

Quarry workers from abroad cause concern in community

Had you been standing on the platform of the railway station at Bloomington and points south on Feb. 21, 1908, you might have noticed a preponderance of quarry workers among the passengers who boarded the train. They were taking the short trip to the station in Oolitic.

As the saying goes, "Trouble was brewing." The workers from Italy were caught in an unpleasant situation. They were willing to work for lower wages than the American workers, and the Americans resented the fact that the foreigners were dragging down the wage scale. There was another complaint: that the Italians did "not stick by the labor unions."

To read the *Bloomington Telephone* in February of 1908, you would have thought that Oolitic was on the brink of anarchy. "Today Oolitic is in a state verging on civil war, and any little thing may start a fight between



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

the Italians and the Americans, which would cost some lives." The newspaper pointed out that the Americans' resentment was not at all a recent thing.

How did so many Italian workers happen to settle in Lawrence and Monroe counties? The *Telephone* explained. "Several years ago the quarry operators, because of the scarcity of labor and the prevailing high prices, started the importation of Italian labor, and since that time have spent thousands of dollars bringing over the sons of sunny Italy and transplanting them in Lawrence County."

The *Telephone* estimated that there were

some 400 Italian workers in Lawrence County alone. They were concentrated in the P.M. & B. and Dark Hollow quarries.

Continued the newspaper, "As the colony has grown, so has the feeling against the 'intruders' been forced home to an 'outraged' community.

The Italians worked hard, but they were 'tight,' and all their extra coin went back to the old home in Italy."

Then there was the exuberance of the foreigners. As the *Telephone* put it, "...there was in the colony a band of adventurous spirits who caused much trouble to the entire countryside. At the door of these rousters are laid all manner of crimes: murders, assaults, fights, arson, theft; and beside those they had a playful way of shoving a stick of dynamite under the property of an enemy, which did not endear them to the hearts of the surrounding Americans."

At this point the *Telephone* relied upon

rumors picked up by its reporter. It seems that "some of the moving spirits" (unnamed, of course) among the Americans had called a secret meeting and began plotting. The result was that around the 10th of February notices appeared in "conspicuous" places in Oolitic.

The signs — addressed to the Italians — said, in effect, they had 10 days to get out of town. Continued the newspaper, "It was intimated that the penalty for not leaving was to be exterminated."

The *Telephone* pointed out to its readers: "Today is the day. Hence the gathering of Italians for mutual protection. It was the opinion of the newspaper that hotheads on both sides would probably restrain themselves until the police had relaxed their vigilance.

And then, concluded the *Telephone*, "Inside of a month it is expected that someone will fire a shot that may start the bloodiest feud Indiana has ever known."

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