

Paper blamed 'Black Hand' group for 1910 murder

In the early part of the 20th century, newspaper editors were frequently guilty of stretching the truth or dealing in pure speculation to increase circulation and profits. A case in point appeared in the June 21, 1910, edition of the Bloomington *Weekly Courier*.

The seeds of mere speculation can be found in part of a big front page headline — "DREAD BLACK HAND CLAIMS VICTIM; SUNDAY TRAGEDY AT SANDERS." Three other separate headlines in smaller



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By Rose McIlveen

type preceded the story.

It should be explained for the benefit of younger readers that the Black Hand was the symbol and name of a terrorist organization of

criminals that plied its trade in Sicily in the late 19th century. Their means of livelihood was extortion, pure and simple.

The victim received a letter (containing the black hand symbol) demanding money "or else." The "or else" was death. Historians have estimated that at one time 90 percent of the Italians in New York City had been threatened by the Black Hand. One of that city's best policemen, Joseph Petrosino, was murdered by the organization when he went to

Sicily to find its trans-Atlantic connections. The mere suggestion that the Black Hand had reached all the way from New York to Monroe County was quite enough to grab the nervous attention of the newspaper's readers.

Perhaps the fact that the victim and the suspect were both Italian gave rise to speculation about the Black Hand. In any case, the facts were these: Ben Corniei, who lived in the Italian colony near Sanders, died of gunshot and stab wounds.

According to the *Weekly Courier*, Corniei boarded at the home of his cousin, Bruno, who had the same last name. The newspaper depicted Ben as a "marked man since his arrival in America less than two years ago."

Venturing even farther down the path of speculation, the *Courier* continued, "It appears that Corniei had incurred the wrath of the 'Black Hand' organization in his na-

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