

Local 'giant' caught New Yorker's attention in 1887

"giant — 1, a legendary being of tall stature; 2, a living being of great size." Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.

Readers of the Bloomington *Saturday Courier* were probably amused by an article which appeared on the front page of the Oct. 1, 1887, edition. The headline was: "Our Giant! A NEW YORK MUSEUM WANTS HIM."

To begin with, there had been an earlier article about "our giant" in the New York *Sun*. It was datelined Bloomington, Ind., Sept. 16 and said, in part, "There is no greater curiosity in human form in this section of Indiana than Riley Smith, who for years has wandered about Bloomington most of the time dependent upon the township for a livelihood. He is remarkable as being the tallest man, the smallest about the waist, and having the largest feet of any person in the whole country."

The *Sun* claimed that Smith was 6-feet-7½-inches and had a waist of 12 inches and



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

a size 17 shoe, "that by actual measurement holds one and one-fourth pecks of corn. He weighs 145 pounds."

According to the newspaper, Smith's shoes had to be custom made in Louisville "Once each year a pair of plough shoes are ordered. They weigh almost ten pounds."

The article went on to say that Smith was married and had two children. Another bit of biographical information included was that Smith was a Republican, although it is difficult to see what that had to do with his being unusually tall.

It is unlikely that anyone in Bloomington

would have seen the *Sun* article if a copy of it had not been enclosed in a letter addressed to the postmaster. The writer of the letter was trying to get in touch with Smith.

Commented the writer, "I would be very glad to use this party at my museum, if there is such a man in your town. I will give him \$50 a week and pay his expenses in New York."

Knowing that things are not always as they appear to be, the owner of the museum stipulated that Smith would be guaranteed two weeks' worth of employment.

It would be interesting to know where the *Sun* got wind of Riley Smith. The second question worth having an answer for is just exactly what kind of establishment was John Burke, who wrote that he was the owner of the "New York Museum at 210 Bowery, N.Y."

That Burke had plans for Riley Smith was evident, since Burke added that if

Smith was a success during the initial two weeks, he would be taken on tour around the country.

A few of the *Saturday Courier* readers who didn't get around Bloomington very much might have thought that the Riley Smith mentioned in the letter was a figment of the imagination of John Burke.

Not so. The 1870 census for Monroe County reveals that there was a Riley Smith living alone in Bean Blossom Township. No age was given for him.

Burke had concluded his letter to the Bloomington postmaster: "If you have nothing to do with him, will you please deliver this litter to the proper authorities. Hoping to hear from you soon, I remain yours respectfully."

Did Monroe County's "giant" rush off to New York City to try to capture fame and fortune? It is not likely that he did. The 1900 census reveals that Riley Smith, age 61, was still living in Bean Blossom Township.