

Teen girl was temporary resident of jail

An article on the front page of the Bloomington *Evening World* of Dec. 6, 1917, surely provided a topic of conversation around the dinner tables in town. It might also have served as an object lesson in talks between mothers and daughters.

The subject of the story had become a temporary resident of native of Bloomington. To put it more precisely, 15-year-old Mary Bennick was an unwilling guest of the Monroe County taxpayers in the jail.

The newspaper account of how she came to be there is full of unanswered questions. The story also contains some conflict with the moral code of 1915, as well as today's.

The article began, "Married at 14, separated from her husband in less than a year, eloping from her home in Sterling, Ill., and landed in jail in this city last Saturday, was the experience of Mrs. Mary Bannick, who occupies a cell in the women's department on the second floor of the Monroe County jail."

Her companion, Claude Chambers, was



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

also in jail, occupying a cell on the first floor. A four-year veteran of the Army, the man had been discharged when it was discovered that he had tuberculosis.

Some of the *Evening World* readers were wondering about laws governing the traveling together of Bennick and Chambers, but law officials were not sleeping on the job after all. Explained the newspaper, "A federal officer from the District Attorney's office in Indianapolis was here today and had a talk with Chambers and the girl. The officer may decide to make a charge against Chambers and the girl. The officer may decide to make a charge against Chambers for violating the Mann 'White Slave' act which

forbids the transportation of females from one state to another for immoral purposes."

Mrs. Bannick probably explained that she had deserted her husband and had taken up with young Chambers, who took them on a detour to Iowa before coming to Monroe County. That was scarcely all of the story.

Continued the *Evening World*, "To a *World-Courier* reporter she said that she had met Chambers after her mother had introduced her to him. She said her mother had been keeping company with Chambers, but that he found her mother was keeping company with another man."

At this point, it might be worthwhile suggest that Bannick had several legal problems: Did her mother give consent to the marriage two years earlier when her daughter was only 14? Did she leave the state of Illinois with her mother's blessing?

Some of the questions may not have answers. One thing was certain, the Monroe

County sheriff was having a hard time trying to decide what to do with Bannick.

As for her, she demonstrated her displeasure with the county and the law enforcement officers. As the *World* explained, "The woman after being put in jail, went on a hunger strike and did not partake of food all day Saturday. She began eating the jail food Sunday at noon."

Chambers swore he was planning to do the "honorable thing" by Bannick. "Chambers had promised to marry her as soon as she got a divorce from her former husband. Added the *Courier*, "She said she begged Chambers to allow her to go home, but he refused to do so until February when he said he would draw his pension."

It is likely that the Monroe County Circuit Court wasn't much interested in waiting until Chambers began receiving his pension or taking his word for the return of Bannick to her mother. The young woman was probably given enough train fare to return to Sterling, Ill., in time for Christmas.

H-T 9/7/93