

### ***William Wirt Robe, Granite Falls Visionary***

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Entrepreneur, musician, rancher—living in town and country—who regarded gambling and liquor laws as but a permeable barrier to his success, visionary of Granite Falls' future, and always a fount of entertainment—such was William Wirt ROBE (1865-1949), a third cousin once removed. To him in his generation fell the ROBE tradition of eccentric bachelorhood, and he carried it honorably. Pity that few alive today remember him; and one who did—Norman BLYTHE—died recently. Wirt, as he was called, gave Granite Falls its name, and left his mark on the town. He needs some kind of memorial, perhaps a plaque in the hardware store on Granite Avenue, where he once sold alcohol-laden Old Wa-Hoo Bitters over the counter to respectable teetotalers.

Wirt had a lot of family pride to live up—or live down—to. Named for a famous Supreme Court justice, he seemed destined for great things. Yet something in the ROBE genome, when exposed to the influence of the frontier, takes the eldest son and for generations has transformed him into a local legend. It happened to poor William ROBE, Jr. (1750?-1801), who went insane while out ploughing one summer afternoon in what is now West Virginia; it happened to my great-uncle William Walker ROBE (1855-1944) contemporaneously with Wirt under the influence of the forests of Linn County, Oregon.

Great-uncle Will was a “preacher’s kid,” and as such his manner of running wild was to spend months in the Oregon Cascades in mining or logging camps. Anyone who ran afoul of him had to pay. It might take the form of a firecracker in a lunch sack which was casually dropped into the campfire as Will passed by. Yet Will got as good as he gave. I was told the story of his attempts to open an umbrella against the persistent Oregon rain, while seated on a mule that spooked whenever the bumpershoot came up, and inevitably threw Will, leaving him to recuperate in bed. While laid up, Will received postcards of “sympathy” from the most remote parts of the county. Like Wirt, great-uncle Will also had a growth on his nose that he thought was cancer (he treated it with blue vitriol and a piece of his nose came off), and, not surprisingly, neither ROBE had a reputation for bathing frequently.

Wirt ROBE of Washington made a similar name for himself. After naming Granite Falls, and after his brothers Truitt and Campbell had platted it and begun building its stores and houses, he thought of its future as a center of culture and established the Granite Falls Opera House. Ideally he would not only be its proprietor but also play a brass instrument in the orchestra. The following year, however, Wirt saw that the future lay with higher-tech entertainment, and so the Opera House became the “Electric Theatre,” the town’s first cinema. At the same time as he was managing the opera house, he also had a bakery and sold cigars. In 1904 he was a deputy sheriff, and in 1908 he ran the Granite Falls Athletic Club.

Wirt was also a talented musician. The local paper announced, on 9 May 1903: “W. W. ROBE ordered this week a fine new tuba, through Prof. McDANIELS of Snohomish.” In the Granite Falls Museum there is a group photo including Wirt, a uniformed member of the town band, holding the tuba. With Lon BROWN, another local entertainer, Wirt used to tour—as far as Oklahoma—doing blackface minstrel

numbers. His regular employment, however, was with the Robe-Menzel lumber camp of his brother Truitt. Wirt was in charge of the camp's sanitary facilities. These consisted of a high-stepping horse attached to a flatbed wagon, on which was mounted a porcelain toilet. Wirt would cut pulp wood on the south side of the Stillaguamish River and bring a lunch of crackers and limburger cheese, that a dog got into once. Great-Uncle Will had a similar affection for limburger cheese, once using it on an unsuspecting victim's coat lapel.

But Wirt's talent as an entrepreneur could not be denied. Wirt would sell whatever he could. Not only did he have a little store in the ROBE cabin on Green Mountain, but he peddled strawberries and other fruits from his Model T pickup. Ranching was not really his forte. The milk cow would not cooperate, but at least he made his trouble with her into an entertaining story for the Granite Falls Forum, circa 1925:

*Page Sherlock Holmes! Wirt ROBE needs his assistance to help solve a big calf-napping mystery.*

*For several days now, one of Wirt's cows has been sneaking off into the wilds with her udder full of milk, and returning bone dry. Wirt has deduced that the cow has become the mother of a calf, and has hidden the babe in the woods lest Joe MUELLER's axe get it. And Wirt can't find the calf. (note: Joe MUELLER was the local butcher).*

*He has made a number of trips into the woods surrounding his place and has scoured the countryside from Meadow Mountain to Canyon Creek, without success.*

*The cow is very sly, too. She starts off in one direction when Wirt is watching, and then evidently changes her course after she gets out of sight, because when Wirt gets time to do some looking around the calf is never in the direction the cow has gone.*

*Mama cow always comes home at meal times, though, and it makes Wirt sore to give her grub and get gyped out of the milk.*

*The cow is an old calf-hider from way back, having done the trick several times in the past. The calves have always been found before, and Wirt hopes that he finds this one before some cougar does.*

The local paper also reported, in 1903: "W. W. Robe has traded his timber claim in Oregon for the Cady Property on Main Street and a cash consideration." He was then the owner of the town bakery: "W. W. ROBE has purchased a \$200 bake oven for the Robe Bakery and will install the plant this week."

I mentioned that, when it came to Wirt's talents, the liquor and gambling laws were permeable. Bob MILLER told me that once Wirt was hauled into court on a charge of running a game of chance. Wirt denied it, saying in his defense that his slot machine was disqualified as a game of chance, because he had rigged it so that NOBODY could win.

The following interview with Northwest journalist Stewart H. HOLBROOK best captures Wirt's storytelling talent and his ability to wink at obstacles to his business. It could not have been by accident that I casually bought HOLBROOK's *The Golden Age of Quackery* (New York: Collier Books, 1959, 1962) while on a genealogical expedition to Portland last May, and read therein the following priceless account on pages 192-94:

*Doc Wirt ROBE, for whose pioneering parents the town of Robe, Washington, was named, traveled for several seasons as a banjo and trombone player with an Old Wa-Hoo Bitters medicine show, and came to believe this fine tonic had greater possibilities if properly marketed. Thus, when Snohomish County surprisingly voted dry in a local option contest, he opened in Granite Falls a store he called Wirt Robe's Second-Class Emporium, over the counter or bar of which he sold Old Wa-Hoo Bitters at two bits a glass, declaring it to be as fine a Temperance drink as any man could want. For the next two years Wirt never blew trombone or picked banjo, save for pleasure, and the men of Granite Falls were never without a tonic drink of astonishing powers.*

*When I knew Wirt ROBE, then all of eighty, he had long since retired from the road, yet, in a way, he was still in the medicine business. Having retired to the homestead he had staked in the 1880's, he spent part of his time gathering cascara bark from the shrub that grew in profusion beneath the towering hemlock on his claim. The tall gaunt old man was wonderful company. Perfectly cynical about medicine shows, and about most medicine, too, he liked to recall the days when he toured the country and when "All sold out, Doctor" meant that business was good.*

*One season in the nineties Wirt went out with a Doc ENNIS who was selling his own Universal Balm. "The stuff was of course good for almost everything," Wirt remembered, "but because Doc ENNIS was basically a kidney man, he bore down strong on kidney troubles. ENNIS wasn't a good lecturer. He lacked the old-time eloquence, and just didn't know how to talk to a crowd. Now, you take ENNIS alone, why, he could scare all hell out of a man—one single man, just telling him quietly how his innards were haywire, pointing out symptom after symptom, using medical terms, until the guy was feeling terrible all over, especially in his kidneys.*

*"But with a crowd—no, ENNIS could neither get their undivided attention, nor hold such as he did get. We'd been out a couple of weeks working small towns and little settlements around Puget Sound, and doing just fair. Then, ENNIS booked us for three nights in Stanwood. I knew Stanwood was a right wild and tough place, a center for loggers from surrounding camps in the virgin Douglas fir timber. The boys there had run more than one show troupe out of town, and I knew they had a reputation to live up to. I was uneasy.*

*"But we had a pretty good show, much better than average, and though Doc ENNIS sure was less than average as a lecturer, I figured we'd get by with our musicians, dancers, and singers. So, we set up shop in Stanwood. Come evening and the place was crawling with loggers. A couple of saloons were doing business, but at that time there were no recognized fancy houses in town. No regulars. Maybe a few part-time workers. The saloons, plus our show, were enough to bring a big crowd of the boys to town.*

*“For two nights we played to packed houses. Free, of course. But Doc ENNIS just could not get them to buying Universal Balm. If we were going to make expenses, we’d have to do it on the third night, which was a Saturday. Well, sir, Stanwood that night was a hullabaloo. The hall was packed. Every bench filled. Five rows deep standing in the rear. We give ‘em our overture, then Doc came on-stage to make the Lecture. He hadn’t more than got under way when a big feller down front started to get to his feet.*

*“Right then and there I thought to myself, This is it. We’re going to have to fight to get out of here at all. This big fellow was a famous bullpuncher who drove bulls—oxen to you—on a skidroad near town. He must have been seven feet tall. Why, when he started up from his bench, I thought he never would stop standing up, he was that tall. And when he did stand up, he let go a most un-Christly yell.*

*“‘Hold on, hold on!’ this big guy roared. I naturally figured he was going to tell Doc ENNIS that his medicine was no good, and then proceed to break up the show and take the hall apart. Things like that had happened right here, and we had noticed the unhealed wounds of past troubles in broken windows and broken benches.*

*“But no, not this time. ‘Hold on!’ the big guy yelled again. He got plenty of attention from the audience. And from Doc, too. Poor ENNIS stood there on the stage, his face white. I could see he was shaking like a poplar. The big feller went right ahead. ‘Lissen,’ he cried. ‘All of you here knows me. You know I been sick for two months. Well, day before yesterday I bought a bottle of Doc’s Universal Balm. And now I’m cured, cured, cured! A well man, cured, I tell you, and I go back to work Monday. Wonderful, wonderful!’ Then he sat down.*

*“We sold every last bottle of the medicine we had that night. The best of it was, that big bullpuncher was no plant, no shill we hired. He honestly believed Doc ENNIS’s Balm had cured him. Further, I don’t doubt for a minute it had cured him. Nobody can tell me that a patent medicine won’t cure some people just as well as some New York specialist with a degree from Columbia College and a goatee in the right style.”*

Nor is it coincidence that this summer I was laid up with kidney trouble myself. While recovering from the procedure that broke up the stone, I related this story to the nurse and told her what Doc’s Universal Balm was good for. She told me that it might have worked for kidney trouble if it was a strong diuretic. I figure that, given its high alcohol content, it may well have been. As part of my new diet, moreover, my (goateed) doctor recommended that I drink 250 ml (one cup) of wine daily, since wine has been reported to reduce kidney stone formation by 39%. So I really think Wirt ROBE, and Doc ENNIS, and that logger from Stanwood, were on to something.