

Missing dinner pails lead to arrest of 14 'vagrants'

The 14 men facing Bloomington's mayor, Claude Malott, on March 13, 1908, seemed to have no place else to go at that moment. They had been charged with vagrancy.

It should be noted that in 1908 Bloomington was considerably smaller in population, and if the citizens didn't specifically know everyone else, they knew of them. In other words, strangers were not all that hard to spot by the police.

Some of the 14 men in the mayor's court had called the law's attention to themselves in an unlawful way. The *Bloomington Weekly Courier* explained:

"At a late hour last night, a phone message from the Monon (Railroad) yards was sent to police headquarters saying that dinner buckets containing the midnight lunch of the round house employees had been taken."

Guilty or not, the 14 men were rounded up by Sheriff Ratliff and night officers Brown and Davis. The visitors had been hauled off to the Monroe County Jail.

Some of them were described by the newspaper. Twenty-year-old Henry Jones



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

said he was from Aurora, Ill. He had always been employed until the winter and had tried to find work there.

Jones heard that there were jobs at the quarries in Bedford. That's where he as headed, he claimed.

Then there was Joseph Rayon. He told the mayor that he was a trained oiler, but would take on any kind of job. Plainly he had been hungry before his trip to the jail. He said he would do anything to get something to eat.

Ernest McClout, aged 19, claimed to be a riveter. He had traveled from his home in Massachusetts and said he was on his way to Indianapolis.

A Tennessean, Charles Cates, was 25 years old. A "circus man," he had hoped to get a job with the Gentry show.

In the case of Horace Bowman, it seemed

that he had wintered in the South and was headed for Chicato. He thought the job prospects were good there.

Tim Murphy had been working in Louisville. He planned to find a job in Indianapolis.

There was James Ellett (an old Ellettsville name) who said he was from Robinson, Ill. He had been working in Bedford, but was laid off and planned to head for Chicago.

Joe Conners' home wasn't mentioned in the *Weekly Courier*, but he wanted a job in Anderson. His skill was in making "fire works."

There was John Bennett who had found a job in Bloomington, working on Judge Duncan's farm. Having no place to stay, he went to the Monon yards every night to sleep in the "sand pile." He added that he was willing to work.

James Morton was from Benton Harbor, Mich. He had been working in Louisville and was experienced as a steamboat crewman on the Great Lakes during the summer months.

Martinsville was the destination of Thomas O'Brien. A native of Cleveland, he

had heard there were jobs in Martinsville.

There were two in the mayor's court who were willing to plead guilty to vagrancy. They were John Wilson and Charles King. They said they had had nothing to do with the theft of the dinner buckets.

It was apparent that some of the men were not as naive as they claimed to be. The *Weekly Courier* had learned that some of them were "Tired of fighting the bread lines in cities like Chicago, Cleveland and St. Louis ..."

There was mercy of a sort in Bloomington in 1908. Explained the newspaper, "Mayor Malott told the men they would have to work on a rock pile or leave town. Given twenty minutes to leave the city, the offer was quickly taken up, and a break was made for the door by the gang. As they passed down the stairs, one man was heard to remark that the Chicago soup houses beat the treatment dealt out to the unemployed in the smaller towns, and he headed north on the Monon for the windy city."

The *Weekly Courier* noted that all of the men were "fairly well dressed and respectable appearing ..."

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