

William Richard White (1844-1906)

William Richard White was born on December 22, 1844 in Goosenest Prairie, Coles County, Illinois. The town, now known as Lerna, is located in Southeastern, IL near Charleston. He was the son of Bartholomew and Elizabeth Easton White. William had eleven brothers and sisters: Lewis B., Paroleane, Arminda J., Hannah E., Delilah Emiline, Mary C., James Napoleon, Sarah Malinda, Martha E. and Melseria. The White lineage can be traced back to Revolutionary War. William's great-grandfather, William White, fought for South Carolina and died in the "war for independence."¹ White's grandfather, William White, migrated to Illinois settling in Coles County on March 3, 1828 where William's father, Bartholomew, made his livelihood as a farmer and a traveling minister. The White's were neighbors and friends of Thomas Lincoln, father of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, the White's lived a mile east of the Lincoln family.² Bartholomew wrote to Abe several times as President and officiated at the funeral of Thomas Lincoln. When William was a boy, the family moved to Cumberland County and settled in the town of Neoga. William lived there until the fall of 1890 when he, his wife and children moved to Bloomington. Their house was located at 612 N. East Street where the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts now stands.

When William was growing up he had serious trouble with his eyes; an extreme sensitivity to light. According to family lore, the first eight years of his life were spent in almost total darkness. It was said that he was forced to "remain in a large wooden cupboard underneath a bed from which heavy quilts were hung" to block the light.³ By the time William was eleven his eyesight was well enough that he could attend school which he did sporadically until the age of eighteen. He was very eager to learn and studied when he could outside of school, even as he plowed the fields of his family's farm.

When William was eighteen, he began teaching school and continued to do so for fourteen years even though he himself had little formal education. What little education he did have equaled a first grade certificate.⁴ In addition to regular school, William also taught singing and astronomy. It was as a teacher that William first tested the waters of invention. He created an idle book that he kept in his vest pocket. If a pupil was found to be "idle" during school hours, they would receive a mark. If a pupil acquired three marks that day, they would be whipped. During his fourteen year career of teaching, he only had to whip one boy. He explained to his students that although lying and cheating were sins, to be idle was hurting themselves, their parents, and teacher. A warning from then on was all that was needed. White always challenged his students. Many times he would assign them hard questions to take home and force them to ask for help from their parents. He taught his students to learn for today and not tomorrow, not to fear mistakes as it only proved what they did not know. At one school where he taught he even changed spelling books from the widely used Webster's to McGuffie's. This resulted in a spell off among students from a rival school that used Webster's and it turned out in White's favor.⁵

Although White's literary prowess proved rewarding, it was as a vocal composition teacher where he met his future wife, Miss Harriet Keller, daughter of Riley and Harriet Miller

¹ *The Biographical Record of McLean County, Illinois, Illustrated.* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1899). 278

² *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 278

³ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 282

⁴ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 282

⁵ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 284

Keller. She was a student in his music class. They would marry on October 7, 1866 in Neoga. They resided in Neoga where Harriet bore them seven children, five daughters and two sons.

In 1871, misfortune fell upon William when he lost their fifty acre farm and home. This may have occurred as a result of the Panic of 1869-1871. The panic spread globally as both the U.S. and Europe fell into an economic depression. Interest rates increased while property values decreased and money was being loaned with no promise of early return. With the sudden economic downturn, William turned to invention for income. Considering his work as a farmer and his mechanical ability, the devices he would invent would directly benefit his fellow farmers in the hopes of making farming a little easier. Later in life he would recount to others the story of how he began inventing, stating that, "Being now entirely broken up by bad crops and sickness, I put my wits to work to invent a fence which would take much less rails to fence a pasture."⁶ Fencing was very important to farmers in Illinois as it protected fields from wandering animals, enclosed pastures, and marked property lines. His invention made it possible for farmers to use parts of their existing fence without removing the entire fence.⁷ After a few weeks of working on his idea for this new fence, he succeeded in creating "a rail and plank fence that did not require a wire, bolt, pin or auger hole."⁸ With no money for a patent, White relied on loans from his sister, Delilah and other friends. He promised reimbursement of \$100 each for every \$1 he borrowed. White's brother-in-law also offered a pig which White sold for \$3.00. White secured the patent within a few months and with the money he received from selling his fences, White bought his land back, paid the mortgage on his mother's land, and successfully paid everyone back who had loaned him money, especially his brother in law whom he gave \$300 for his pig investment.⁹

White did not stop with this invention. He went on to invent a new type of gate as well. It was after he moved his family to Bloomington in 1890 that White patented his most successful invention, a drive gate. White invented what is considered the precursor to the automatic garage door. This gate allowed the farmer to stay seated in the carriage, pull a cord or wooden dowel, and the gate would swing open.¹⁰ The farmer would then drive through the gate and pull another lever to close the gate behind him, all without leaving the carriage or wagon. With a possible patent pending, White opened a factory at Grove and McClun streets. White's factory remained open day and night to meet the demands of the orders. For 104 days he brought in \$500 daily, which today would be about \$13,200 a day. During most of his career his average daily sales were about \$300 to \$400. In less than two years he had sold \$150,000 worth of gates, which today would be worth about \$4 million. His gates were "painted; insured for ten years and will last a lifetime by changing posts."¹¹ He also claimed that it was "cheaper than any wood gate, for its durability and resistance to stock and its accuracy in latching."¹²

In selling the gate, White offered merchants the option to learn from White how to make their own gates or buy gates from him and sell them. He started his salesmen out by giving them each 1,000 handbooks, taught them "how to make and set up the gate," showed them how to fill

⁶ Bill Kemp. "Automatic Gate Makes a Fortune" *The Pantagraph*, December 3, 2006, p.B5

⁷ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 283

⁸ William White. Brochure- Information on White's Drive Gate, ca. 1899, McLean County Museum of History Archives, 5-6

⁹ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 283

¹⁰ Brochure on White's Gate

¹¹ Brochure on White's Gate, 8-9

¹² Brochure on White's Gate, 3

out deeds, gave them “twice as many counties or states to sell on the halves as you buy, letting [them] make [their] own gates” or he would make them at his factory in Bloomington at his own cost and once the gate was sold, he would recoup his cost from the seller out of the profits.¹³ The sellers also had models of the gate they used to sell the gate to people. He would also give the sellers half the sale if he was to sell a gate to a customer in someone else’s territory or another seller sent a customer to him.

White received many letters from sellers telling him of their successes in selling the gate. He often used his seller’s testimonials as a way to promote and sell his gate too. One man, S.J. Hanson, wrote to White and said that he sold about \$9,000 worth of gates in about six months and expected to sell \$20,000 total for the year! Another man stated that he had doubled his initial investment with White through sales of the gate.¹⁴ Customers of White’s were also very pleased as well. “I have used one of Mr. Whites drive gates on my farm, and would not take any reasonable amount and do without it,” stated Mr. J.A. Parrett. A Mr. John Mallow said that “it is the best gate I ever saw!” While a Mr. C.H. Washington wrote to White that, “everyman I have sold to speaks in the highest terms of the gate.”¹⁵ It was also not uncommon for farmers (who were his main customer) to buy multiple gates from White as practical and durable gates and fences were an absolute necessity for farmers at this time.¹⁶

White began to exhibit his gate all over the U.S. and even in different parts of the world. He took his invention to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and was awarded a “blue ribbon and diploma.” By May and June of 1897 White’s drive gate was patented, the only one of its kind. White then exhibited the gate at the Omaha Expo in 1899 and was given a gold medal. He also exhibited the gate at the Paris Expo in 1900. The United States Government also placed his invention in patent office exhibits in their officers across the country from 1884-1897.¹⁷

On January 18, 1903 William’s wife Harriet died. Not long after that William’s own health began to decline. He had suffered from severe stomach trouble that developed into dropsy, (which is now referred to as edema or swelling of tissue caused by fluid under the skin). He died on July 10, 1906 at the age of sixty-one. At the time of his death he was a very wealthy man. In his obituary, it stated that it seemed “unfortunate after overcoming so many obstacles in life that he should be taken away just when enjoying the fruits of his labor.”¹⁸ Over his lifetime, White patented over seventy inventions and was one of the most respected “gate men” in the nation. He was in the truest sense a self made man. He was always happy to aid others along his path. His friends knew him as “Happy Bill White,” a generous man.¹⁹ He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington next to his wife.

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

¹³ “Wm. R. White explains his gate to 1,500 people at Canton, IL,” undated, unknown newspaper, McLean County Museum of History Archives

¹⁴ Brochure on White’s Gate, 17

¹⁵ Brochure on White’s Gate, 24-25

¹⁶ “Automatic Gate Makes a Fortune.”

¹⁷ “Wm. R. White explains his gate to 1,500 people at Canton, IL.”

¹⁸ “Passing of W.R. White,” undated, McLean County Museum of History Archives

¹⁹ *Biographical Record of McLean Co.*, 286