

Student's jail visit prompts lurid news account

Whatever possessed the editor of the *Bloomington Evening World* to publish a description of the inside of the Monroe County jail on July 12, 1920? Perhaps the tongue-in-cheek article was intended to be a deterrent to crime in the future.

It is unlikely that an appreciable number of local citizens had expressed any curiosity about what it was like inside the jail. No matter.

If they were inclined to read, they could experience incarceration vicariously, so to speak.

To begin with, there is a curious reference to a club:

"Have you ever been in the Monroe County Jail? We ask this question not in attempt to pry into the concealed past of any masquerading criminal or member of the Raisin Club, but merely in the interest of general education," the article reads.

We learn that the reporter visited the jail voluntarily as part of a "Journalism 2" class. "The sentence administered was to report to



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Sheriff W. H. Bartlett to stay as long as necessary to absorb the 'atmosphere' of the place and thus be able to give the gently readers of the *Student* a 'whale of a story.'"

The reporter/student journalist pointed out that the jail was one of the oldest in the state.

What separated the accused or convicted from the general public was a "triple-locked, steel barred, patent-locked door."

Furthermore, the jail had a colorful past. The reporter depicted that past as filled with "sensational escapes, peculiar cases, awful accidents and hair-raising experiences, which have happened to its ten-thousand-odd inmates during its long life."

The jail's small windows were approxi-

mately 25 feet from the ground, and inner walls were two feet thick.

Those walls contained "sketches, initials, carved and written names, morbid observations and crude attempts at art ..."

The heart of the jail building left no doubt about the serious reason for its existence. There was a large cage that enclosed another cage containing eight cells in two stories of four each.

Continued the reporter, "Underneath the cage room are the old dungeons which fifty years ago were used to care for the more violent and dangerous of the prisoners."

Be it said to the credit of advancing humanity that the most horrid usage to which these dungeons have been subjected in modern times is the storage of coal for the giant heating plant under the jail which furnishes heat for the courthouse, the jail and the sheriff's home."

Escape-proof it was not. Sheriff Bartlett showed the reporter where one inmate cut a hole through the concrete about 8 inches high

and a foot long and got away. When the reporter asked the sheriff what the prisoner used to make the hole, he received no answer.

Sheriff Bartlett boasted that there had been 400 persons in jail during his tenure, and only one "got away for good."

There were other stories the sheriff could have told, but the reporter only hinted at them.

There was the man by the name of Lindsey who "tore the radiator in the sick cell loose and flooded the apartment, how he did gymnastic stunts of the most stupendous character such as diving headlong down the staircase with the sheriff locked in his arms, how he overpowered a man twice his size and nearly made good his escape by one of the most agile of athletic feats."

But the stories would have to wait for another time.

The reporter suggested that after the circuit court had moved on, anyone would find the sheriff amenable to talking about daring escape attempts.

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