

Who Was Bret Harte?



Grolier Online reports (see reference at bottom of page):

Bret Harte

Born: August 25, 1836, in Albany, New York

Died: May 5, 1902

The rough and feisty mining camps of the Wild West were brought vividly to life in the stories of Bret Harte, whose gold-rush tales made him famous. In such stories as "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" and "The Luck of Roaring Camp," Harte described the California wilderness, its crude frontier settlements, and the colorful characters whose dreams of striking it rich rarely came true.

He actually spent little time on the frontier that his stories described. Francis Brett Hart was the third of Henry and Elizabeth Ostrander Hart's four children. Elizabeth was from a cultured Dutch family, and Henry was a schoolteacher. From his parents, young Harte developed a love of literature and history. He was an avid reader and adored books by Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper. Harte's father died when the boy was nine years old. His widowed mother moved the family to Brooklyn. In 1853, she moved to California to marry Colonel Andrew Williams, an early mayor of Oakland. Harte and his sister, Margaret, followed the next year. On the steamboat's journey, they saw shipwrecks and storms at sea; rain forests and warring tribes. These fanciful experiences colored Harte's later writing.

In California, the teenaged Harte helped the family by working as a teacher. He briefly tried gold-mining before becoming a printer's apprentice at a weekly newspaper. Writing under the name Bret Harte, he submitted articles and poems to various publications. In 1858, his poem "Dolores" was published. It convinced him to become a writer.

In 1860, Harte moved to San Francisco. The city was fast emerging as a major urban center. He found a job as a typesetter for The Golden Age newspaper. That year, the publication of "The Work on Red Mountain" brought Harte literary recognition. The

24-year-old quickly rose to local fame as a satirist and short-story writer. Harte was welcomed at the city's elite meeting place, the Bohemian Club. Over the next three years, more than 100 of his stories, essays, and poems were published. Harte became an editor for a weekly publication, *The Californian*. As such, he worked with the then-unknown author and humorist Samuel Clemens (later, Mark Twain), and editor and inventor Charles Henry Webb. During this time he also met and married Anna Griswold. The couple would have four children. In 1866, Harte accepted a position as secretary to the superintendent of the new U.S. Mint on Commercial Street. He held this job even after being named as editor of the new journal *The Overland Monthly*. Harte's 1868 story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp," made him a household name throughout the country. His stories were humorous, touching, and imaginative.

Harte's work helped establish a writing style known as local color writing. Readers felt that they were actually in the very place that Harte richly described. His words painted pictures. The romanticized tales were also filled with sentimental characters and unlikely heroes. In "The Luck of Roaring Camp," a group of grizzled miners change their ways to raise an orphan child. In "Brown of Calaveras," a vagabond tears himself from a woman's love rather than harm her social standing. Harte's most famous story, "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," tells of four "improper persons"—a gambler, a thief, and two prostitutes—who are driven out of a mining camp by self-righteous people. The four exiles are trapped by snow on a mountain trail, and three of them die. But they meet death with courage and dignity, shaming those who sent them away.

Harte knew how to entertain his audience. His stories of the American West were in demand in the United States and Europe. The Hartes moved to the east coast in 1871. Harte accepted a job with the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in Boston. He was to write a story or poem each month for one year. The magazine paid Harte the unprecedented sum of \$10,000 (equal to \$100,000 today). Harte never returned to California, but kept writing gold-rush stories for the rest of his life. In 1877, he and Clemens co-wrote a play, *Ah Sin*. The collaboration strained the friendship. The play was a box office failure. (Clemens said of Harte in an 1895 interview: "I detest him, because I think his work is shoddy. He has no heart, except his name, and I consider he has produced nothing that is genuine.")

In 1878, Harte was appointed United States Consul in Crefeld, Germany. His wife and children remained in the U.S. Two years later, Harte was transferred to Glasgow, Scotland. Thereafter he lived and wrote in London. Critics agreed that Harte never again achieved the high quality of his early works. He died of throat cancer on May 5, 1902, in Camberely, England. In his honor, friends in San Francisco installed a ten-foot bronze plaque on the Bohemian Club. It survives to this day, at the intersection of Taylor and Post Streets. Several of Harte's stories were later filmed as early silent

movies. Although nearly forgotten in the 1900s, Harte's prolific work has recently been recognized as an influential contribution to American fiction.

Reference:

Harte, Bret. (2008). *America the Beautiful*. Retrieved July 8, 2008, from Grolier Online <http://atb.grolier.com/cgi-bin/article?templatename=profile.html&assetid=atb006b02&assettype=b>

Links:

[Bret Harte](#)

Well-chosen links to Internet resources on Bret Hart, provided by Donna M. Campbell of the dept. of English, Gonzaga Univ., Spokane, Wash.

[Making of America - Harte](#)

Links to scanned page images from the 'Overland monthly and Out West magazine' containing numerous Harte stories plus two frontispiece portraits. From the inter-university Making of America digital library of primary sources in U.S. social history.

[Making of America - Poems, by Bret Harte](#)

Scanned page images and searchable text of the 1871 J. R. Osgood edition of Harte's 'Poems'. From the inter-university Making of America digital library of primary sources in U.S. social history.

[Harte, Bret \(1836-1902\)](#)

Scanned versions of early editions of several books by Bret Harte. From Wright American Fiction--a literature digitalization project of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation and the Indiana University Digital Library Program.

[The On-line Books Page](#)

Database of links to texts of thousands of literary, historical, and scientific works. Can be browsed by author, title, or subject and searched by keyword. Edited by John M. Ocherbloom, a digital library planner for the Univ. of Pennsylvania Library.

[All about the Gold Rush](#)

Comprehensive guide to the epic western migration in search of gold, based on the PBS documentary (1998) commemorating the 150th anniversary of the California Gold Rush.