

Preacher vowed to spread the word or rot in jail

Bloomington has had its share of itinerant preachers who couldn't resist delivering their religious messages on the courthouse square. Not everyone who gathered there on such occasions found the sermons to their liking.

The Rev. James Pearson, who began preaching at the southwest corner of the square on the morning of Sept. 29, 1916, was allowed to finish his sermon before he was arrested and hauled off to the Monroe County Jail. According to the *Bloomington Telephone* of that date Pearson "was arrested on the old commitment for taking a punch at Special Judge Boy Buckley during a trial in police court . . ."

The disagreement between the preacher and judge arose over the fact that Buckley was smoking a cigar during the court proceedings. Explained the newspaper, "Rev. Pearson took offense at Attorney Buckley smoking what he termed a 'heathen roll' and punched at Buckley with his good right arm."

According to the *Telephone* of Sept. 12, Pearson shouted at Judge Buckley, "What



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

do you mean by smoking in court and so insulting my wife?" and made a grab at Judge Buckley's cigar."

The newspaper explained that there had been some misunderstanding between the preacher and the court. The police believed that Pearson's sentence of 30 days in jail had been suspended on the promise that he would leave Bloomington and stay away.

The *Telephone* noted, "Rev. Pearson claims to have made no such promise and came back to Bloomington to demonstrate his right and willingness to preach on the Bloomington streets at any time." As he was being led away by the police, he waved his hat at the crowd and shouted, "Don't

worry. I'll be back."

The objection of the police to Pearson's preaching was that the crowd he gathered constituted a traffic hazard on the square. The minister chose to differ, but the Bloomington police were not alone in their objection. Pearson had been arrested five times previously in Bloomington and 29 times in all of his preaching career.

In case the *Telephone's* readers did not recall the details of Pearson's life from earlier news articles, the newspaper supplied them on Sept. 29. "His home is in Bloomfield and there has a reputation as an inventor of a fence post in which a number of Bloomfield men have invested, also a brick stamping process for a Bloomfield company."

On one of his visits to the Monroe County Jail, Pearson had called the police "red-nosed devils" to their faces. Meanwhile, his wife was even less tactful, calling the same police "a set of beer-bloats."

The Indianapolis police were not all that fond of Pearson's preaching, either, having arrested him several times, the arrests hav-

ing resulted in jail terms. In fact, the *Telephone* mentioned that when Pearson was released he was planning to go back to Indianapolis expressly for the purpose of preaching on the street.

In none of the *Telephone* coverage is there any explanation of why Pearson stubbornly returned to either Bloomington or Indianapolis. Nor is there anything to indicate what variety of religion the man was preaching. There was, however, a touch of the old-fashioned hell, fire and brimstone about it.

On one of his trips to Bloomington during that September in 1916, Pearson stopped off at the jail to relate some of his arrest experiences to the police. "The Indianapolis cops, he said, had him sent to the penal farm, but he was released after his hair was cut."

As for Bloomington, Pearson said he would preach the gospel on the streets of the city as he saw fit or rot in the jail.

It is likely that he spent a lot of time as the guest of Monroe County taxpayers.

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