

Editor and blacksmith tangle in 1883

Judged by journalistic standards today, Walter S. Bradfute, editor of the *Bloomington Telephone*, occasionally printed little news items that skated on the edge of libel.

CONSIDER, for example, the following in the July 14, 1883, edition: "Early one morning last week a young blacksmith by the name of Devault who has been in Bloomington long enough to contract a debt with numerous businessmen, left for Martinsville without a word of warning. This item is an eye-opener to the businessmen of Martinsville."

With or without legal advice, Devault took immediate exception to the suggestion that he had changed

Looking back

By Rose H. McIlveen

his residence to avoid paying his debts in Bloomington. Furthermore, the warning to Martinsville merchants did not bode well for his business prospects there.

The blacksmith retaliated by threatening to file a libel suit against Bradfute and the *Telephone*. Undaunted by the threat, the editor printed a front-page

story about it. Bradfute wrote loftily, "Of course it is a God-given principle of every American citizen to bring suit for libel against newspapers, and would indeed be a cruel man who would say nought against it . . . An editor will, willingly, do no person an injury for none know the consequences better than he, but when they do make assertions they generally know where to lay their hands on the proof."

IT IS NOT KNOWN whether Bradfute had hoped to forestall the suit, but the second half of his article was an update, apparently written later in the same day, after he had seen a copy of Devault's complaint. The (Back page, col. 3, this sec.)