

## Kin Hubbard

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Born on Sept. 1, 1868 in Bellefontaine, Ohio, Frank McKinney Hubbard was the youngest member of a family that included five older brothers and sisters. Fred C. Kelly, who chronicled his friend's career in *The Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, remarked that Kin, who was named after his father's friend, an Ohio politician, was part of an eccentric family. "Neighbors often said the Hubbards were 'the best people on earth and the queerest,'" Kelly remembered. Kin's father, Thomas Hubbard, was a fiercely Democratic newspaper editor who often suffered for his political beliefs. During the Civil War when he was editing a Democratic weekly, the *Empire*, in Dayton, an angry crowd threw the crusading journalist out of a second-story window. Luckily, Hubbard's fall was broken by an awning and the editor moved on to friendlier surroundings in Bellefontaine, where he established the *Weekly Examiner*.

Reminiscing about her husband's family, Josephine (Jackson) Hubbard, whom Kin married in 1905, said that the Hubbard family would often gather around the fireplace in the evening to discuss the day's events, especially the different characters who wandered into the newspaper office. The discussions, however, soon turned into arguments that became so heated, according to Josephine, that the family would all leave the room. Eventually, the family ended up back in front of the fireplace. "It was the strangest family you ever saw, loyal but opinionated," she said.

In these interesting surroundings, Kin displayed an artistic flair at an early age. In an autobiographical sketch he provided the *News* a few years before his death, Hubbard said that from the time he was old enough to hold a pair of scissors, he could "cut from blank paper any kind of an animal with a correctness and deftness that was almost creepy." This artistic talent, however, did not translate into classroom success, as Hubbard dropped out of school before the seventh grade and took a job in a paint shop. His father couldn't be too upset at his youngest child, as he seemed to miss Kin's presence during the day. He once complained to a teacher who made his son stay after school that if his son "doesn't get his lessons, it's because you don't know how to teach. Besides, the boy's needed for errands at home."

Although displaying no enthusiasm for school work, Hubbard, like fellow Hoosier humorist George Ade, who figured prominently in the artist's subsequent career, displayed a passion for the theatrical life. From his youth until his death, Hubbard would drop whatever he was doing if a circus came to town. He also was a familiar presence at Bellefontaine's Grand Opera House, where he was the official seat duster. Asked by the owner of the paint shop where he worked what he wanted to be, Hubbard had a career in mind: "I want to be the sole proprietor of a good, well-painted, comprehensive, one-ring circus."

Politics, however, provided Hubbard with another livelihood. With the election of Democrat Grover Cleveland to his first term as president in 1884, Hubbard's father was rewarded for his lifelong devotion to the Democratic party with an appointment as postmaster. Kin clerked at the post office for a time, but it did not cure his ambition for the theatrical life. During his employment, he made trips to the South as a silhouette artist and even enrolled in the Jefferson School of Art in Detroit. That experience, however, lasted only a short time as Hubbard complained that the school was "too tame."

In looking back over these years, Hubbard blamed his wanderlust on the fact that he had a secure home to rely upon. "I knew during those formative years that I could always return home, walk up to the desk behind the general delivery window and go to work at a living wage in the post office," he said. Although always busy in one occupation or another, Hubbard realized that his life lacked direction. "While I worked hard, I dilly-dallied. I paid a big price for the knowledge that I had a soft place to alight, back home," he recalled.

Hubbard's love for the theater, however, paid off in a way that set the course for his future career. After witnessing a local performance of the Grand Bellefontaine Operatic Minstrels and Professor Tom Wright's Operatic Solo Orchestra, Hubbard wrote to a friend in Indianapolis about the show, embellishing his remarks with some drawings. Impressed with Hubbard's artwork, the friend showed the drawings to John H. Holliday, *Indianapolis News* owner and editor. The friend wrote to Hubbard and urged him to come to Indiana and try for a job on the *News*. Hubbard agreed, but once in the city he sat in University Park for nearly a week before gaining enough courage to approach the newspaper for work. Finally given a job, Hubbard remembered the editor remarking as a salary was agreed upon (\$12 a week), "I reckon you've got to live."

Hired in 1891, Hubbard remained at the *News* for three years. During that time he produced a number of works for the newspaper, but, as he remembered, was "always handicapped by not knowing how to draw. I could execute rude, sketchy caricatures that were readily recognized, but I knew nothing of composition, light and shade, and perspective." Although apprehensive about his position, Hubbard did manage to enjoy his life in Indianapolis. Given an annual pass to local theaters, he never missed a show or, when they came to town, a circus. Admittedly not advancing his skills as a newspaper artist, Hubbard was nevertheless "storing up a vast amount of theatrical knowledge and incidentally accumulating a fine assortment of canes and overgaiters."

The end of his first stint at the *News* came about as the result of the hiring of a new managing editor who wanted, according to Hubbard, "a real artist who could draw anything." Called upon by the editor to produce a drawing of an angel for Easter, Hubbard didn't panic, but hurried to the city editor, who liked the young man, and asked for his help. The sympathetic editor found an art student to furnish the needed illustration (described by Hubbard as a "production that would have made a circus wagon woodcarver turn green with envy") and Hubbard's job was saved for a time.

His time at the *News*, however, would be short. Called upon to draw for the newspaper pictures of the intricately-restored interiors for a number of city banks, Hubbard threw up his hands and departed Indianapolis for the safety of the family home in Bellefontaine. During the next few years, Hubbard kept busy by again visiting the South, driving a mule team in Chattanooga, serving as a gatekeeper for a Cincinnati amusement park, and working as an artist for the *Cincinnati Tribune* and *Mansfield (Ohio) News*. In 1899, the thirty-one-year-old Hubbard received a letter from the *Indianapolis Sun* inviting him to work for the newspaper. He accepted the offer and during the two years he worked at the *Sun* "really made more progress as an artist . . . than I had in all the years before," he said. Hubbard rejoined the *News* as an artist in the fall of 1901 and worked there until his death.

Upon his return to the *News*, Hubbard became well-known for his caricatures of state political figures, particularly Indiana legislators. In working with politicians as subjects, he preferred to draw those with whiskers and hair, as caricaturing bald lawmakers was "just like drawing a cocoanut." Although a collection of these drawings was published in 1903, Hubbard's lasting fame would come not from politicians, but from a rustic character who made a habit of commenting on legislator's foibles all the way from the wild country of Brown County.

In 1904, while traveling on trains during campaign trips by Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan and Republic vice presidential candidate Charles Fairbanks, Hubbard found that at campaign's end he had some extra material. After first experimenting with such names as Seth Martin, Steve Martin, and Abe Hulsizer, Hubbard finally hit on the right one--Abe Martin. On 17 December 1904 the Abe Martin character made his first appearance. The drawing showed a smiling, whiskered gentleman staring at a playbill featuring a scantily-clad (for those days) woman. At the drawing's bottom, the character commented: "If I thought that blamed troupe done everything it has pictures fer, I'd stay over this evening and go home on the interubin." The feature, Hubbard laconically recalled years later, "caused some favorable comment and it was decided to continue it."

On 3 February 1905, Hubbard moved Abe Martin to Brown County, where he would remain for the rest of his career. The artist described the area as "a rugged, almost mountainous, wooded section of Indiana without telegraphic or railroad connections--a county whose natives for the most part subsist by blackberrying, sassafras-mining and basket making." Finding that sometimes he had things to say that Abe Martin would be unlikely to utter, Hubbard added to his cast with such delightful country neighbors as spinster Miss Fawn Lippincut; senior citizen Uncle Niles Turner; teacher Professor Alexander Tansey; editor and publisher of the Bloom Center Weekly Sliphorn the Hon. Ex-Editor Cale Fluhart; businessman Tell Binkley; and many others. In naming his characters, Hubbard sometimes used the names of people he knew in Bellefontaine. He also found that another good source was Kentucky jury lists.

An immediate hit with *News* readers, Abe Martin found an expanded audience in 1905 when Hubbard himself, just in time for the Christmas season, released a book featuring

Abe and his humorous remarks--a publishing tradition that continued for years to come. Along with Abe Martin's remarks, the first collection included an introduction by Meredith Nicholson and a poetic tribute to the character from the Hoosier Poet himself, James Whitcomb Riley, who immediately recognized that the Ohio native had in his hands a potential gold mine.

Shortly after the first book was released, Hubbard happened to meet Riley on the street. Hubbard noted that Riley told him: "Kin, your book is bully: You've found yourself. You've got a great character in Abe and there is no end to his possibilities. I want you to stick right with him, and some day (taking a pencil from his pocket and holding it up) you'll be receiving checks--money--and you'll be amazed at what a lead pencil and a little thinking will do."

Hubbard's career received an additional boost in 1910, again thanks to a Hoosier author. In May of that year an article about the Abe Martin feature appeared in *American* magazine. The article's author, the aforementioned Ade, lavishly praised Hubbard's work. "His comments on men and affairs prove him to be a grim iconoclast, an analytical philosopher and a good deal of a cutup," Ade said of his fellow Hoosier humorist. Before the article had appeared, Hubbard's friend Kelly had been trying to find a firm to syndicate Abe Martin nationally. Kelly was turned down by the McClure Newspaper Syndicate in New York because that agency thought Abe Martin was merely a local phenomenon. Ade's piece changed that view in a hurry, as syndication offers poured in after its publication. Hubbard signed with the George Matthew Adams Syndicate and Abe Martin was soon appearing in approximately 200 cities.

Hubbard's working environment at the *News* was very conducive to creating humorous comments. He worked in a section of the newspaper that came to be dubbed the "Idle Ward." Along with Hubbard, other members of that delightful company included ace reporter William Herschell and cartoonist Gaar Williams. The trio was productive, but Kelly noted that the men "seemed idle to others because they always had time for talk." Herschell, best known today for his poem "Ain't God Good to Indiana?," had fond memories of those days at the *News* with Hubbard. Herschell recalled once incident that highlighted Hubbard's ability not only to find humor in others, but in himself as well. A devoted fan of perennial Democrat presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, Hubbard took the Bryan's last defeat in stride. Ducking into a darkroom at the *News* after Bryan's campaign went down in flames, Hubbard soon appeared swathed head to foot in bandages and supported by crutches. Herschell noted that his friend "limped through the editorial rooms. He neither smiled nor spoke, but went on his battered way, the rest of us roaring our delight at his satire."

Although he had repeated job offers from other newspapers, Hubbard remained at the *News*, where he eventually left the "Idle Ward" for a private office. "He was very devoted to the *News*," his wife Josephine noted. "The *News* had been good to him and he'd been good to them." Along with Abe Martin's success, Hubbard also produced for the newspaper a popular weekly series of humorous essays for the Sunday section called "Short Furrows." When asked why he stayed in Indianapolis, Hubbard quoted a friend of

his whose uncle wanted him to relocate to Denver to run a drug store: "He said, 'I'd rather stay here where I'm known and can play in the band.'"

Despite the critical and popular acclaim Hubbard enjoyed for his work, he often seemed uneasy with his fame. His wife remembered enduring her husband's anger when she listed his occupation in the city directory as artist. "Well he just went clear to pieces. He said, 'Don't ever call me an artist 'cause I'm not.' I said, 'What are you?' He said, 'Well, I suppose you'd just call me a writer. I don't know,'" Josephine Hubbard told an interviewer. She also remembered that Hubbard didn't like being called a genius. "He didn't take it seriously ever," she said.

On Dec. 26, 1930, at his new North Meridian Street home, the sixty-two-year-old Hubbard died from a heart attack. Just the day before he told his wife and two children that it had been the happiest Christmas of his life. Tributes to Hubbard flooded the *News* following his death. Although touted as "the humorists' humorist" by D. Laurance Chambers of Indianapolis's Bobbs-Merrill Company, Hubbard probably wouldn't have let the praise go to his head, preferring to remember what Abe Martin once said: "Flattery won't hurt you if you don't swallow it."