

Where's the Mayor?

The world of politics never seems to be lacking for interesting, and sometimes controversial happenings, whether locally, at the state level, or at the national level. This appears to have been true in the past, as well as in the present time.

The year was 1905, and Mr. William W. Ward was the newly elected mayor of Fairmont. The April 7, 1905, *Martin County Sentinel* stated that "Mr. Ward is a natural born diplomat, enterprising and up to date and will make Fairmont a first class mayor." He was reelected in April of 1907.

William W. Ward was the third mayor of Fairmont after it became a city. Known as "Billy" to his friends, Mr. Ward came to Fairmont in about 1900 from Peoria. He worked for a short time with his uncle, Thomas Gleason, in the saloon business before opening one of his own. He was also a partner with H. C. Keck in the drainage business, at one time he owned a plumbing business, and he was also one of the organizers of the Fairmont Telephone Company serving as both president and manager. He was apparently quite an entrepreneur of his time.

However, the popular mayor was soon to become best known for his absence. A headline in the October 18, 1907, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel* states, "Mayor Ward Disappears." The article continues saying that he left Fairmont about six weeks ago, and hasn't been seen since September 30th in St. Paul.

Newspaper accounts indicate that Mrs. Ward soon began taking active steps to locate her husband. She initiated a search through her attorneys. They sent a printed circular to law enforcement agencies relating the following information about Mr. Ward: "Disappeared: W. W. Ward of Fairmont, Minnesota." It went on to describe Ward as being about forty-six years old, grey eyes, grey hair, face smooth shaven, florid complexion, height five feet eight inches, weight 215 pounds. It also stated that he was last seen in St. Paul on Sept. 30th; having indicated that he was leaving for Fairmont on official business. It further said that Ward had lived in Fairmont for a number years, that he was "somewhat involved financially, but not enough to warrant his leaving for parts unknown, as most of his creditors were secured and his unpaid bills were few and in small amounts."

Further reports stated that “there has been nothing dishonorable in his business transactions.” Although some newspaper accounts of that time seemed to imply that there might have been some financial concerns for Mr. Ward, they did not elaborate and were perhaps somewhat speculative in nature.

Apparently, Mayor Ward left for St. Paul in early September on business and was last seen by a Fairmont resident in St. Paul on September 30th. Many speculated that he had met with foul play; some thought that he had committed suicide; and others suggested that he had quietly left rather than face the certainty of business failure. In any event, Fairmont was without a Mayor. The city council was at work attempting to find a viable solution, as the public was becoming concerned that there was no mayor of Fairmont, and the city charter of that time provided that vacancies shall be filled whenever they occur.

The January 17, 1908 edition of the *Martin County Sentinel* reported that “Billy” Ward had been spotted in Tacoma, Washington, by a Fairmont resident. In addition, other reported sightings of Mr. Ward were in Peoria, Indiana, Des Moines, Chicago, Texas, Seattle, and Alaska. The editor of the *Sentinel* reportedly received a letter from J. R. Dalton, referred to as a reliable man formerly of Martin County, stating that a Mr. William Hartley, another reliable man also formerly of Martin County, had spoken to Mr. Ward. He said that the ex-mayor had just come from San Francisco and was on his way to Tacoma. Apparently “Billy” Ward either did a considerable amount of traveling, or he had a number of “doubles.”

So, what exactly became of the former mayor of Fairmont? The January 31, 1908, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel* read, “Lost Mayor Is Located!” Mrs. Ward finally received a letter from her missing husband. In his letter, he wrote that he left St. Paul for San Francisco and that he became sick and grew worse along the way. He said he lay sick in Oakland for two weeks. He then spent a short time in San Francisco, and later went to Portland to visit an old friend for a couple of weeks. After that, his journey led him to Seattle, his location at the time he sent the letter to his wife.

Mr. Ward apparently gave no reason for his disappearance except that he was “all in financially, and saw no hope of bettering himself here.” The article speculated that he would eventually send for his wife and family to come west to live.

William W. Ward, the third mayor of Fairmont, was considered as being one of the “good fellows” of early Fairmont. He ultimately settled in Santa Ana, California, running a cigar store. He passed away in 1932 at the age of 65, as reported in the February 6, 1932, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*.

Visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont and review *Martin County Sentinels* of the era referred to above for more information on this topic, and others of interest about Martin County history.