

Unlikely suspect tried in 1885 Monon train robbery

Shortly after the train robbery on the Monon Railroad between Bedford and Bloomington in April of 1885, the authorities thought they had found a suspect. After a tip from a farmer by the name of Chap May, the police set a trap for Chesley Chambers.

Strangely enough, Chambers was one of the least likely to have committed the robbery that culminated in serious injury to two men on the train. In his book, *Relive It*, C. Earl East described the suspect as "a stock buyer, bearing a countywide reputation for honesty, fair dealing and sobriety, he attended regularly the nearby South Union Church and was never known to use profane language."

The trap was set with the blessing of "Colonel" George Friedly, the Monon's lawyer, who lived in Bedford and the plan utilized a tran-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

sient who had been arrested merely because he left town after the robbery. Chambers was lured into town on the pretext that he was to be present at a hearing for the transient, and it had been spread about that one of the injured trainmen, Peter Webber, had been brought up from Louisville to identify the transient.

Henry Bates, a Bloomington shoe shop owner, lured Chambers to the National Hotel where Webber identified him as the robber. The law

was swift. As East put it, "When Chesley (Chambers) entered the courtroom a little later for what he thought was to be a Wright (the transient) hearing, he was himself placed under arrest."

Chambers' bond was set at \$10,000 and was quickly posted. Returning home, he found that an officer with a search warrant had unearthed the \$135 Chambers had put into a table drawer. After new charges were sent to court, the young man was re-arrested—this time in church.

East wrote that the general public was in sympathy with Chambers, the consensus being that the charges were flimsy and that arresting him in church was a shoddy thing to do. Meanwhile, the Monon had shipped to Bloomington a Chicago lawyer to assist Monroe County Prosecutor Joseph E. Henley.

For his part, Ezekiah Chambers,

father of Chesley, mortgaged his farm to pay for legal counsel. The trial began its course with witnesses describing the scene and facts of the crime.

Perhaps the idlest part of the trial was the testimony of Henry Bates, a man very much respected in the Bloomington community. Through the years he had gathered around him a group of devoted followers, who referred to his shop and their regular gatherings as "the Bates School of Philosophy."

Bates' only contribution to the testimony was that when most everybody else in town that day hung around the south side of the courthouse to catch a glimpse of Webber, Bates "walked through the courthouse yard to the north side of the square and sat down in front of the livery stable there."

It would be interesting to know how many jurors felt that Bates' testimony was hardly damning. When Webber took the stand, he testified to the effect that Chesley Chambers was the robber. The other victim, who still had a bullet in his head, had been brought from Louisville and was put on the stand. East commented that the man's testimony was pitiful, since "the bullet had taken a terrible toll of his mentality."

The defense brought so many witnesses to testify to Chambers' good character that finally the Monon's lawyer exclaimed, "Hold! Enough! We admit to his good reputation."

The result was a hung jury, and the agony of the Chambers family was not yet over.

Next week: The second trial and outcome.