

Vigilante mob action reveals 1893 Hoosier mentality

The ad hoc mob justice that had resulted in the vigilante-type murder of John Turley at Bedford in June of 1893 was swiftly demonstrated again within the month. In the second incident, the victim was an Indianapolis man being held in jail at Brownstown.

According to a report in the *Bloomington Republican Progress* of May 24, 1893, an Indianapolis man had gotten himself into serious trouble in Seymour. "A drunken tough, several weeks ago, entered a restaurant in Seymour and insulted one of the waiter girls; when remonstrated with by the restaurant keeper's wife, he struck the girl in the face. The restaurant keeper then came in and told him to leave the house, when the fellow, a drunken cigar maker from India-



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

napolis, Lou Trenck by name, drew his revolver and shot Fealder, the restaurant man, dead."

Having disposed of Turley at Bedford, the mob from the Seymour area apparently decided to rid society of Trenck, as well. But it is a mark of their boldness that their plans were not all that secret. Noted the *Bloomington Telephone*, "All during the afternoon people knew it was coming off, and last evening the streets (of Seymour)

were crowded with an eager, expectant crowd."

Both newspapers described the mob's arrival at the Jackson County seat, the "convenient" absence of the sheriff and the keyless turnkey. Commented the *Telephone*, "This, however, failed to deter the mob from its determined purpose. Pickets were hastily thrown out, a battering ram was improvised, and the outer doors of the jail were battered in."

Unlike the silent Turley, Trenck had a lot to say about his apparent fate. "Oh, this is awful. My God men, don't hang me; let the law have its way. Oh, God bless my soul!" were Trenck's last words before the rope deprived him of air.

Among the interesting details supplied by the newspaper ac-

counts, one in particular suggests something about the mob's organization. The *Progress* relates that the leader commanded "No. 20" to climb the tree and adjust the rope and "No. 8" to adjust the noose. The *Progress* also told its readers, "Many of the men were very nervous and acted as if they did not at all relish the work, but the urgent commands goaded them on."

Incredibly, the lynchers held an informal, impromptu news conference after their return to Seymour. "Newspaper correspondents and other interested parties awaited their coming, and to those several masked men talked freely of the scenes and incidents connected with the execution of Trenck. They jocularly spoke of the work as having been well done."

The two incidents say far less about the fact that senseless crime is a timeless occurrence in human relations than it does about Hoosier mentality at the turn of the century.

Convictions of Whitecappers (vigilante mobs) were hard to come by for county prosecutors. Witnesses were usually conveniently unobservant or afraid. But a deeper, more disturbing reason why lawless lynching could and did happen was reflected in a couple of concluding sentences in the *Progress* article of May 24, 1893:

"These acts are unlawful; and to the victims, undoubtedly awful. But it was a great saving of time and expense, and there was positively no danger of punishing an innocent man in either case."

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