

Oil fever was hot with 1894 discovery

"At an early hour this morning James Mobley, the fish market man, went to get a bucket of water for washing purposes, when to his surprise he discovered that the top was covered with oil." *Bloomington Telephone*, Aug. 5, 1894.

Whatever else may have been at fault in Bloomington in the 1890s, there was nothing wrong with the town's grapevine. The *Telephone* reported that by 9 o'clock "a crowd of men were about the well using the pump."

The well was "on South Walnut Street between Fourth and Fifth, joining the Kirby Grocery on the west." Nor was Mobley's discovery a complete surprise. Commented the newspaper, "For a number of years it has been known that the water in this well scented so strongly with oil that it could not be used, and mention has been made in this paper of the fact."

Mobley and the spectators resorted to the simplest method of determining the nature of the find. Explained the *Telephone*, "When it is poured on the ground, it will burn readily, causing a black smoke, and



Looking back

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when the water was placed in a lamp it burned freely."

If the owner of the fish market had any hope of profiting from the discovery, the curious seemed to be unaware of it. According to the newspaper,

"The pump has been busy all morning, and at least two barrels of oil and water have been wasted and carried away."

Actually the well belonged to the city, having been dug in the 1870s. It was reputed to be about 35 feet deep and containing about five feet of water.

Among the bystanders, there were some educated guesses about the source of the oil. One theory was that it came from the 2,000-foot-deep artesian well in the "court yard." Others said that it came from the well where

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