

# Whitecapping incident embarrassed residents

*"Disgraced again! Citizens of Monroe County have sufficient reasons for hanging their heads in shame, for another blot has been added to her fair name and reputation for peace and respectability." The Courier, Aug. 27, 1897.*

Most of the citizens of Monroe County were appalled when they read in *The Courier* of Aug. 27, 1897, that a handful of men had again banded together and passed judgment on one of their neighbors. And it was the usual, a violent form of chastisement.

In the news account, Milton Southers was depicted as "a respectable farmer" in the southern part of the county near Fairfax. On the night of Aug. 23, he was rudely awakened by unexpected visitors.

The men, whose faces were concealed, yanked Southers out of his bed and marched him outside in his night clothes. There they beat him severely with switches.

In the history of whitecapping in Monroe County, there were some awful doings. During the Civil War a Union Army recruiter had been lynched down in Indian Creek Township by a group of organized



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Southern sympathizers. The response of the governor and state adjutant general was to send some troops down there to arrest the leaders.

On another occasion a man suspected by the whitecappers to have passed counterfeit money and of harboring counterfeiters, was beaten so severely that he died. The coroner had told the local newspaper that the beating was so awful that the man didn't have one place on his body that was of normal flesh color. All of it was raw and red. Through the years there were other whitecapping incidents. The trouble was not entirely the fault of law enforcement officers or prosecuting attorneys. The latter group hadn't had much luck in getting prosecutions on the perpetrators. Juries kept letting the guilty ones go free.

Not satisfied with punishing Southers,

the masked men dragged his mother out of the house and beat her also. Then they flogged a woman who lived with Southers family.

*The World* described the beatings. "The gang capped the climax of the outrage by taking his old gray-haired mother aged about 62, out in the cold night air and beat and lacerated her back until, being ashamed of their work, released her. Another lady named Mrs. Josie Treadway who resides with the Southers family, received a like punishment..."

The State of Indiana in general and Monroe County in particular was getting a reputation for having two sets of law enforcers — the duly elected or appointed ones and the self-appointed ones. The latter didn't have time for the subtleties of the law.

By the time Winfield T. Durbin, a Republican, was elected governor in 1900, he'd had it with the arrogance of the whitecappers. His message to the counties that had the worst record was this: If you can't handle law enforcement in your county, the state will step in and do it for you.

It is possible that the Southers beating turned the public against the whitecappers.

There is no doubt about how the editor of *The World* felt. He or one of his reporters made it very plain. "...that gang of brave regulators went their way rejoicing in the fact that they had whipped two old women nigh unto death. Such an outrage should and shall not pass unheeded by the officers of the law in Monroe County who have taken a solemn oath to bring violators to the bar of justice and uphold the peace and dignity of the commonwealth.

"Let justice be done and let the citizens of the county purge themselves of the disgrace being thus heaped upon them, and show to the world that Monroe County citizens are law-abiding people."

Another article on the front page of *The World* of Aug. 27 commented about upcoming grand jury proceedings. "Prosecutor Edmondson has signified his intention of investigating the recent whitecapping outrages in the county, and claims that with a fearless jury he will be enabled to probe this class of crimes to the bottom, which will result in establishing the identity of those who engage in this lawless work. Mr. Edmondson will be aided in his investigation by the State officials who are determined to rid the state of white capism."

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