

# These stories were just a slice of life, with no gravy

Around the turn of the century Bloomington newspaper editors had a habit of publishing some short, attention-getting articles for which there was little or no follow-up to satisfy the curiosity of the readers. Here are three examples:

"CRUSHED GLASS Found in Dinner Prepared For Will Baker" was the headline on a front-page story in the Aug. 12, 1902, edition of the *Bloomington Courier*. The article began "When Will Baker, an employee in the finishing department of the Showers factory began eating his dinner yesterday, his teeth filled in with broken pieces of glass."

Fortunately for Baker, he didn't swallow any of the food, but spat it out. He also threw away everything else in his dinner pail.

Speculated the *Courier*, "The question is, how came the broken glass in the man's food?" The newspaper said no one has pointed a finger of suspicion at anyone, but added that "Baker returned to his home near the Covenanter graveyard and is not in the factory today. He moved here with his wife from Missouri about two years ago."

If readers were expecting the *Courier* to enlighten later, they were disappointed.



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

On March 9, 1914, a slightly longer news item bore a headline that took up as much space as the text of the article. The headline said: "Grand Duke Solomito Must Fight For Power, Uprising in the Local Italian Colony Against the Ruler and Vito is Re-arrested. Insurrectos and Cops Both on Trail of Royal Boss of Bloomington's Little Italy."

Beneath the headline was an account of what was going on with Solomito and his enemies. "There is an uprising in little Italy, and an effort is being made, evidently, to overthrow the Grand Duke, Vito Solomito."

"The Duke" was arrested on two charges. First of all, he had been accused of operating a blind tiger down in the limestone district in the southern part of the county. For the uninitiated, "blind tigering" was bootlegging.

It should be noted that Solomito was nei-

ther the first nor the last of foreign born persons who came here to work and set up a bootlegging operation on the side. Also, such operations were conducted in town from time to time by several generations Americans.

Solomito was reported to the police by some employees of the Consolidated quarries. The ring leader in opposition to Solomito was supposed to have been a fellow Italian, Sam Manitno. The *Daily Telephone* tried to explain. "Vito for several years has been the acknowledged ruler of the Italians in this county ... he has been the Grand Duke."

The *Telephone* continued that "What Vito said went as law with the local boys from sunny Italy, and if a subject disobeyed there was trouble coming to that subject."

Manitno claimed that Solomito pulled out a gun and struck him on the side of the head because Manitno challenged Solomito's authority as the Italian community leader. Other "rebels" involved were supposed to have been Tressa Palone, a person by the name of DeLillo and others.

Solomito would have had his hands full with the bootlegging charges. If he had revenge in mind, he had to wade through the

liquor charges first.

The *Telephone* didn't follow up on the story. Presumably the editor got his money's worth out of the sensational headline.

And then there were the "fire ladies." The *Telephone* of Nov. 25, 1914, reported that the ladies were serving a chicken dinner of appreciation for the Bloomington police officers, the mayor (Harris) and city councilmen Suggs, Huntington, Benckart, Strain and Coyle. Presumably the "fire ladies" were an auxiliary to the Fire Department.

Anyway, the fire bell interrupted the dinner for three hours. The fire was at the Hoadley Mill on the south side of Bloomington. Some excelsior in a box car had caught fire, and the blaze threatened a coal pile in the mill's blacksmith shop. The "fire ladies" were not daunted. They simply put the meal in ovens to stay warm until the men returned.

Three slices of life from a long time ago. Who put the ground glass in Baker's dinner? Did Vito Solomito maintain his position as leader of the Italians in Monroe County? How did the fire in the Hoadley mill get started?

The newspapers didn't share the answers with their readers.

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