

# Vagrants detained when dinners disappeared

*Vagrant: "one who has no established residence and wanders from place to place without lawful or visible means of support," Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.*

It all began when a message came to the Bloomington Police Department that the midnight supper dinner buckets belonging to the night shift of the Monon roundhouse had mysteriously disappeared. The date was March 13, 1908.

Some people in town might have scratched their heads over the incident, but not the police. Within a short space of time they had rounded up 14 vagrants who were the most likely suspects and taken time to the Monroe County jail.

According to the Bloomington *Weekly Courier* of March 13, "all were fairly well dressed and respectable appearing . . ." The charge was vagrancy.

Apparently a reporter for the newspaper wandered down to the jail to have a look at the prisoners and chat with them. Some of the men's stories were included in the



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

front-page article.

For example, "Henry Jones, aged 22, who gave his home as Aurora, Ill., said he had always had a job until this winter, and being unable to get anything to do in his hometown, he had heard that he might get something to do at the Bedford quarries and was on his way there."

Then there was Joseph Rayon, who was 17. He said his profession was "oiler," but he would do anything to earn enough money to get something to eat.

One of the prisoners was a very long way from home. "Ernest McClout, aged 19, who said he was a riveter and lived in Massa-

chusetts, was on his way to Indianapolis to seek employment."

One of the men actually had expectations of remaining headquartered, at least, in Bloomington. He said he was a "circus man" and had been hoping to get a job with the Gentry Brothers show.

As for the rest, they all claimed to be on their way to somewhere else. Horace Bowman had wintered in the South and headed for Chicago, while Tim Murphy, whose last stop was Louisville, hoped to find a job in Indianapolis. Jim Ellett had lost his job at Binford and was going to try Chicago, as well.

Jim Bennett's case was a little different. He had found a job on Judge Duncan's farm outside Bloomington, but having no place to stay, he fell in with the other vagrants who slept on a "sand pile."

One of the men was experienced at working on steam boats, having worked on the Great Lakes out of Benton Harbor, Mich. In fact, he was on his way to Louisville to look

for work on the Ohio River.

All of the men denied having taken the Monon night crew's dinner buckets. Two of them reckoned they would have to plead guilty to vagrancy, since they truly had no visible means of support.

Bloomington's mayor, Claude Malott, didn't have very much patience with vagrants. Times were not all that hard in Indiana, or in the rest of the country, for that matter.

The *Courier* faithfully reported what happened when the "vagrants" were brought into court. "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."

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