

Later news about suspects takes shine off 1897 arrest

"MODERN SLEUTHS" was the headline over a front-page story in *The (Bloomington) Courier* on a Tuesday morning in March of 1897. It is likely that most every reader of that edition got a good chuckle out of the story — that is, every reader but two.

What prompted the news in the first place was the visit of a stranger from Spencer, who was staying in the hotel at Ellettsville. Some inevitable shop talk among local merchants revealed that several of them had received some shiny nickels bearing the date of 1897. Since the merchants hadn't ever seen a coin minted in the current year, they got very suspicious.

Word got around Ellettsville. *The Courier* reporter, who was having a lot of fun writing about the incident, departed from the standard journalistic style. "This exciting piece of news (about the nickels)



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

spread like wildfire and people poured out of their homes like English sparrows and congregated on the public square where they called upon the 'faithful and tireless' officers to do their duty and maintain the good reputation of Ellettsville for peace and morality other than on the dates of republican speakings."

Turn-of-the-century journalists in small towns like Bloomington didn't bother with the first names of public officials in news articles. Apparently, they reasoned that everyone knew the first names anyway — so why take up valuable space

with them.

Thus in *The Courier* we find that the Ellettsville police authority figures mentioned were simply constable McNeely and Marshal Moreland. (The two men may have been, in fact, Alonzo McNeely, age 38, and George W. Moreland, age 50.)

While he was at it, *The Courier* reporter amused himself at the expense of Ellettsville, referring to it as "that little burg" and suggesting that brand new coins didn't often find their way to that out-of-the-way place.

The stranger from Spencer found himself under arrest at the hotel by the two lawmen. The charge was passing counterfeit money. As the newspaper described the arrest, "The officers signified their intention of arresting the culprit at all hazards, and buckling their belts another notch tighter and gutting

their teeth (whatever that means) with dare-to-do-style swooped down upon the hotel where the stranger . . . was stopping with great pomp and ceremony permitted the strong arms of the law . . . to rest upon his shoulders."

While the stranger was in the Ellettsville jail waiting for exoneration, apparently McNeely and Moreland indulged themselves in fantasies about "words of commendation from Uncle Sam for having made such a daring capture." Had they not found even more of the shiny nickels in the pockets of their prisoner? Just to be on the safe side, Frank Sharp, proprietor of an Ellettsville saloon, refused to accept any of the nickels in exchange for a beer.

McNeely and Moreland moved the stranger to the jail in Bloomington on the next day, which was a Sunday. The prisoner had been in

his new cell only two hours when it was discovered that he had been in Bloomington before — the "before" having been when he got the shiny new 1897 nickels in change at the First National Bank.

No doubt McNeely and Moreland were somewhat uncomfortable when they returned to the Monroe County Jail and apologized to the stranger for their excessive zeal. The prisoner's reaction was recorded by *The Courier*. "The stranger was justly indignant and compelled them to drive him back to Ellettsville and has since determined to prosecute them for false imprisonment."

Concluded the newspaper, "Both Moreland and McNeely were given the laugh as they took their accustomed position on goods boxes in front of the corner grocery to await the coming of another counterfeit."