

## **William White (1844-1906)**

Truly a “self-made” man, “Happy Bill White,” as his friends knew him, overcame adversity and hardships many times in his life to become a wealthy and successful man. An inventor with many patents to his name, he is credited with creating one of the earliest automated gates.

William Richard White was born in Coles County, Illinois on December 22, 1844 to a family of 12 children. His great grandfather, William White, had fought and died in the Revolutionary War. His grandfather, William White, moved to Illinois in 1828 where his father, Bartholomew White, became a farmer and traveling minister. Bartholomew White was a friend and neighbor of Thomas Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln’s father.

As a young boy, William White suffered from serious eye problems which caused him to have an extreme sensitivity to light. According to family stories, young William spent the first eight years of his life in almost total darkness. By the time he was eleven, William was well enough to attend school, and did so whenever he could. However, most of his education was acquired by studying on his own even as he worked the fields of the family farm.

At 18, William began teaching school, a career he would have for 14 years. In addition to regular school subjects, he taught astronomy and singing. William taught his students not to fear making mistakes. He invented new ways to challenge them. He would give them hard questions which they would have to take home and discuss with their parents. He felt the worst problem a student could have was being idle. He explained that in being idle, students hurt themselves, their parents and their teacher. He experimented with new teaching techniques and textbooks.

It was while teaching vocal music that William met his future wife, Harriet Keller. William was nearly 22 when they married and settled in Neoga, IL. Here they had their first home and began their family of seven children.

In 1871, a financial panic swept across the country. When they could not pay the mortgage, the Whites lost their fifty acre farm and home. Out of the necessity to find a new source of income, William turned to invention.

Using his knowledge of the needs of farmers, William began to think of ways to make farming easier. Fencing was extremely important to Illinois farmers. It protected fields from roving animals, enclosed pastures and marked property lines. White invented a new type of fencing which required less material and time to construct. Later, he invented new types of gates as well. With no money for a patent, William turned to friends and family, promising to return \$100 for each \$1 invested. His brother-in-law gave him a pig which William was able to sell for \$3. Within a few months, William was able to secure his patent. With the money he earned from selling his fences, White bought back his farm, paid off the mortgage on his mother’s land, and successfully paid back everyone who had loaned him money, especially his brother-in-law who received \$300 for his pig investment.

In 1890, William White moved with his family to Bloomington. Here he patented his most successful invention, a drive gate. It is considered a forerunner of today’s automatic garage door opener. This gate allowed the farmer to stay seated in his carriage or wagon, pull a cord or wooden dowel, and the gate would swing open. The farmer would then drive through the gate and pull another lever to close the gate behind him, all without leaving the seat of the wagon. White built a factory at Grove and McClun streets to manufacture the new gate. Soon it was

open day and night making gates to fill the demand for orders. In the next two years, White sold \$4 million (in today's dollars) worth of gates.

White was also an inventive businessman, often turning customers into salesmen by teaching them how to make and install the gates. He printed "how-to" handbooks and offered to help his salesmen get established in their new territories. He received many letters telling him of the financial successes of these customers turned salesmen.

White began to exhibit his gate all over the U.S. and even in different parts of the world. He was awarded a blue ribbon and diploma at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. He was awarded a gold medal at the Omaha Exposition in 1897 and another gold medal at the Paris Exposition of 1900. His gate was also displayed by the U.S. government in patent offices across the country.

Sadly, just a few short years later, in 1903, William's wife, Harriet, died. Not long after that, William's health also began to fail. He developed severe stomach trouble and died on July 10, 1906 at the age of 61. When he died, he was a very wealthy man. He had patented over 70 inventions and was one of the most respected "gate men" in the nation. He was known as a generous man. He is buried next to his wife in Evergreen cemetery.

**Discussion Question:** In the first paragraph, the words self-made, adversity, successful and inventor are all applied to William White. Tell how each of these words applies to him.

- \*Born December 22, 1844 in Coles County, IL; died July 10, 1906 in Bloomington.
- \*Suffered as a child from eye problem that caused extreme sensitivity to light
- \*Mainly self-educated, taught school for 14 years.
- \*Financial Panic of 1869-1871 caused him to lose home and turn to invention for income
- \*Successfully patented new type of fencing and “drive gate” which earned his fortune