

# Evidence was sparse in death by fire case

It was one of those stories that left the readers of the *Bloomington Daily Telephone* wondering what really happened on Jan. 9, 1911. This much was true: the clothing of Lilly Liford, a 17-year-old girl who lived in Ellettsville, caught on fire. She died about two weeks later of severe burns.

As the story unfolded, the newspaper reported that her boyfriend, Lewis Skelton, 25, of Stinesville, was with her at 4:30 a.m. when the horrible tragedy happened. According to the newspaper, Skelton had visited Lilly earlier in the day, and they decided that he would stay until morning, both of them sitting up in the Liford living room.

Skelton's account of what happened was printed in the Jan. 25 edition of the *Telephone*. "...the day preceding the affair he went from Stinesville to Ellettsville to see her, intending to return to Stinesville on the afternoon train. She insisted that he stay over night. About 4 o'clock in the morning they replenished the fire and decided to take a nap as they both were sleepy. Skelton says that he laid down on a table and that the girl sat on a chair, her head resting against his shoulder. The next thing he knew, he says, he was being awakened by the



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

girl's burning clothing."

Skelton also stated that he tried to put out the flames with his hands and had burns to prove that. He went for the doctor.

Two weeks later Skelton was charged with having poured oil on her clothing and setting fire to it. The charge was based upon a statement by Lilly's father.

Liford, an ex-marshall of Ellettsville, claimed that in his presence and that of her mother, aunt (Mrs. Jennie Cross of Indianapolis), and grandfather (Theodore Buskirk) Lilly said that Skelton set fire to her clothing. On that basis, the young man, who had spent most of his waking hours at her home while she was dying, was arrested.

Skelton employed Bloomington attorney J.K. Barclay to look after his legal interests in the case. The *Telephone* of Jan. 26 revealed

that he was separated from his wife and that they had three children. He had worked for the past six years for the Kessler Stone Company in Stinesville.

Lilly lingered for two weeks, but despite the care of Dr. Harris of Ellettsville, she died of her burns. Meanwhile, feelings in Ellettsville ran very high. Those who thought he was guilty said he had deserted his wife and children. His defenders said just the opposite had happened and that he had taken care of his three children and was intending to marry Lilly once the divorce was final.

On Jan. 30 the *Telephone* reported that during the two weeks that Lilly lingered she was delirious and said nothing coherent. Her father told the newspaper that Skelton had lied to Lilly, making her believe that he was already divorced.

Skelton requested permission to attend her funeral, but that was denied. He told a reporter from the *Telephone* on Jan. 30 that he was innocent and added, "I loved the girl and intended to marry her ..." Meanwhile, his wife visited him in jail, bringing him a basket of food and declaring that he was innocent.

The case was put before the grand jury by

deputy prosecutor Frank Regester. The jury was composed of A.G. Howe of Bloomington; Festus H. Smith and Samuel Sparks of Van Buren Township; Veneman McConnell of Indian Creek; Ralph Pauley of Perry; and Henry Teague of Indian Creek. The *Telephone* of Feb. 3 revealed that the principal witnesses were Lilly's father and mother, aunt and grandfather.

The Feb. 4 edition of the newspaper reported the end of the story. "All witnesses who know anything pertaining to the case are being examined. It now seems to be the general opinion at Ellettsville and Stinesville that Skelton will not be held on the charge. Later — at 2 o'clock this afternoon the grand jury failed to indict Skelton and he was discharged."

Was he guilty? Perhaps. There is the possibility that immediately after the fire Lilly was in deep shock and not really accountable for what she said. The grand jury may have taken that into consideration. On the other hand, Skelton may have gotten away with murder.

Had the case been handled by the police today, forensic science would have helped to solve it promptly.

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