

# Fires plague store owner after not guilty verdict

The bankruptcy petition entered by Mrs. Mary Rock in the Federal court, who runs a store at Oolitic and for a time had a store at Sanders south of town, is another chapter in the story of the ill fortunes that have persistently followed the family for many years." *Bloomington Daily Telephone*, Oct. 12, 1911

The story of the Rock family seems to be a question of how much revenge is enough. But the circumstances should speak for themselves.

It began in Oolitic in 1894, when Louis Lotito, a quarryman, entered the Rock's store quite drunk. Philip Rock, the owner, tossed Lotito out with the expectation that the offender would not come back that day, at least.

Explained the *Telephone*, "He (Lotito) returned and was hurling rocks through the windows, when Rock killed him. Rock was tried for murder, but was acquitted."



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

It was not long before Rock's store in Oolitic burned to the ground, and the family barely escaped being burned to death. Rock was undaunted and opened another store and was again "burned out."

Rock decided to remove his family and himself from the Oolitic area. Continued the newspaper, "The Italian merchant then moved Sanders, Monroe County, and again embarked in business. He had hardly started on his business career when a torch was applied and both building and stock were destroyed. He moved back to Oolitic and was again burned out."

The *Telephone* article does not describe

in detail what building material was used for his earlier business places, but, Rock, in his frustration, built a stone fireproof business in the hope of succeeding at last. The newspaper related what happened next. "...he was short from ambush near the Salt Creek bridge."

Were the Rocks victims of revenge? In the eyes of the court, Rock had been found not guilty. It is likely the jury had decided that the shooting was in self-defense.

In any case, nothing had been solved either by the shooting or the string of suspicious fires. There is, by the way, no mention of any insurance involved, and the hope of gaining money by that means is not implied in the article.

It is possible that among the Italian immigrants who had gravitated to this area as limestone quarrying began to increase, that American justice was not so just after all. Two fires might have been coincidence, but

not several.

Part of the reason for the bankruptcy petition is explained in the last paragraph of the article. "The Rocks became involved in a factional fight following the killing of Philip Rock, which involved the filing of charges and counter charges. Much money was spent in these fights in court, and the filing of the petition in bankruptcy is no surprise to the many who have followed the affairs of the Rocks closely."

According to the court records, the legal actions had certainly taken their toll on the family's resources. "Mrs. Rock places her liabilities at \$3,663.22 and her assets at \$600, which she holds exempted under the bankruptcy law."

The *Telephone* writer implied that after the death of her husband, Mary Rock tried to carry on the business. Looking at the story from today's perspective, she would have been safer and better off to have left the area. Perhaps she did.

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