

# Mystery marriage license helped sell papers in 1897

Back in the days before public relations gurus and marketing experts, Bloomington's *The World* launched a promotion project designed to increase circulation. Maybe it was dreamed up in an editorial office brainstorming meeting.

Efforts to boost circulation were not new. The holiday season was a more likely time of year than the one chosen by the newspaper. It was related to matrimony, but not staged in June, the traditional marrying season.

On Oct. 20, 1897, the front page headline of *The World* asked: "WHO ARE THEY?" The "who" had secretly obtained a marriage license from the county clerk, John T. Woodward. He had promised not to reveal the names of the applicants for 30 days.

Here was the newspaper's scheme: "The World this morning makes the following liberal offer. To the one who first sends in a correct guess giving the names of the lady and gentleman will be given a year's subscription to the Daily World free." Runners up would receive six and one month subscriptions.

The contest was for one week only, and a coupon for entries was printed at the end of the announcement. The whole promotion



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

idea conjures up images of groups of women getting together to suggest the names of eligible bachelors.

In fact, on Oct. 21, the newspaper reported to its readers, "As the published returns might prove rather embarrassing to the ladies, we will only give the names of the gentlemen. Translated, that meant that the majority of entries must have come from women.

On the first day of the contest Kirk Miers was in the lead with 26 mentions of his name. His closest competitor was Harry Axtell with 12. The editor of *The World* must have been smiling when he wrote, "Over twenty-five young people in Bloomington received from five to fifteen ballots apiece ... The junior editor of the World-Courier received forty two votes, in all possible combinations, and it is hardly necessary to state that these forty two

people guessed wide of the mark, as he is not the victim."

The next time the newspaper reported a tally of entries, T.J. Penrod was in the lead with 15 nominations. He was trailed by a tie between Charley Graham and Harry Axtell. Others among the 42 listed were such prominent Bloomington males as H.D. Orchard, Harry Feltus, Eli K. Millen, Morton Hunter and Frank Dunn.

On Oct. 24 the lead shifted to Charley Graham with T.J. Penrod close behind him. *The World* noted that there were eight new names in the list. The next day Penrod had passed Graham, and Ernest Jackson was a close contender. Commented the newspaper, votes continued to roll in until 10 o'clock.

"The *World-Courier's* novel matrimonial contest is ended, and we give this morning the names of the two young couples that entered the life of double blessedness Monday night. Several hundred ballots were cast, and fifty-eight eligible young men received votes, fifty-six of whom are yet susceptible to cunning cupid's wiles. It is a list upon which the girls will gaze with many a heartsease, and Bloomington's old maids will sleep with the names

under their pillows as an incentive for happy dreams."

The mystery couple were Fred Anderson and Renna Bennett. His name did appear on the very first list of guesses. The person who won the one-year subscription was Miss Carrie Slocumb. Runners up were M.C. McNeeley and John W. Young. A second couple had concealed their license application on the same day as Anderson and Bennett. They were Marion Lentz and Miss Ella Harding.

With tongue in cheek, on Oct. 26 *The World* proposed another contest.

"Now that the matrimonial voting contest is ended, the *World-Courier* offers another scheme by which three of its hundreds of readers may obtain subscription free. About three months ago the city of Bloomington purchased a steam street roller at a cost of \$3,200, and it has been resting in quietude almost every day since. Now the paramount question that has been agitating the taxpayers is: When will Miss Roller get rested enough to go to work again?"

There was a coupon for naming the date at the bottom of the article.

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