

Dispute over funeral expenses tugged at consciences

There was a time in Indiana history when counties assumed the problem of taking care of the homeless by maintaining a county farm. That was a place where the residents received room and board in exchange for such chores as cleaning and working in a vegetable garden.

That particular solution was controversial even then in that it was the responsibility of the county commissioners to periodically inspect the premises to see how things were going. One year the farm came up with a bad report. Some of the residents looked as if they were in pitiful condition, and the man in charge was hauled into court on a charge of neglect of his duties.

Monroe County government had other problems associated with the residents of the county home. In 1913, one of those problems appeared in the *Bloomington Telephone*.

An 80-year-old resident of the county farm, Ben Vandever, had died. According to



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

the newspaper, the problem was simply: Who was to pay for his funeral?

The lead sentence in the Aug. 22, 1913, edition of the *Telephone* was likely to touch the hearts of its readers. "To lie a corpse at an undertaking establishment with his body unclaimed for three days and to thereby raise a legal question as to the disposition of his remains, was the lot of Ben Vandever, who died at the County Farm Friday night and was buried today."

That was a fortunate outcome for the remains, since a far different disposition was an alternative for the county commissioners.

The problem was that none of the authorities could find any relatives for Vandever.

The usual procedure in such cases was spelled out in the newspaper article. "Under the law, unclaimed bodies are to be turned over to the state anatomical board to be sent to a college medical laboratory."

In recent years, explained the *Telephone*, Monroe County commissioners have declined to assume the funeral expenses of persons whose remains were unclaimed. The newspaper put it rather coldly: "They (the county commissioners) feel that the \$25 expense should not be paid by the county so long as there is a state law turning over the remains to the colleges."

There had been a time when the township trustee involved took care of the burial arrangements and turned the bills over to the county. The commissioners usually authorized the payment.

The change of heart on the part of the

commissioners did not begin with Vandever's death.

In his case, a compassionate township trustee, Rolla Walker, offered to take on the responsibility of the expenses. She probably risked at the very least some frowns on the faces of the commissioners.

There may have been some residents in one part of the county who felt some twinges of conscience. The *Telephone* did not print the names of any of Vandever's relatives, but didn't spare their feelings. "...all efforts to find his relatives proved futile. Although he has kin in the neighborhood of Ellettsville, they could not be located, and despite the publicity given to his death, no one claiming relationship has made an appearance."

Concluded the newspaper, "Until Trustee Walker volunteered, it looked as though Vandever, an unfortunate victim of fate during his lifetime, was to be deprived of all honor even in death."

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