

Drowning accident cast pall on 1938 Spencer graduation

"She has gone to a greater commencement..."

Bloomington *Daily Telephone*, May 6, 1938, referring to Hazel Isom, who died just hours before her graduation on May 5.

The death of Hazel Isom was an unfortunate accident, and it touched the hearts and lives of people living in Bloomington, as well as Spencer. Had she lived, Hazel would have been celebrating the closing of her school years and a new beginning to the rest of her life.

Hazel, who had lived part of her 16-year life in Bloomington, was spending the last hours before her graduation from Spencer High School with a classmate, Irma Winkler. They were strolling across a narrow bridge that spanned the White River at the edge of the town.



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

As traffic approached, both girls moved to the side of the bridge and perched on the railing. One of the drivers was Billy Boyd Harris, son of William H. Harris, Jr., publisher of the Ellettsville *Farm*. Billy and a companion, Gilbert Chambers, had just delivered a load of printing supplies to the office of the *Spencer World*.

According to the *Telephone*, "While the truck was passing Hazel made the mistake of turning to one side, thereby coming into contact with the side of the truck. A heavy bolt on the side of the truck struck

her shoulder, causing her to lose her balance and fall screaming from the bridge. Before falling Hazel clung to the railing for an instant with one arm. The other arm was broken by the force of the impact when the truck struck her."

The drop from the bridge to the river was approximately 30 feet. According to eyewitnesses, Hazel bobbed in the water for a moment or two and then sank from sight.

Related the *Telephone*, "Harris had stopped immediately after hearing the Isom girl scream, and he and Chambers helped in the rescue attempts." According to the *Bloomington Star*, the young man drove to a filling station at the end of the bridge and launched a boat that unfortunately had no oars.

Hilda Megashire, who was driving behind Harris, had been on her way to Bloomington, but turned her

car around and raced back to her wood products factory to order its steel boat into the water. At the factory were Bloomingtonians Walter Woodburn, a roofing contractor, his son, John, and employees Felix and Mitchell Ellis. They put Megashire's boat on their truck and were the first of a dozen to be launched in the hope of rescuing Hazel Isom.

The accident had happened about 2 o'clock. Her body was not found until 3:50 due largely to a miscalculation on the part of rescuers. As the *Telephone* explained it, "Delay in finding the body was the result of the search being conducted largely several yards from where the girl had fallen in. It was thought that the swift current would have washed the body below the bridge. Actually, however, the body evidently had become entangled when it reached the river bottom for it was found at almost the exact spot

where it entered the water."

After Hazel's body had been found with grappling hooks, frantic rescuers gave her artificial respiration. The effort was abandoned at 5:40, when a physician decided that further effort was useless.

Harris was taken into custody, probably routinely, until the authorities could talk to witnesses and sort out what had happened. The young man was released to the custody of his father later in the evening. There is no indication that he was blamed for the tragic accident.

Needless to say, it was a very sad commencement at Spencer High School. Many wept openly, reminded that Hazel Isom was not sitting with them. But as the speaker, Dr. Preston Bradley of the Peoples Church of Chicago, told the graduates, "She has gone to a greater commencement..."