

Fair brought chances to gamble

The suicide by rat poison of a man who called himself Marcellus Sharp vied for newspaper space with events that may have brought him to this area, in the first place. In the fall of 1893, the *World* was giving its readers accounts of the Cook & Whitby circus and the opening of the "Big Bloomington Fair."

Apparently, Sharp (or whoever he was) was attracted by the opportunity to make big money by operating a "wheel of fortune."

It should be explained that in those days games of chance were allowed at circus appearances. After the Cook & Whitby show was in Bloomington on Sept. 18, 1893, the *World* reported that taking large sums of money to the circus had been hazardous to the pocketbook.

Under a headline which said, "PETER WAS WRONG," the newspaper informed its readers that Peter Ballenger, who lived southwest of the city, came to town with \$30 earmarked for paying his taxes. He was apparently attracted by the circus.

Continued the *World*, "In one of the side tents at the show he saw a fellow trying to hide a ball under three little shells. Peter thought that pesky little ball could be under only one of these cut little shells at a time, and the fellow offered to do a little gues-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

sing. They decided to guess \$30 worth, and the result was that Peter did the guessing, and the other fellow took the \$30."

Ballenger decided that the game was crooked and got the police to help him get part of his money back. The *World* related that a Dr. Malott had been relieved of \$200 in one of the Cook & Whitby shows in Bedford earlier in the week.

The newspaper doesn't mention anything about betting on harness racing at the Bloomington Fair, which immediately followed the appearance of the Cook & Whitby show. But racing was a big attraction at the fair.

With a little touch of humor, the newspaper said, "The *World's* race-horse editor can not predict the result of the various races, but in our next issue we will tell our readers what happened and why it happened."

Sure enough, though the fair had the usual animal, cooking and crafts exhibits, it was the racing that attracted the most attention. Bragged the newspaper, "Driver Pitman, who is one

of the best horsemen in the west, states to THE WORLD that the track is excellent and will compare favorably with any in the state." (The next track featured a grandstand and a natural lake.)

Results of the races were printed on the first pages of the *World* and the *Saturday Courier*. It was the latter newspaper that reported the racing had attracted 130 horses and, of course, their owners. It is naive to suppose that the prospect of wagering on the horses never entered the minds of owners or fairgoers.

One judge of racing horse flesh was none other than a Monroe County judge himself, Robert W. Miers, the owner of entries with such fanciful names as Katie Green, Silver Charm, Richard III and Alta Y. The latter, a yearling, won \$50 in a field of three in a half-mile race. One race with a purse of \$150 was described by the *World*. "There were eight starters and three stoppers."

The man who called himself Marcellus Sharp may have come to town for the fair and the circus, but he didn't make it to the fairgrounds. One person who did had a disastrous encounter. Related the *Saturday Courier*, "An inmate of the poor house was on the track last Wednesday when 'Lady Finch' ran against him, knocked him down and ran over him. A pneumatic tire on the sulky was broken. The man was seriously injured."