

'Whitecappers' ushered Monroe into dark days

One of the darkest periods of Indiana history was the time when self-appointed arbiters of everyone else's behavior appeared suddenly in the night and flogged people they believed to be sinners.

One Monroe County resident was lynched so horribly that a physician stated that the man had no portion of his body that was not badly bruised. Needless to say, the victim died.

The sensationalism of that case should have given the lynchers a good enough reason to disband, but it didn't. The local newspapers are dotted with "whitecapper" cases from the period after the Civil War to the early 1900s.

During Winfield Durbin's governorship (he was elected in 1900) he made it clear that he had no patience with whitecappers. After all, it had the potential for making Indiana look downright uncivilized and undermined the law enforcement agencies.

Anti-lynching laws were passed in 1899, and, according to James Madison, author of *The Indiana Way: A State History*, Governor Durbin took advantage of the new laws to call out the militia in the Evansville area. On another occasion when whitecappers confronted some people living in a house near Indiana University, Durbin had some stern words for the Monroe County sheriff about keeping order here.



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

Still, the lynch mob mentality lingered here. In June of 1907, a group of men — some of whom were from Monroe County — were alleged to have ridden to South Bethany in Bartholomew County and thrashed a man by the name of William T. Vanest. Eight men were arrested, and their trial was held in the winter of 1907-08. The accused were David Fox, Charles Sylvester, Lovell Bowers, Charles Kirk, Andrew, Joseph and Charles Stull, and Charles Seitz.

It should be noted that Vanest was not incapacitated by whatever injury he suffered from the beating. He was well enough to be out and about the next day and start pointing fingers at person he regarded as the perpetrators.

The case of the eight alleged whitecappers was of sufficient importance for the state attorney general, James Bingham, to lead the prosecution. He faced the same problem that earlier prosecutors had — that the accused always had convenient alibis and that witnesses seemed to lose their memories in the court-

room. Many accused whitecappers of the past had gone scott free because of fear on the part of witnesses or because juries believed that the victim "had it coming."

The trial was extensively reported by the Bloomington newspapers — the *Telephone* and the *Evening World*. It was the *Telephone* that gave a hint about the reason for the Vanest flogging. In the Jan. 1, 1908, edition it said, "Mrs. Sallie Ann Stull, mother of the defendant(s), and a woman who has been called 'the woman in the case,' as she was the source of the contention between Vanest and the Stulls, was the third witness today."

As the defense continued its case — with veteran Monroe County attorney Robert Miers representing them — there was a parade of witnesses giving the defendants alibis for the night of June. 22. Another defense witness had something particularly interesting to say. "Mrs. Richard Eddy of South Bethany told that Vanest told her that he would like to get some one mixed up in this whitecapping who had money so he could sue them for \$4,000 or \$5,000 damages, and would not have to work any more. Vanest had previously denied that he had made any such statement."

Jan. 2 was the ninth day of the trial. The *Telephone* reported that "the defendants, attorneys, jurymen and even the newspaper

men were looking rather fagged. The case has been a long one, and a hard-fought one also and every one concerned with the case is hoping the finish will come soon."

Attorney General Bingham was no slouch as an attorney. When Jacob Kirk testified that he was in Nashville on June 22 for the purpose of buying some mules, Bingham challenged that testimony. "The attorney General questioned him considerably about the fact that he had taken this drive of twenty-seven miles from his home to inquire about a span of mules that had been sold last February when he had a telephone in his own house, and for 15 cents could have telephoned about these mules and saved a long trip."

Another defendant, Lovell Bowers of Smithville, testified that he had never met Vanest until after the whitecapping incident. Bowers swore he and Charles Sylvester were at Stinesville on the 22nd.

The state contended that David Fox had shaved off his mustache to change his appearance. A Smithville physician testified that Fox had had typhoid fever and shaved off the hair because it was falling out. Also, there were blisters on his upper lip.

Next week: The end of the trial.

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