

# Passing stranger met 'instant death' on rail line

Somewhere in the United States there may be a person doing genealogical research, and wondering what happened to a great-great uncle so-and-so whose name is in the family records, but whose death date is unknown. "Disappeared" ancestors are a source of genuine frustration to conscientious genealogists.

Perhaps someone has been trying for many years to trace a man whose life ended on the Owen/Monroe county line in the fall of 1898. His death was reported in *The* (Bloomington) *World* of Oct. 18.

"INSTANT DEATH," read the headline of a back-page story in the newspaper. It was sandwiched between "University News" and an advertisement for Chamberlain's Colic, Cholera and Diarrhea Remedy.

Piecing the story together, the *World* reporter learned that a stranger had appeared in Gosport on the previous Sunday. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon, he had asked directions to New Albany and was pointed in the right direction.

The stranger may have thought that the best way to keep from getting lost along the way was to follow the Monon Railroad tracks, which ran from Chicago to New Al-



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

bany. In any case, from that point on he was not seen again in Gosport.

According to the newspaper account, "The man reached the suspension bridge over White River and sat down on the side of the track. Two boys who were passing warned the fellow that the train was almost due and that he had better get off the bridge."

It was a pity the man didn't take the boys' advice. There is a possibility that he may have been drunk or so depressed that he was immune to advice. Continued the newspaper, "To everything that was said to him the stranger made no reply and seemed indifferent. He still sat on a sleeper just at the side of the track."

The awful inevitable thing happened. The

southbound afternoon Monon train "running at full speed came dashing along, and as the man did not move he was struck full force by the steam chest on the engine and knocked into the (White) river."

The train screeched to a halt, and crew members looked down into the river to see if they could spot the victim. As the *World* put it, "...nothing could be seen of the man."

It was the two boys who had advised the man to sit down somewhere else who found the body. It was floating in the river "some distance from the bridge."

The problem was: How to retrieve it. *The World* supplied the information to its readers. "The citizens of Gosport were notified, and soon a party was out trying to rescue the body. By means of a small boat, two men reached the dead body and brought it ashore."

Apparently the unfortunate man was taken to the Monroe County side of the river, because he ended up on the farm of David Buskirk. Then the county coroner was summoned to take charge.

The official found that the stranger had sustained several injuries. He could have

survived the broken jaw and shoulder, but the crushed chest probably caused his death.

It was customary for the coroner to establish the identity of victims. Unfortunately, that was not possible. In going through the stranger's pockets the coroner found several old newspapers, a sack of tobacco, a pipe and 29 cents. Nothing more.

*The World* described the stranger. "He was 5 feet and 9 inches in height and weighed about 165 pounds. The man was evidently 45 or 50 years old, had light brown hair and blue eyes."

After completing his report, the coroner was concerned about a burial place for the stranger. The solution was close at hand.

The Buskirk farm had a family graveyard, and the stranger was buried there. He was in distinguished company. One of the tombstones says, in part, "Sacred to the memory of Isaac Van Buskirk who was born in Virginia Oct. 7th, 1760. He was a patriot Soldier of the Revolution and fought in the battle of Monmouth . . . In the fall of 1805 he removed to Indiana where he remained until his death Oct. 27, 1843."

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