

# Autopsy foils professor's insurance scam plans

**B**loomingtonians and the student body at Indiana University were stunned by the death of Professor Harold W. Johnston. No sooner had those who knew him reconciled themselves to his death due to a "heart attack" than it was revealed by the *Bloomington Telephone* of June 18, 1912, that that assumption had been somewhat hasty.

It may be recalled that two fellow passengers had managed to grab Johnston before he fell over the railing of the moving southbound Monon train. That is an extremely important factor in the story.

Generally speaking, unexplained deaths must be accounted for by an autopsy. That was also the case in the sudden death of the professor.

All of the shocking facts surrounding the case evolved from a terse statement that appeared as a bulletin in the newspaper. "An autopsy on the stomach of Dr. Johnston revealed a quantity of cyanide in the stomach. Heart was in good condition."

That explained his near-fall from the railing of the train's observation car. It also explained something else. The newspaper reporter had apparently talked to Johnston's fellow passengers. They said that "A short



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

time before he was stricken he complained of being thirsty and a few seconds before the attack came on (he) remarked, "I feel like I am burning up inside."

It was the *Telephone* of June 19 that provided an explanation for the professor's suicide. "The continual worry over his financial affairs caused Dr. Johnston to take his own life, was the opinion of his friends. He was heavily in debt on his house on East Third Street and also owed considerable money."

The article revealed that Johnston had heavily mortgaged his new home and had other debts, as well. The building association had foreclosed on him, to the extent of some \$8,000. Though he had been granted a 10-day extension, he had not been able to come up with the money.

It was recalled by some of his colleagues that within the last year Johnston had asked

some very pointed questions about poisons. He had accounted for his questions by saying that he needed it to poison a dog. In fact, he had been given poisons on two occasions by a staff member in the chemistry department.

In tracing what Johnston had been doing on the last day of his life, authorities learned that the professor had been in Indianapolis. His errand was to take out as much life insurance as possible.

His sitting on the railing of the observation car had been carefully planned. The poison would take effect, and he would fall backward. Johnston believed that his death would be considered an accident, and there would be no autopsy. The fatal injuries would have masked what had really happened.

Had Johnston been only an average professor or neighbor, the community would have been sorry about his death, but not deeply saddened. But he was a man who was larger than life.

Johnston had not been elected president of the National Intercollegiate Athletic Association by accident. His devotion to a fledgling athletic program at IU had endeared him to a large segment of the community and campus.

Johnston was not only a baseball fan, but a player as well. In his capacity as faculty athletic representative, he felt he had a lot to say about how things athletic were handled at the university.

IU historian Thomas Clark described Johnston's reaction to an impasse in 1909-10, when the baseball coach was demanding more money. Related Clark, "This (Coach Roach's demand for an increase) caused Professor Harold Whetstone Johnston to declare he would coach baseball himself before he would allow the committee to make such a commitment."

In another history of IU, James A. Woodburn paid tribute to Johnston. "Harold Whetstone Johnston, of Illinois College at Jacksonville, was elected to the chair of Latin, beginning with the year 1895-1896. Dr. Johnston stayed with the university until his tragic death by suicide in 1912. He was a Latin scholar, author of textbooks in his field, and was a man of brilliant mind."

All of Johnston's eight children attended IU. Six of them graduated.

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