

A low-angle photograph of a building facade with a climbing plant silhouette against a blue sky. The plant is a dark silhouette of a climbing vine with several large, rounded leaves. The building is a multi-story structure with a grid of windows. The sky is a clear, light blue. The overall composition is vertical and uses a low-angle perspective to make the building appear tall and imposing.

***BILL
NYE***

***BILL
NYE'S
SPARKS***



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Bill Nye

Bill Nye's Sparks

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BIOGRAPHICAL

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Edgar Wilson Nye was whole-souled, big-hearted and genial. Those who knew him lost sight of the humorist in the wholesome friend.

He was born August 25, 1850, in Shirley, Piscataquis County, Maine. Poverty of resources drove the family to St. Croix Valley, Wisconsin, where they hoped to be able to live under conditions less severe. After receiving a meager schooling, he entered a lawyer's office where most of his work consisted in sweeping the office and running errands. In his idle moments the lawyer's library was at his service. Of this crude and desultory reading he afterward wrote:

"I could read the same passage today that I did yesterday and it would seem as fresh at the second reading as it did at the first. On the following day I could read it again and it would seem as new and mysterious as it did on the preceding day."

At the age of twenty-five, he was teaching a district school in Polk County, Wisconsin, at thirty dollars a month. In 1877 he was justice of the peace in Laramie. Of that experience he wrote:

"It was really pathetic to see the poor little miserable booth where I sat and waited with numb fingers for business. But I did not see the pathos which clung to every cobweb and darkened the rattling casement. Possibly I did not know enough. I forgot to say the office was not a salaried one, but solely dependent upon fees. So while I was called Judge Nye and frequently mentioned in the papers

with consideration, I was out of coal half the time, and once could not mail my letters for three weeks because I did not have the necessary postage."

He wrote some letters to the Cheyenne *Sun* and soon made such a reputation for himself that he was able to obtain a position on the Laramie *Sentinel*. Of this experience he wrote:

"The salary was small, but the latitude was great, and I was permitted to write anything that I thought would please the people, whether it was news or not. By and by I had won every heart by my patient poverty and my delightful parsimony with regards to facts. With a hectic imagination and an order on a restaurant which advertised in the paper I scarcely cared through the livelong day whether school kept or not."

Of the proprietor of the *Sentinel* he wrote:

"I don't know whether he got into the penitentiary or the Greenback party. At any rate he was the wickedest man in Wyoming. Still, he was warm-hearted and generous to a fault. He was more generous to a fault than to anything else—more especially his own faults. He gave me twelve dollars a week to edit the paper—local, telegraph, selections, religious, sporting, political, fashions, and obituary. He said twelve dollars was too much, but if I would jerk the press occasionally and take care of his children he would try to stand it. You can't mix politics and measles. I saw that I would have to draw the line at measles. So one day I drew my princely salary and quit, having acquired a style of fearless and independent journalism which I still retain. I can write up things that never occurred with a masterly and

graphic hand. Then, if they occur, I am grateful; if not, I bow to the inevitable and smother my chagrin."

In the midst of a wrangle in politics he was appointed postmaster of his town and his letter of acceptance, addressed to the Postmaster-General at Washington, was the first of his writings to attract national attention.

He said that, in his opinion, his being selected for the office was a triumph of eternal right over error and wrong. "It is one of the epochs, I may say, in the nation's onward march toward political purity and perfection," he wrote. "I don't know when I have noticed any stride in the affairs of state which has so thoroughly impressed me with its wisdom."

Shortly after he became postmaster he started the *Boomerang*. The first office of the paper was over a livery stable and Nye put up a sign instructing callers to "twist the tail of the gray mule and take the elevator."

He at once became famous and was soon brought to New York, at a salary that seemed fabulous to him. His place among the humorists of the world was thenceforth assured.

He died February 22, 1896, at his home in North Carolina, surrounded by his family.

James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier poet, was for many years a close personal friend of the dead humorist. When informed of Nye's death, he said: "Especially favored, as for years I have been, with close personal acquaintance and association with Mr. Nye, his going away fills me with selfishness of grief that finds a mute rebuke in my every memory of him. He was unselfish wholly, and I am broken-hearted, recalling the always patient strength and

gentleness of this true man, the unfailing hope and cheer and faith of his child-heart, his noble and heroic life, and pure devotion to his home his deep affections, constant dreams, plans and realizations. I cannot doubt but that somehow, somewhere, he continues cheerily on in the unbroken exercise of these same capacities."

Mr. Riley recently wrote the following sonnet:

O William, in thy blithe companionship
What liberty is mine—what sweet release
From clamorous strife, and yet, what boisterous peace!
Ho! ho! It is thy fancy's finger tip
That dints the dimple now, and kinks the lip
That scarce may sing in all this glad increase
Of merriment! So, pray thee, do not cease
To cheer me thus, for underneath the quip
Of thy droll sorcery the wrangling fret
Of all distress is still. No syllable
Of sorrow vexeth me, no tear drops wet
My teeming lids, save those that leap to tell
Thee thou'st a guest that overweepeth yet
Only because thou jokest overwell.

BILL NYE'S SPARKS

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Washington, D. C.

Along toward morning, 1887.

Cashier World Office, New York.—

MY DEAR SIR: You will doubtless be surprised to hear from me so soon, as I did not promise when I left New York that I would write you at all while here. But now I take pen in hand to say that the Senate and House of Representatives are having a good deal of fun with me, and hope you are enjoying the same great blessing. You will wonder at first why I send in my expense account before I send in anything for the paper, but I will explain that to you when I get back. At first I thought I would not bother with the expense account till I got to your office, but I can now

see that it is going to worry me to get there unless I hear from you favorably by return mail.

When I came here I fell into the mad whirl of society, and attracted a good deal of attention by my cultivated ways and Jeffersonian method of sleeping with a different member of Congress every night.

I have not written anything for publication yet, but I am getting material together that will make people throughout our broad land open their eyes in astonishment. I shall deal fairly and openly with these great national questions, and frankly hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may, as I heard a man say to-day on the floor of the house—the Willard House, I mean. But I believe in handling great political matters without gloves, as you will remember, if you have watched my course as justice of the peace and litterateur. Candor is my leading characteristic, and if you will pardon me for saying so in the first letter you ever received from me I believe there is nothing about my whole character which seems to challenge my admiration for myself any more than that.

Congressmen and their wives are daily landing at the great national Castle Garden and looking wildly around for the place where they are told they will get their mileage. On every hand all is hurry and excitement. Bills are being introduced, acquaintances renewed, and punch bowls are beginning to wear a preoccupied air.

I have been mingling with society ever since I came here, and that is one reason I have written very little for publication, and did not send what I did write.

Yesterday afternoon my money gave out at 3:20, and since that my mind has been clearer and society has made fewer demands on me. At first I thought I would obtain employment at the Treasury Department as exchange editor in the greenback room. Then I remembered that I would get very faint before I could go through a competitive examination, and, in the meantime, I might lose social caste by wearing my person on the outside of my clothes. So I have resolved to write you a chatty letter about Washington, assuring you that I am well, and asking you kindly to consider the enclosed tabulated bill of expenses, as I need the money to buy Christmas presents and get home with.

Poker is one of the curses of national legislation. I have several times heard prominent foreigners say, in their own language—thinking, no doubt, that I could not understand them—that the members of the American Congress did not betray any emotion on their countenances. One foreigner from Liverpool, who thought I could not understand his language, said that our congressmen had a way of looking as though they did not know very much. When he afterwards played poker with those same men he saw that the look was acquired. One man told me that his vacant look had been as good as \$50,000 to him, whether he stood pat or drew to an ostensible flush while really holding four bullets.

So far I have not been over to the Capitol, preferring to have Congress kind of percolate into my room, two or three at a time; but unless you can honor the inclosed way-bill I shall be forced to go over to the House to-morrow and write something for the paper. Since I have been writing this I

have been led to inquire whether it would be advisable for me to remain here through the entire session or not. It will be unusually long, lasting perhaps clear into July, and I find that the stenographers as a general thing get a pretty accurate and spicey account of the proceedings, much more so than I can, and as you will see by inclosed statement it is going to cost more to keep me here than I figured on.

My idea was that board and lodgings would be the main items of expense, but I struck a low-priced place, where, by clubbing together with some plain gentlemen from a distance who have been waiting here three years for political recognition, and who do not feel like surrounding themselves with a hotel, we get a plain room with six beds in it. The room overlooks, the District of Columbia, and the first man in has the choice of beds, with the privilege of inviting friends to a limited number. We lunch plainly in the lower part of the building in a standing position without restraint or finger-bowls. So board is not the principal item of expense, though of course I do not wish to put up at a place where I will be a disgrace to the paper.

I wish that you would, when you send my check, write me frankly whether you think I had better remain here during the entire season or not. I like the place first rate, but my duties keep me up nights to a late hour, and I cannot sleep during the day, because my roommates annoy me by doing their washing and ironing over an oil stove.

I know by what several friends have said to me that Congress would like to have me stay here all winter, but I want to do what is best for the paper.