

Elementary school teacher fired on religion issue in 1881

"A very interesting trial was held in the County Superintendent's room last Friday, by Mr. McGee. Mr. Ferguson, of Washington Tp., was the defendant and several parents of children from the same locality the plaintiffs." Bloomington Hawkeye, Feb. 2, 1881.

There was a very serious charge against the Mr. Ferguson. Simply put, it was "teaching infidelity" to the Bible. Two of the witnesses were little girls, "eight or nine years of age."

The charge dated back (several weeks) to a morning when Ferguson called the school to order and asked the children a question. According to the girls, the question was: Do you believe there is a God?

Not unexpectedly, the pupils replied in the affirmative. He then, according to the girls' testimony, told them there was no such a being, and that the Scriptures were false.

Apparently, Ferguson was prepared for what the girls had to say. Continued the *Hawkeye*, "The defendant brought in a number of witnesses who testified that they were



LOOKING BACK

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in Mr. Ferguson's school room on the morning the above conversation was said to have taken place; that he had not said there was no God, but had told them that there was and it was right for them to believe the Scriptures."

Furthermore, Ferguson himself, testified that he had never within the schoolroom or on the property said to the children that there is no God. The trouble stemmed back to a sermon the teacher had preached at Simpson's Chapel.

Specifically, on that occasion Ferguson had said that "if the Scriptures were true, Jesus Christ was in Hell then and would ever remain there." That statement had caused no end of trouble for Ferguson.

Explained the *Hawkeye*, "Several of the patrons of his school took offense at this

statement and decided to withdraw their children from the school of which such a 'monster' was teacher, but some of the patrons still continuing to send their children to him, thereby keeping the school up, those that had withdrawn their offspring decided to lay in complaint and have him dismissed from his charge."

It is likely that Ferguson was under the influence of Robert G. Ingersoll. In fact, Ingersoll was very much on the minds of Midwesterners in the 1880s.

A letter-to-the-editor writer had sent a long commentary on the man's philosophy to the *Bloomington Telephone* in November of 1881. While the writer defended the right of the public to read Ingersoll's opinions about the Bible, the writer also condemned those opinions.

Ingersoll was the son of a Congregationalist minister who settled in Illinois. The son began to achieve great things — admission to the bar and service in the Union Army during the Civil War. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was in the realm of politics.

According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, "...in 1876 he nominated James G. Blaine for President in his famous 'plumed knight' speech."

In time, Ingersoll developed a reputation as a brilliant orator, even earning the praise of the great Henry Ward Beecher. Ingersoll became known as "the great agnostic," and it stunted his political growth. He advanced no further than attorney general of Illinois.

His writings became widely circulated — hence the comments of the letter-to-the-editor, who implied that some people in Monroe County had sampled them.

The Monroe County school superintendent was sophisticated enough to stand up for the young man. The time was not right.

And so, concluded the *Hawkeye*, "The Superintendent saw fit to revoke Mr. Ferguson's license, notwithstanding the testimony of several parents, who had children attending his school, that he had advanced them farther in their studies than any other teacher they had ever had in that district."

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