

# Sentimental attachment couldn't save polluted well

**O**n Jan. 31, 1897, *The (Bloomington) World* did some good-natured looking back at local history. The subject was naiveté in regard to water purity.

Recalled the reporter, "Twenty seven years ago James Small and Joseph. M. Howe, two of Bloomington's prominent citizens, conceived the idea of a town well."

The two were businessmen — Small in hardware and Howe in dry goods. There was a great demand for drinking water was high, and was, according to the newspaper, greater than the supply.

Both men felt that having a source of water close to their stores would "prove a paying investment and attract customers to their stores." So they hired Andrew Parks, whose past services to residents of the area had earned him the title of "water-witch and weather prophet of great renown, reputation that he fostered and which clung to him until his demise some two years ago."

Parks brought to town his little forked stick, which had once been part of a peach tree. Did his efforts to find water underground



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

attract a crowd? *The World* does not say so at that point in the story. Anyway, he walked up and down College Avenue for quite awhile.

At the "Howe corner" his little wooden fork began to "quiver spasmodically."

There must be water there, Parks concluded. By the time he reported that to Howe and Small, he had drawn a crowd. The two businessmen authorized him to begin digging a well as soon as possible.

Continued the newspaper, "At a depth of 36 feet he struck a strong stream of water that has continued to gush forth in abundance from that day until this, and its quantity, purity and quenching propensities have never been questioned until a few days ago ..."

The two merchants could have been pro-

viding refreshing water to their customers as long as they were in business except for a rather startling fact. A Professor Pierce did an analysis of the water and found that it was poison — "deadly in its character and contained bacteria, essence of horse rack, dead rats and so forth — in short condemning it in strong terms."

That put the city fathers in a quandary. The refreshing water was very popular with shoppers. Perhaps the sentiment went deeper than that. *The World* put it more strongly. "If the city authorities should conclude to abandon the well, it will be to many as parting with an old friend."

In fact, stated the newspaper, Bloomington boys might go West to seek their fortunes, but they would always come back because of feeling nostalgic about the well downtown — "not so much to see the town of their birth, as to obtain another draught from the old town pump."

Some of the town fathers' debate appeared in the article. Could the well be saved? "It is true that every dog in town knows

its location and are want to call often when thirsty. It may be doubtless true that much surface water finds entrance into the well, but this could be remedied by changing the water course or putting in new sewers."

Knowing how much townspeople liked the well, the crafty Mr. Small had several times sent the city a bill for the costs of construction of that public attraction, but those bills had never been allowed.

Arguments for the saving of the well surfaced. It was pointed out that when a fire destroyed the Orchard House 20 years earlier, women of the community formed a line from the town pump and "did valiant service helping to save valuable buildings while the men folks stood by with their hands in their pockets."

In the end, all of the discussion did not save the well/pump. Concluded *The World*, "Certainly the old town well has sometimes been a friend in need and we bow in reverence to the old corner pump, although science has decreed that it ought to go."

H-T 6/1/98