

William F. Kirk: a history lesson on one of the area's most prolific and famous writers

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The sights and sounds of the Chippewa Valley have been a muse to artists of all mediums, but no one may have channeled that inspiration into the written word more successfully than Chippewa Falls native William Kirk. A literary renaissance man, he dabbled in poetry, sports writing, dialect humor, and Broadway musicals. While still at the height of fame, he returned to the city of his youth to live out his days.

William Frederick Kirk was born April 29, 1877 in Mankato, Minnesota to David and Caroline Kirk. The family moved to Chippewa Falls in 1880, when David got a job as the City & County Surveyor. "Billy" lived a charmed childhood, engaging in the joys of the local swimming holes and baseball sandlots. A diligent student, Kirk graduated from Chippewa Falls High School in 1894.

The summer after graduation, he took a job as a typesetter in the print shop for the local morning newspaper, the Daily Independent. A brief stint at the Chippewa Herald was followed by a two-year stint at the Eau Claire Morning Telegram. He then spent half a decade as stenographer in Chippewa Falls and then St. Paul, where he began to find his voice as a writer. Unhappy with the exposure his verse was getting, he jumped at the chance to return to Chippewa Falls where he took over as the editor and feature writer for the Chippewa Herald.

This was around November of 1902, and he quickly found an audience for his column entitled *Fleeting Fancies*. One of those followers was Charles Pfister, editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel. Pfister offered to double Kirk's wages, plus pay for housing if he brought the column to the Sentinel. Kirk made the move and spent the next few years enjoying an enormous following. It was during this time that he published his first book – a compilation of his columns, appropriately named *Fleeting Fancies*. A second one followed a year later; this one entitled *Norse Nightingale*. Drawing on his childhood in the Northwoods, the humorous verse was written in a Scandinavian dialect.

Shortly after the release of *Norse Nightingale*, Kirk was once again called to a larger stage, this time to New York City by William Randolph Hearst. For the next 13 years Kirk lived the big city life, becoming an internationally recognized writer. A lifelong fan of baseball, he was assigned to follow the New York Giants. Hearing the call of Broadway, he wrote a handful of show tunes. Finally, he published two more books: the baseball-inspired *Right Off the Bat* and the World War I-inspired *Song of Sergeant Swanson*, once again utilizing Scandinavian dialect.

It's unclear what brought about a need for a change of scenery, but in late 1918 Kirk decided to return to Chippewa Falls. He continued to write weekly for the Hearst papers. He dove headlong into local organizations, lending his words and voice to numerous

efforts. In 1920 he was named to "Who's Who in America." He put out two more books of poetry: *Out of the Current* and *The Harp of Fate*.

Kirk began suffering excruciating stomach pain after a fall at his Lake Wissota cabin. Always a large man, he began to rapidly drop weight. It was soon found that he had cancer. The diagnosis didn't change his demeanor as he cheerily entertained numerous visitors at his bedside at the Hotel Northern. In the early morning hours of March 25, 1927, Kirk succumbed to the disease that had ravaged his body. Flags in the city flew at half-mast.