

# Bedford police tackled real-life murder mystery

"The mutilated body of Miss (Sarah) Schafer was found at seven o'clock this morning in an old shed by W.J. Cook, a cabman. The body was under Mr. Cook's cab." — *Bloomington Evening World*, Jan. 22, 1904.

The act of murder was not unknown to the community of Bedford at the turn of the century, but its citizens were not in any way prepared for the brutal death of Sarah Schafer, a young Latin teacher at the high school.

The facts are hardly adequate to describe the crime, since the violence against her included rape. Actually that word was never mentioned in the newspaper accounts. The *Evening World* of Jan. 22 put it as delicately as possible, stating



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

that she had been "criminally assaulted" and during the struggle she had made a "desperate fight for her honor." Only the most unsophisticated reader would have missed the implication.

The murder weapon was a brick. Specifically, she had a five wounds — a large one over her left eye, three on her forehead and "a considerable scalp wound on the right

side." Fragments of her clothing were scattered along the area where she had been dragged from the street, down an alley and into the shed.

She had been walking from a boarding house where she ate her meals to the rooming house of Mrs. Addie Smith at the corner of 23th and M streets. It had been raining heavily, and she was holding an umbrella over her head. It was found at the scene with other things — her hat and hairpins.

Besides her attacker, the last one to see her alive was an old man, Capt. J.D. Alexander. He recalled later that as he was walking along and talking to himself, Schafer passed him. According to the *Evening World*, Alexander asked her if

she heard him talking, and she laughed and replied, "No, I was singing and did not hear you."

A significant clue was found in Schafer's hand — hairs reported as red in color in one article and black in another one. The *Evening World* mentioned another clue that may or may not have had any significance. "A half pint whiskey bottle that had been purchased at Dorsey's saloon was also found in the alley, about 50 feet from the barn (shed)."

By coincidence, the Bedford marshal, Frank Russell, had left there for Bloomington at 7:45 a.m. before the body was found. Circuit Judge Wilson, who lived in Bloomington and actually knew Schafer, received word about the murder and informed Russell. But the

marshal, who was naturally anxious to get back to Bedford, had a problem.

Related the *Evening World*, "Mr. Russell has been making an effort all day to get back home on a freight train so as to go to work on the case. He did not succeed, however, and was compelled to wait until 3:45 this afternoon."

That meant the murderer had nearly a 24-hour head start or, at least, that much time to cover his tracks. Bloodhounds were ordered from New Albany, but the heavy rain on the night of the murder and an unlucky light snow afterward had removed any promising scents as far as the dogs were concerned.

see **Looking back**, page C2