

# Sin-sational

## Early Bloomington crimes made headlines

To read some of the accounts written about the early years of Bloomington, you would think it was some kind of "sin city."

IT IS INTERESTING to note that the very first business established here was a "wet grocery." In his book, *Historic Treasures*, "Pop" Haff explained that a wet grocery was a place of business that was established for the purpose of selling liquor. Although William Hardin's store had some \$150-worth of notions, his principal commodity was whiskey.

Cornelius Pering, the principal of Bloomington's female seminary, wrote to a friend back in England in the 1830s that Bloomington had "doggeries where a man can get drunk as a Chloe" for a two pence. The drinking establishments didn't exactly cause a crime wave, but they certainly furnished a lot of "Dutch courage" that got Bloomingtonians into trouble with the law on occasion.

The early Monroe County court docket is full of cases of brawling and slander, and in a few cases of the former, it was not uncommon to bite

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### Looking Back

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By Rose H. McIlveen

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off a portion of one's opponent's ear or nose.

LIQUOR HAD NOTHING whatsoever to do with the tragedy of one of Bloomington's most colorful con artists, Johnny Lusk. Back in 1870 he found a short-cut to burglary technique. He convinced a local blacksmith that he (Lusk) was a wizard when it comes to making things. Actually, his best example of craftsmanship was duplicate keys, which he used at night to help himself to lots of merchandise belonging to local merchants. Lusk's moonlight activity was pretty profitable until the rash of burglaries came to the attention of the sheriff.

Newspapers all over the state had a

field day for weeks with the great Monon train robbery back in 1885. The sensational case had all of the drama any reporter could wish for, since it included a questionable identification by an eyewitness, a hung jury and a subsequent conviction.

ACTUALLY, MOST Bloomingtonians in the early years were quietly going about their business making a living, rearing children and making it to the church of their choice on Sunday. However, sensationalism in print sold newspapers, and there was fierce competition among hopeful editors. Hence, the newspaper accounts often gave a distorted picture of Bloomington life.

Another local case that got statewide attention was the result of some drunken and overzealous self-styled vigilantes. Back in the 1850s they lynched a suspected counterfeit money passer who died a few days later. The same fate awaited a constable, Ed Bingham, who was too close to solving the case for the lynchers comfort. So sensational was

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