

Hitching rack set off controversy in 1909

In March of 1909, when the Monroe County Council voted to install a new hitching rack on the Monroe County Courthouse square, the stage was set for a controversy that took some strange directions.

BLOOMINGTON had a new courthouse, and for some local residents the impressive edifice proclaimed to the rest of Indiana, at least, that here was a community that had graduated from a little county-seat town to a progressive city. Argued the anti-hitching rack faction: Replacement of the rack would lead to the square being littered with horse manure and a sanitation problem.

The impetus for the putting back of the hitching rack had been pressure from two factions — courthouse square businessmen and farmers who needed some place to park their wagons. Midway in the controversy, one local citizen had a constructive suggestion. In his travels about the Midwest, said Austin Thompson, he had seen special paved, off-the-square hitching lots complete with covered stalls, drainage into the sewage system and an attendant to keep it tidy.

LEST THE COUNCIL begrudge the cost of such a lot, Thompson explained that his plan would be a park-and-shop arrangement. A 10-cent fee would defray the cost. Furthermore, merchants could buy 5-cent tickets wholesale and distribute them to customers at one ticket for each dollar of merchandise purchased.

Such a happy compromise should have been seriously considered. Unfortunately, residents had already chosen up sides. Hitching rack proponents, anticipating another referendum on whether there would be saloons in Bloomington, suggested that if the council failed to install a rack, the farmers should threaten to get even by voting "wet." It would be noted that the idea for the threat came from downtown businessmen, who would also profit from saloons on the square.

Looking back

By Rose H. McIlveen

Taking note of the controversy, the City Council took up the question and was treated to a liberal dose of participatory democracy.

Quotes from the *Daily Telephone* reflect the shades of opinion expressed at the meeting. "It is our duty to see that the hitchrack is replaced about the public square. We owe it to the farmers." "Though the rack may be a nuisance, I want it back there because it is the only solution to the present unpleasantness between the farmers and townspeople."

ANOTHER SPEAKER, Dr. John Tourner, said that the city health office had the power to stop the hitchrack. Ex-Judge Duncan, caught in the middle of the arguments, told the council that on the one hand the merchants had shown their support for the rack by signing a petition and on the other, the council was instructing the city attorney to prepare an injunction against it.

The city was supported in the latter position by the secretary of the State Board of Health, who already took a dim view of Monroe County sanitation standards. On June 5, acting on behalf of the city, Duncan filed an injunction which named the county commissioners and auditor Horace Blakely. Specifically, the latter was enjoined against opening bids for the new rack on June 9. The injunction claimed that the commissioners' jurisdiction extended only to the concrete wall at the inside edge of the walks around the courthouse and that a rack would obstruct the street and cause filth (with unpleasant sights and offensive smells) to accumulate.

Next week: The city vs. the county in court.