

Gypsies Fined After Disorderly Conduct in Monroe in 1908

As I have been reading many years of Monroe newspapers I come across articles about tramps and gypsies in Monroe. I've seen gypsies portrayed in many westerns during my lifetime, but really never would have expected them to be in this area. The following information comes from two 1908 Monroe Evening Times articles.

Five Spanish women, members of a band of gypsies, were fined \$2 each and costs, amounting to \$5.52 in Justice Thomas Luchsinger's court on the afternoon of August 12. They were charged with disorderly conduct.

The women and three men arrived here early in the forenoon in three covered wagons, coming from the north. The women left the wagons as soon as they reached Jefferson street [17th Avenue] and proceeded to reap their harvest begging for money and looking for victims who wanted their fortunes told. One of the women entered the saloon of Fred Leiser and flim-flammed him out of a \$5 gold piece and some silver, snatching the money from his hand. He wanted to give her ten cents and had the gold piece in with some change he held in his hand. A traveling man was made to part with \$5 in the same way and another victim was worked for \$1. The money was afterwards returned by the men in the party.

The chattering women, with raiment [clothing] of many colors, attracted a large crowd to the justice's office. Alberlardo Brunet acted as interpreter and repeated the explanations made by the women. One of them had an infant in her arms.

The women were gathered in by Sheriff Durst and Marshal Blunt. The dusky visitors had been operating only a short time but provided a lot of excitement while they were at it.

The following information was gleaned by the Times from one of the Freeport papers that was printed two days later. It sounds like the following incident happened the next day. Ten dollars was "the price that a traveling band of Mexican gypsies charged Solomon Bechtold, a farmer residing north of here on the Cedarville road yesterday morning for wishing him good luck. Mr. Bechtold naturally protested, as the ten dollars was taken away from him by his unwelcome visitors, and as a result Chief of Police Silk rounded up four wagon loads of gypsies, arresting them on a charge of disorderly conduct."

Two of the women were the primary culprits in this case. Mr. Bechtold who had a crippled leg, was laying in the shade in his yard when the train of gypsies passed his place. The two women got out and approached him so that they could read his hand. He declined, saying that he had no money for such purposes. They wished him well anyway and at that point they sat down, one on each side of him. One of them "put her hands in his pockets. In one pocket was his purse. It was drawn out exceeding quick by the woman whose hand was in that pocket, while the other held Mr. Bechtold and helped her pal get away with the goods."

They extracted a ten-dollar bill from his purse and returned the balance, which amounted to a dollar or two. They started to walk away. He yelled for her to bring it back, but she kept on running and retorted that was her charge for reading a palm and wishing him good luck.

Mr. Bechtold notified Chief Silk by telephone shortly afterward; Chief Silk immediately began a search for the culprits. He arrested the whole bunch that afternoon on Carroll street and took them to the station. There were about five men and as many women "and twenty-five children if there was one. None of them were any too completely attired and some of the smaller ones were practically naked. The men and women were unkempt, dirty and disgusting in appearance."

The whole crowd was "hied" to the police station where Mr. Bechtold identified the two women who robbed him and swore out warrants before Magistrate Bentley. They were compelled to return the \$10 to Bechtold. Then the charge of highway robbery, which had been preferred, was changed to disorderly conduct and the women were fined \$15 each plus costs, amounting to \$44.30.



Headline from the Monroe Evening Times issue of August 12, 1908.

“Bedlam reigned at the station when the gang of gypsies were there. Unable to talk English, they nevertheless all talked at once to the police officers, the reporters and everyone else they got a chance at. Cadet Walter Vausmeier, who is a Spanish student and thoroughly conversant with the language, acted as interpreter, but the crowd, and especially the women, made life miserable for him by a continual clatter emphasized throughout by pokes, and nudges, and shakings of fists.

“When the amount of the fine was made known, a great scurrying occurred, and out of many inconceivable places appeared purses and bags. By and by the money was collected on a police station table in denominations ranging from five cents to five dollars. “Give us recede” continually clamored one of the men, who made it known that he intended to take the matter up with the Mexican consul in Chicago, declaring that he would get his money back immediately he explained the situation.”

After the transaction was finally completed and Signoritas Madena Ellena and Sophia Marguirita’s fines had been satisfactorily paid, the outfit was ordered to clear out of the station and the town immediately. They claimed to be enroute to Chicago. It was “with a sigh of relief that those who saw the four disreputable outfits and their numerous occupants clear the city for good.”

Chief Silk intended to show such bands of crooks as these that they must give Freeport a wide berth in their wanderings.

The Freeport paper suggested that, “The women are no doubt members of a gang that worked Monroe Wednesday.”