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## Article Title: Bix in Nebraska: A L Bixby and the “Daily Drift”

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Article Summary: A L “Doc” Bixby (1856-1934) was one of Nebraska’s best-known newspaper columnists and humorists. His forty-two years (1892-1934) on the staff of the *Nebraska State Journal* of Lincoln afforded him an informed view of Nebraska history from the days of William Jennings Bryan to those of FDR. Bixby’s “Daily Drift” column became a fountain of original wit and comment on topics of statewide and national interest.

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# Bix in Nebraska

A. L. "Doc" Bixby (1856–1934) was one of Nebraska's best-known newspaper columnists and humorists. His forty-two years (1892–1934) on the staff of the *Nebraska State Journal* of Lincoln afforded him an informed view of Nebraska history from the days of William Jennings Bryan to those of FDR. Bixby's "Daily Drift" column became a fountain of original wit and comment on topics of statewide and national interest. His most memorable and frequently quoted satiric verse was written during the Populist era. Bixby was also a popular lecturer and the author of *Driftwood* (1895, 1902) and *Memories and Other Poems* (1900), both drawn from his newspaper columns; and of several travel books, *'Bix' Abroad* (1907) and *'Bix' in America* (1914).<sup>1</sup> At the time of his death in 1934 he was widely recognized as one of America's leading newspaper columnists.

Bixby (Ammi Leander) was born in Potsdam, New York, in 1856. His family shortly thereafter moved to a frontier farm in Dodge County, Minnesota, and in 1856 to Emmet County, Iowa. He learned the printer's trade at Estherville, where he worked for a Democratic paper and then for the Republican *Northern Vindicator*.<sup>2</sup>

*Patricia C. Gaster is assistant editor of Nebraska History.*



Photo courtesy Journal-Star Printing Company

## By Patricia C. Gaster

Bixby in 1878 married Mary Bates, the "Mollie" of his rhymes, at Center Chain, Minnesota. The couple settled in what later became Nance County, Nebraska, where Bixby's father had located the year before.<sup>3</sup> The younger Bixbys soon moved to North Platte, where "Doc" Bixby prac-

ticed medicine. He had attended Rush Medical College in Chicago, but left school before completing the full course. He later regretted that he had taken but "one turn at college" and his "lack of regular degrees," even though it prompted him to begin a successful newspaper career. At Fullerton, Nebraska, he worked on the *Nance County Journal*, then lived in Colorado for several years before returning to Fullerton. In 1889 he moved to Columbus.<sup>4</sup>

After Bixby became well established on the staff of the *Nebraska State Journal* in Lincoln, he seldom referred to his brief stint in Columbus. In 1912 he described to *Journal* readers his newspaper difficulties there, panning in verse former "friends" who offered good advice and good wishes but "cut me off from legal fees/And let me perish by degrees."<sup>5</sup> Almost certainly he regretted his brief journalistic adventure with Populist Warwick Saunders. Bixby had been a Republican, but

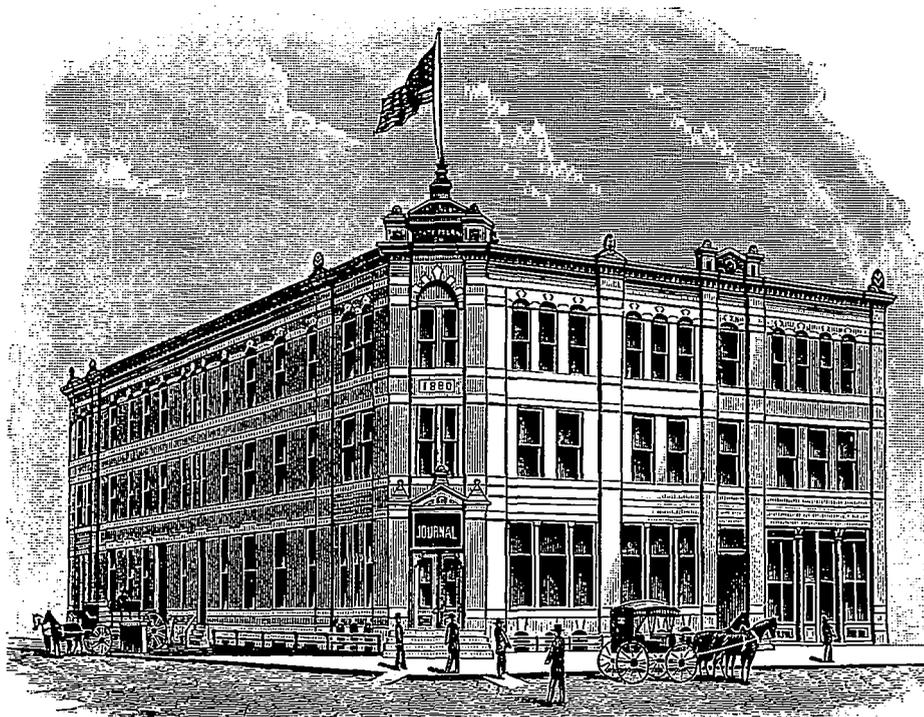
in the spring of 1891 began writing in support of the political independents. The Democratic *Columbus Telegram* blamed financial problems and his failure to gain a Republican post office job at Fullerton for Bixby's apparent change in politics. Bixby acknowledged in a serialized autobiography published in 1926 in "Daily Drift" that his *Columbus Sentinel* had

“espoused the Populist cause for prudential reasons” in 1891. Whatever the reason for Bixby’s political “flop,” he joined Saunders on the *Platte County Argus*, which absorbed the *Sentinel* in a move from Platte Center to Columbus in early 1892.<sup>6</sup>

The venture did not go well. Saunders, who functioned as business manager, was widely regarded as dishonest, and it was charged that Bixby had been brought into the arrangement as editor chiefly as whitewash. In 1926 Bixby wrote carefully that he and Saunders had only “consolidated liabilities” on the *Argus* and that he had left at the first opportunity.<sup>7</sup> Clearly Bixby was trying to distance himself as much as possible from his brief alliance with Populism. He could be gracious when publicly reminded (for example, by fellow newspaperman Charles Wooster of Silver Creek in 1907), but near the end of his life Bixby confessed that his personal newspaper files of “that hapless adventure were committed to the flames that there might be no more remembrance among the people who knew me of the imbecile adventure as of record on the printed page.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1892 Bixby joined the staff of the *Nebraska State Journal*, the state’s leading Republican newspaper, founded by Charles H. Gere, which had praised Bixby in January as the “lion of the state press association.”<sup>9</sup> Edwin A. Fry, editor of the *Nebraska Pioneer* at Niobrara, in 1935 recalled the circumstances that brought Bixby to the attention of Will Owen Jones, managing editor of the *Journal*.

At the annual press association meeting in Fremont in January 1892, Bixby read one of his poems, persuaded the delegates to hold their next meeting in Columbus, and impressed Jones as a talented writer and public speaker.<sup>10</sup> He tentatively offered Bixby a job on “the big paper at Lincoln” (which Bixby called a “deliverance”) as soon as an opening occurred. Within a few months Bixby was substituting for a *Journal* exchange editor and doing some independent writing. He took over an existing column and retitled it “Daily Drift,” which he produced until his death in



*Nebraska State Journal* building, Ninth and P, Lincoln. From A. B. Hayes and Sam D. Cox, *History of the City of Lincoln, Nebraska* (1889)

1934. The column reflected his genial personality as well as his political, economic, and social opinions.<sup>11</sup> Additional editorial duties earned him the title of associate editor, which he carried for most of his career.

Although Bixby wrote much of his *Journal* column in prose, he is best remembered for his comic rhyme, often ending in “BIX.” Fractured poetry was a newspaper staple of the period and was used to advantage by many of Nebraska’s early journalists, including Will Maupin, Ross Hammond, Walt Mason, and Bess Furman Armstrong. Bixby’s rhyming ability, once said tactfully to “show the impulses and oddities of the writer,” had been evident at least since his days on the *Columbus Sentinel*.<sup>12</sup> He was also adept at forming and using new words for rhythmic and comic effect.

Nothing else—prohibition, woman suffrage, World War I—stimulated Bixby’s creative genius like the Nebraska political scene during the 1890s. Politics was then his greatest spectator

sport. “Jerry Simpson and the circus will be here on the same day,” he wrote in June 1893, “What more can the heart of man desire at one sitting?”<sup>13</sup> As a columnist on the state’s leading Republican newspaper, he opposed both traditional Democrats such as J. Sterling Morton and so-called Silver Democrats under William Jennings Bryan. Another target was Edward Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Bee*, who though a Republican, often opposed the more conservative *Nebraska State Journal*.

Bixby not only supported his newspaper’s political stance, but nursed a personal aversion to Rosewater. He accused Rosewater of trying to divide the Republican Party in Nebraska by failing to support regular party candidates, and criticized Rosewater’s sharp, incisive writing style so different from his own. “Rosewater has a caustic pen,” Bixby noted, “and his slashing editorials, to which his name is usually inscribed, are written in blood.”<sup>14</sup>

But the chief objects of Bixby’s hu-

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mor were his former friends in the independent ranks. He questioned both their general outlook, calling them "close" and "narrow-minded," and their honesty. His special target was Populist politician Silas Holcomb, whom Bixby represented as proving false to the professed principles of his party by living on "mortgage loans, orphans' cries and widows' groans." Although Holcomb eventually served as governor of Nebraska (1895–99) and chief justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court (1904–6), his early career as a Custer County lawyer was not unblemished. One of Bixby's early bits of newspaper poetry concerned a pig and a spotted cow named Speck, supposedly taken by Holcomb from a widow. Mention of the animals reappeared in succeeding "Daily Drift" columns throughout the decade, despite repeated promises by Bixby to drop the subject. "I had thought to write no more . . . Of that storm-cloud colored boar, . . . Of the poor old spotted cow," Bixby wrote in 1899 in a six-stanza spoof of Holcomb—but continued to do so well into the new century.<sup>15</sup>

In an era when political divisions tended to be sharp and views extreme, his comparative balance and generosity of spirit were notable. Bixby in late 1894 and early 1895 boosted Warwick Saunders, who had previously caused him such embarrassment on the *Argus*, for the state job of deputy oil inspector. And when Jay Burrows, former editor of *The Farmers' Alliance* at Lincoln, temporarily left Nebraska for California in the summer of 1895, Bixby wished him well. Even the "erratic, rabid and rantankerous" Charles Wooster, a long-time critic, was said by Bixby in 1900 to write entertainingly and to publish "one of the spiciest little papers in the state [the *Silver Creek Times*]."<sup>16</sup>

Despite his strenuous support of the Republican Party, Bixby accepted electoral gains and losses with equanimity and was ever ready to avoid the "gross and repulsive subject of post mortem politics." He wrote in November of 1892, "It is not well to brood over unpleasant



Silas Holcomb, governor of Nebraska, 1895–99. NSHS-P853

things, when there is no remedy in sight." Yet for all his literary preoccupation with politics, Bixby kept a safe personal distance. In 1910 he confessed to "Daily Drift" readers that he had sought political office only once in his life and "missed it a mile. It was a grievous disappointment at the time but the best thing that ever happened."<sup>17</sup>

Bixby tried to remain on good terms with most of his counterparts on other Nebraska newspapers, but he extended less courtesy not only to Edward Rosewater but to Mary Fairbrother, daughter of pioneer Nebraska newspaperman and legislator George Washington Fairbrother.<sup>18</sup> A prominent suffragist, she owned and edited *The Woman's Weekly* of Omaha from 1894 to 1901. In 1896 she unsuccessfully opposed the election of Republican H. L. Corbett, in-

cumbent candidate for state superintendent of public instruction (strongly supported by Bixby), and boosted Grace M. Sudborough from Douglas County. Fairbrother, denounced in "Daily Drift" as a "rantankerous old maid," addressed Bixby in print as "Miss Bixby" and demanded that he not interrupt a political question with "talk about spleen and old maids."<sup>19</sup>

Of course, nonpolitical topics sometimes attracted Bixby's poetic attention. The visit of Nebraska Senator John M. Thurston to O'Neill in October of 1899 was noted in the *Omaha World-Herald* by a reprint of Thurston's famous rose poem accompanied by a number of parodies. Thurston's "Rose! Sweet Rose!" became Bixby's "Shirt, night shirt—," originally published in April of that year in "Daily Drift" [see sidebar]. Will M. Maupin, Bixby's counterpart on the *World-Herald*, where he authored the "Limnings" column, contributed his ode to "Lunch! Late lunch!" Bixby observed wryly that at least the rose poem and the resulting ridicule were giving Thurston "considerable advertising, such as it is."<sup>20</sup>

As his journalistic duties expanded, Bixby's role on the lecture circuit grew as well. He was reported to be an excellent speaker, whose humorous anecdotes and informal style practically guaranteed a full house. In April of 1892 he spoke in Fullerton on "The Country Editor," which became a favorite topic of the man who came to the *Lincoln Journal* from country newspapers in Fullerton and Columbus.<sup>21</sup> His talents later included amateur performances as a fiddler and singer.<sup>22</sup>

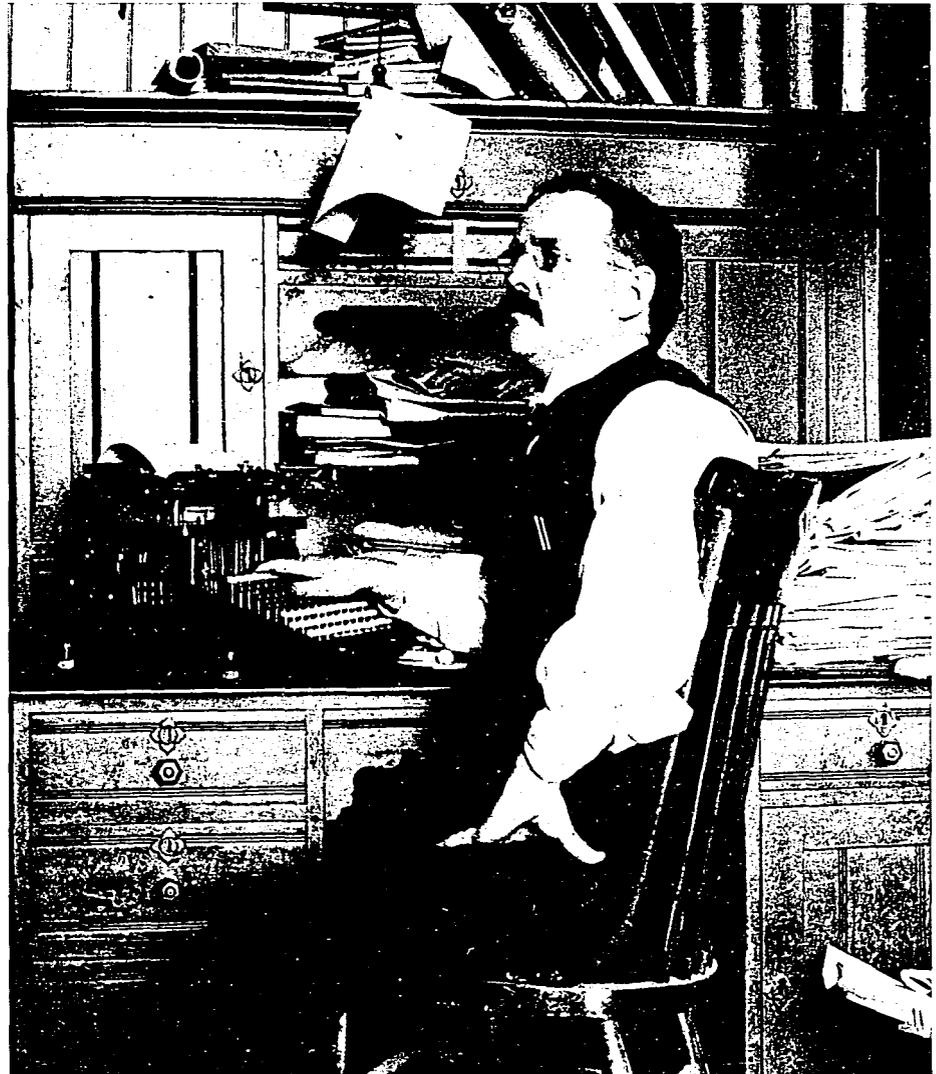
Bixby had long favored almost any reformist cause, "any movement that has for its prime object the betterment of the earth." He seemed ahead of his contemporaries in race relations, criticizing in 1892 "the haughty caucasians composing the football team of the state university of Missouri [who] still decline to play the Nebraska university team unless the colored member thereof is withdrawn."<sup>23</sup> In July of 1910 he opposed the racial bitterness which erupted after

Jack Johnson, an African American, maintained his heavyweight boxing championship in a bout with James J. Jeffries, a white. In response to proposals to abolish prize fighting throughout the country because of Johnson's victory, Bixby pointed out that the recent University of Nebraska football victory over Minnesota was largely due to black quarterback William Johnson.<sup>24</sup>

Bixby realized, however, that some reformist goals and methods were impractical. This was particularly true of prohibition. Republicans in Nebraska were predominantly dry, but there was an active wet element in the party. The *Nebraska State Journal* was "anti-saloon" rather than prohibitionist in sentiment. In June of 1898 during the meeting of Nebraska prohibitionists in Lincoln, Bixby wrote, "Although we don't want prohibition, we do need some sort of reform." He continued to maintain publicly that intelligent regulation rather than total abolition was the key to dealing with the liquor problem.<sup>25</sup>

Bixby also had strong reservations about another contemporary reform movement: woman suffrage. His initial opposition to it (explained in a two-part "Daily Drift" column) was largely based on idyllic ideas of family life. "The woman's place is by the hearth/To fight away the mice and rats," he wrote, "It is for man to rule the earth/And roll the unwashed democrats." He also believed that enfranchising women would increase election expenses without affecting the final result of most elections, because wives would automatically vote as their husbands voted.<sup>26</sup>

However, a series of suffrage bills was introduced in the state legislature during the 1890s and early 1900s, which though unsuccessful, helped remold public opinion toward enfranchising women.<sup>27</sup> In 1909 Bixby disapproved of limited suffrage as a substitute for full suffrage; and in 1911 wrote that he had never advocated withholding it if women really wanted the ballot and all the accompanying responsibilities. In 1914 he admitted that it was becoming clear that a



Will Owen Jones, seated at desk in his office at the *Nebraska State Journal*, 1899.  
NSHS-J79.9-6

great many women desired the ballot and its attendant obligations, and that he would "not be among those who assume that they don't know what they want."<sup>28</sup> As World War I engulfed Europe and then the United States, Bixby found another reason to favor woman suffrage—the belief that equal political rights for women would promote international peace. By the time full suffrage was granted in 1920, Bixby had largely accepted it.<sup>29</sup> Even without the ballot, women were rapidly moving beyond the home to enter other occupational fields,

including journalism. Bixby must have been made acutely aware of this by the "Woman's Wesleyan" edition of the *Nebraska State Journal* on June 5, 1895. He and other regular *Journal* employees relinquished their duties for a day to an all-woman staff, which included Mrs. William Jennings Bryan. Bixby's only complaint on the following day was that the women occupying his office, while taking over his regular duties and preparing their version of "Daily Drift," had rearranged his papers, pens, and office supplies.<sup>30</sup>

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When women occasionally appeared in politics, Bixby regarded them seriously. One of his favorite poetic subjects was Populist orator Mary Ellen Lease of Kansas. A Valentine's Day "Daily Drift" column from 1893 devoted three stanzas to Mrs. Lease but only one each to a number of Nebraska Populists.<sup>31</sup> Bixby also defended Lincoln lawyer and suffragist Ada M. Bittenbender when she ran unsuccessfully in 1893 as the Prohibition Party's candidate for Nebraska Supreme Court justice. Almost five percent of the all-male electorate voted for her. Bittenbender was Nebraska's first woman attorney and only the third woman admitted to practice before the U.S. Supreme Court. Bixby recognized her ability and admitted that "the novelty of having a brainy woman on the supreme bench would be worth something as an advertisement of Nebraska's liberality of sentiment."<sup>32</sup>

Bixby's early acceptance of able women like Lease, Bittenbender, and Fairbrother in public life seems an enigma in light of his initial opposition to woman suffrage. His comments in "Daily Drift" indicate that he viewed talented women in a favorable light as long they refrained from attacking him personally. When he criticized nationally prominent suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, who visited Nebraska in the fall of 1900, the resulting condemnation from state woman suffrage supporters, moved him to write: "I honor a woman ambitious/In life's larger duties to mix,/But save me from those who get vicious/And set out to 'paralyze' Bix." Bixby later compared suffragists, "when they find someone to persecute," to executioners cutting off heads.<sup>33</sup>

Although Bixby had no "desire to enter into any controversies along theological lines," he occasionally shed this characteristic benign quality. In the summer of 1915, for example, he roasted Billy Sunday's Omaha campaign for what he regarded as Sunday's insensitive demands on Omaha ministers. The local pastors were requested by an overbearing advance man to avoid

slang or coarse language in their sermons while Sunday was in Omaha and to avoid any hint of familiarity with the great evangelist including any reference to him as "Billy."<sup>34</sup>

Bixby also attacked spiritualism, which in 1895 he called "the jolliest [ism] of the age, but O, what a fertile field for fraud."<sup>35</sup> Late that summer "Daily Drift" reported the activities of Celia Hughes, whom Bixby dubbed the "trumpet medium." Bixby attended at least one seance and laughed in print at what he considered a comic attempt to impose upon a credulous public for profit. As the summer wore on, Hughes attempted to hold the interest of Lincoln spiritualists by another innovation: messages from the spirit of Yellow Blossom, an alleged Indian maiden who sometimes took possession of the medium. Bixby stopped laughing and denounced the medium as a fraud, prompting at least one angry letter from a *Journal* reader who criticized Bixby for attacking a faith held by many which gave them comfort and happiness. Bixby replied to "A True Believer" in a subsequent "Daily Drift" column that faith is "great stuff and should be cultivated along consistent lines" but not imposed upon the public when based on fraud. By November, probably to Bixby's relief, Celia Hughes had left Lincoln.<sup>36</sup>

However, as the 1890s drew to a close, interest in spiritualism remained high. Mediums devised new strategies to hold public interest, and Bixby noted these as they appeared in the state. A succession of mediums who brought their performances to Lincoln were named and satirized in "Daily Drift": Lloyd Cook, a sleight-of-hand artist; a "Brother Wheeler," whose seances were accompanied by a "lengthy dissertation at G.A.R. hall"; and C. E. Winan, a Council Bluffs medium, who boasted a "manager and a committee." The spirits of Bach, Mendelsson, Handel, and other classical composers supposedly possessed the body of medium Edith Edwards and caused her to play various musical instruments. As late as 1924

Bixby remarked on the presence of a professed medium in Lincoln, noting, "There used to be a dozen or more."<sup>37</sup>

Most contemporary news stories were duly reflected in the "Daily Drift" column: the Lizzie Borden murder case in 1892; Admiral Peary's trek to the North Pole in 1893; the Nebraska exhibit at the Columbian World's Fair in Chicago that same year; the march of Gen. Jacob S. Coxey's "army" across the country in 1894; the marriage of *New York World* reporter Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Cochrane) in 1895; the 1897 airship sightings over the Midwest; and many others. Bixby in 1916 lamented the departure of E. C. "Jumbo" Stiehm, football coach at the University of Nebraska, who accepted a higher paying coaching job in Indiana.<sup>38</sup>

Bixby was a perennial Nebraska booster in an age when one of the most important functions of a newspaperman was to promote his home town and state. In 1894, only two years after he moved to Lincoln, he wrote, "A person who has lived in Lincoln a few years is never entirely happy in any other location."<sup>39</sup> He noted in subsequent columns both the strong points and the deficiencies of his adopted city and recommended in 1894 a program of public improvements that would employ workers idled by the business depression. "Build the Ninth street viaduct, straighten Salt creek, improve the highways, construct new sidewalks," he recommended and "furnish work and wages for idle hands."<sup>40</sup> When gold fever hit Nebraska and the rest of the nation in the summer of 1897, following the fabulous discoveries on Bonanza Creek in the Yukon, Bixby counseled Nebraskans to stay at home. "This Klondyke business will prove to be a stupendous game of freeze-out," he noted, probably concocted by men "interested chiefly in selling town lots at Klondyke."<sup>41</sup> Nebraskans would be better off at home, he thought, laboring for agricultural and industrial wealth.

Few contemporary social mores escaped Bixby's attention. A highly visible phenomenon, such as the changing

mode of feminine dress, inspired stanzas of comic rhyme. But even the more obscure custom of according the honorary title of "colonel" to newspapermen, was discussed in "Daily Drift." "Doc" Bixby never assumed the title of "colonel" himself, but bestowed it liberally upon other journalists in the state and even did so for an acquaintance in Fullerton who was "colonelized by virtue of having a third interest" in a newspaper there.<sup>42</sup> Women as well, at least in "Daily Drift," were occasionally given the title. Col. Mary Fairbrother of the *Woman's Weekly* was disliked by Bixby, but recognized as a competitor worthy of note in Nebraska's newspaper world during the 1890s.<sup>43</sup> Col. Ada Bittenbender had newspaper experience in Osceola before she became a lawyer and entered the political field.

Like most newspaper columnists, Bixby coped with periodic "writer's block," complaining in April 1895: "I've written till I'm written out, I've said my say, and said it all, / There's nothing more to write about, / And nothing new except baseball." Of course, aspiring writers sometimes brought their own work to Bixby for publication in "Daily Drift," but such "help" could not be relied upon. Given a "large batch of imperishable verses" by an amateur poet in September of 1897, Bixby admitted that he "frankly informed the author that his lines were declined with the usual thanks."<sup>44</sup>

Bixby initially opposed America's possible involvement in the Spanish-American War. He believed that although Cuba merited American sympathy in her struggle for independence and that U.S. volunteers should be allowed to assist the Cubans, any action which might cause a war with Spain should be avoided. However, as evidence of Spanish atrocities in Cuba mounted, Bixby supported the growing



Oswald R. "Oz" Black of the *Lincoln Daily Star* drew this cartoon, which appeared in *Bix's Own Journal*, April 21, 1926. NSHS-RG 5,000

sentiment for intervention, warning that war "in itself was not a good thing." He made a token attempt in 1898 to enlist but was rejected—as he expected—and explained to "Daily Drift" readers that his contribution to the war effort would be to war with his pencil against the forces of misguided thinking at home (the Populists and fusionists). He revealed his distrust of military men turned politicians by discouraging George Dewey's reported presidential aspirations in 1900, believing that the qualities which had enabled Commodore Dewey to triumph at the Battle of Manila Bay in May of 1898 would not necessarily be appropriate for public office.<sup>45</sup>

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Bixby wrote chiefly of topics he had covered through the 1890s. In 1909 he replied to a fellow newspaperman's charge that he had "hammered

away on the same old themes so long that at times it gets tiresome."<sup>46</sup> He conceded that the *Journal* could survive handily without his columns, which included "straw that has been run through the machine a couple of times before," but emphasized that history kept repeating itself and displaying familiar themes. And then there were the "dull days" that suggested no topic for "Daily Drift," for which Bixby wrote glumly, "some allowance ought to be made."<sup>47</sup> Despite his discouragement at this point, Bixby continued with the *Journal* until his death in 1934, reworking the historical themes that seemed to him to recur in Nebraska history.

Bixby opposed America's participation in World War I and the increasing arms buildup in the years prior to the war.<sup>48</sup> As early as 1911 he warned, "No international dispute is worth going to war about." In September of 1915 he criticized "the graft in the [munitions and weapons] business that makes militarism so popular." When Europe is bleeding almost to death," he wrote without a

trace of his usual humor in December of that year, "and people everywhere can see the futility of the struggle in which the warlike nations [in Europe] are engaged, a cry goes up that America must get ready to be as big a fool as the biggest across the Water."<sup>49</sup> He commented on American industrialist Henry C. Ford's effort to influence international events by sending a peace expedition on a chartered ship to Europe in December of 1915, regretting in a light-hearted vein that he had not been invited. "So as a partial recompense/I'll labor here with men of sense," Bixby wrote, "to try to head off, more or less/The frenzy for preparedness."<sup>50</sup> Earlier in 1915 he had stated bluntly, "Great armaments do not head off war; they provoke it."<sup>51</sup>

Bixby during the World War I era was often somber. The criticism directed at him as a result of his position on mili-

## “Rose! Sweet Rose!”

Nebraska Republican Senator John Mellen Thurston during his single term (1895–1901) enjoyed a reputation as a great orator. However, his facility with words did not extend to poetry. Bixby and other newspaper columnists parodied Thurston’s rhymed praise of a white rose, read by him at a society gathering in Philadelphia in 1899. One Thurston biographer believes it was dedicated to Lola Purman, daughter of former U.S. Representative William James Purman of Florida. Thurston’s first wife, Martha Poland Thurston, died in 1898; Thurston and Miss Purman were married in 1899. Several of the parodies, including Bixby’s, appeared in the October 24, 1899 edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*.

### The Rose

I said to the rose: “Oh Rose! Sweet Rose!  
Will you lie on my heart tonight,  
Will you nestle there with your perfume  
rare,  
And your petals pure and white?”

I said to the rose: “Oh Rose! Sweet Rose!  
Will you thrill to my every sigh,  
Tho’ your life exhale in the morning  
pale,  
And you wither and fade and die?”

I said to the rose: “Oh Rose! Sweet Rose!  
Will you throb with my every breath,  
Will you give me the bliss of a passionate  
kiss,  
Albeit the end is death?”

The white rose lifted her stately head  
And answered me fair and true;  
“I am happy and blest to lie on your  
breast  
For the woman who gave me to you!”

J. Mellen Thurston

### The Night Shirt

I said to my shirt: “Oh shirt, night shirt—  
Will you nestle about my frame  
When the stars shine bright and the  
moon’s pale light  
Shall into my window come?”

I said to my shirt: “Oh shirt, night shirt—  
With the beautiful fringe of red—  
Will you hold me so tight in your arms  
all night  
That I cannot fall out of bed?”

I said to my shirt: “Oh shirt, night shirt—  
You are soft as the down of swan,  
But I can’t quite see why you rip for me  
When I’m trying to put you on.”

The night shirt stayed on the line and  
said,  
In a tone that was quite absurd—  
“While you’ve grown at least a foot  
larger, beast,  
I have shrunk about a third.”

A. L. Bixby



This caricature of Nebraska Senator John M. Thurston by Guy Spencer was published in the *Omaha World-Herald*, along with the parodies.

tary preparedness and the war in Europe prompted him on April 11, 1917, to angrily reject the label of “stalling pacifist,” and to describe a pacifist as one who “may favor war when it seems necessary.”<sup>52</sup>

Bixby supported U.S. involvement in the conflict after Congress formally declared war in April of 1917 (signing a “Daily Drift” poem as “Patriot Bix”) but was not enthusiastic. In the spring of 1918 his old friend, newspaperman Edwin A. Fry, was under attack by the

Sedgwick (Colorado) County Council of Defense for publishing “unpatriotic” articles in his *Sedgwick Sun*. Bixby wrote in the fall of that year of the “reams of war poetry” being sent for publication and noted the self-serving displays of patriotism by political hopefuls in the poem “War Candidates.” And on November 21, 1918, just ten days after the signing of the Armistice, he reiterated his prewar opposition to preparedness.<sup>53</sup>

The postwar period seemed to find Bixby emotionally drained. (In June 1919

he described himself as “sitting in a stuffy little office . . . running a little old rhyme machine on low gear.”) However, his political opinions became more independent of party labels, and he supported some of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s early economic proposals. He responded to the occasional complaint of a reader that he was the *State Journal*’s “pet” with the assurance that he had always been allowed complete freedom of expression. He supported the concept of a League of Nations and believed that world progress

was necessary for U.S. industrial stability. Bixby was more resigned to pre-World War II preparedness than he had been to the arms buildup before World War I, although he still opposed the idea in principle, believing that war-related expenditures had helped cause the worldwide economic depression after 1929.<sup>54</sup>

Bixby had always been an avid traveler and during his years with the *Journal* had taken four extended trips to the West Coast, a half dozen to the East Coast, three to Canada, and three to the Southwest. (He stoutly defended Nebraska as “the loveliest state in the Union under normal conditions” but admitted that “its scenic effects are not always up to standard.”) One of his major interests after 1900 was the good roads movement, active in Nebraska from 1900 until about 1930. As an enthusiastic participant in the dawning automobile age, he boosted the state’s early highway system and criticized badly maintained roads, including “that gumbo trail,” the early Lincoln Highway. During the arms buildup prior to World War I, he recommended that resources intended for the war effort be spent instead on improving U.S. roads and bridges.<sup>55</sup>

In July of 1924 Bixby, along with his wife and several friends set off for a Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) convention in Salt Lake City. Long distance travel by automobile from Lincoln to Utah was not then lightly undertaken despite the completion of the Lincoln Highway across Wyoming in 1913. Bixby sent daily accounts to the *Journal* for his “Daily Drift” column, ending a July 25 letter from Kemmerer, Wyoming, with the simple sentiments: “I like this outing very well/Out here among the hicks./But when the roads are simply bad/It tries my patience. BIX”<sup>56</sup>

Bixby strongly influenced other Nebraska newspaper writers. Bess Furman (later Armstrong) delivered a rhymed tribute to him before the April 21, 1926, meeting of the Nebraska Writers Guild in Lincoln. The banquet capped the group’s annual spring gathering and

was in 1926 a celebration of Bixby’s seventieth birthday. Attending in Bixby’s honor were some of Nebraska’s best and best-known journalists: Will M. Maupin representing the *Omaha Daily Bee*; Bess Furman for the *Omaha Daily News*; Walter Locke for the *Nebraska State Journal*; George Grimes for the *Omaha World-Herald*; and Oswald R. “Oz” Black for the *Lincoln Daily Star*. Two years later in December of 1928 Bixby was awarded the Kiwanis Medal for Distinguished Service as poet, editor, and philosopher.<sup>57</sup>

Bixby’s last years were active; he worked until the day of his death, December 24, 1934. That morning he visited *Journal* offices to extend holiday greetings to newspaper employees and then returned home, where he died in his sleep. Three daughters and a son survived him; a fourth daughter had died in childhood. His wife was killed in an auto accident in 1928.<sup>58</sup>

Bixby had a unique vantage point from which to survey Nebraska politics and socio-cultural life during his forty-two years on the *Lincoln Journal*. His best-known and most-quoted columns date from the 1890s, when he became as well-known as the political figures about whom he wrote. Few histories of Populism in Nebraska omit Bixby’s name; most quote at least a few stanzas of his verse. After his start with the *State Journal* in 1892, he remained with the Republican Party and made only veiled references to his early association with Populism, having concluded that a third-party movement had little chance of success in American politics.

Bixby believed the general course of history exhibited “remarkable changes for the better” and in an 1896 comic poem from “Daily Drift” gave his tongue-in-cheek predictions for “one hundred years from now,” the year 1996. He foresaw the existence of air travel and as yet unrealized scientific advances (the elimination of drought and tornadoes). He also predicted political changes (“The Democrats will all be dead/A hundred years from now”) as well as social

and moral improvements (“No men will go upon a tear/In Omaha or anywhere/ And none will smoke or chew or swear/ A hundred years from now.”)<sup>59</sup> He did not mention his own possible reputation in 1996 as a Nebraska journalist, humorist, and social observer, but one hopes he realized that it would be substantial.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Bixby obituary, Dec. 25, 1934. Unless otherwise identified, succeeding citations to *Nebraska State Journal* are to Bixby’s “Daily Drift” column.

<sup>2</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 4, 1910; Sept. 6, 1924; Bixby obituary, Dec. 25, 1934. Lincoln Kiwanis Club award booklet (1928), in Ammi L. Bixby File, RG 5,000, Vertical File Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter cited as Bixby File).

<sup>3</sup> Various other members of A. L. Bixby’s extended family also came to Nebraska. Well-known rancher Lawrence Bixby, a cousin’s son, is the subject of a recently published biography by Ruth VanAckeren and Robert M. Howard, *Lawrence Bixby, Preserver of the Old Spade Ranch* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 12, 1897; Sept. 12, 1908; May 18, 1926; Bixby obituary, Dec. 25, 1934. Bixby File.

<sup>5</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 27, 1912.

<sup>6</sup> *Columbus Telegram*, May 7, 1891; Mar. 17, 1892. *Nebraska State Journal*, June 12, 15, 1926. Bixby’s experiences in Columbus with the *Sentinel* and the *Argus* may explain why he remained with the *State Journal* for the rest of his career—forty-two years.

<sup>7</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, June 12, 15, 1926.

<sup>8</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee* (morning), Feb. 21, 1907; also in Edwin A. Fry Collection, MS 213, box 3, scrapbook of unidentified newspaper clippings, NSHS. “Flames” quote from *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 24, 1930.

<sup>9</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 30, 1892.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Letter from Edwin A. Fry to Henry Allen Brainerd, Jan. 26, 1935, Henry Allen Brainerd Collection, MS455, NSHS. Fry called the 1892 Nebraska State Press Association meeting in Fremont the “turning point in his [Bixby’s] career.” Both the *Fremont Tribune* and the *Fremont Daily Herald* on Jan. 29, 1892, praised Bixby in their reports of the press-association meeting and gave the text of his poem.

<sup>11</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, June 15, 1926. “When Mr. Bixby Arrived.” Wayne A. Alvord, “The Nebraska State Journal, 1867–1904,” master’s thesis, University of Nebraska, 1934, 16.

## A. L. Bixby

<sup>12</sup> "The editor of that most peculiar sheet, the Sentinel, has quite a reputation as a poet," noted the *Columbus Telegram*, Dec. 3, 1891. *Nebraska State Journal*, Dec. 10, 1894; Feb. 28, 1921.

<sup>13</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, June 20, 1893.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1892; Oct. 11, 1893. See also Dale J. Hart, "Edward Rosewater and the Omaha Bee in Nebraska Politics," master's thesis, University of Nebraska, June 1938.

<sup>15</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Aug. 31, 1898; Oct. 5, Nov. 4, 1899. N. C. Abbott, "Silas A. Holcomb," *Nebraska History* 26 (Oct.–Dec. 1945): 198–99.

<sup>16</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 18, 1895; Jan. 28, 1908; Feb. 14, 1895; Apr. 12, Sept. 19, 1900.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 15, 1892; Dec. 8, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Allen Brainerd, *History of the Nebraska Press Association* 2 (Lincoln 1923), 17–18, 30–31. George Washington Fairbrother (1827–1900) settled in Nemaha City in 1857 and later lived in Tekamah and Brownville.

<sup>19</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, July 1, July 3, Dec. 23, 1896. *Woman's Weekly* (Omaha), June 28, 1896.

<sup>20</sup> "J. Mellen Thurston—Knight of the Rose," *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), Oct. 24, 1899. "The Evolution of a Poet," *ibid.*, Apr. 22, 1899. For other Bixby verses on John M. Thurston and the rose incident, see *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 21, 23, 27, 29; May 3, 4, 1899. Eva May Fosbury, "Biography of John Mellen Thurston," master's thesis, University of Nebraska, August 1920, 22–24.

<sup>21</sup> A. L. Bixby, *Poet-Philosopher and Humorist of The Nebraska State Journal*, Bixby File. *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 27, 1892. In later years Bixby preferred to lecture on country editors rather than leave the *State Journal* and join them. See note 5.

<sup>22</sup> The *Nebraska Democrat* (Omaha), Aug. 26, 1916. Bixby was praised as "one of the stars in the now famous Press Association minstrel show that recently toured the western portion of the state."

<sup>23</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, May 27, 1897; Oct. 30, 1892. The "colored member" is George A. Flippin (1868–1929), first African-American to play football for the University of Nebraska.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, July 16, 1910. For background on attitudes of Nebraskans (especially Omahans) to the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries championship bout, see Randy Roberts, "Heavyweight Champion Jack Johnson: His Omaha Image, A Public Reaction Study," *Nebraska History* 57 (Summer 1976): 226–41.

<sup>25</sup> For the *Journal's* position on prohibition in 1909, see John Anderson, "Lincoln, Nebraska, and Prohibition: The Election of May 4, 1909," *Nebraska History* 70 (Summer 1989): 184–200. Rich-

ard DeBrown, "A History of Daily Newspaper Publication in Lincoln" (University of Nebraska, 1938), 13. *Nebraska State Journal*, June 9, 1898.

<sup>26</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 17, 1911; Jan. 23, 1895. The doubling of the labor and expense of ballot counting without affecting the election's outcome was a familiar theme of opponents of woman suffrage. See also Ann L. Wilhite's "Sixty-five Years Till Victory, History of Woman Suffrage in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 49 (Summer 1968): 157–58.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas C. Coulter, "A History of Woman Suffrage in Nebraska," 1856–1920," Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1967, 115–16.

<sup>28</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Jan. 25, 1909; Nov. 9, 1911; Sept. 28, 1914.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1917. "The question is asked: will husbands and wives vote the same ticket? That is nobody's business but their own. . . . Either is free to vote his or her convictions." *Ibid.*, Sept. 17, 1920. DeBrown, "Newspaper Publication," 13–14.

<sup>30</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, June 5, 6, 1895. Editorial staff for the June 5 edition: Corinth L. Crook, editor in chief; Mrs. George W. Burton, managing editor; assistants, Mrs. F. A. McPherrin, Mrs. W. J. Bryan, Mrs. Paul F. Clark, Miss Francis Kingman, Mrs. C. A. Jones.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, 1893.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1893.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 7, 1900; June 25, 1901.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 31, 1915. For Omaha reaction to William Ashley "Billy" Sunday's campaign, see Leslie R. Valentine, "Evangelist Billy Sunday's Clean-up Campaign in Omaha: Local Reaction to His 50-Day Revival, 1915," *Nebraska History* 64 (Summer 1983): 209–27.

<sup>35</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Oct. 10, 1895.

<sup>36</sup> References to Celia Hughes: *Ibid.*, Aug. 7, 15, 23, 27; Sept. 10; Nov. 18, 1895; May 4, Aug. 20, 1896.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1896 (Cook); Nov. 17, 1896 (Wheeler); Oct. 14, 1896 (Winan); Oct. 27, 1898 (Edwards); Dec. 16, 1924.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 10, 1916. Stiehm coached "Stiehm Roller" Husker football teams from 1911 to 1915.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 27, 1894.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 12, 1894. Three years later Bixby was still advocating extensive city sidewalk repair to improve Lincoln streets and employ out-of-work laboring men. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1897.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, July 27, Aug. 4, 1897.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, July 19, 1893.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1, 1896.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 10, 1895; Sept. 27, 1897.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 23, 1896; Apr. 7, 1900; Oct. 26, 1898.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1909 (reprint from *Burwell Tribune*).

<sup>47</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 2, 1909.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1910. In the "Daily Drift" column of this issue, Bixby wrote that he and perpetual opponent Charles Wooster of Silver Creek could "at last agree" on an issue—"the proposition that the fighting forces of this commonwealth may be safely reduced in these piping times of peace without danger to the security of our home."

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, July 25, 1911; Sept. 16, 1915; Dec. 30, 1915.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 30, 1915; Dec. 5, 1915 (quote). The "Ford Peace Ship," as the vessel was called, carried an American delegation to Europe to exert moral and social pressure to end the war. Student W. F. Noble went as a representative of the University of Nebraska (*Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 16, 1916); Peter Jansen turned down an invitation to go (*Fairbury Journal*, Dec. 9, 1915).

<sup>51</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 8, 1915.

<sup>52</sup> "Because I was for peace until the fist/of Bill, the Kaiser, swung at Uncle Sam/ Must I be called a 'stalling pacifist'/By every cheap-John office hunting ham?" *Ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1917.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 12, 1917; Oct. 30, Nov. 2, 1918; Nov. 21, 1918. *Julesburg* (Colorado) *Grit Advocate*, Apr. 25, 1918 (clipping in Fry Collection, ser.2, f.5).

<sup>54</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, June 20, 1919; July 31, 1933; Aug. 20, Sept. 6, 1924; Sept. 17, 1929; Jan. 6, 1931; June 9, 1932.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1915; Mar. 10, 1915; Jan. 14, 1916. "Scenic effects" quote from Bixby's *Bix in America, A Vacation Trip* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1914), 28.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 2, 1924.

<sup>57</sup> *South Side Sentinel* (Danbury), Apr. 29, 1926. *Bix's Own Journal*, Apr. 21, 1926, printed for meeting of Nebraska Writers Guild honoring Bixby on his seventieth birthday, MSS. *Nebraska State Journal*, Apr. 22, 1926; Dec. 15, 1928. Kiwanis Club booklet.

<sup>58</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Bixby obituary, Dec. 25, 1934; *Lincoln Star*, Mar. 8, 1928.

<sup>59</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, Oct. 3, 1893; Feb. 25, 1896.