afterward was that a policeman, George Reeves, tried to restrain the marshal and arrest him, firing two shots in the process. The marshal, who had been relieved of his gun by a friend, started throwing rocks at Reeves. Small wonder that the reporter had a hard time piecing the story together.

Once the dust had settled, the marshal went immediately to see the wounded bystander. The *Cou-*

rier reported that the marshal later "took a buggy ride for some point North."

The reporter could not resist the temptation to moralize about the whole affair. He wrote, "As is usual in such cases, whiskey had a great deal to do with the riot, but who was drunk and who was sober we don't pretend to say, for reports are very conflicting. It is nothing unusual for a number of men to be out Saturday nights enjoying themselves, but this is the worst affair of the kind that has happened in Bloomington for many years.

"It is generally said that poor whiskey is the cause of many rows, but it seems that fifteen-cent whiskey started this one. The whole thing, no doubt, will be sifted by the next grand jury."

The wounded man, Bailey, was

carried to his mother's house, and a doctor called to have a look at him. The first aim was to remove the bullet, but it could not be found. Explained the *Courier*, "It is supposed that it struck the bone and glanced downward. If the bone is not fractured there is no danger, unless from blood poisoning."

The marshal returned to Bloomington on the following Wednesday and went back to duty as a law enforcement officer. Commented the newspaper, "At a meeting of the City Council, Thursday night, nothing was said about the Saturday night affair."

An isolated news bit on the same page added a little postscript. "It is not quite two months to swearing off time (a period of prohibition), and it seems the boys are making the best of the short interval."