

In 1857, mob killed county constable

By ROSE WOERTZ

Special to the H-T

The men who were loitering around the courthouse and spitting tobacco juice said, "It couldn't happen here." But it did.

On a June night in 1857, Ed Bingham, a Monroe County constable, was sleeping peacefully in his home two miles from Stanford. During that night a mob swarmed down on his house and beat him so badly that he died a couple of hours later.

THE COUNTY CORONER who examined Bingham's body testified that he "was so horribly lacerated there was not one spot from head to knee that was not as black as beef liver . . . and there were knife gashes about the head and blue and black fingerprints on the neck."

According to law in Indiana, when a person meets with a violent death, someone must be held accountable. The Indianapolis *Daily Journal* of June 25, 1857, reported:

"Our readers will remember that some weeks ago a Mr. Edward Bingham, of Monroe County was taken from his bed one night, by a band calling themselves the 'Regulators,' and beaten to death. Four of the band, George Morgan, Enoch Morgan, John Koons, and Elisha Rainbolt, have been arrested, and are now on trial at Bloomington for murder. The Bloomington *Republican* says that seventy-five witnesses have been examined, and the trial is not ended."

WHAT HAD CAUSED the four men to be involved in Bingham's death? Some of the courthouse loiterers may have known the names of others in the mob, but they kept it to themselves. As with every murder, there were plenty of rumors. The most persistent

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one was that Bingham was murdered because he knew too much.

In the 1850's Monroe County had two law forces — one legal and one extra-legal. The extra-legal one was a group called the "White Cappers" or "Regulators". Self-styled arbiters of what was right and wrong, they took the law into their own hands.

Their brand of justice was handed out to anyone who didn't meet their standards of behavior. An adulteress could be whipped to reform her. A drunken father might be violently reminded by the Regulators that he needed to adjust his attitude toward his family. Bingham's murder wasn't just a case of justice — Monroe County style. Regulators could be found all over the midwest.

ED BINGHAM'S CASE was complicated and possibly linked to an earlier murder. In the winter of 1856-57, 69-year-old A. W. Vansickle, who lived southeast of Bloomington, was badly switched. Shortly afterward he died in Morgan County.

Counterfeit money was floating around in the county, and apparently Vansickle knew the whereabouts of one of the gang. The Regulators may have thought the counterfeiter they were looking

for was at his house. In trying to extract the information from Vansickle the mob got carried away.

Vansickle's death had to be investigated, and Constable Ed Bingham went to work on it. He may have known the names of some of the Regulators. (They wore white caps over their heads to hide their identities — hence the other name of "White Cappers".)

BINGHAM WAS REPUTED to be a drunkard. He had also, on the Friday before his murder, arrested some men who got rowdy at a house-raising. Whether he was killed because he knew too much or because of his life-style is a moot point.

Whatever the reason for his violent death, arrests were made, and the mill of justice in Monroe County Circuit Court began to grind very slowly. Rainbolt's case was dismissed in May of 1859 because he produced a witness who testified that he was somewhere else the night of the crime.

Enoch Morgan's case was venued to Owen County, where they meted out justice to him. George Morgan's case in Monroe County got underway in January of 1858. He was tried and found guilty, but there was a bizarre twist to the proceedings.

ACCORDING TO CIRCUIT Court records, a duly empaneled jury found him guilty. The verdict was arrived at before the end of the court term, but not reported until afterward when the judge was curiously absent. George Morgan's attorney argued that the conviction was therefore not valid and that the court couldn't process the case again because of the provision in the U.S. Constitution which states that a person can't be tried twice for the same crime.

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