

Newspaper's morality assessment shifted in 1881

"It has been but a short time since a girl came to town to find employment. her ruin soon followed . . ."

— *Bloomington Saturday Courier*, Aug. 20, 1881.

If Bloomington matrons weren't whispering about which husbands were spending time with "loose" women in that summer of 1881, there surely was considerably speculation about the country girl referred to in the *Courier*. Was the town as bad as the newspaper had insisted that it was?

Part of the topic of conversation concerned an ad hoc fund drive. Related the *Courier*, "It has been but a week since young men were running about town to raise money to pay a prostitute's fine for fear that she would expose them — men, too, who claim to be highly moral, and in good standing in the best society."



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Moralized the newspaper, "Our city authorities will have the support of all good citizens in their efforts to abate this great and growing evil in our midst. Until a thorough reform in this matter is brought about, we warn the farmers against sending their daughters to town to be employed as domestics."

The *Courier* cited two cases of country girls who came to town to find work. Both had illegitimate children and ended in one case in a pauper's grave and the other dying of consumption. Added the newspa-

per, "We could recite many more cases, but it would be the same old story in each one of them."

Did the startling front-page expose galvanize Bloomingtonians into action to root out the evil in their midst? There is not much evidence to that effect in subsequent issues of the *Courier*.

But the newspaper changed, doing an about-face within three months. Remembering how the *Courier* had described the blatant prostitution going on in the near downtown area, the local residents must have been scratching their heads over the article, *The Bright Side*, which appeared on Nov. 11.

A hint of what happened after the August condemnation of Bloomington can be found in the subheads of the November one. They said, "The seat of the state university. It's facilities for making noble men and

Christian women. And for bringing up children in the way they should go. Vice totally eclipsed by morality. A proud record for a happy and prosperous people."

Does that sound like the same community? Apologized the *Courier*: "It frequently becomes our duty as news publishers to give the dark side of the picture of Bloomington and its society . . . Bloomington has its share of immoral people, but our standard of morality will rank high with that of any town in the state."

The *Courier* continued by saying Bloomington's moral character was evidenced by the fact that it contained 12 churches and added, "Services of some kind are held in these churches every Sunday and, besides, religious lectures are given in the College Chapel every Sunday afternoon."

The newspaper added that much good is done in those churches to inspire young and old to do noble deeds. "We challenge any other town of the size of Bloomington in the State to make as good a showing."

What caused the *Courier* to change its estimation of the local morals? One does not have to look far for the explanation. It was customary for newspapers of that time to pick up and reprint articles from sister publications.

The August article about the prevalence of prostitutes must have made juicy reading in other parts of the state. It is also possible that the editor of the *Courier* received a visit from Indiana University President Lemuel Moss, whose concern about the article was somehow connected to how many parents would be willing to send their children to school in such an awful community.