

Countrymen

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BOY FROM CHILLICOTHE

By JAMES THURBER

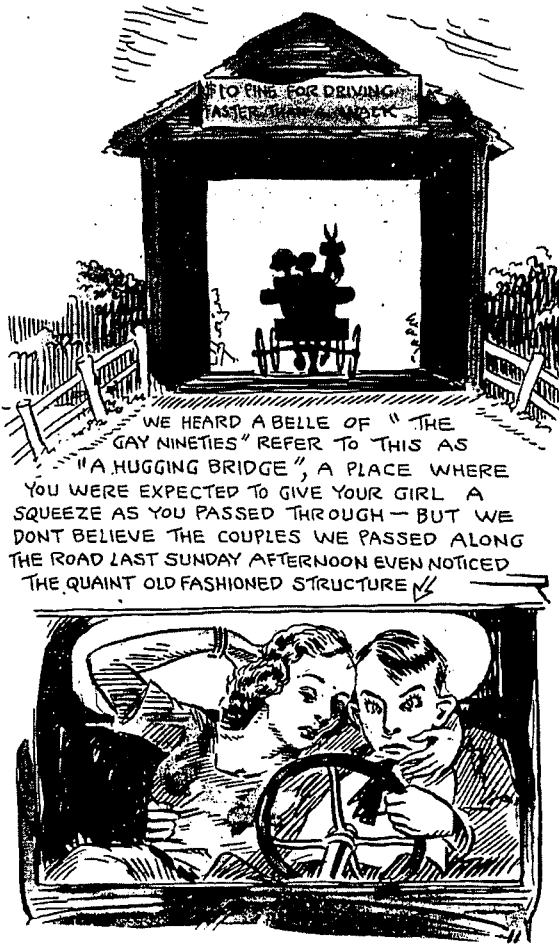
BILLY IRELAND got on a train, somewhere in Ohio, one summer day thirty years ago, sat down, and began looking out the window. Shortly after the train started to move, one of the men aboard set off on a slow walk through the coaches, examining everybody's face politely but carefully. When he had had a look at all the male passengers, he came back to where Ireland was sitting, and spoke to him. "Every time I get on a train, I search for the most interesting-looking man aboard. You are far and away the most interesting-looking man on this train, and I would like to sit down and talk with you." This collector of special personalities said his name was Charles J. Finger, and that he was a kind of writer. Billy told me about the incident a week later when I dropped in at his office. He was the cartoonist of *The Columbus Dispatch*, and everybody on the paper liked to watch him draw his daily cartoon or his Sunday page in color called *The Passing Show*. I didn't know anything about Charles J. Finger, but I looked him up. It turned out that he was the editor of *Reedy's Mirror* and general manager of a group of railroads in Ohio. He was in his early fifties when he introduced himself to Billy Ireland, and he was writing the first of the twenty-four books that he finished before his death in 1941.

The man Charles Finger picked out that day thirty years ago as the one most likely to charm and instruct him had silvery hair, although he was only forty-two years old, twinkling—it's the only word for them—blue eyes, and a healthy pink complexion, all of which conspired to give his round face a kind of genial glow. He was rotund, and not tall, like the jolly figures of

myth, from Santa Claus to the beaming, plump Mother Nature who often appeared in his cartoons. He became the *Dispatch* cartoonist in 1899, when he was only nineteen years old, and worked on the paper for thirty-six years. When he died, at the early age of fifty-five, he had been one of the city's most loved landmarks, and it was almost as if the statehouse had been quietly taken down during the night and moved away.



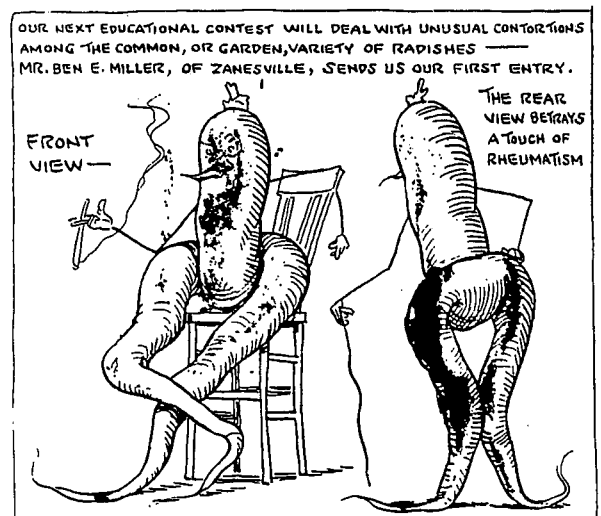
BILLY LOVED GOLDEN BANTAM CORN



William A. Ireland was born in Chillicothe, in Ross County, Ohio, in 1880 and grew up there during the nostalgic era of horses and buggies, covered bridges, and dusty country roads that mired carriage wheels in the rainy season. These roads were always in his mind. I ran into him one day in 1922, walking along East Broad Street in Columbus, and his face wore the particular Ireland smile that meant he had just heard, or remembered, a good Ross County story. "This farmer down there," he began, "drove over to a preacher's house in Chillicothe one day, with the mother of his five children and the kids themselves, running in age from six months to eleven years. 'Me and Elviry want to git married,' he said. The parson was surprised and said, 'These, I take it, are the children of a previous marriage.' The farmer shook his head. 'No, they ain't, Reverend,' he said. 'Y'see, me and Elviry's been plannin' to

drive over here an' git hitched ever since I met her at the huskin' bee back in 1909, but roads has been too bad.'" Billy could turn any topic in the direction of his old home town. Once, when a friend told him that his work shone like a beacon light, he shook his head. "My kind of light," he said, "is an old lantern a farmer carries around his barnyard after dark." He meant, of course, a Ross County farmer and a Ross County barnyard and, if lanterns are made there, a Chillicothe lantern. Ross County people ("My kind of folks," he called them) turned up, gently disguised, in some of his cartoon characters; the Jedge and Uncle Jerry, Tish Lybold and Uncle Lafe Newberry, and Teck Haskins, from the village of Yellow Bud up near the Pickaway border.

YOUNG Billy Ireland was a regular small-town kid and the leader of his gang. He pitched horseshoes, played marbles and Run Sheep Run, flew kites, made slingshots, carved jack-o'-lanterns and fished for bass and catfish in the streams and pools, and swam with the rest of the fellas in a part of Paint Creek called "Yaller Hole." I don't think he ever did a Passing Show with quite as much pleasure as he got out of drawing a similar page for The Chillicothe News-Advertiser one day in November 1931, on the occasion of that paper's hundredth anniversary. He went back to the years between 1886 and 1899 for his material, and the page was crowded with drawings that came out of the memories of his youth; a covered



bridge with a sign on it reading "\$10 fine for driving through this bridge faster than a walk"; Billy and four other little boys walking naked into the town after the Marshal had seized their clothes in a futile effort to keep them from swimming in "Yaller Hole"; a travelling medicine show, complete with a colored banjo player, entertaining a crowd on the Courthouse Square; eight-year-old Billy shaking hands with the great P. T. Barnum at the circus grounds "way out on East Main Street"; a bunch of fellas belly-bustin' down Water Street Hill on their sleds; the same bunch gaping at a Saturday matinee performance of "Bessie's Burglar" in Clough's Opera House; a balloon ascension and parachute jump at the Ross County Fair. "We never smell leaves burning in the Fall without thinking of a little brick house at the corner of Sixth and Paint Streets" was lettered above a fond drawing of the cartoonist's birthplace. In the lower righthand corner young Ireland, aged nineteen, was shown leaving town for Columbus, and carrying a straw suitcase—"the unhappiest moment of this period." The page is signed "Bill Ireland of the old Paint Street gang." (His oldest friends called him Bill, but he was Billy to everybody else.)

Billy Ireland was a precocious craftsman with a piece of chalk when he was only seven years old. He would lie on his stomach and draw pictures, of locomotives and Indians mostly, on the smooth, flat flagstones in front of the Courthouse, and on other suitable surfaces around town. He never took a drawing lesson in his life, but he got a lot of encouragement from his astonished elders, especially a sympathetic teacher, Miss Jennie Winn, who gave him a set of paints and crayons. Miss Winn was also a writer of sorts, and when a St. Louis newspaper agreed to publish some short nature pieces she had written, she got Billy to illustrate them. They were used in the newspaper, whose editor actually bid for the permanent services of the illustrator without realizing that he was a child in short pants. Everybody in Chillicothe soon knew about Billy, the boy artist, and when he was only seventeen, he got a job on The News there. He worked on copper plates covered with a coating of chalk, and the process was tedious



and difficult. He would lay his original ink drawing on the plate, and carefully cut through its lines with a sharp stylus, reproducing them on the chalk, which often chipped or crumbled, so that he would have to begin all over again.

IRELAND was not yet twenty when he got three different offers from papers outside Chillicothe, one in Cleveland, one in Pittsburgh, and the other The Dispatch in Columbus. He accepted The Dispatch offer because Columbus was not so big as the other cities, and because it was not very far from Chillicothe. Columbus people were soon talking about the young man's cartoons, which were signed with a shamrock. They showed observation, inventiveness, and a warm humanity, and they had the power of provoking a smile or, more rarely, a frown that was not easy to lose. Unlike his local contemporary, Harry J. Westerman, of The Ohio State Journal, whose style and symbolism were oblique and allusive, so that people sometimes phoned The Journal to ask what he was driving at, Ireland had a direct representational ap-

proach to the ideas and happenings, predicaments and phenomena, wonders and curiosities that amused or amazed him. His draftsmanship was clean and brisk, and no arty or pretentious line ever got into his daily cartoon, or his Passing Show. Nobody else could draw a weather-vane, or a rocking chair, or an old-fashioned ice-cream freezer with his fine affectionate touch. He wanted to be known as a newspaperman, and not as an artist. "I don't know what they mean by style," he would say, not realizing that he had a style all his own. It was the product of a unique comic sense, and a profound love of "scratching", as he called his painstaking drawing. He sat at his drawing board with the eager concentration of a man watching a tennis match, and he would lean back every now and then, with his head on one side, to chuckle over some hilarious figure in progress. His daily cartoons were widely reproduced, both in America and abroad, but his Sunday page in color was his great dedication.

The Passing Show was largely regional in character, and often purely local, but it somehow managed a universal appeal and it became nationally popular among connoisseurs of comic art. Irvin Cobb and George M. Cohan knew and liked the Sunday feature, and Will Rogers, who came to be a great friend of Ireland's, went around telling people, "I take two newspapers, the New York Times, and the Columbus Dispatch for Billy Ireland's page." The "janitor" of The Passing Show, as its creator modestly called himself, slaved lovingly over it for nearly thirty years, turning out more than twelve hundred lively extravaganzas of Midland life, in its robust and happy aspects, and its strange and wonderful moods and manifestations. Trying to "make" The Passing Show became a challenge and a pastime. People stopped the amiable janitor on the street with suggestions, or came to his office, or wrote him notes. He was regularly informed of the grotesqueries and peculiar goings on in a dozen different states. Readers sent or brought to his office enough freaks of nature to fill a museum: oddly shaped vegetables, enormous hen's eggs, turtles with dates carved on their shells (one 1869 specimen was proved to be a young imposter), coins, arrowheads, and

other relics turned up by farmer's ploughs, an oak bough with a horseshoe embedded in it, a plank into which the quill of a chicken feather had been driven by a cyclone, and a vast assortment of other odds and ends. When he got an idea he liked, his pleasure was as exultant as a Ross County rooster's cock-a-doodle-doo. One day, a week after he had drawn a "snuggle puppy", a variant of the common lounge lizard or parlor snake, somebody suggested that the female of the species must be the "cuddle kitty." Billy had put his hat and overcoat on and was about to go home, but he went back to his drawing board instead, and drew a cuddle kitty that Tenniel would have envied.

The Dispatch cartoonist was most at home and most effective in the intimate domain known as human interest, which takes in everything from the calling out of the fire department to rescue a cat in a tree to the assumption of royal guardianship over the destinies of five infants born to the same mother on the same day. In this congenial region Billy's imagination played brightly upon the familiar antics and quandaries of Man and Beast. When he turned to the animals of house and field for his devices, as he often did, he could achieve a peculiar combination of warmth and sharpness that none of his contemporaries could quite match. He looked up the rigging of ships or the harness of horses, to get it meticulously right, but he drew domestic animals, and most wild ones, from memory. The morphology of the rhinoceros and the hippopotamus came readily to his mind, but he had difficulty spelling their names. He wasn't even sure, in fact, of "Holstein" and "Guernsey," and I once asked him how he could draw cows from memory as accurately as he did, when he couldn't even spell their names. "If you'll look closely at those cows," he told me, "you'll see that they're misspelled, too."

ON Mother's Day, 1932—Dorothy Parker called it "This Year of Hell"—one of his most widely copied cartoons came out. It presented the world as a forlorn calf, lost in a bog of desolation and fear, its head raised on high and bawling "Mother" at the unresponsive skies. Two years later, after he heard the glad

news of the birth of the quintuplets, he drew another cartoon that became one of his most popular. It showed various females of so-called lesser species and their young; a possum, with nine; a bird with a nestful of open bills; a sow with a litter of seven; a rabbit with thirteen, a turtle with twenty-two; a quail with her multiple brood; a black bass with twenty-five; and a frog with countless polliwogs. (Billy didn't live long enough to be cheered by the Middle Western hound dog that gave birth to twenty-three puppies a dozen years ago.) The caption went like this: "What's all this excitement about having five babies?"

My own favorite Ireland cartoon is one of a half dozen that he made between 1920 and 1933, dealing with a number of proud dirigibles that came to grief in wind and storm in those years. There was a mouse-faced dirigible, in center foreground, peeking timidly out of a hangar, obviously dubious about the wisdom of emerging, while high up in the sky, unseen but sensed by its prey, a mammoth cat, made of clouds, was crouching and getting ready to pounce. His cartoon about the crash of The Shenandoah, on September 3, 1925, was more conventional, but there is an interesting story connected with it. He had been about to go out that day for a round of golf in a foursome of long standing, about which he once said, "If I can't play with these boys in Heaven, I don't care whether St. Peter lets me in or not," when he got word that The Shendandoah had been blown to pieces in a thunderstorm at five o'clock that morning over the village of Ava, less than a hundred miles from Columbus. He had once seen the cabin lights of the Shenandoah as it drifted dreamily over Columbus in the night, like a ship out of the Empire of Imagination, and its end disheartened him. He called off his golf game, drove to his office in his car (it was a Packard his doting publisher, Robert F. Wolfe, had given him for a Christmas present) and drew the cartoon that had occurred to him. In its upper lefthand corner the heroic figure of a warrior in armor, labeled "The Elements" and carrying shield and broadsword, stared down in contemptuous triumph at the broken figure of winged Man, lying in the right foreground. I had forgotten this one



until it was recalled to me recently, but I have never forgotten for long the cloud cat and the dirigible mouse.

BILLY Ireland preached and practiced a simple theory of his own about newspaper cartooning: "If you can make a man laugh you can spit in his eye." For three and a half decades he made a constantly increasing audience laugh, but he would spit in his reader's eye only when he wanted to alert him to a public danger or a civic nuisance, or to enlist him in some cause near to his own heart. His drawing pen became an influential instrument in his city and his state. He was largely responsible for restoring the log cabin birthplace of U. S. Grant to a site near Point Pleasant, Ohio, where the President was born. The cabin had been on vulgar display for a long time in the State Fair Grounds. He led the campaign to put the quail on the song-bird list in Ohio, and he was on hand and joined in the whistling of the bobwhite song the day the legislature passed the protective bill. Billy called the quail "the little old lady in the Paisley shawl," and there is a legend that he hired a freckle-faced youngster in a tattered jacket to sit in the gallery and start the bobwhite whistling. His ridicule of the Ku Klux Klan, in the early twenties, was a significant force in the disintegration of the Klan's local Klavern. Klansmen used to stand, in full bedsheet regalia, on street corners, with lighted cigars protruding

from the mouth-holes in their robes, and Billy's caricatures literally kidded them to death.

In September 1917 he drew a cartoon called "The Leper of Potsdam," showing the Kaiser sitting in front of a hovel and whimpering, "I only murdered Belgium because I had to," while hooded female figures representing the virtues and decencies of humanity file by in a mournful procession, averting their eyes or raising their hands in horror. It was reprinted in papers all over the country, and it brought its creator a remarkable letter from the celebrated Jay N. ("Ding") Darling, which Mrs. Ireland, who still lives in Columbus, has preserved. "Your 'Leper of Potsdam' is a wonderful cartoon," Darling wrote. "I think it is really better than any cartoon I have ever seen on any subject or at any time—and I am more or less of a fan on the subject. It fascinates me with its perfection and I cannot let it slip by without extending my congratulations." Ding, incidentally, was one of thirty newspaper artists who drew special cartoons in honor of Billy Ireland in 1924, on the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary on The Dispatch. They were reprinted in a big Sunday supplement that Billy didn't know anything about until the day it came out. He was once given a silver loving cup inscribed to "The First Citizen of Columbus" and he got many other honors during his long career, but this homage from his colleagues was the tribute he prized most.

IT seemed to me, when I was on The Dispatch in the early twenties, that Billy was always in his office, working on his Passing Show or a cartoon. The door was open and anybody could walk right in; he had learned to go on drawing when he had visitors, and there was a constant stream of them through the years: admirers, sightseers, gag men and cut-ups, Ross County folks and other friends, youngsters who wanted to become cartoonists themselves, and collaborators of established reputation in his own vineyard. He looked at all the sketches the would-be artists brought him, and his opinion was either an enthusiastic "Keep at it!" or a gentle "What else can you do, son?" In 1925, Milt Caniff, now famous for his "Terry and the Pi-

rates," but then a freshman at Ohio State, came to Billy and asked for a part-time job in The Dispatch art department. "Draw something that will make me laugh," Ireland told him, "and I'll get you the job." Caniff went to his room off the campus and drew a panel of cartoons telling, in the figures and idiom of fairy tale, the story of his own life. The final panel revealed that it was up to King Ireland whether or not the Dragon of Life slew Prince Milt. Billy not only laughed at it, he loved it, and Caniff got a job working on layouts after class, at seventeen dollars a week.

Most of Billy's contemporaries, both comic and serious artists, were friends of his, close or casual, from Rudolph Dirks, the Katzenjammer man, and George McManus, creator of the immortal Jiggs, to George Bellows, one of his earliest fans, who gave him a lithograph, lovingly inscribed, that still hangs on a wall in the old Ireland residence on Woodland Avenue in Columbus. Bellows' two daughters (Billy also had two, just as pretty) were admirers of their father's idol, too, and must have made him sign his name and draw his shamrock for them when they were little girls, for they were dauntless autograph hunters then. They once accosted McManus in a restaurant after somebody had pointed him out to them. He asked them who they were, and when they told him, he turned over his menu, handed it to them, and said, "*You sign your names for me.*" I told Billy this story when I was in Columbus, two years before he died, and he sighed and said, "The comic strip boys have all the charm, and something else the rest of us haven't got—money."

Among his best friends in his own profession were two men who shared his genius for capturing intimate, recognizable scenes from American family and neighborhood life, H. T. Webster and the late Clare Briggs, a Middle Western boy himself, whose style and subject matter greatly resembled his own, and whose death in 1930, also at the age of fifty-five, was one of the severest blows of Ireland's life.

Neither Robert F. Wolfe nor any other of Billy Ireland's friends had to work very hard, as a rule, to persuade him to take a trip with them. "The motto of America," he once said, "is 'Let's

Go' " and he was an inveterate goer. On a thousand fair Sundays he set out early for automobile trips with his cronies that lasted all day. He liked to drive down to Chillicothe when the redbud, dogwood, and lilacs were in bloom. "I get hill hungry," he would say. If there was a maple sugar "b'ilin' " or an apple butter "stirrin' " going on anywhere, he wanted to be there, and he would travel to the ends of Ohio to look at a covered bridge he hadn't seen before, or watch cheese being made in a new way, or attend a county fair, or stand around for awhile in an old blacksmith shop. He knew all the roads of Ohio, and they appeared in maps and sketches drawn for "The Gipsy Trail," a corner of The Passing Show that recorded his Sunday travels.

THE streets of Columbus, however, also held a deep fascination for him, and his eyes would gleam like a boy's when he looked at a steam shovel in an excavation, men in helmets using acetylene torches on a streetcar rail, a scissors grinder sharpening something on his whetstone, a hook and ladder turning a corner, or a hyacinth on a window sill. He regarded the skillful worker in any field, from hedge trimming to watch repairing, as a fellow craftsman, and a workmanlike job always held his attention and brought out his sincere praise. The accomplishment of a creative task, such as the erection of a hen house, or the painting of a flagpole, seemed to him to call for a celebration. He once led the merrymaking that attended the building of a bird house in a friend's backyard. There was a washing on the clothesline at the time, and Billy admired it as he admired everything that was neatly done. He promptly looked up to the washwoman and said, "Edna, that's the prettiest washing out there I ever saw." Edna never forgot that, and often talked about it. It was still fresh in her memory, fifteen years later, when she heard the sad news that Mr. Billy Ireland was dead.

He died in his sleep, at his home on Woodland Avenue, one night in late May, as his favorite season of the year was coming to a close. He had suffered several minor heart attacks, but he had had no intimation that he was going to die,

fifteen years short of his three score and ten, and his friends were glad of that.

Billy Ireland's church was the American outdoors, with its far-flung congregation of folks. He rarely went to indoors church, and once said, "I'd rather see the sun shining on trees and streams than elbowing its way through stained glass," but he was an Episcopalian, and so there were formal services at his home. So many people came to the funeral that hundreds could not get inside the house. The ones that stayed outside were careful not to trample the double row of iris in bloom that lined the walk to the front porch. Hazard Okey, a deacon of long standing in the outdoors church, waited in the front yard, and when a catbird in a bush began to sing he opined, "Billy's probably hearing that bird and not what the parson's saying in there."

Billy Ireland had wanted to be buried in Chillicothe, and he was taken there in a motor hearse followed by an imposing procession of automobiles, of which at least a dozen were needed for his close personal friends, he had so many. The car just behind the hearse was the red one of the chief of the Columbus Fire Department, and Billy's friends commented that the idea of the swiftest and most impatient motor car in town leading the way to Chillicothe would have made the chief's old friend smile. He was buried on a green slope of Grandview Cemetery. The redbud and dogwood and lilacs had long since gone out of bloom, but the sun was shining and the day was pleasant, and the flowers of June were coming into blossom. His grave overlooks the town of Chillicothe, the valley beyond, and Mt. Logan and its adjacent hills. More than a hundred years before, this very scene had inspired the artist who designed the great seal of the state, which shows a benevolent sun rising between the hills and shining upon the proud symbols of Ohio's agricultural wealth. Billy Ireland loved that seal and its story, and often talked about it. It represented for him not only his beloved Ross County, but his Middle West and his United States of America. A dozen publishers, including Hearst and Pulitzer, had tried to get him to leave Ohio for New York or Chicago, or some other big city, but Billy always turned them

down. "I'm a buckwheater, and I belong in buckwheat country," he wired the owner of one newspaper, and to another he sent this simple message, "I want to live within burying

distance of Ross County." The Gipsy Trail of the boy from Chillicothe had come to its end, many years too soon, but in the right weather, and at the right place.

[Excerpted by permission of the author from The Thurber Album; Simon & Schuster, New York; \$3.50]

