

Waverly farmer 'poet of the Plains'

By Charlene Tresner
For the Review

No land has greater sorrow,
No land has greater woe;
None brings you tales that harrow,
None sadder tales can show.
No land save Erin, only,
Such tales of woe can tell;
Of bothy, hidden, lonely.

Where fairy maidens dwell.
None boast such tales as DEIRDRE, by folk long
handed down, Descending through the ages, alive
in croft and town.

These lines were not from an English or New England poet but from the pen of a Waverly farmer, William Augustus Martin, who came west in 1887. In 1938 Martin wrote the epic poem "Deirdre, A Tale of Ancient Ireland," and published it in a small book in 1945.

Born on Oct. 26, 1871, in Livingston County, Ill., Martin with his family moved to a Nebraska homestead until the death of his father in 1880. After his mother with the three children moved back to Illinois, William, at age 16, set out for Dakota Territory, which is now Wyoming. Here he hunted, trapped, prospected, and carried mail by stagecoach before becoming a guard at the penitentiary in Laramie.

While a guard he met Birdie Gooding when she brought lunch to her father Joseph A. Gooding who taught various subjects to the inmates. On Sept. 8, 1896, Birdie and William were married; in 1899 they moved to Waverly where they first lived with her Grandfather Gooding on his homestead. In 1905, Billy, as he was called by his neighbors, homesteaded an adjoining 80 acres.

Reminiscing about Billy some 20 years after his death, Lillian Hatfield in Wellington Hi-Lites wrote: "He planted everything — cherries, wild plums, Damson plums. Some grew and some did not. He was an authority on what grew. He planted every variety of apple ever heard of and most of his truck garden produce he gave to the neighbors." Then she added, "He had the soul of a poet."

Martin, whose formal education had been sketchy, was a self-educated man, as he put it "never within shouting distance of a college degree."

O.E. Rayburn, editor of a contemporary literary magazine Arcadian Life, stated in a biography of Martin that he is "the most prodigious student I have ever met. He knows history and folklore as few men know them and his knowledge of English literature is profound and scholarly. He is versed in philosophy and knows the intricacies of natural science. And, strange as it may seem, he spent his young manhood as a cowboy, freighter, stage driver, and prospector in the pioneer West. He has a marvelous memory and has read and digested almost everything worth reading. He writes with ease and rapidity. It is not uncommon for him to write forty or fifty eight-line stanzas in a single evening. Many of his poems have been printed but his unpublished work runs into thousands of pages."

Noah F. Whitaker in the Poet's Messenger of October 1937 proclaims W.A. Martin as America's greatest living poet. He states: "If you have not heard of him it is because he, like other men of true worth and genius, has abstained from personal ballyhoo."



William Augustus Martin (1951)

"Light-in-Darkness," the history of early Wyoming and Colorado country, and "The Foster Brothers," a history of the Cache la Poudre Valley, are two books published by Martin.

"Light-in-Darkness" is available at Fort Collins Public Library but no copies of "The Foster Brothers" have been located. He also published several volumes of verse in addition to "Deirdre": "Childe Roland, A Tale of Early England"; "Ultima Thule, a Vision of the Future"; "Unusual Poems in an Unusual Form"; and "Western Verse."

Dubbing himself "The Poet of the Plains," he sometimes signed his poems with a pseudonym, "W.H. Williams."

One of Martin's unpublished manuscripts entitled "Negus in Johnson County," a history of the Johnson County Stock War, may be read in the Fort Collins Public Library's local history area.

"For years when anyone mentioned Waverly, the personality of Billy Martin came to mind," said Lillian Hatfield, remembering that he wrote regularly for the Express-Courier of earlier days and later for the Coloradoan.

A grade school teacher in the area, Mrs. Hatfield particularly recalled the Literary Society that the Martins helped to organize. "The extraordinary range of literary endeavor was due in part to the efforts of Mr. and Mrs. Billy Martin. There were debates, skits, harmless bits of gossip and news, and spelling bees." Both children and parents took part in the programs held once a month at various schools in District 55.

Mrs. Hatfield (with two other teachers) remembered debating Billy Martin, Mark and David Harned on the question "Should the Ku Klux Klan Be Allowed To Function?" But writing many years later she didn't recall which side won.

The Martins were parents of three children: Mrs. Helva McQuain of Fort Collins; Mrs. Hazel Walker of Ventura, Calif.; and the late William A. Martin, Jr.

Billy Martin lived to the age of 84 when he died in a Fort Collins nursing home on Nov. 5, 1955.

Asked to state his philosophy of life in 1938, he replied: "I had nothing to do with coming here. God brought me into the world and he will call me when I have accomplished the work he has planned for me. It is up to me to try to leave the world at least a little better for my brief residence herein."

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