

Gosport man's fondness for cars leads to jail sentence

Claude Virt, who lived at Gosport, liked cars. The trouble was, he liked other people's cars so much that he appropriated them for his own use.

In the winter of 1918-19, when the automobiles of School Superintendent W.H. Jones and D. E. Helfirch, of the city water works suddenly disappeared, both of the men were feeling pretty hostile about their loss. Bloomington police sent postcards with descriptions of the cars and their license plate numbers to surrounding counties.

It was the alert town marshal at Cloverdale who spotted Virt driving Jones' car in that area. He called the Bloomington police station, and officers Hinkle and Peterson were sent to Cloverdale to try to catch Virt. On their arrival there the policemen learned that they had just missed the suspect.

The Bloomington *Evening World* of Jan. 2 described what hap-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

pened next. "They (Hinkle and Peterson) found traces of Virt at several places, but did not come upon him until 7:30 in the evening. They stopped at a little store at Cataract and found Virt had cashed a wooden check for \$5, getting 10 gallons of gasoline and the balance in money."

The chase was on. The trail led through Carp into Putnam County to eight miles southwest of Cloverdale. Virt had a particular reason for hanging around that town. He was trying to sell Jones' car to a man there, and there had been some hard bargaining over the price. According to the *Evening World*, "He (Virt) priced it at \$200

and had been offered \$150." Both sides were thinking about it.

Hinkle and Peterson were driving a rented care, since they had taken the Monon train to Cloverdale. They stopped Virt by pulling up close enough to shine a light on the license plate.

The newspaper reported, "Peterson exclaimed (predictably), 'It's the Jones car, all right.'" AT the confrontation, Virt confessed that it was indeed the Jones car, which he had stolen from the south side of the Bloomington square. While he was at it, he told the officers he had also stolen another car — the one belonging to Helfirch.

If the superintendent had been wondering where his car was, he found out when he read the Jan. 2 *Evening World*. "I got the Helfirch car and sold it to a saloonkeeper at Seigle, Ill., near Effingham, for \$200," confessed Virt.

According to the man, his logic in stealing cars and passing bad

checks was flawless. "I knew I was in bad and thought I had as well have a good time because sooner or later they would get me."

While he was in Monroe County Jail facing three charges — grand larceny, forgery and army desertion, the rest of the events of his crime spree began to unfold.

Virt had explained to the officers that he had spent three years in the army. Afterward, he was caught in the draft and deserted twice. He had one other comment. "Virt said his only ambition is to give the marshal of Gosport a good whipping as he has a grudge against that official."

Helfirch went to Seigle, Ill., to reclaim his car and returned to Bloomington with the saloonkeeper, who wanted an opportunity to confront Virt in the jail. The saloonkeeper told an *Evening World* reporter that he still wanted the car. "I don't want the people of Seigle to know I have bought a stolen car. If they find out, they will carry me

high, and I will never get through being kidded."

The problem was what to do with Virt, since he was wanted by two different entities — the army and Monroe County. It would have been cheaper all around for the taxpayers if the man had been turned over to the army. That's what the county thought it was doing.

Although a Sergeant Bruno Willard was sent to Bloomington from Camp Know, Ky., to retrieve Virt, no additional orders came through for him. The Monroe Circuit Court sentenced Virt to two years at the state prison in Jeffersonville.

And, oh, yes. Bloomington Police Chief Browning sent Thomas Morgan, the marshal at Cloverdale a check for \$50 as a reward for the tip about Virt. It was the prisoner who said of the marshal, "Why that Cloverdale marshal couldn't catch anything. That's a joke."

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