

Railroad project felt in Monroe

First of three parts

"An Italian boy not over 16 years old, arrived on the 11 o'clock train Sunday direct from Italy and was a touching sight as the little fellow with his budget of clothes, stood on the platform of the Monon depot with not a friend in sight. He could not speak a word of English nor could he make himself understood. The boy had a card addressed to Frank Renalle, Bloomington, Ind. The boy came to work on the railroad . . . " *Bloomington Telephone*, May 23, 1905.

There was a time in the late 1800s when an Indianapolis newspaper editor wrote of Bloomington, "You can't get there from here." His comment was in the context of an editorial deploring the fact that the Indiana legislature had been shortsighted enough to locate the state university in Bloomington.

The New Albany and Salem Railroad (later the Monon) was built in the 1850s, and Bloomington had also been serviced by regularly-scheduled stagecoach and wagon freight



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

wagons, but the community had also been hampered economically by limited traffic in and out. Therefore, just after the turn of the century, the announcement of the construction of the Indianapolis and Southern Railroad through Bloomington was welcome news indeed.

Railroads, like the canals before them, were built by work gangs, mainly foreigners. Even the most superficial scanning of the newspapers between 1905 and 1906 shows that the influx of foreign workers had a far-reaching impact on Monroe Countians collectively and individually.

Foreigners were not new to the county. The thriving limestone in-

dustry had long attracted them, and they cropped up in the news occasionally. For example, there was the Scots stoneworker who had the misfortune to fall under the train at Stinesville and died of his injuries. There was also an Austrian — part of the work gang at the Consolidated Stone Company — who died of alcohol poisoning after an all-day drinking bout with some of his fellow countrymen.

The foreign labor gangs who helped to build the Indianapolis and Southern Railroad were part of an enormous working force. The *Bloomington Weekly Courier* of June 2, 1905, reported that the 1,800 men working on the line "were making rapid progress with the grading. It is now thought that they will have the road open to Bloomington by the first of September. This is questionable, however, as there are four bridges to erect, ranging from 200 to 600 feet in length."

Though railroad construction had progressed somewhat from the pick-and-shovel days, one gets a

sense of the magnitude of the task of building through limestone country from the *Courier* article. It also informed the readers, "As completed the road will be laid with seventy-five pound steel, well cross-tied and well ballasted, and all trestle work so constructed that it can be filled without any delay to trains after the work is commenced."

One contractor — W.M. Spencer — boasted of a "steam plow" and "dirt loader" used in making "cuts" for the tracks. Commented the *Courier*, "Old residents remember how Irishmen worked months with wheelbarrow and pick in making some of the cuts on the Monon. Today with the twenty-five horsepower traction engine and this remarkable machine operated by three or four men as high as three wagon loads a minute can be got up and loaded ready for the trip to the dumps."

Next Week: The Foreign Laborers in Camp