

Five ears of corn ended up costing about \$500

The Bloomington *Saturday Courier* of Dec. 6, 1884, called the whole dispute between the Rev. James O. Baxter and Franklin Releford a case of *multum in parvo*. Freely translated, it means much ado about nothing.

The disagreement began when the reverend had Releford arrested for stealing five roasting ears of corn in Salt Creek Township. Hauled before "Squire" Hellenburg, the accused was bound over to court and held for more than two weeks on \$1,000 bond.

Incarceration was not to Releford's liking. In fact, "incensed" would probably be as good as any expression to describe his feelings.

At that point, the man had had plenty of time to nurture his anger, especially when he reappeared in court to find out what came next. As the *Courier* put it, "The charge was finally dismissed, as there was nothing to it. Anything stolen must be worth 10 cents to constitute larceny."

In Releford's case, revenge took the form



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

of a lawsuit. His complaint was that he had been falsely imprisoned.

The case was tried in the Monroe County Circuit Court at the end of November. It took up the court's time for three days.

The *Courier* reporter obviously had a good time tracking down all of the relevant points of the case. Three days in the courtroom probably also provided its share of entertainment.

Incredibly, the Rev. Baxter denied filing the affidavit in the first place. His defense on that point was that the document (alleging theft) had been signed by someone's mark, rather than a signature. As the news-

paper put it, "and he (Baxter) can sign his name."

The next testimony was bound to put the jury into a real quandary. The *Courier* continued, "The Squire (Hellenburg) swore that Baxter did file the affidavit."

In all, the testimony of three persons took very little time. Two of them were described with humor by the newspaper. "The principal witnesses were a minister of the gospel, a Squire who was a very rapid and vehement masticator of tobacco and the plaintiff with a dent in his skull made by a brickbat."

Feeling that he had to comment upon his client's mental processes, Releford told the court, he was not "overly bright," but he "proved sharp enough to get away with the preacher," whatever that meant.

When the jury began deliberation of the evidence, three of the jurors were at first inclined to vote for the defendant. The night hours dragged by while they debated over the preacher's truthfulness and how the case should be disposed of by the court.

In the morning, the verdict was for Releford. In fact, he was awarded a rather large amount for that particular period of time — \$150.

Explained the *Courier*, "If some had had their way they would have broken up brother Baxter; but at last they (the jury) all agreed to give the boy enough to pay his attorneys and something for laying in jail."

Among the habits of the courthouse there may have been those who felt that the circuit court had better things to do with its time. Others may have felt that even a not-quite-bright man with a dent in his head was entitled to his day in court.

The newspaper put the whole incident and its resolution in perspective: "Pretty big bill for Bro. Baxter and the county to foot for five ears of corn. The jury fees amounted to about \$96, the judge, clerk and sheriff about \$50, the witnesses about \$50, the lawyers at least \$150, all in addition to the \$150 judgment. It will not be far from \$500 spent over five ears of corn — \$100 an ear."

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