

Reporters have fun with 'merchant's friend' invention

Nov. 4, 1881, must have been, as journalists have been heard to say, "a slow news day." Even the front-page column, "Paragraphs Purely Personal" seemed to have articles that were more mundane than usual.

Apparently, some of the boys in the *Saturday Courier* office were looking for something to amuse the readers. One of them came up with the "The Merchant's Friend," a continuation of helpful advice for merchants in Bloomington.

In the Nov. 5, 1881, issue it began, "Five or six years ago the *Courier* published some good advice to the Bloomington merchants as to how they could rid themselves of the loafers who hang about the stores in winter time and deprive customers of seats about the store."

In those days Bloomington had two rather different kinds of loiterers who found ways to keep warm during the winter months. In the first category were the courthouse habitués.

Under the guise of intense interest in the ends of justice, those persons packed the



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

court rooms when the circuit court was in session. When they weren't listening to the proceedings, they could be found standing about in the hallways debating about the guilt or innocence of the current accused.

Their hours of loitering in the courthouse were perfectly legal, since trials, in general, with the exception of the proceedings of the grand jury, are open to the public. Only when the courthouse was closed at night did the loiterers scatter to wherever they came from.

The other category of loiterers truly annoyed the merchants.

Advised the *Courier*, "Many plans have been devised to get rid of these inveterate loafers, but none of them have, as yet, been successful, and our store keepers have been

compelled to 'grin and bear it,' for lack of a remedy."

Continued the newspaper, "But we propose to help them out of their difficulty this winter by pointing out to them a new invention, which will be found an invaluable loafer's annihilator. It is a machine (patent applied for) and is known as 'Begardus Patent Irresistible Combination Kicker,' for the use of stores and newspaper offices and is in every respect far superior to the buzz saw or stuffed club."

The article went on to describe the contraption as a large, strongly made chair with powerful springs concealed in the bottom. There was also in the same area of the chair "an immense boot, made of a hard, unyielding substance, and connected with the chair. The boot and chair are also connected with a powerful hook which is concealed in the ceiling."

The special imaginary chair in action was described by the *Courier*. "As the unsuspecting lounge approaches, he is requested to

take a seat in this comfortable-looking chair, and he will not hesitate to accept. Just as he settles down the operator of the machine jerks a convenient knob; the powerful springs in the chair begin to toss the loafer in a most extraordinary manner; the immense boot springs into position; the concealed hook then drops from the ceiling and seizes him by the coat collar, and then the boot with the rapidity of lightning, is put where it will do the most good."

It should be noted that "the merchant's friend" was not intended to kill the unsuspecting loafer, but rather give him a hint that could not be ignored. Concluded the *Courier* article, "When the boot has gone rapidly back and forth for about three minutes, the machine is stopped, and its shattered victim carried out on a litter. Thinking that he has been assaulted from behind by some exasperated monster too hideous to describe, he never returns again."

As I said, it must have been a slow news day.

H-T 7/10/95