

Singing Bloomington's praises is part of our history

It's hard for today's children to imagine exactly what Bloomington life was like before the turn of the century. They will probably tell you that their ancestors used horses and carriages and kerosene lamps, but the children may not realize that lots of other things were different, too.

John W. Cravens, who was secretary of Indiana University, sat down with a reporter of the *Weekly Courier* in January of 1915 and talked about Bloomington in the 1880s. He said that when he arrived in Bloomington on Jan. 28, 1885, the town had about 3,000 inhabitants. By 1915 the population had increased to about 10,000.

The 1885 version of life in Bloomington was devoid of some facilities we take for granted. Cravens listed the things the town didn't have — sewers, electric lights, hot water heating, telephones, a water works, daily newspaper, cab line, modern courthouse, concrete sidewalks and improved streets.

Cravens told the reporter: "The electric light system was put in the early part of 1885,



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

and the light was turned on (appropriately) on the 4th of July. It was truly a memorable day in the history of the city."

The university official told the reporter that street lights didn't suddenly appear overnight on the streets. The newspaper article, which appeared on Feb. 2, 1915, explained. "At first there were about a half dozen lights placed on high places to light the city. One of these was placed on the old courthouse tower and another was on the building known as the Central School Building. The idea in those days was to put a few large lights far above the streets, instead of the present plan of having a large number of smaller lights near the streets and buildings."

Cravens explained that to see their way

about men and women carried lanterns, and several hundred could be seen on the streets on Sunday evening after church services. They reminded him of fireflies in the summertime.

Bloomington had three weekly newspapers, whose owners must have been in frantic competition for subscribers among the 3,000 population. The newspapers were the *Telephone*, edited by Walter S. Bradfute; the *Courier*, edited by Henry J. Feltus, and the *Progress*, edited by W.A. Gabe. Among the three, it was the *Progress* that did not survive.

Cravens continued, "Indiana University at that time had fewer than 200 students."

Cravens couldn't resist telling an anecdote about those early days. There was only one train — the Monon — that passed through Bloomington, and most everybody in town went to the station twice a day (11 a.m. and 4 p.m.) when the train stopped to see who might be arriving.

Cravens said: "It is recalled that about that time a traveling man stuck his head out of a

window in one of the coaches on the 11 o'clock train, and he inquired of a native Bloomingtonian, 'How many people in this town?' and he received the reply, 'Count 'em yourself. You're higher up than I am.'"

The university official then began to talk about merchants of the past and the locations of their businesses. If his memory can be trusted, the article is a valuable resource for anyone doing research on the history of the Bloomington business community.

In the interview Cravens turned out to be an excellent public relations spokesman for Bloomington and the university. He told the reporter: "It has been said that anyone who ever drank at the old town pump, or anyone that ever visited the campus of Indiana University is never satisfied until he returns.

"There is a charm about Bloomington and its environment that is difficult to properly describe. That it is there is a fact that will be testified to by thousands of people from all parts of the United States. Bloomington at its best is unsurpassed."

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