

JEFFERSON COUNTY STORIES IN NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

Some of the most important events in Jefferson County history were reported in the big-city newspapers. That isn't a surprise. General William Tecumseh Sherman's visit to Jefferson County in 1878 brought thousands of veterans to Mt. Vernon and was widely reported. The cyclone of 1888 certainly made the national news—especially when Clara Barton came to help. Visits to Jefferson County by famous political figures like William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt were written about in newspapers across the United States. And the Hight-Sweetin murder case in the 1920s was a sensation that was reported about for months.

But who would have thought that smaller stories from Jefferson County would be in American newspapers from the 1870s to the early 1900s? Here are some examples from that time. Following the unfortunate journalistic axiom, "If it bleeds, it leads," most are sad. Nevertheless, all made the national news.

The *Chicago Inter Ocean* of May 8, 1874, had a small article about a fire that destroyed the St. Louis and Southeastern Railway machine shops in Mt. Vernon. It stated that there was no fire department, and that despite efforts by townspeople the building and machinery were total wrecks. It also said that the loss was about \$100,000, and that the company had no insurance.

On September 13, 1879, the *Chicago Inter Ocean* reported about a horrible, family story in Jefferson County. A fifteen-year-old farm boy named Bertie Knott was accidentally poisoned by his mother. The boy was sick. So his mother gave him what she thought was quinine, but it was actually arsenic. He died in "great agony in about an hour." The parents were "inconsolable."

**Special Telegram to The Inter Ocean
Mt. VERNON, Ill., Sept. 12.—Bertie Knott,
15 years of age, son of J. W. Knott, a well-
known farmer living four miles north of
this city, was accidentally poisoned this**

Another story about the death of a child in Mt. Vernon was reported in the *Belleville News-Democrat* on October 30, 1909. Elmer Landgraf, 4 years old, died suddenly of ptomaine poisoning caused by eating kraut.

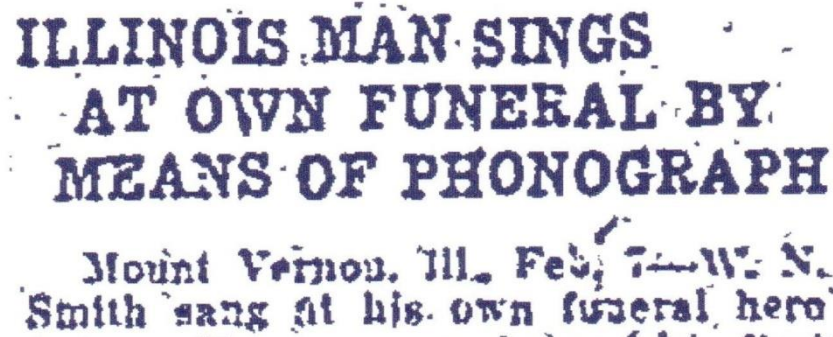
On June 15, 1907, the *St. Louis Palladium* had an article about a Mt. Vernon resident named James McCoy, aged 24, who was struck by lightning and killed. The story stated: "His clothing was torn off and the bolt charred portions of his body from head to foot."

On November 17, 1911, the *Morning Oregonian* of Portland, Oregon, reported about an Appellate Court decision in Mt. Vernon. The Illinois legislature had passed a law forbidding the re-marriage of **divorced**

persons for one year. The court ruled that it was illegal for people to evade this law by going out of Illinois to be married and then returning to this state to live. The decision made hundreds of marriages invalid.

The *Kansas City Star* of December 17, 1917, had a story about the robbery of a Mt. Vernon grocery owned by J. P. Boyle. Two men with drawn guns forced Mr. Boyle to open the cash drawer. Mrs. Boyle, who was in the rear of the store, grabbed a gun and rushed toward the two thieves. She was shot in the chest and died instantly. The two men escaped with \$60.

On February 8, 1920, the *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* of Columbus, Georgia, reported that a Mt. Vernon man sang at his own funeral. W. N. Smith and his wife had recorded "Rock of Ages" on a phonograph record years before his death. Then it was played at his funeral in 1920. Of course, recorded music had been around for many years before that date. (Edison invented the phonograph in 1877.) But in the days before our ubiquitous cell phones, it was unusual for average people to have a recording of their voice.



ILLINOIS MAN SINGS
AT OWN FUNERAL BY
MEANS OF PHONOGRAPH
Mount Vernon, Ill., Feb. 7—W. N.
Smith sang at his own funeral here

The fact that local news from small towns like Mt. Vernon was reported throughout the United States illustrates the changes taking place in America. The public was more literate; the newspapers had expanded and needed to fill their pages. Furthermore, inventions like the telegraph and the telephone made it easier to find content to do just that. Thus, smaller Jefferson County stories found their way into newspapers across the country.

Sources:

1. *Chicago Inter Ocean*, September 13, 1879
2. *St. Louis Palladium*, June 15, 1907
3. *Belleville News-Democrat*, October 30, 1909
4. *Portland Morning Oregonian*, November 17, 1911
5. *Kansas City Star*, December 17, 1917
6. *Columbus Enquirer-sun*, February 8, 1920