The Ups and Downs of Bloomington’s Fire Bell

By Penelope Mathiesen

In 1895, the Bloomington city council decided to purchase a new fire alarm bell weighing 2,000 lbs. It was cast by Buckeye Bell Foundry of Cincinnati, Ohio, and installed in a wooden tower near the fire department’s engine house, which was located on the courthouse square. The tower and the fire bell became the subject of considerable discussion and debate. A newspaper article published early in 1905 stated that:

“The old frame fire tower in the northeast corner of the court house yard, near the engine house will be taken down to-morrow and will be replaced by a substantial steel tower. The old tower has been in a rotten condition for some time and was condemned by the fire committee of the city council. The new steel tower will be 40 feet high and five feet lower than the old one … which was erected nine years ago.”

Erection of the steel tower for the fire bell was scheduled to begin on 1 February 1905, but weather conditions delayed the project. As reported on February 11th: “Since the old fire bell tower was taken down about two weeks ago there has not been a single fire or even one alarm sent to the department. The new steel tower will be erected as soon as the weather is favorable.” There must have been a long wait, because construction didn’t start until April 5th, when it was reported that the fire bell tower was being put up that day “and will be ready for the next fire.”

On April 10th, the fire bell was raised to the tower. The working apparatus was “tested and found satisfactory.”

Further discussion involving the fire bell took place on 22 January 1908, when the city council decided to refurbish “the old Seward foundry building on north Walnut street for a fire department.” The council debated whether to move the bell to the new location:
“Mr. Blair said he was opposed to the bell being put on again. He said no other towns have a bell. Councilman Neill said he thought the bell ought to be rung because it gives people a chance to get out of the way of the department. Mayor Malott said that he thought it might be a good idea to try doing without the bell for a time. Councilman Sears said when he hears the bell ring at night the first thing he thinks of is the Showers factory. It was finally decided to wait until the department is ready to be moved and then allow the committee to say what will be done to the bell.”

On 18 September 1912, after the fire bell was moved to the N. Walnut site, “Fire Chief William Shinn had a narrow escape from death” when the clapper of the bell fell 75 feet, barely missing his head.” The clapper had fallen twice before, once at the current station on N. Walnut, and once at the previous station in the old courthouse yard. That no one had ever been injured was considered “little short of miraculous as the bell rope is directly beneath the huge bell.”

In 1915, work began on a new city hall at Walnut and Fourth streets, with a fire station located in the rear. The new facility opened in 1916. The bell was moved in 1919 from the old fire station to the new location behind city hall. In 1929, the city council decided to retire the old fire bell. The tower was torn down because “the structure was rotting away and might fall, causing injury to someone.” The fire bell “was put to good use in the days when Bloomington was protected only by a volunteer fire department but since modern fire fighting methods have come into use the bell has served as little more than a reminder of the past.”

In November 1929, the old fire bell was placed on a five-foot-square stone pedestal in Third Street Park. It was now known as the Liberty Bell of Bloomington because on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, “it was rung all day long and was thus cracked. Jerry Green was the fireman who climbed to the tower and beat the old fire bell with a hammer.” The bell still stands today on its pedestal in Waldron, Hill, and Buskirk Park, formerly Third Street Park. The decorative bands and the engraving remain legible after 127 years.

Notes
4. News item, [unidentified newspaper], February 1, 1905.
5. News item, [unidentified newspaper], February 11, 1905.
6. News item, [unidentified newspaper], April 5, 1905.
7. *[Bloomington World]*, April 11, 1905.
8. “The Old Bell Shall It Ring?” [unidentified newspaper], January 22, 1908. (The Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Bloomington, August 1913 shows the fire department’s location just south of the Harris Grand.)
9. “The Old Bell Shall It Ring?”
William Norman’s Whitecapping Trial

By Lee Ehman

The terms “Regulators” and “Whitecappers” described vigilante groups that formed to uphold 19th-century frontier law. They appeared as early as 1767 in South Carolina. In Monroe County, they came into being in the late 1840s and 50s to combat counterfeiters, horse thieves, and other criminals. However, the regulators abused their power with violence by settling grudges and extorting land from defenseless people. William Norman’s case illustrates this abuse and shows that justice by the vigilantes was different than that delivered by the courts.

On the evening of 1 May 1888, a group of several hooded men came to William Norman’s house in Polk Township and gave him a severe beating. He and his wife, Susan, believed that they recognized some of the men, including William’s half-brother Hezekiah and his son Frank. William brought a civil lawsuit against Hezekiah, Frank, and nine others, some of whom were also his relatives, for $10,000 damages. The case was first tried in February 1889 in Monroe County’s Circuit Court.

William Norman was a farmer and dairyman born in Polk Twp. He was of Scotch and Irish ancestry, his father having come from North Carolina. William married Susan Jane Shields, and they had four children. In September 1864 he was drafted into Company C, 32nd Indiana Volunteers, where he served until May 1865.

William’s father, Peter, died in 1875 and left a substantial estate. The Norman genealogy states that “All of the property and the monies owed on same were some part of the family problems that led to the beating of William Norman.” Between Peter’s death and the whitecapping there were several lawsuits involving Hezekiah, William, and other Normans.

Central to the civil court trial was a February 1888 lawsuit brought by Simpson Lowe, Monroe County Prosecuting Attorney, against Hezekiah Norman for “failure to list property.” The County Assessor found that Hezekiah omitted over $1,000 of personal property to be taxed, including notes of money owed by William and Charles Norman. William Norman and others were subpoenaed to testify. The outcome of that case is unknown.

The whitcap trial began on Monday, 11 February 1889, and lasted through Saturday of that week. The courtroom was packed throughout, and “the crowd in the courtroom resembled a political meeting.” Testimony by William and Susan described the event. William said: “They were partly masked; two held me and the others whipped me…Beat me with clubs from small of back to heels, was perfectly black; had to lie on my face; was bed-fast 3 weeks…I was notified by Reed and Carson [two defendants] not to appear in court against Hez Norman.” William’s wife, Susan, and his children, Peter, Nannie, and Lizzie, corroborated parts of his testimony. Three other witnesses related facts supporting William’s case.

The defense centered around two themes: William’s and Susan’s bad character, and alibis for the defendants. The latter were provided mainly by relatives of Hezekiah and contradicted the testimony given by the plaintiff’s side. In all, over 100 witnesses were called.

On Saturday, the last day of the trial, charges of jury tampering were circulated: one of the jurors was seen talking with one of the defendants, in or near a saloon during the trial, contrary to the judge’s instructions. The judge sidestepped the issue, saying that it would be investigated and then brought up later.

The judge lectured the jury on the evils of mob law:

“If a good citizen fails to sustain and cherish the law…he can not expect a due administration of justice. For, if the good citizen fails herein, it is reasonable to suppose that the more vicious would grow indifferent to the law’s enforcement, and be finally led to disregard it, and by mob or white cap organizations set it at defiance. White-cap law is but the outgrowth of a vicious public sentiment, the outcropping of ignorance and selfishness, and can only be applied successfully against the weak and defenseless to whom the law would extend the same rights as it does the most powerful of the land. If such a system is given any quarter in a community, and an influential or wealthy citizen by chance should feel its power, then we at once see that such community will become powerless to punish anybody under the protection of such factions.”

The judge’s message rings as true today as it did 133 years ago. (Continued on page 4)
News from the Library

library@monroehistory.org

Compiled by Megan MacDonald and Penelope Mathiesen

November Event

The Monroe County History Center and the Monroe County Public Library will hold a joint program, “Mapping with Monroe County Field Notes,” on November 15th from 6–7 p.m. at MCPL (location TBD). Monroe County Field Notes is a virtual dig done by members of the community (“field reporters”) to uncover stories about 19th-century landmarks and people, from 1816–1876. At this event we will be mapping people and places already discovered by field reporters, discussing the project in greater detail, and seeing what the next steps are. If you are already a field reporter or would like to be involved, please join us for this event! For more information, check the events calendar at MCPL (mcpl.info) or contact Megan MacDonald (library@monroehistory.org).

Recent Acquisitions

* Commissioners’ Record, Monroe County. Indiana, Volume C, 1831–1839, transcribed and indexed by Brenda Lommel. 2022. Indexed by name and subject.

(Whitecapping Trial, continued from page 3)

After being sent back several times, the judge finally accepted that he had a hung jury, with the final vote 8 to 4 for acquittal. The retrial was venued first to Owen County, where it was not heard, and then to Morgan County, where the jury held for the defendants. William Norman was left to pay large court costs. Later in 1889, Nannie Norman, William’s daughter, sued Hezekiah and others for $5,000 in damages. The case was venued to Morgan County, and its disposition is unknown. William died at age 80 on May 8, 1922, and is buried with his first wife, Susan, in Rose Hill Cemetery.

Was justice done to William Norman? Few convictions were obtained in Indiana against whitecappers during the late 1800s and into the first decade of 1900. Finally, in 1912, Governor Marshall intervened directly to obtain convictions in the McFarland case, and prosecutions began to be more successful. Indiana whitecapping waned after that.

Notes

1. For a more general description of Monroe County whitecapping, see Lee Ehman, “Vigilante Justice: Whitecapping in Monroe County,” Monroe County Historian (April 2012), 4,7.
3. Ibid., p. 44-5.
6. Ibid., p. 22-4. I believe the family history used the transcript from the court recorder (see p. 22-9).
7. Ibid., p. 22-11.
8. Nannie Norman vs. Marquis D Reed, Isaac Bonham, Hezekiah Norman et al. November 1889 Term, Court Records Box 594, located in the MCHC Research Library.
9. Ehman (see Note 1).
A Note from the Director

By Daniel Schlegel

I hope you have enjoyed your newsletter so far. The articles from the Research Library are always top notch and intriguing. I learn so much about local history from them. Penny Mathiesen, Lee Ehman, and Beth Lau are such great writers and put so much effort into their articles. Just when I think I cannot believe what a great article that was, they manage to find another interesting subject and amaze me again in the next newsletter.

It is really remarkable what we have in our collection at the History Center. These articles and our exhibits only showcase a small portion of our holdings. It can be really difficult to show things when we have limited space, but we try to show everything in an inviting and engaging manner to promote Monroe County. We are looking to the future, and that involves you! We are hoping to engage more with our members and the public, and we are working on some ideas to present to you. So keep an eye out because our members are quite important and we’d like your feedback.

Phil Stafford, our board president, has come up with a great idea to reach out to more people. We will have several speakers come to talk and present in our Deckard Education Room. The first one will be in October, and we are very excited to have Pam Davidson talk about planned giving. This is a very important topic, and we are happy to feature a knowledgeable and dynamic speaker.

And we have been busier than normal with visitors to see the exhibits on display and to shop in the Museum Store. If you, or someone you know, might be interested in helping out at the History Center, we are on the lookout for friendly faces that would like to help at our Front Desk. It includes greeting and orienting people to our site, helping them find parking if they are from out of town, and selling items in the store. And there’s always someone that needs help with a project around here. If you want to know more, please reach out by stopping in to see us person, or email volunteers@monroehistory.org

Hope to see you soon,
Daniel

From the Educator’s Desk

By Andrea Hadsell

We celebrated the Bloomington Speedway centennial with two days of programming. Thanks to the generosity of our community, both events were free to the public to attend to learn and engage with Speedway history. A very special thank you to the IU Credit Union for sponsoring the event as well as our neighbors at the First Presbyterian Church for providing available parking.

Every October, we collaborate with the City of Bloomington’s Parks and Recreation department for our Dearly Departed Cemetery Tours of Rose Hill. It is a favorite program for many as we highlight the rarely heard stories of the community members buried in the cemetery. What tales will we share this year? Enter the cemetery if you dare!

For more information on upcoming programs, be sure to follow our website and social media.
Volunteer Spotlight

By Andrea Hadsell

We would like to give a special shout out to Scott Loman for all of his contributions to the History Center! Scott first volunteered in 2016, starting at just four hours a week in Collections. Since then, he has shifted his duties to the Research Library, joined the Board of Trustees, and serves as the chair of several committees. He even recently starred in one of our YouTube videos educating our community on how we use our card catalog.

Scott and Jim, his partner, are moving this fall to Arizona. We will miss them both very much and wish them safe travels in this new chapter of their lives!

Interested in volunteering with us? We have some opportunities available!

We’re seeking a volunteer to help year-round for the Monroe County History Center’s Garage Sale Fundraiser Extravaganza. If you love seeing the treasures of the sale, this may be the perfect opportunity for you! Volunteers must be willing to receive, clean, and distribute donations. As a request from our corps of volunteers at the sale, volunteers should be able to show proof of up-to-date COVID-19 vaccinations to ensure a safe working environment for all.

If you are a person that enjoys providing customer service and engaging with visitors, there are several opportunities to become a greeter at our Welcome Desk. Volunteers at the Welcome Desk assist guests as they enter the building to visit the museum, make purchases in the Dunn Museum Store, and donate items.

If these opportunities seem like something you would like to do, email Andrea at volunteers@monroehistory.org to get started!

Above: Scott and Jim planting succulents for a volunteer appreciation program.

Right: Garage Sale Volunteers Teresa Hull, Catryna Loos, and Linda Williamson hard at work.
Dunn Museum Store Minute

By Daniel Schlegel

Fall has arrived, and our selections for the Museum Store reflect this time of year! Cemetery tours are coming up, the cemetery committee will be active in this weather as they repair and take care of cemeteries, and the Civil War Roundtable has resumed its meetings.

This means we have books on haunted and spooky places in the Hoosier state and in Bloomington. Stop in to see what delightfully spooky books await you – they range from cemeteries, hauntings in Bloomington, and plenty of other great books to read.

One of the exciting things you read about earlier in the newsletter is the new Collections and Exhibits Department run by our newly minted Curator, Hilary Fleck, and new staff member Gabby Krieble. One of the great things about this is that with the extended exhibit schedule they are working on creating, we are able to plan our store offerings and offer more for the visitors. Thanks to their efforts, we brought in an exciting new piece of merchandise: “Order Up” shirts featuring three local restaurants. These shirts are fun and come in a range of colors from small to 2XL, but quantity is limited. Check out the exhibit and take home a great shirt today!

In addition to the long range planning for the exhibits, Education Manager Andrea Hadsell has been working on extending the range of programming for our family audiences. We will be stocking a great many items in the store to increase our offerings. For instance, the Abraham Lincoln bus that Andrea coordinated allowed us to feature the Abraham Lincoln and Civil War books and CDs in our inventory.

The Garage Sale Ladies have rested from the June Garage Sale and are restocking Sue Sue’s Boutique. These ladies work so hard on picking just the right items and making the space so attractive. If you need something unique or special, chances are you cannot find these items anywhere else. Stop by and see what they have on display!

Finally, anyone that misses a Monroe County History Club meeting can still stop by the Museum Store to pick up books about the topic, and you can check out the videos on YouTube. We have a great relationship with the History Club and are very grateful for their collaboration.

Operations News

By Justin Robertson

We’re continuing to onboard several interns, including former intern Grace Donahue who is coming back to MCHC to do her practicum work as a research assistant for our future planned podcast episodes. Daniel and I have been hard at work planning topics for episodes, and Grace and I will work closely together to create an entertaining, inclusive, and informative podcast about Monroe County, including the History of the Monroe County Historical Society, Staff Picks from the Collection, Bloomington as an Entertainment Mecca, and the History of Rose Hill Cemetery. Having spent many years doing radio, and even creating a radio program on WGCL for the History Center back when I was a student intern here, I have to say that I am very excited about this opportunity and look forward to doing the podcast with such amazing people on such interesting topics! Speaking of practicum students, Sarah Schaefer, our membership practicum student, finished her practicum, but has continued doing membership and development for the History Center as a volunteer. We are so lucky to have her, and she is doing amazing work!
Hello! You may notice that this edition of “Notes from the Curator” is a little different. Hilary has kindly lent me her column to introduce myself and share a little bit about what I’ve been up to in my first few weeks at the History Center. My name is Gabby Krieble, and I am the new Assistant Curator. Great to meet you, and happy to be here! I have been a Bloomington resident for the past eight years as I pursued an undergraduate degree in American Studies and two master’s degrees in Art History and Library Science at IU Bloomington. I’ve had the pleasure of interning and working at a variety of museums around town, but MCHC was my very first introduction to the world of museum collections. I am delighted to be back for the long haul!

Since joining the team at the start of August, I’ve been settling in and learning the ropes. I was able to help put the finishing touches on Order Up! Restaurants in Monroe County (on view in the Rechter Gallery through November 5). I was glad to pitch in at the end, but the vast majority of the credit goes to Hilary and her two fabulous student interns, Julie Stout and Jaqueline Harding. Jaqueline also designed two new cases in the Brown Gallery exploring early automotive fashion. As a lover of fashion history, it was such a treat to see those historic outfits come together. The lady’s hat is a particular favorite of mine. Be sure to check them out!

Three new interns will be joining us this fall. Kasha Appleton is coming aboard as our Thiel intern. She will be processing the newly acquired Herald-Times photo collection. Kasha is a history PhD student at IU. Krissy Brzycki is starting as our Press Club intern doing research on newspaper history in Monroe County! She is a sophomore in the Media School at IU. Finally, we will also be welcoming Matthew Nokes as our fall collections intern. Matthew is a senior history student at IU. We’re excited to have them join us!

To close, I’ll share a little more about my interests beyond Monroe County history. I love to thrift and collect unique treasures for my home—I have a particular weakness for glassware and ceramics. I am an enthusiastic novice gardener, and I love to cook and make flower arrangements with the things I grow. If you see me at MCHC or around town, come up and say hi! I am doing my best to get to know all of the lovely volunteers and regulars here at the History Center, but I can use all the help I can get. I’m so excited to be here, and I can’t wait to share all of the very cool collections and exhibits projects with you all in future newsletters!
Current and Upcoming Exhibits

COOK GALLERY: Go, Gerry, Go! Soap Box Derby Car Racing in Bloomington Opening October 1, 2022

The Soap Box Derby was a beloved institution in Bloomington for years as countless children flew down the Dunn Street hill in homemade derby cars. One of those children was Gerald Patterson, or Gerry, who was sponsored by Schmalz’s Department Store, where his father worked as a salesman. Gerry won 3rd place in 1963 in the “Schmalz's Special.” Great job Gerry! Stop by the Cook Gallery to see Gerry’s derby car and other memorabilia he saved from his 1963 race.

RECHTER GALLERY: Order Up! Restaurants of Monroe County August 2 to November 5, 2022

Monroe County has a long history of beloved restaurants that have come and gone, and some that remain today. Order Up! uses our collection of memorabilia and additional loans to tell the stories of institutions such as Trojan Horse and bygone classics like Pancho’s Villa. We encourage you to stop by and have a seat at the Ladyman’s diner counter or order dinner from the Nick’s English Hut booth. We’ll have menus from many Monroe County establishments for you to browse through, so stop by and let us know what is your favorite place to eat!

HILL GALLERY: Zines June 28 to October 29, 2022

A zine, short for magazine, is a self-published, small circulation work of original and appropriated text and images, usually distributed amongst friends or sold locally. Zines provide a community for socially isolated and marginalized groups through the ability to share common ideas. Therefore, zines become a tangible trace of these often less documented marginal communities. The History Center received two donations of zine collections, and we are excited to share these unique perspectives on life in our community with our visitors. Opening June 28th, the exhibit will focus on the zines created by Monroe County residents which are at times deeply personal reflections on life in our community.

DECKARD EDUCATION ROOM: We Answer the Call: Our Neighbors’ Stories from the COVID-19 Community Oral History Project May 24 to December 31, 2022

The exhibit, opening on May 24, features portions of the captured oral histories of Monroe County residents, business owners, and organizations. Health administrators and business owners share how they helped or were helped by our neighbors in the midst of the global pandemic. Hilary Fleck, Curator, together with Megan MacDonald, Research Librarian, began collecting oral histories in April 2021. We Answer the Call and the Community Oral History Project is made possible through the support of IU Health Bloomington Hospital, Indiana Humanities, the Bloomington Urban Enterprise Association, the City of Bloomington Arts Commission, and members of the History Center.

DECKARD EDUCATION ROOM: New Acquisitions to the Museum Collection October 1 to November 30, 2022

Over the past months, generous donors have given over 350 new items for the museum’s collection. This case display will share just some of the many unique objects added to our collection since January 1st of this year. From glass decanters, family quilts, and Johnson’s Creamery smokestack bricks, what will come in next?
When you check out our new displays on early automotive fashion, take a closer look at the man’s outfit. Our driver has finished off his ensemble with a fun and fashionable necktie featuring illustrations of early automobiles. How fitting!

Found at the MCHC

When you check out our new displays on early automotive fashion, take a closer look at the man’s outfit. Our driver has finished off his ensemble with a fun and fashionable necktie featuring illustrations of early automobiles. How fitting!

Found at the MCHC

When you check out our new displays on early automotive fashion, take a closer look at the man’s outfit. Our driver has finished off his ensemble with a fun and fashionable necktie featuring illustrations of early automobiles. How fitting!

Seen at the MCHC

Step into our Sports Gallery to see the new display on sprint car driver Rex Mitchell! A highlight of the display is Mitchell’s jumpsuit, embroidered with his name. Awards and photos related to Rex and his racing career are also on display.
Remembering

David Allison loved to see his girls happy and would do anything to make them smile. One of David’s pride and joys was teaching both girls how to remodel houses and use power tools at an early age.

Eileen Tess Balliet loved to laugh and did as much of it as possible unless she lost a poker game or an argument. Then her infamous scowl arose, and she ripped up cards, swore never to discuss the matter again, only to raise it again the next day. Eileen tended the birds at her feeders and waged a years-long battle against the squirrels. Eileen spent thousands of hours on many decks and patios setting the world straight, laughing and arguing, and taking as much pleasure as she could out of what was offered. Including yelling at the squirrels.

Lucy Jacobs co-authored numerous textbooks during her career. Her most successful book was first published in 1968 and she updated its 10th Edition at the ripe age of 88. She was always bright and cheerful until a few days before she passed. Lucy enjoyed sitting at the kitchen table and watching the birds, sitting on her patio in the woods, and outings in the car, as well as excursions in her push-chair through local parks and the IU campus.

Marjorie M. Kanne was a volunteer at the Bloomington Hospital, as well as Meals-On-Wheels. She was a former member of the Board of Directors of the Boys and Girls Club of Bloomington. After living in Bloomington, Indiana for 50 years, she and her husband moved to Carmel, Indiana in 2018.

Carrie Snapp was a member of the Trinity Episcopal Church in Bloomington. She enjoyed knitting and needlepoint, loved animals, and was known as a very kind and generous person. She loved her family very much. She will be greatly missed.
Calendar of Events

October
8- WFHB’s Saturday’s Child
11- Monroe County Civil War Roundtable
15- Dearly Departed Cemetery Tours of Rose Hill (register with City of Bloomington Parks & Recreation)
20- Planned Giving: How to Do Simply and Smartly What You Know to Do
24- Memory Walk
25- Monroe County History Club @ American Legion
29- HiStory Book Club

November
4 & 5- November Garage Sale Extravaganza
8- Monroe County Civil War Roundtable
12- WFHB’s Saturday’s Child
15- Mapping with Monroe County Field Notes @ MCPL
16- “Revolutionizing Dementia Care” Screening
17- MCHC Board of Trustees meeting
24- MCHC Closed for Thanksgiving
25- Annual Canopy of Lights Open House
26- History Book Club
28- Memory Walk
29- Monroe County History Club @ American Legion

December
10- WFHB’s Saturday’s Child
13- Monroe County Civil War Roundtable
14- Salt Creek Valley History Week- Friendship Cemetery History
19- Memory Walk
24 & 25- MCHC Closed for Christmas holiday
31- MCHC Holiday hours 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM