

No strychnine shortage in Owen County in early 1900s

Suppose you picked up a good mystery and read your way near the end only to discover that the pages of the last chapter were missing? That would give you an idea of how avid readers of the *Bloomington Weekly Courier* must have felt back in the spring of 1915 when they read about what was going on in Owen County.

It may be recalled that in 1907 George Edwards, auditor-elect of that county, received a gift bottle of whiskey laced with strychnine from an anonymous donor. Edwards didn't like the taste and spit it out, but some of his friends were not so discerning and became ill.

Fortunately, nine years later Owen Countian Charles P. Surber had a good memory. Just prior to the November 1906 election, he received a "free sample" bottle of quinine in the mail. At that time he had a cold and was tempted to use some of the sample to give him some relief. He didn't.

To add to his pre-election discomfort, there were anonymous typewritten letters circulating — letters which warned the voters that Surber was "incompetent to serve as county recorder." Nevertheless, he won the



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

election by some 800 votes.

Surber didn't think about the anonymous package again until the following May, when he sent it off to the State Food and Drug Laboratory. They found that the bitter taste of quinine was covering up the equally-bitter taste of strychnine.

That legal chemical doesn't crawl into a bottle all by itself. It has to have help. Surber called for an official investigation.

He told the local newspaper, "It is disappointing to know that there is some person mean enough to send me poison. I know of no reason why any man should be my enemy. The only motive I can assign for such a dastard attempt is jealousy — political jealousy"

While Surber and the authorities were searching for a motive, a startling event hap-

pened. Readers of the *Weekly Courier* of June 4, 1915, picked up their newspapers and discovered that Spencer undertaker F. Edward Drescher had taken his own life with poison.

What's more, he left a note behind, asking that an Indianapolis undertaker be called to handle the funeral arrangements. He was dead by the time his wife returned from a shopping trip to another community.

She recalled that earlier in the day he mentioned something about dying before she got back. He did.

There was immediate suspicion that he had committed suicide, especially since she initially refused to allow an autopsy. The physicians who had been called wouldn't sign a death certificate unless there was an autopsy. Perhaps she didn't particularly like the idea of her husband's stomach being sent to a lab in Indianapolis.

As the story evolved in the *Weekly Courier* it was revealed that Drescher had been mentioned as a suspect in the anonymous distribution of the poisoned quinine. Others who received them were William Blair, an undertaker, and Dr. R.H. Richards, deputy county

health officer, both of Patricksburg; Dr. William McQueen, a physician of Quincy; George Martin of Jordan Station; Dr. G.E. Willoughby of Gosport; Webster Worley of Morgan Township, Frank Cogle of Poland; Jacob Gosshorn of near Clay City; and George B. Scott and W.M. Spears of near Freedom. Joseph Wise of Jordan Station had sickened after drinking one of the free samples.

Meanwhile, Owen Countians began remembering unexplained deaths in recent years. There was Maud Clark, the maid in the Drescher household. He had embalmed her body before the coroner arrived.

Drescher was the undertaker in some of the other unexplained deaths — F.K. Mason, a Mrs. Baldon, Mrs. Alice McHenry, D.H. Johnson, Thomas Karns, Jacob S. Harris, John W. Rivers and the Rev. A.B. Banta.

Suddenly the *Bloomington Weekly Courier* dropped the story. Perhaps it was really a "non-story." On June 11 when authorities in Spencer were still waiting for results of the autopsy on Drescher, he added, "We can't take action against a dead person."

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