

# Gossip mill got plenty of fuel in 1907

"Arrested yesterday afternoon on the charge of rape upon one of his pupils, Prof. W.O. Bohannon, late teacher of English in the Bloomington High School, only escaped from going to jail by a \$1,000 cast bond which was telegraphed at 8 o'clock last night from his father at Evansville." *Bloomington Weekly Courier*, July 12, 1907.

If the summer of 1907 had been a "dry season" for Bloomington's chronic gossips, the July 12, 1907, edition of the *Weekly Courier* supplied them with plenty to talk about well into the autumn. Spread across the front page with a larger-than-usual headline was the story of a teacher/pupil friendship that had gone terribly wrong.

William O. Bohannon came to Indiana University from a farm near Evansville and graduated with the class of 1906. He was not a typical student in that he and his wife were members of the Married Folks Club on the campus. According to the *Weekly Courier*, Bohannon had been married at age 16 and had an 8-year-old son and a younger child, an infant.

So how had his professional relationship with Nettie Belle Northcott gotten so far out of hand? It is not clear from the newspaper accounts who was pursuing whom, but it is certain that they began to spend out-of-classroom time together.

It is likely that the relationship began innocently enough. By the luck of the draw, in 1907 Bohannon and Northcott lived two blocks apart on East Second Street.

By her own admission, Northcott met the 24-year-old teacher on many occasions for strolls down Henderson Street and on the old university campus at Second Street and College Avenue. As Northcott explained in court, "We avoided the light as much as possible no nobody would see us, as it would cause talk, because he was a married man, and it was improper for us to be together."

Letters expressing their admiration for



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

each other had been exchanged, always a dangerous indulgence in a clandestine relationship. The *Weekly Courier* informed its readers that Bohannon had managed to get all of his notes and letters to Northcott back except the last one. Commented the newspaper, "This letter is now in the hands of the prosecution. It consists of a page and a half written on letter size paper, and is said to read like the silly love-sick message of a 14-year-old boy."

It was during their next-to-the-last meeting that the incident that was to lead to Bohannon's arrest happened. Sifting and sorting through Northcott's testimony it is difficult to tell with any certainty whether Bohannon did, indeed, force himself on her, or whether she was talked into going against the strict Victorian code of the times and invented the rape charge afterward.

Bohannon's attorney, J.E. Henley, had a told a reporter, "I do not believe my client can be convicted on the charge of rape. Further than this statement I have nothing to say." Nor was Henley the young teacher's only defender. As the time for a legal hear-

ing drew closer, John W. Spencer, partner in an Evansville law firm, joined in the defense.

Of particular interest in the newspaper accounts of the trial are allegations by the *Weekly Courier* before the case was resolved. The *Courier* first stated that the Bohannans of Vanderburg County were well-to-do. "Prof. Bohannon's home folks at Evansville were quite rich, and they have signified their intention to make every effort to free him of this very serious charge."

When the prosecutor wanted the bond raised to \$5,000, Henley "argued that Bohannans were comparatively poor people, that the father owned only 80 acres of land, and that they money to sent Prof. Bohannon through college was furnished by the parents of Mrs. Bohannon."

Another allegation by the *Weekly Courier* concerned the young woman. "Miss Northcott is a frail girl and has always appeared very modest and refined. She is of a good family, her mother being an industrious and respectable bread-winner."

Next week: The preliminary trial.

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