

Bedford teacher's murder investigation knew no limits

The investigation of the murder of Bedford schoolteacher Sarah Schafer in January of 1904 was handicapped by a couple of factors, one which was unavoidable and the other which was within the control of Bedford officials.

Rain on the night of the murder had washed away clues that would have been helpful, but the search for her killer was further hampered by the way it was conducted.

Detecting by committee does not bode well. First, there were local law enforcement officers who gave the case their best efforts. Then there was a committee of citizens ultimately headed by attorney Simpson B. Lowe, president of the school board. And thirdly, as if enough people weren't working to solve the crime, the Pinkerton Detective Agency of Chicago was called in by the city council.



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

With so many "investigators" the case was bound to be flawed with conflicting and sometimes entirely irrelevant details. For example, someone came up with the theory that the murderer was a local man with a Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde personality problem. But the Pinkertons looked into that lead and discarded him. Another suspect was questioned by Mayor Smith, the two Pinkertons, S.B. Lowe and Deputy Prosecutor Eli Stephenson.

Meanwhile, as a result of the reward offered for information, every opportunist and crank who could

read the newspapers was getting in touch with the authorities. Most of their assertions were not believable, but the Pinkertons, led by Deputy Superintendent E.S. Reed, did follow through on some of the leads, particularly one suggesting that the murderer was an old acquaintance of Schafer.

In retrospect, the arrest of Jim McDonald, a coal wagon driver from Bedford, was largely due to public outrage and pressure. From the outset, the evidence against him was purely circumstantial. The taxpayers of Lawrence County were put to the expense of his trial for the flimsy reasons that his foot fit a print at the crime scene, that he had a blond mustache with hair similar to that found clutched in the victim's fingers, and that he was a general ne'er-do-well around town.

McDonald was spirited out of

Bedford and spent time at the State Penitentiary in Jeffersonville and the jail at Bloomington to prevent an unreasonable mob from lynching him before he had had his day in court. At the same time, there were those in Bedford who felt he was being railroaded.

The accusations against him had a curious effect on McDonald. However unfortunate the circumstances, he had become a celebrity and was beginning to manipulate both the media and the Monroe County sheriff. The latter took McDonald at his request from the jail to the First Christian Church for baptism. McDonald had, he said, found religion.

Another principal character in the drama was Reed, the Pinkerton, who, after telling the newspapers he believed McDonald was innocent, changed his mind. Thereafter, he spent many hours at the jail in

Bloomington, trying to get the prisoner to confess. Gov. Winfield Durbin criticized Bedford authorities for not keeping McDonald in the Bedford jail, and Reed was ordered to stop harassing him.

At the trial, the prosecutor did his best to get as much mileage as he could out of the evidence, but after several ballots, the jury had more sense than he reckoned on and voted to acquit McDonald.

Two other factors contributed to McDonald's exoneration.

One of his attorneys came up with credible alibi witnesses who place McDonald somewhere else during the crime. And the attorney startled the court by saying he knew who had killed Sarah Schafer.

Next week: "Society" ladies subpoenaed.