

No evidence famed thief-catcher solved land swindle

When John Norris, the vaunted "thief-catcher," arrived in Bloomington to begin his pursuit of the man who swindled local farmer John Stipp out of \$4,000, the victim may have held out some hope of recovering his money.

To recap briefly, on May 24, 1893, Stipp met two men, who did not seem to have been associated with each other. One, calling himself Goodwin, called at the Stipp's house and said he was looking for a farm to buy. As they were driving along near Clear Creek, they encountered another man, who called himself David Reed and explained that he was a local quarry owner in some financial difficulty.

"Own that quarry right down there. But I won't very long if I can't raise \$4,000 by nightfall. I'm in such a jam in these panic times, I'd



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

give any man half my quarry if he'd let me have four thousand dollars today," said Reed in one account.

Stipp had a reputation in the county for being a kind-hearted man and was sympathetic to the man's plight. In the process, Goodwin and Reed swindled the Monroe Countian out of the \$4,000 in cash by putting the money Stipp had withdrawn from the bank in a box and then switching boxes. The second one had a few bills on top of some filler.

In his book, *Professional Criminals of America*, published in 1886, New York City Police Inspector Thomas Byrnes described confidence men as friendly, chatty persons who have extremely plausible stories to tell potential victims. In that respect, they could qualify as actors.

Said Byrnes, "Their varied schemes have been exposed by newspapers, and it seems strange that these men on that account should be able at all to eke out a livelihood. But it must be admitted that they do, and a good one too, and these rogues have been often heard to boast that a fool is born every minute, and that they are able to find more subjects than they can safely operate upon."

Initially, Stipp was willing to talk

about the financially distasteful experience, and for a few days saw his name in headlines in the local newspapers. But the thought that he had been taken for a fool by a couple of out-of-town professionals apparently prompted the man to stop talking about it.

Local readers were soon reminded of the swindle when Norris, the thief-catcher, arrived in August. There is no indication in the newspaper accounts whether his services were solicited by Stipp or that he came on his own to have a try at the \$1,000 reward.

Strangely enough, Norris' name (like Stipp's) simply dropped out of the local newspapers' pages. Presumably, Norris started following the trail, beginning locally with Craig Worrel, a stable owner. He had received a letter from the swindlers,

saying the horse and buggy they rented could be recovered at Clay City.

Despite his boast he would deliver the thief/thieves to the jail in Bloomington, there is no evidence to suggest Norris was successful in catching either of the men who swindled John Stipp. In his book, *Relive It . . . with E. Earl East*, the author states that Stipp made two out-of-town trips to identify Goodwin (alias "Red" Austin) at jails in Pittsfield, Ill., and South Bend. After the first identification, the swindler escaped by jumping bail. The second meeting between the thief and victim was in 1904.

It is unlikely Stipp ever recovered any of his \$4,000. He dropped dead on the courthouse lawn in 1913. As for Norris, the thief-catcher, he never appeared in Bloomington again.