

# AMERICAN HUMORISTS OF FOUR GENERATIONS

WHATEVER may be said of American humor, there is no doubt as to its distinctive quality. It is racy of the soil, it has held its own for more than a century, and it is today as fresh and as wholesome as the air we breathe.

While there are some who affect to believe that genuine American humor is in a state of vanishing and that in a few years it will become extinct, like the dodo, there are others—and they are largely in the majority—who maintain that it is never more promising than at present. At all events there is an awakened interest in the subject by reason of the announcement by a prominent magazine of a series devoted to a century of American humor, and it is well worth a critical examination.

American literature in its youth had no distinctively humorous phase,

though it displays a vein of satire which may have passed for humor. The early writers were given to polemic, they always wrote with a purpose, and that purpose was generally to "polish off the other fellow" with neatness and dispatch. The writers of today follow different methods, though their object may be practically the same. Philosopher Benjamin Franklin, born near the beginning of the eighteenth century, may be called our first famous humorist; at all events he wrote much, had the humor, and his vein was well developed and was consistent to the very last.

In 1817 was born James T. Fields, a native of Portsmouth, famous publisher of Boston, a scholarly writer who dearly delighted to tickle the muse's fancy with queer conceits. Close upon the heels of Fields trod the quaintest and most philosophic humorist America ever saw, Henry Wheeler Shaw, who distinguished his rightful name in the comeliness of Josh Billings. There was never another such as Josh except it be Artemus Ward. He was forty-five years old when he gave Josh Billings to the world and was sixty-seven when he died in 1885. There is a "heavy" humor in Josh Billings' "Sayings," not because of but despite their phonetic spelling. To prove this look up "Uncle Ezek," in which the hard sense is apparent without the aid of imagination.

In 1818, also, was born F. S. Cozens, author of the once famous "Sparrowgrass Papers" and "A Sojourn Among the Bluesoes." The next year the world was blessed with the birth of James Russell Lowell, hardly second to Holmes as a humorist, as those acquainted with his "Biglow Papers" can testify. In him, as also in Holmes, humor and satire were exquisitely blended, and it is doubtful if either has been greatly surpassed. Both Holmes and Lowell were, first of all, men of letters, and either would have become famous without the expression of the humorous quality. The "Biglow Papers" abound in orthographic peculiarities hard for an American to swallow, but there are many gems of "purest ray serene."

Lowell's birth year was also that of W. R. Travers, more wit than humorist, but one who made many laugh. Donald G. Mitchell (Ik Marvel), who was seventy-nine years old last April, displayed a quiet humor of the gentle sort in his "Theories of a Bachelor" and other works, always classically elegant, though of the old school style. G. H. Derby, later and better known as John Phoenix, was born in 1823 and died 1861, a few years after the appearance of his "Phoenixiana" and "Squibb Papers," 1856 and 1859.

America's ripe scholar and genial humorist of the "Easy Chair" sort, George W. Curtis, born 1824, made a "hit" in his "Potiphar Papers," published years ago. Like many another humorist, however, he rather looked askance at "fun" in his later years. He died in 1892, but a humorist of the rollicking sort, Charles Godfrey Leland, who was born the same year as Curtis, is not only living, but has just revised his famous "Hans Breitman" ballads, which first appeared more than thirty years ago. Bill Arp (Charles Henry Smith), whose humor has the genuine southern smack to it, was born in Georgia in 1826, where he still lives in Cartersville. Major C. G. Halpine, better known as Private Miles O'Reilly, was one of the few American humorists of foreign birth, having come from Ireland in 1847. He died in 1888 at the early age of thirty-nine, but another humorist, Charles Dudley Warner, born the same year as Halpine, 1829, nearly reached the century's end. Halpine was a wartime writer, but Warner's humor is for all time, having in it the essence of perennial youth. His delightful "Summer in a Garden" appeared in 1871, and his equally attractive "Backlog Studies" in 1872. He traveled much, wrote much and died in the fullness of years and knowledge.

The decade opening with 1830 yields a "baker's dozen" of humorists who acquired worldwide fame, first on the list being J. P. F. Knott, author of the amusing "Duluth Sketches" in congress. He was born in Kentucky, 1830, and still lives in Danville. In 1832 appeared one who wrote voluminously in after life as Q. K. Philander Doolittle, P. B. born Thompson, ye old Mortimer, an alleged humorist who during wartime had quite a vogue, but who at the death left little that will long outlast the century.

In 1833 was born David Ross Locke, who gave to the world the unctuous Petroleum V. Nasby of "Confederate X-Rays" fame. He "swung round the circle" with President Johnson, of whom, by the way, he once remarked that "it would have been \$10 in Andy Johnson's pocket if he'd never been born," and published "Eckoes From Kentucky," "Nasby in Exile," as well as a tender poem called "Hannah Jane." Locke (Nasby) died in 1888 after a very busy life.

The year 1834 was made notable in our annals for nothing else by the births of Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward), Frank Stockton and Charles H. Webb (John Paul). The first two are known the wide world over if the third is not; but what is better, the last two are yet alive, and very much alive for veterans of nearly three score and ten. Browne was born in Maine, Webb in New York and Stockton in Philadelphia. The first named died in England in 1867, the second, after inventing several useful machines and publishing books in prose and verse, now resides at Nantucket, Mass. He claims the proud distinction of having edited and published Mark Twain's first book, "The Jumping Frog."

It was superfluous almost to more than mention the name of Artemus Ward, a "downsized" born Browne, who achieved as great a reputation abroad as in this country and a greater in his country than any other humorist of his class. He may perhaps be tickled as the first of his genus to make humor a profession or to go into it with "malice prepense." He began



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reputation for this humorist. He lives in New York where he found the material for his Bowery characters. Tudor staff of St. Nicholas, possesses an exquisite humor and is a writer of neatly turned phrases and quaint conceits. He is author of "Imaginations, or Truthless Tales," and other books. His coadjutor, Albert Bigelow Paine, born 1861, has attracted attention by his point of view, nearly always humorous, in his "Gobolinks," "The Arkansas Bear" and "The Bread Line."

Although better known as a reader, Marshall P. Wilder, born 1859, 1874 claim to being a humorous author on account of his "People I've Smiled With," the number being legion.

A writer of humorous fables has arisen of late in the person of George Ade, born in Kendall, Ind., 1866, a Chicago journalist and author of "Fables in Slang," "More Fables," etc. The same year gave birth to Frank Gellert Burgess, writer and illustrator, who has made hits with his "Purple Cow," "Nonsense Almanac" and other books. A year younger than both these last (deceive them, as he might say) is Peter Finley Dunne, journalist and author of Chicago, whose rise to fame with Mr. Dooley has been phenomenal. He is one of the few examples of successful dialect writing in recent years which owe their success to the fact that they had solid sense behind them and glimmering through the chinks. His "Mr. Dooley in Peace and War" and "Mr. Dooley's Philosophy" have received high praise.

G. V. Hobart, a young Canadian doing journalistic work in the United States, brought out a formidable rival to Mr. Dooley in his Herr Dinkelspiel, whose German dialect is uproariously funny. Last to be mentioned as one of the younger humorists is Paul Laurence Dunbar, born in Ohio, 1872, and the only one of African descent who has achieved a wide and wide distinction. He is author of several books, such as "Lyrics of Lowly Life" and "Folk Songs From Dixie," which have received praise from such an eminent critic as W. D. Howells.

Some names famous in the past or present may have escaped the keen eye of the observer, but it is believed that nearly all have been mentioned in this article that have given this country its reputation as the home of humor. It is a pleasure to note that of the more than fifty American humorists here given fully half the number are living and most of them working today. Another encouraging fact is that the supply of humorous writing seems to keep pace with the demand both in quantity and quality. The prophecy once uttered that the fountain of American humor was about to run dry seems in no danger of immediate fulfillment.

FREDERICK A. OBER.

WINDY CITY'S TELEPHONE BOOM.

The demand for telephones in Chicago is beyond the resources of the telephone company, and it has withdrawn its canvassers. This increase is the result of the company's campaign of education in connection with the experimental installation of party lines in residences and small stores. Of the 16,000 new subscribers secured during the past six months 9,000 are persons who had never before used the telephone. It is hoped to increase the present number of instruments in the city (40,000) to 100,000 in two years, giving the city a larger number of telephone subscribers for its population than any other city in the world.

President John L. Sabin of the Chicago Telephone company has made a popular hit by installing movable phones in fashionable restaurants. You do not have to leave the table to enjoy this luxury. "Walter, bring me a telephone," is the only order necessary to have a fully equipped long distance phone at your elbow. By simply ordering a telephone a guest may be placed in communication with New York or Denver or any other city served by the Chicago Telephone company without moving from the table at which dinner or luncheon is being served. The service is very simple.

What is termed a "telephone spring jack" is adjusted to the wall near the table, and when the telephone is ordered the waiter brings the instrument, inserting a plug in the "spring jack," perfecting direct connection with the main telephone exchange.

SUCH IS FAME. Autograph letters of Wagner have been discovered in use as jam pot covers. A German journalist found them at the house of two maiden ladies, sisters of a musician long since deceased who had formerly been in intimate correspondence with the composer of "Parsifal." The ladies were exhibiting to him with much pride their cupboard full of jam when the journalist saw some writing on the covers which he recognized as that of Wagner. The superior thickness of the paper, which all most resembled parchment, had supplied the reason for its application to this domestic use.

Wales. This change is in response to the Welsh request that the principal figure in the royal standard or in the arms of their parliament.

The cotton crop of the United States now almost equals in value its wheat crop.

The gold mines of Mysore, India, are worked by American electrical devices, the power being from the melting alayan snow.

India produces annually about \$10,000,000 of gold.

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