

1896 scam centered on 'patented' fence

"There's a sucker born every minute."

— Phineas T. Barnum, 1810-91

In spite of what he said, the great showman didn't have legally demonstrable fraud in mind when he implied that the general public was pretty gullible. And in the spring of 1896 W.S. Dillman, who lived near Smithville, got a valuable lesson in the ways of the world.

It all began with the appearance of a dapper man by the name of William Powell — at least that is what he called himself during his lucrative stay in Bloomington. Stationing himself on the south side of the square, Powell displayed a wire fence, which he declared was patented. For a fee, Monroe Countians could purchase the sales rights for specific territories. At this point it would be worthwhile to speculate about whether Powell actually used the word "exclu-



Looking back

By Rose
McIlveen

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sive" in connection with the territories he was selling. According to the March 24 edition of the Bloomington *Telephone*, rights to some of the counties surrounding Monroe went for \$85 to \$150.

Dillman was more ambitious than some of the other buyers. He related to a Monroe County grand jury that he bought the rights to Kentucky and Tennessee for \$3,000. To complete the bargain, he gave Powell a small down payment and "executed notes and mortgages on his farm for the balance."

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