

Night at saloon leaves visitor injured and broke

Tom Johnson may not have been a sound sleeper, but the amount of whiskey he put into his system on that evening in July of 1898, guaranteed that for one night, at least, he would be "dead to the world." It was an unfortunate mistake on his part.

Johnson wasn't a Monroe Countian. He was, instead, a visitor in town from Kansas. *The World* of July 9, 1898, did not divulge to the reader what the man was doing in town.

His first mistake was dropping into a local saloon for a bit of liquid refreshment. His second one was that one bit wasn't enough. After several drinks the part of his brain that differentiates between honest people and drinking buddies was very much impaired.

Johnson, according to the newspaper, was buying rounds of drinks for his new-found companions. Too, they could hardly have missed seeing how much money he had or some other signs of prosperity on him. He had a gold watch and chain and a diamond stick pin.



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

The World continued the story: "One of his newly-made friends took him walking to north Morton street and they sat down on the Showers Brothers lumber piles to rest."

Johnson's unconscious condition was too much for his companion to resist. When Johnson woke up at 2 a.m., he discovered that he had been hit over the head. Staggering to his feet, he made it to the Bundy Hotel and went back to sleep.

About noon the next day he woke to discover that he had been hit over the head with a sharp piece of board. The wound was about three inches long and went all the way down to his skull.

If that was not enough, he also noticed that he was also without \$20 in cash, his gold watch and chain and the diamond stick pin. Obviously, all of that had to be reported to the authorities.

They, in turn, referred him to a physician. Presumably the latter had to take some stitches in Johnson's head.

The young man explained to the authorities that he had no recollection of being hit on the head. Johnson gave the police even less to go on than that, according to the newspaper. "He also states that he does not know the person who hit and robbed him, and can't remember what saloon he was in."

Nevertheless, the chief of police went to work on the case. "Chief Owens was looking for the robber yesterday and has hopes of locating him soon. Johnson will return to his home today with a very sore head, but a much wiser brain."

That may or may not have been true. Actually, it was not the responsibility of the authorities to alter Johnson's behavior in

the future, including any characteristics bordering on the foolhardy. It would have been a safe bet that the officers gave him some advice.

Bloomington had some ne'er-do-well citizens who patronized the saloons. Some of them no doubt merely entertained the hope of picking up free drinks, but were not necessarily criminal types as such. Others like the legendary "Crook" Mershon were opportunists with criminal intent.

The intent was really of no interest to Owens, who was merely doing his job. *The World* was able to report to its readers that the lawman was on top of the case. "Later — Late last night Officers Kerr and Johns arrested 'Smidge' Wilson, and he was locked up charged with robbery. He was searched, and the officers found Mr. Johnson's watch. The diamond and money could not be found."

Was Wilson the culprit? If he was, there certainly isn't any record of his having been convicted in the Monroe County Circuit Court.

H-T 7/11/94