

Vigilante justice was alive in Monroe County in 1876

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In the winter of 1876, residents of Monroe County were violently reminded that some of their neighbors were still suffering from the disease of "vigilante justice."

Dissatisfied with the county's legal machinery, on the night of Feb. 8, 1876, a gang of masked men executed Cornelius Mershon who was awaiting his second trial a half a block from the courthouse.

The story of Mershon's untimely death began five years earlier with another puzzling event that was either a disappearance or a murder, depending on how you looked at it.

ON APRIL 14, 1871, John Moore, en route to his home in McClean County, Ill., stopped off in Bloomington and registered at the Old National Hotel located on Kirkwood Avenue. Naive, Moore flashed a wallet with nearly \$2,000, proceeds from a recent Kentucky land sale.

Moore's purpose in stopping off here was to visit his uncle, the Rev. E.P. Farmer, who lived west of town. After settling in his room, Moore strolled to the post office and happened to run into his first cousin, William Farmer, who offered to drive Moore out to the minister's house the next morning.

At the appointed time William was at the hotel with his buggy, but Moore wasn't. In fact, after a search, he didn't seem to be anywhere at all. Alarmed, the Rev. Farmer went to talk it over with the sheriff.

Already there were rumors about what had happened to Moore. Some said the night before when he disappeared, he was seen in Oscar Sowders' saloon, which was located on the west side of College Avenue a half a block from the square on the alley. A couple of men even went so far as to say they saw

a man killed in the saloon, but later before a grand jury; they suffered from poor memories.

CORNELIUS A. MERSHON had a bad reputation around town and had been given the nickname of "Crook." He hung out at Sowders saloon and rumors persistently linked him with the Moore disappearance. Some said he did Moore in and stuffed him into the fire box of the Monon engine standing in the station that night.

The first grand jury called to hear evidence about the case failed to indict anyone. But several juries later the prosecutor did manage to get indictments against Crook Mershon, his brother, Charles, (nicknamed "Hoosier"), and Francis Williams, who promptly got a change of venue for his case.

The trial began in April of 1875. Crook was given the option of bail at \$15,000. But the *Indianapolis Gazette* reported on the April 17: "Mershon is still in jail, and is not likely to get his bond filled, and for the present feels much safer in prison than out. It was noticeable that quite a number of strangers were in attendance upon the trial."

PROSECUTOR W. TUCKER had located a couple of key witnesses, but it wasn't easy for him. One, a Sam Johnson, 17 years old when the murder was committed, had been found by a detective in Tuscola, Ill. His cousin, William Fry, was tracked down and brought back from Arkansas to testify.

Tucker was smart enough to keep the cousins separated before they appeared in court, and their stories agreed in all of the important details. On the night of Moore's disappearance they had gone to Sowders' saloon together.

While they were standing at the bar, they heard a commotion. Johnson said he turned around to see Crook Mershon knifing a stranger. Wanting no part of it, Johnson suddenly

decided he wanted to be somewhere else — anywhere else, but Mershon headed him off at the door with threats of hanging him if he couldn't conveniently forget what he saw.

NOT SATISFIED that he had gotten his point across, Mershon button-holed young Johnson on the square the next day and repeated the warning. A third threat the day of the first grand jury hearing shut Johnson up completely. He was too scared to tell what he knew.

Fry, who was with Young in the saloon, testified that he had seen the man's body dragged into the alley and that afterward he and his wife were warned to forget about it.

The courtroom was packed as the trial dragged on. One of Mershon's lawyers, ex-Governor E. Dunning, tried to throw up a smoke screen of sentimental oratory that had nothing to do with the case.

Quoted by the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Dunning said: "When the mother of this man and I were young, we went almost hand in hand together as we started out life. We were happy, hopeful; the future looked bright and beautiful. We have always been steadfast friends and it hurts me to see her boy here."

DESPITE A BATTERY of competent defense attorneys both Mershon brothers were convicted, sentenced for life, and found themselves next at the South prison at Jeffersonville. But while they were idling behind bars, their lawyers were busy. Only five months after their conviction the Indiana Supreme Court ordered Monroe County to try the brothers again.

The new trial wasn't going to be a rerun of the first one though. Witnesses Johnson and Fry had disappeared again and wouldn't be available to testify.

On the night of Feb. 6, 1876 Town Marshal John Sears was

making his rounds when a bunch of masked men overpowered him and shoved him into the jail. He and Sheriff McKinney were tied up while one of the vigilantes got the keys to the cells from the sheriff's bedside table.

"Hoosier" Mershon hid under his cot and saw his brother dragged from his cell, begging for time to make a statement. Not interested in anything Crook had to say, the vigilantes put three bullets in his head and one in his chest.

ON THEIR WAY OUT, they dropped an unused noosed rope and a pre-written note on Sheriff McKinney's stomach. Badly written, the note sounded like a cross between taxpayers' revolt and just plain frustration over the legal process. Quoted by the *Indianapolis Gazette* the note said: "This is a warning to the Moore murderers: You can bribe Judge Laird, get new hearings by false representations to the Supreme Court, get your trials continued by swearing to lies, but you cannot come in over Judge Lynch. He is now on the bench, and you can have your choice. You can have one fair trial before Judge Pearson and submit to the verdict, or have a final trial before Judge Lynch. The Mershon harlots rust and shall leave the country, and Jim Mershon just has thirty days to get away; and if ever he returns he will meet the same fate of Crook. This family has cost the county over thirty thousand dollars. Mr. Pittman says, who once was prosecutor, and he made a good one, and Judge Lynch says they shall never cost another thousand."

"HENRY GILMORE, a hint to the wise is sufficient. Enough. Thirty days is long enough for you. And now the friends and sympathizers of the Mershons the least they say about the matter the better. The courts are not what they should be, but are courts of speculation and selling out. If

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