

Isaac “Ike” Sanders (1878-1929)

He would be called “murderer” and defender. He would go to jail and run a popular club in Bloomington. In the end, he would be remembered as “honest, sober, upright and a law abiding citizen” by all members of this community.

Isaac Joshua Beasley Sanders was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1878. It was said that he was named after everyone in the room when he was born. Ike, as he was commonly called, came to Bloomington when he was 14 years old from Boston where he had been living. He began boxing as a hobby and fought under the names of “Kid Sanders” and “Young Dixon.” In 1897 Ike married his first wife, Allie Headley. They had one daughter, Lillian. Sadly, she died before her first birthday.

Ike held a variety of jobs during his lifetime. At nineteen he worked as a driver for Edgar D. Harber, an owner of Harber Brothers Co., which made carriages, wagons, and buggies. Two years later, he was working as a hostler, a person who takes care of horses and mules. By 1902 Ike and Allie were working for the Adlai Stevenson I family. Stevenson would later become Vice-President of the United States under Grover Cleveland. Allie worked as a maid and Ike as a servant and driver for the family.

By 1904 Ike had opened “Ike Sander’s Restaurant Short Order House” on south Main Street. He was the first African American to own and operate a restaurant in Bloomington. He was known to provide “good meals and courteous service,” and also “boarding and lodging by the day or week in clean, well-ventilated rooms at reasonable prices.” Ike was well liked and the restaurant was successful with all the people of Bloomington. After Allie passed away in 1911 Ike sold the restaurant and moved back to Boston where his sister was living.

While living in Boston Ike got into serious legal trouble. Ike’s sister Lillie had been living with a man named Frank Williams whom she believed to be her husband. On the night of December 20, 1911 Lillie came to Ike with the news that not only was Frank not her legal husband, but that he had been extremely abusive to her for a long time. She said that night he had threatened to kill her and tried to strangle her. The next day Ike and Lillie returned to her home to gather her things. Then they went to Williams’ laundry store “to effect an understanding with him.” An argument began; Ike drew a gun and shot Williams. Ike fled the scene with Williams chasing him, but Williams collapsed and died.

Shortly after, Ike was arrested and held on a charge of murder. He was indicted for second degree murder. At this point Ike’s friends from Bloomington began writing letters. They wrote character references testifying to the facts that Ike had always been a peaceable and honest man with no history of breaking the law. He received letters from former employers, patrons of his restaurant, former and current police officers. The Police Magistrate of the City of Bloomington wrote that he “took pleasure in endorsing Ike.” The Chief of Police wrote that Ike had never been in trouble of any kind and was always hard-working. Even Illinois State Senator Frank Funk wrote saying Ike was an honest man respected by all. These letters helped as Ike never came to trial. He pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of manslaughter and was sentenced to three years.

After his release from jail, Ike returned to Bloomington and the restaurant business. In 1916 he opened the Workingman’s Club of the City of Bloomington. Shortly after this, he married his second wife, Lou Anna Brown. Together they ran the Workingman’s Club as equal partners. The Club was open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to midnight. It provided “rooms, recreation and food for the working man.” This didn’t leave much time for leisure, but Lou

Anna remembered that the two of them would take long walks all over Bloomington early in the morning. Membership in the club was a dollar per year but, Lou Anna recalled that “after awhile, everybody just came in.” The Club also had a pool hall and barbershop. Lou Anna said that people came from all over town because Ike was a friendly-type man and well-liked by all.

Unfortunately, Ike was forced to close the Workingman’s Club in 1919 when a new owner refused to renew the lease on the building. It appears Ike did not work again although Lou Anna went to work at Livingston’s Department Store. He died in 1929 of an unknown cause. Lou Anna survived for another 63 years. Ike is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his first wife, infant daughter, and mother-in-law.

Discussion Questions: Was Ike’s sentence of three years a fair and just sentence? Explain your answer.

Bloomington became a “real home” to Ike. How were Ike and Bloomington each enriched by the relationship?