Deaths of Spencer, Old Tramp leave blander city

Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

The friendship between Old Tramp, the dog, and his owner, Col. D.O. Spencer, ended sometime between 1895 and 1900. The four-legged friend was mentioned in the Civil War veteran's obituary in the Bloomington *Courier* of Sept. 11, 1900. But it is unclear which one died first.

The last two years of Spencer's life were not particularly pleasant, since he suffered a stroke in 1898, and it became increasingly difficult for him to get around. The *Courier* reported, "He was a patient sufferer and bore up bravely through his long struggle, calmly awaiting the final summons."

There was nothing ordinary about Spencer. He was about as flamboyant a character as one could come by in those days — attorney, with the ability to bring tears to a jury's eyes; newspaper reporter, court reporter and, in the latter part of his life, mind reader.

Spencer was a native son, born in a two-story log house on Rogers Street. He was one of 12 children (11 boys and one girl). His education was purchased by his own efforts as a janitor at the "Second Female Seminary" and, during 1860-61, he completed all of the freshman and most of the sophomore course work at Indiana University.

The Civil War took him away from his studies, and he and at least one brother enlisted in Company H of the 18th Regiment of Indiana Volunteers. The battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas was the worst of several engagements he and his brother fought in, and the latter died from the effects of a long march from Batesville to Helena, Ark.

Returning to Bloomington, the veteran studied law in the office of two local attorneys and finished his degree with a loan of $30 from George A. Bicknell, who was teaching at IU and later served two terms in Congress. Spencer taught school for a time to earn enough money to repay Bicknell.

The young attorney took up the study of shorthand and got his first experience as a court reporter in a murder trial in Morgan County. His