

# Case of mistaken identity leads to tragic end

Jesse Burton walked past a tavern in Mitchell on Nov. 15, 1898. He was in town on business, but it was abruptly and tragically halted.

John Flora was waiting with a gun and wounded Burton so severely that he died the next day. It is possible that the men had never actually met.

The story unfolded on the front pages of the Nov. 16 and 18 editions of the *Bloomington World*. Although there was a keen rivalry between Bloomington and the Bedford and Mitchell communities, the printing of the story was not the case of journalistic warfare — that of making the Lawrence County communities look bad. Bloomington was very definitely involved.

Reported the *World*, "John Flora, the man who shot Jesse Burton at Mitchell Monday evening, was brought to this city last night by Sheriff Dobbins of Bedford and placed in jail. It was feared that Flora would be mobbed at Bedford, as a crowd of men had been forming all day, seemingly for that purpose."

The "purpose," it was feared, was to drag Flora out of the Lawrence County Jail and lynch him. When the word was passed to



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Bloomington, the Monroe County sheriff and city policemen went down to the Monon station to be there "if necessary."

Word has a tendency to get around town, and the law officers found a large crowd waiting for Flora's arrival.

Continued the *World*, "The sheriff (Dobbins of Lawrence County) came out of the train with this man, and no disturbance whatever was made. Flora trembled as he saw the large crowd of men on the station platform before him. He stepped from the train and was taken in charge by Policeman Kerr and the other officers."

Flora, who was wearing a black suit and soft felt hat, was carrying a cane. "He limped as he walked hurriedly with the officers to the cab at the rear of the station.

Three of the policemen with the prisoner stepped into the cab, which was driven very rapidly to the jail."

If they didn't know each other, how did Flora happen to shoot Burton? It was a clear case of mistaken identity.

The story began when Flora learned that a man by the name of Bent Jones was spreading "false reports" about him (Flora). As Flora explained it for the *World*, "Things went on from bad to worse, and Jones threatened my life so often that I became alarmed and did not venture up town very often, until Monday at noon I concluded that I would stand it no longer, so took my shotgun and went up town, meaning at Mitchell."

Flora stepped into Burton's saloon and propped the gun behind the door. In Flora described what happened next. "Presently I saw a man coming down the street wearing an overcoat resembling the one worn by Jones. I waited for him until he was opposite the doorway and shot at him, fatally wounding him, but did not know it was not Jones until sometime afterward."

According to the newspaper, Flora did not make any attempt to hide what he had

done and pleaded guilty to the murder of Burton. The guilty man's fear was that he would be murdered by a mob. Hence his removal to Bloomington.

Bloomington and Monroe County officers were not all that certain they could protect Flora in the jail and decided he would be safer in Indianapolis. He was transferred to Indianapolis and from there to the state prison at Jeffersonville.

Even out of range of vigilantes in Lawrence and Monroe counties Flora was not comfortable. The *World* of Nov. 18 commented, "Last night's Louisville *Times* says: 'He was then taken to Indianapolis and from that city the trip was made over the Pennsylvania line to Jeffersonville.'"

The *Times* reported that Flora "suffered nervous collapse and had to be assisted to a cell. At every stop of the train enroute he expected to be taken off and hanged."

There are two footnotes to the story. Jesse Burton had once attended Indiana University. Bent Jones, whose slander of Flora had triggered the mistaken identity shooting, had served time in prison for his implication in the murder of an Orange County doctor and barely escaped hanging.

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