

Grand jury: Rape charge was 'ignoramus'

The "fraternization" between William O. Bohannon, a teacher at Bloomington High School, and one of his pupils, Nettie Northcott, which led to a charge of rape, was neither the first nor the last case of its kind. Testimony during a preliminary trial before the mayor indicated that the relationship was not entirely spontaneous.

In the July 16, 1907, edition of the Bloomington *Weekly Courier* Northcott was quoted as having testified, "During all the time since I met him (Bohannon) in May, I loved him off and on. These third parties asked me to meet Bohannon."

There is also reason to believe that the teacher may have realized that the relationship had gone entirely too far. Northcott said that after Bohannon had given her some "medicine" and escorted her part way home, "Coming home that night I told him to kill me. He just laughed. . . . He did not kiss me goodnight, as was his custom."

At the end of the preliminary trial, Bohannon was bound over to the Monroe Circuit Court. He and his Evansville attorney,



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

John W. Spencer of Spencer & Brill, retired to Evansville to start working on the defense.

On Oct. 15, the *Weekly Courier* reported that Bohannon was back in Bloomington to confer with J.E. Henley, who was also working on the teacher's behalf. Added the newspaper, "The criminal charge is to be investigated by the grand jury, which will meet two weeks from next Monday."

The defense attorneys had to plan for at least three outcomes. Conviction of rape carried a sentence of not less than two years or more than 21. The newspaper continued, "In the event the charge of rape is not sustained, a relative of the girl states that a charge of seduction will be filed un-

der Section 458, which reads as follows, 'Any male person who, under promise of marriage, shall have illicit carnal intercourse with any female of good repute for chastity, under the age of 21 years, shall be deemed guilty of seduction.'

The penalty for that could range from six months to five years in jail or prison and a fine from \$100 to \$500. The other contingency was, of course, acquittal.

Bohannon may have wanted to get the case over with so he could go on with his life, but sometimes the mill of the courts grinds very slowly. Bloomingtonians who pursued sensational cases with avid curiosity had a relatively long time to wait before the outcome.

Meanwhile, there may have been those thoughtful persons who wondered how the relationship between Nettie Northcott and William Bohannon had become so intimate in a society that gave at least lip service to the straight-laced Victorian code of morality. After all, Bohannon was married, and the parties involved should have known that sometimes familiarity breeds other

things besides contempt.

Bohannon's marriage was a well-known fact. In fact, his wife had lived with him in Bloomington prior to his graduation. There is also an indication that Northcott's mother may have disapproved. During her testimony the girl said, "My mother saw us as we came home and asked who that man was. I told her it was Bohannon, and my mother scolded me for being with him."

Finally, on Nov. 19 Bohannon had another day in court — that time before the grand jury. Although that body returned 16 indictments, one against Bohannon was not among them. Instead, in his case the jury returned an "ignoramus," an old-fashioned legal term which means that the accusation was groundless.

What then became of the principal persons in the case? By the time that the 1909-10 city directory was published, Nettie Northcott and her mother were not listed, which may mean that they left Bloomington. Bohannon studied law in the firm of one of his defense attorneys back in Evansville and became a member of the bar.

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