

Strange circumstances and park

By ROSE H. McILVEEN

Special to the H-T

Is truth stranger than fiction? Of course it is, and the history of Bloomington's first park proved it.

THAT HISTORY INCLUDES benefactors, an unsolved murder, some political wheeling and dealing, a circus owner, an anonymous letter to the editor and ultimately a cast of thousands. Intrigued? Read on.

Once upon a time, in 1875 to be exact, 25-year-old J.H. Ryors built a factory to make spokes for wagon wheels. He picked a site about five stone throws end to end from the Courthouse.

Investors in the spoke factory didn't operate it long, but couldn't get together on what to do with it. So they did nothing, and by 1899 the property eventually became an eyesore.

A BILLBOARD ON THE north side only partially hid the ugliness. It would be charitable to call the eastern boundary a stream. Actually it was an open

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sewer. The squatter's shack, built of scrap lumber, added to the picture of neglect.

When John Harris was mayor and W.M. Showers of furniture factory fame entered into an interesting agreement. It isn't known which man got the idea for the park, but Showers agreed to pick up the tab for buying up claims to the property. Showers thought it would be nice if Harris could get the city council to agree to have a stone arch at the entrance. It would be inscribed, the W.N. Showers Park.

THE HARRIS-SHOWERS agreement came apart

at the seams when the latter died on Easter Sunday, 1919, before Harris got back into office again in 1922.

Harris did, however, get the city council to put up the \$5,200 to obtain the property. But the park idea lay dormant until August 1, 1923, when circus owner Henry Gentry led fifty volunteers who waded into the jungle-like "park" with picks and shovels to remove the rocks, cans, and wild growth.

Ten more months passed. On the evening of June 19, 1924, readers of the Daily Telephone found a letter to the editor chiding the Park Board with confining its funds to "improve the Cascades where only those with cars will benefit."

THE LETTER WAS SIGNED "Friend of the People". Not satisfied with the Park Board's assurances, "Friend" wrote again, announcing his plans to run for mayor on an "improve Third Street site" platform. A crossfire of letters followed.

Another year dragged by with the park still in lim-

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