

# Train robbery in 1885 a matter for lengthy debate

Although the jury in the first trial of Chesley Chambers for robbery of the Monon Railway in 1885 couldn't agree about whether he was guilty, the second one believed the prosecution's witnesses and allegations. Perhaps his surprisingly light sentence — two years — was based upon the fact that Chambers was well respected and had never before been accused of any wrongdoing.

C. Earl East, author of *Relive It*, wrote that Chambers was released from prison in 21 months because of "good behavior." To his credit, he could have chosen to take up his life elsewhere, but instead, he set himself up as a builder in the Bloomington area.

His carpentry work seems to have been a means to an end in that he later bought a farm west of town for himself, his wife, the former Julia Ann Baugh, and their two chil-



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

dren. But that particular farm was sold in 1914 to provide expansion room for the Bloomington's water supply.

A second farm — one mile east of Ellettsville — then became the Chesley Chambers family home. In 1917 he died at the age of 62.

It is evident in reading East's account of the case that he had spent a considerable amount of time in research and in debating in his own mind whether Chambers was guilty. He relates that it was a topic

of debate in Monroe County for many years.

Actually, East's father, W.H. East, a local attorney, had been one of the team who defended Chambers. He (W.H.) had even written a 200-page book entitled, *The Monon Express Robbery or The Celebrated Trial of Chesley Chambers*, which was published in 1891.

According to C. Earl East, he could never get his father to express an opinion about whether Chambers was guilty. East wrote that half of the people in Monroe County believed Chambers was innocent.

The case seemed to have a life of its own, having been revived again in the winter of 1944-45, when W.H. East's book was reprinted serially in the Bloomington *World-Telephone*. The newspaper received a very special request by mail from

India.

An America sergeant subscriber stationed there reported that the edition containing the final installment of the train robbery case had apparently been lost in the mail. He and his buddies had made bets on the outcome of the trial and needed the newspaper to settle their accounts.

Considering the evidence that C. Earl East reported in his book, it seems in hindsight that the case against Chambers was extremely flimsy. Alternative scenarios suggest themselves; that the robbery was an inside job in which one of the trainmen was more seriously wounded than had been argued upon or intended; that the pigeon-toed robber panicked, dropped some of the money and disappeared from the county.

The fact that Chambers had some \$135 in his table drawer could have been interpreted by the jury as evidence that he was not in need of money, rather than that he had stolen it. Most damning of all, was the identification of Chambers by the Monon employees, one of whom still had a bullet in his head and was hardly rational.

Did Chambers rob the Monon Express on that night in April of 1885? East concluded that when he wrote his book in 1963, there was no one left alive who could add any fresh details to the case. The author added. "But it is recalled that many who had known Chambers continued to hope until their last that new evidence would come with the years, pointing a suspicious finger elsewhere. But the finger never pointed."