

Mystery of the decapitated man

"Was the stranger, whose body was found decapitated yesterday morning, a victim of his own insanity or was he foully murdered?" *Bloomington Telephone*, April 2, 1909.

As April Fools' Days go, the one in 1909 in Bloomington was perhaps the most unusual one. On that day the Bloomington police had a puzzling case on their hands, and local citizens had a bizarre mystery to talk about for awhile.

Fact: a body of an adult male found approximately under the North Rogers Street bridge over what was then the Indianapolis Southern Railroad (now Illinois Central) tracks;

Fact: the head was severed from the body, which had multiple stab wounds in the chest in the area of the heart;

Fact: the stabbing occurred at some distance (along the cut) from where the torso and head were found;

Fact: the clothing on the body bore no identifying papers.

The county coroner, Dr. Rogers, and the police were faced with two main questions: was the death the result of murder or



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suicide, and who was the man? Publication of the *Telephone's* initial news story on the Associated Press wire brought in inquiries from as far away as Massachusetts. The latter was in regard to a W.H. Reynolds, a sewing machine traveling salesman who had been missing for a year.

In those days police investigation was hardly a science. The place where the body was found was not cordoned off, and the officers of the law found so many footprints that singling out any particular ones was futile. The *Telephone* stated that the scene had drawn quite a crowd.

The body was, in time, taken to the Harrell funeral establishment, where the head was sewed back onto the torso, and it was photographed. As inquiries came in, the photos were sent out in the

hope that one would be identified. Reported the *Telephone*: "At midnight last night a long distance call from Toledo, Ohio, rang in at the S.L. Harrell residence. It was from the police in that city who wanted a description of the dead man in the morgue here. Some one was missing over there and they were working on the case here as a possible solution."

Actually, the *Telephone* had a field day over the whole affair — with articles running from April 2 to 13. The *Bloomington Evening World*, on the other hand, took a more dignified and restrained approach to the whole matter. The *Telephone* writer reported the story as if he had THE story of his journalistic career unfolding before his eager eyes. He gave his readers every eye-popping detail from the sewing on of the head to speculation about whether the flanged wheel of the train could have produced a cut matching that on the victim's neck.

Meanwhile, bodies do not wait forever for identification — at least not in those days. The *Telephone* shed some further light on what might lie ahead for the

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