

Paper didn't wait for trial to label man a murderer.

"Any publication that tends to degrade, disgrace, or injure the character of a person or bring him into contempt, hatred or ridicule constitutes libel."

— Rader and Stempel, *Newspaper Editing, Make-up and Headlines*, 1942.

Just as the courts in the United States operate on the assumption that a person is innocent until proven guilty, the laws of libel imply that people are entitled to a good name unless proven otherwise. The ideals have not always been honored in actual practice.

In 1867, at Gosport the railroad station agent, James Johns, was



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brutally murdered. The case attracted the attention of a new Bloomington newspaper, the *Republican Progress*. As the investigation evolved, it appeared that the interest of the *Progress* was based upon more than mere geographic proximity.

A puzzling factor in the newspaper's reporting of the case was its dependence upon accounts in the *New Albany Ledger*, despite the fact that a Bloomington detective was apparently involved in the investi-

gation. But the reprinting of news from other newspapers was common in those days, as can be seen in two striking examples involving what could be called libel.

At Gosport a drayman was arrested, having been found with an amount of money nearly equal to the agent's financial receipts. The suspect later tried to provide himself with an alibi from a man who chose not corroborate their having been together at the time of the murder.

From the perspective of 1989, it is likely that the suspect did commit the murder. But the *Progress*' second account of the case had the man convicted before justice had run its course. On May 15, 1867, the newspaper reported to its readers: "Detective Hight of Bloomington, figured as extensively in the detection and arrest of McMinniny, the Gosport murderer, as Akers, to whom the N.A. *Ledger* ascribes so

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