

1906 explosion put Hoosier hospitality in question

Joe Solomito was just turning out the gaslight jets in John Buffo's saloon on West Kirkwood Avenue in Bloomington when suddenly there was an explosion in the room. The date was April 26, 1906.

On the other side of the partition separating his business from Buffo's, Lawson Branam, also a saloon keeper, was counting the day's proceeds when he was suddenly thrown to the floor by the explosion. Bottles fell off the counter around him. Later, he was unable to recall how he got out of the build-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

ing.

Unlike the fire on the square in 1888 in which Robert Foster was rescued, the West Kirkwood explosion and fire had a tragic outcome.

It so happened that two Bloom-

ington police officers were standing near Buffo's saloon and turned in the fire alarm when Solomito was blasted through the front windows. All of the glass was shattered by the explosion.

Reported one local newspaper, "Parties stated that two men and two women had been seen to enter the back stairway" of the building. Aware that the upstairs was divided into sleeping rooms, the firefighters put a ladder against the building and climbed through a window.

Unfortunately, the smoke and

darkness made it impossible for the firefighters to see anything, and they returned to the ground to get a lantern. On their second trip to the upstairs they found the first fatality, David Bockman, who was lying on a bed with his head buried in some covers. Apparently he had been trying to escape when he was overcome by smoke. He was wearing only his pants and a hat.

The other victim was not found until the blaze was extinguished after 3 a.m. It was Burl Speeks, an aged black man. He had occupied a

room on the second floor, and his body had fallen to the ground floor.

According to the newspaper, both bodies were taken to Hunter's Morgue, where they were viewed by the coroner and "hundreds of people" — a rather bizarre custom that would have little general appeal today.

A post-fire inspection revealed that the gas pipes in the Buffo saloon were intact and not the cause of the explosion. The newspaper

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