

Historical book of 1880s smelled a lot like a scam

"This volume goes forth to our patrons the result of months of arduous, unremitting and conscientious labor. None so well know as those who have been associated with us the almost insurmountable difficulties to be met with in the preparation of a work of this character." — F.A. Battey & Co, Publishers, 1884.

The preface to the new *Counties of Morgan, Monroe and Brown, Indiana*, contains a long disclaimer about the contents of the book. County histories were big business for such publishers as F.A. Battey of Chicago.

The preface to the 1884 edition explained, "In gathering from these numerous sources, both for the historical and biographical departments, the conflicting statements, the discrepancies and the fallible and incomplete nature of public documents, were almost appalling to our historians and biographers, who were expected to weave therefrom with some degree of accuracy, in panoramic review a record of events."

Those were highfalutin words to describe the crew of research gophers the publisher sent to Monroe County to gather enough facts, and more importantly, enough prospective buyers to make the publication possible. It should be remembered that those buyers who wanted to have their biographies (or those of their ancestors) included in a spe-



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

cial section were obliged to pay an extra \$10.

Continued the publisher's preface to the history, "Whatever may be the verdict of those who do not and will not comprehend the difficulties to be met with, we feel assured that all just and thoughtful people will appreciate our efforts, and recognize the importance of the undertaking and the great public benefit that has been accomplished in preserving the valuable historical matter..."

So much for the publishers' opinion of their work. We get a very clear picture of what some Monroe countians thought of the book in the May 10, 1884, *Saturday Courier*. The newspaper account begins with this startling lead, "The history of Monroe, Brown and Morgan counties' is completed, and agents were here last week delivering the book, or, we should say, trying to deliver it, but almost in every case there was hard 'kicking' on the part of the subscriber, and many refused point blank to receive the book."

The editor of the *Saturday Courier* noted that there were some subscribers who never

really intended to pay for the book and were looking for an excuse not to pay for it and added "...but the majority had good grounds for repudiating their contracts, as the blunders in the work show a great deal of carelessness on the part of Riley, the agent, who bragged so much about his ability to write biographies."

The newspaper article didn't make any effort to hide its scorn for the new volume. Here is another sample of its "book review." "The 'taffy' applied to a number who paid \$10 each to have their biographies in the book is in many cases ridiculous, if not nauseating. In one place we are told that the whole town is running after a certain lawyer to seek his advice; of another it is said that he has taken an orphan to raise; it cost another man \$10 to have it made public that he is affectionate to his wife, and every man in the book is either an influential Republican or Democrat, and a leading member of the church."

According to the editor of the *Saturday Courier*, the history was supposed to contain biographies of all of the old settlers in the county, but only those for whom someone paid \$10 were included. The writer reckoned that since there were some 300 sketches, the publisher made \$3,000 on that part alone.

The remainder of the article in the *Saturday Courier* pointed out some of the glaring

mistakes in the book. For example, "We were startled to see in the book that R.W. Miers and Dr. Harris are 'staunch Republicans.' This is certainly a good opportunity for a libel suit, if the publishers are worth anything."

There are incorrect dates connected with office holders and businessmen. Among the other errors described are these: "Mr. McPheeters, we are told by the book, was commissioned Postmaster in 1875, when, in fact, he was Postmaster ten years previous to that ... Mr. Waldron, says the book, has one of the largest tanneries in Bloomington, when it is the only one in Bloomington."

The publisher concluded its preface with "To those who have given us their support and encouragement, we acknowledge our gratitude, and can assure them that as years go by the book will grow in value as a repository not only of pleasing reading matter, but of treasured information of the past that will become an enduring monument."

The newspaper concluded its review: "We might keep this up (citing errors) to the extent of another column, but what we have pointed out is sufficient to show that the book is a grand series of blunders, as well as incomplete."

The Counties of Morgan, Monroe and Brown, Indiana, can be found in the Indiana Room of the Monroe County Public Library.

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