

'Old Sleuth' visit elementary to local writer

Of all of the characters who stepped off the Monon train in Bloomington, perhaps "Old Sleuth" was one of the most unusual. His real name was John T. Norris and he was a flamboyant private detective based in Springfield, Ohio.

The Bloomington *Saturday Courier* of Aug. 26, 1893, suggested that Norris was in town to begin tracking down a man who had succeeded in a confidence scheme against a John Stipp earlier in the year. Whatever else his mission may have been, the detective attracted a lot of attention.

In case its readers were not duly impressed by the news of Norris' arrival, the *Courier* explained that the man was "a noted thief catcher," who had been in business for many years. He also was known to resemble "the celebrated Chaplain Lanier," whoever he was.

One of the things that intrigued the writer at the newspaper was that Norris arrived in Bloomington undisguised. Noted the *Courier*: "Mr. Norris was not disguised for any particular case; yet he was dressed in such a manner that he would be the last man you would pick out of a thousand for a detective."

Had Norris wanted to be inconspicuous, the newspaper blew his cover by providing a description: "He wore an old yellow straw hat without any band, a black shirt and



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

high-water pants that hardly reached the top of his shoes. He wore glasses and shaved his chin only...."

Naturally, the *Courier* had plenty of information about Norris' reputation for success. There is a strong possibility that it was readily supplied by the detective himself, since he brought with him a "portfolio."

"The detective had his 'grip' full of rogues — pictures of them — and he has the honor of being personally acquainted with nearly all the magnificent rascals in the country," wrote the *Courier*.

"Mr. Norris has been a noted thief catcher for many years and accounts of some of his exploits read like dime novels. He has arrested and convicted 19 murderers, the last one being VanLoon who was recently hung in Ohio for murder while committing a bank robbery."

It would be interesting to know what the Monroe County sheriff thought of having such an "experienced" investigator involved in the Stipp case. There may have been

some resentment about the interference, because any success Norris might have had would have made local authorities look rather amateurish.

That Norris sought out the press to tout his visit to Bloomington is obvious, since there is an indirect quote in the *Courier's* front-page article. "He has promised to deliver at our county jail within 30 days the man who recently swindled John Stipp out of \$4,000 under the pretense of buying his farm."

The *Courier* did give its readers a couple of other possible reasons for Norris' trip to Bloomington. "It was rumored that the gentleman's visit here was in connection with the several robberies and incendiaries we have had in this vicinity lately."

It is more likely, however, that the Stipp case and the sweet smell of reward money had brought Norris to town. The newspaper implied some kind of prior agreement had been made.

Concluded the *Courier*: "If the detective keeps his promise, he is to get \$1,000 cash. He had a picture of the fellow and said that he had him under arrest a short time ago for the same kind of offense. If the fellow is caught, it is expected that all, or at least a part of the Stipp money will be recovered."

No doubt the *Courier's* readers were eager to know whether Norris could deliver the swindler as promised.

Next week: The outcome.