

# Whitecapping endangered IU existence

It was not what you would call Bloomington's finest hour. The year was 1903, and the deplorable practice of whitecapping still plagued various parts of the state, including Monroe County.

"Behavior modification" was the aim of whitecappers. Having no connection with law enforcement, they arrived unannounced and frequently masked to hide their identity. Their visit usually meant a flogging for those whose behavior didn't suit the vigilantes.

The date was April 26, in the wee hours of what was considered Saturday night. The account of the incident by one of the victims was reported in the Bloomington *Telephone* of May 1. The peace and quiet of the Stephens residence on East Eighth Street was suddenly disrupted by a mob of some 15 "drunken" men.

The Stevens family — a mother and three daughters — shared the house with a black man by the name of Joseph Shively. Entering the house by force, the mob dragged mother and daughters to



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen  
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nearby Dunn Meadow.

There, according to Stevens, her daughter, Ida, about 16 years old, was whipped with a piece of barbed wire, causing deep cuts on her legs and back. The mob then returned to the Stevens home, broke into Shively's room, dragged him to Dunn Meadow and whipped him, too.

Another of Stevens' daughters ran "up town and gave the alarm." Policemen Garten and Duncan headed for Dunn Meadow. They were stopped by two masked men, who discouraged them from progressing any farther eastward. The police then went to the Stevens home and heard what had happened.

The incident would have been

merely another dismal chapter in the history of whitecapping and law enforcement in Southern Indiana, except for one factor the mob and city fathers could not have foreseen. Apparently the mob and victims were not alone in Dunn Meadow.

According to the *Telephone*, a student was a witness to the violence and wrote a letter about it to Gov. Winfield T. Durbin.

He had had it with whitecapping and lawlessness. The *Telephone* reported Durbin's reaction in the May 1 edition. In a letter addressed to Sheriff Pete Thrasher, the governor said, in part, "Private advice from credible sources received by me this morning indicate that there has been another manifestation of mob law in your community, the second within a brief period, and there has been no serious effort on the part of local officials to prevent it or to bring punishment to those who have thus inflicted disgrace upon Monroe County and the State of Indiana."

In case the law enforcement officer and city fathers weren't inclined to take him seriously, the governor spelled out his feelings:

"Permit me to call your attention to the fact that there is a growing sentiment among the people of Indiana against the continued location of a state institution of learning in a community where there is either an absence of a predominating public sentiment in favor of suppression of violent lawlessness or, what I prefer to believe exists, a chronic callousness on the part of public officials to that predominating sentiment.

"The spectacle of a bloodthirsty mob wreaking its lawless will upon helpless women, whatever their offense, within the very shadow of the walls of the State University, without the strong arm of the law being interposed to prevent or punish the outrage, is one not longer to be tolerated."

Stripped of "state officialese," the governor was threatening to move the university elsewhere.