

Humorist gets start in Laramie
By JUSTIN JOINER
Boomerang Staff Writer

Considered by some people to be one of the great American humorists, Edgar Wilson “Bill” Nye got his start in the literary world in Laramie, where his humor was known around town.

“Nye was always a kindly, jolly soul ever ready for a joke; he could sit on a dry-good box in any corner of town with his long legs tied in a knot and tell more stories and jokes than any other man who ever lived in Laramie,” an undated biography by Jane Gray says.

Born in Shirley, Maine, on Aug. 25, 1850, Nye moved to Wisconsin with his family when he was 2. While there, he developed a passion for law. Unfortunately for Nye, his grades were not as great as his passion, and he flunked the state bar exam.

Not willing to give up, Nye moved to Laramie, thinking the bar exam would be easier in Wyoming. However, luck once again was not on his side when he checked with Laramie’s judge for a job as a clerk. There wasn’t a position available, so he was referred to the Laramie Sentinel in 1876.

Nye gathered and wrote local items and humorous paragraphs and short articles for the paper, according to a biography on Nye by Lloyd McFarling. Many of the writings were unsigned but attributed to Nye from internal evidence.

These articles began the foundation of a career in writing.

“Nye’s humorous characteristics immediately began to bud and day after day his mirth-provoking articles appeared in its columns. Bill Nye’s literary career had begun,” Gray’s biography says.

Not long after starting at the paper, which published both daily and weekly editions, he earned the title of assistant editor and remained so until October 1877.

The Sentinel ceased publishing in 1878, and Nye went to work for another Laramie paper, the Laramie Daily Times, in 1879.

Nye, however, wasn’t content just writing for one publication and supplemented his income by writing for several other newspapers, including the Cheyenne Daily Sun and the Denver Tribune.

“These letters averaged about one column in length, and appeared at irregular intervals,” McFarling’s biography says. “They contained news from Laramie City and the surrounding area, editorial comment, essays on various subjects, tall stories, etc., — in short, they resembled Nye’s newspaper writings for the rest of his life.”

After a few years with the Laramie Daily Times, Nye opened up his own paper, The Laramie Boomerang, in 1881. It published daily and weekly editions with Nye as editor and manager. He wrote at least one humorous column a day, McFarling’s biography says.

Many of his columns were later used in his books.

Nye became ill in November 1882 and severed his ties with the publication in 1883.

In between full-time positions, Nye spent his time as a freelancer for several publications, including the Chicago Daily News and the Boston Herald.

He finally settled down and took a position at The New York World, where he wrote a weekly letter from 1886 until he died.

His last newspaper article published the day after he died said: “Some times it is perfectly

tiresome waiting for a man to die so you will feel safe in saying what you think of him, but if he happens to be a large, robust man, it certainly pays to do so,” Portland Evening Edition writer Arthur D. Hawkins quotes in an article.

During his life, Nye wrote many books, including “Bill Nye and Boomerang, or Tale of a Meek-eyed Mule, Some Other Literary Gems,” “Bill Nye’s Cordwood,” “Remarks” and “Bill Nye’s History of the United States.” Many of these books were very popular because of the gentleness of his humor.

“His wit was pure. It was uncorrupted by the wisecrack and glib gag,” Hawkins writes.

“There is no anniversary of the founding of American humor, but Bill Nye’s life marks an important milestone.”

He also contributed to several magazines, including Cosmopolitan, The Century Magazine and Ladies Home Journal.

Nye’s talents were not limited to writing. He worked as the Laramie Postmaster — a job he earned because of the 50 letters he wrote and sent out weekly.

Although he died at 45 due to a spinal infection, Nye’s short life will always be remembered for his pure wit, Hawkins’ article says.

On his tombstone in Arden, N.C., is inscribed a verse from Jeremiah: “I will turn their mourning into joy and will comfort them and make them rejoice from their sorrow,” the article says.

Justin Joiner’s e-mail address is lbedit10@laramieboomerang.com