

Heartbreak story of 1904 involved missing boy

"Searching over-land step by step for little 5-year- old 'Dick' Byers, who mysteriously disappeared from his home in Vigo county over two months ago — John McCann was in Bloomington all of last night and part of today." Bloomington Telephone, Aug. 5, 1904.

Bloomington has had its share of prominent visitors — who came, in the most part because of the presence of Indiana University — but no visitor to the city had a more poignant story than that of John McCann.

As the *Telephone* described it, "The story is one of deepest human interest — not new to many newspaper readers, and a father and mother in the little town of Seeleyville, Vigo county, are not only desolate, but almost demented because of the sudden loss of their only son."

The sequence of events began on a Sunday afternoon — May 29, 1904, to be exact. The boy, "Dick," had simply disappeared, "as if the earth had swallowed him up ..." His father, S.L. Byers, a druggist, had already spent all of his \$1,000 in a futile effort to find his son.

His nephew, John McCann, had volun-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

teered to take up the search. His only clue was that Dick had been picked up by itinerant junk buyers. The party in question was supposed to be composed of two men and a woman.

The trio had passed through Seeleyville on the day that Dick disappeared. (After the boy's disappearance, it had been thought that perhaps he had accidentally fallen into a well, coal mine shaft or a pond. All of those locations were thoroughly searched and eliminated from the list of things that could have happened to him.)

Rumors spread on such an occasion and speculation can get an upper hand. Commented the *Telephone* reporter, "At one time it was reported that he (Dick) was in St. Louis, but investigation only brought no result to the heart-broken parents."

Other clues presented themselves and were duly discarded as probabilities. Continued the newspaper, "However, the parents still believe him alive, and the only clue yet to be tested — that of the traveling junk dealers — is now being faithfully followed by McCann, and according to his story, he has some reason to hope for final success."

Human interest stories sell newspapers, and the *Telephone* reporter spent a lot of time with McCann, getting as many details as possible. He explained, "The two men and one woman had two other small children, and left the little town the night the boy was found missing. He had gone out to play and was near where the strangers stopped."

McCann had traced the junk buyers to Brazil and Greencastle, but at that time they were not under any real suspicion. He told the reporter, "The only way to trace their wanderings so long after the kidnapping is to follow them step by step, and that is what I am doing."

McCann said that he had walked the route, asking from house to house for any clues that might help. "I have found that they (the junk buyers) had a boy about the size of

'Dick' at Greencastle; and at Putnamville, it was a girl — likely dressed that way — and the hair was cut short."

McCann had tracked them to the Eel River, a camping place, and then to Gosport and Stinesville. He was confident that after the junk buyers left Bloomington, they went to Bedford.

He was asking for donations of money to keep him going until he could find out to his satisfaction whether the boy was with the junk buyers, and added, "I will never give up the search, though I walk a thousand miles." He speculated that Dick was taken so he could beg for them or to collect a reward (which, incidentally, amounted to \$500).

McCann said the junk buyers were traveling in a covered wagon pulled by one horse. They were poorly dressed. Of late, they had been buying and selling rubber, brass and copper.

Did young Dick Byers pass through Bloomington with them? It is one of those little unanswered questions with which local history is strewn.

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