

A disaster at Ellettsville in 1884

Early in May 1884 a petition was being circulated in and about Bloomington — a petition that required merchants to either remove dynamite from their premises or secure it in such a way that it was not likely to cause injury to anyone.

What had prompted the sudden concern about dynamite was a tragedy waiting to happen in Ellettsville until the morning of April 29, 1884. Eighteen months earlier, Fred Mathews, a member of a pioneer limestone family firm, had put 10 dynamite cartridges — ordinarily used for blasting at the quarry — into an old kettle and suspended it from the ceiling of the smoke house behind the house.

Mathews' storage solution was thereafter quite forgotten until after the tragedy, which began with a defective flue in the west



Looking back

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end of the Mathews homestead a mile north of Ellettsville. As luck would have it, the wind was blowing in a northeasterly direction, spreading flames through the house.

Help came in the form of neighbors, who started trying to salvage weatherboards from the smoke house. According to the Bloomington *Telephone* of May 3, the jarring of the building by the salvagers caused the kettle to fall. Sudden contact with the floor turned the dynamite into a burst

of violent energy and the kettle into a lethal spray of shrapnel.

According to the *Telephone*, 13 Ellettsvillians were injured, but the names and conditions of two of the victims were missing from the newspaper's first article. And, although, beginning in 1882, Indiana counties had been mandated to keep death records, the names of those who were supposed to have died in the 1884 explosion are not in the Monroe County death record.

The *Telephone's* initial death toll was: Peter Mathews, Lonzo Mattingly and William Williams. At press time for the May 3 edition, the injured were: Edward Moberly, William Freeman, Grant Galloway, Fred Mathews, Abram Spires, Edward Vanikner, Allie

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