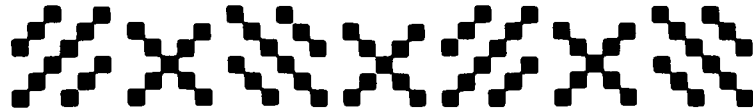


Kin Hubbard's Abe Martin: A Figure of Transition in American Humor

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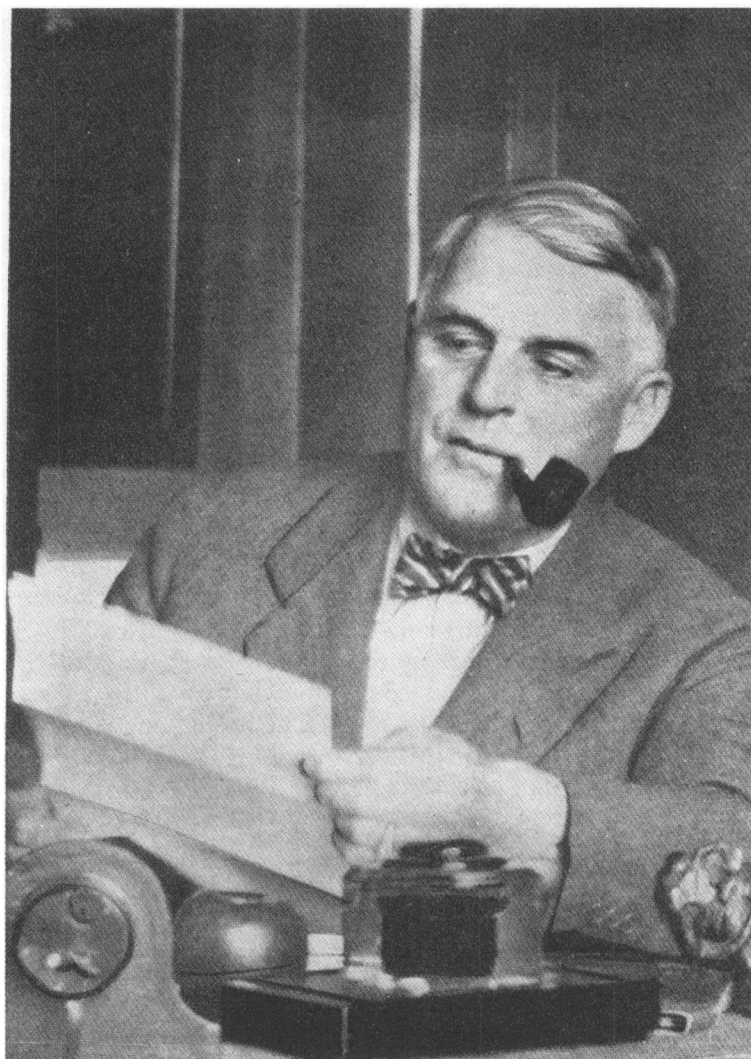
During the first three decades of the twentieth century one of America's most important humorists was Indiana's Frank McKinney "Kin" Hubbard, creator of "Abe Martin." For twenty-five years, from 1904 to 1930, the comic sayings of Martin and his neighbors in Brown County in southern Indiana were highlights of the newspaper to millions of Americans. By 1910 the Abe Martin mania had so enthralled the country that there were "Abe Martin cigars, overalls, cookies, whiskey, porch-furniture, lead pencils and moving picture theatres . . ."¹ At the time of Hubbard's death in 1930 his humorous comments were nationally syndicated in more than three hundred newspapers and magazines.²

Hubbard's Abe Martin appeared during the waning years of the crackerbarrel ascendancy in American humor. The nineteenth-century crackerbarrel figure traditionally focused on political involvement, rural residency, the fatherly image, employment, and success. Above all else he was a capable figure in a world still based in eighteenth-century rationalism. If problems arose, common sense and past experience would be enough to make any life well ordered again. The inability to cope with a dilemma was an individual rather than a societal

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¹ Margaret Rohe Howard, "The Hoosier Humorist," *Human Life*, XXXII (September, 1910), 14.

² J. Harley Nicholas, "Kin Hubbard," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXVII (March, 1931), 5. During his lifetime Hubbard received high praise from contemporary comedy writers such as fellow Hoosier George Ade and the renowned Will Rogers. Rogers wrote: "No man in our generation was within a mile of him. . . . I have said it from the stage and in print for twenty years." Quoted in *Dictionary of American Biography*, V (New York, 1961), 324.



FRANK MCKINNEY "KIN" HUBBARD

Reproduced from Fred C. Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard: Creator of Abe Martin* (New York, 1952), frontispiece.

problem. The crackerbarrel figure was thus a symbol of American individualism.³

By the early twentieth century a transition was taking place in American humor. This change would find its first full articulation in the *New Yorker* magazine of the 1920s, especially in the writings of Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Clarence Day, and S.J. Perelman.⁴ These new writers focused on the comic antihero, a character almost the complete antithesis of the crackerbarrel type. The antihero was nonpolitical, urban, childlike, leisure-oriented, and frustrated—often at the hands of his domineering wife. In his earlier appearances in the comedy world the comic antihero had invariably represented the whipping boy for the capable hero, and his frustration usually resulted from a failure to follow the commonsense model of his crackerbarrel counterpart. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the antihero was appearing on center stage. Abe Martin was a product of this transitional period. He was in most respects a typical nineteenth-century crackerbarrel figure; yet, he was increasingly at home in the twentieth-century world of the antihero. An examination of this dichotomy will perhaps help to restore both Hubbard and Martin to their proper places in American humor.

The most dominant characteristic of the crackerbarrel figure, his fascination for politics, is a trait for which Martin became famous. In fact, the birth of the character was the result of the 1904 presidential election. Hubbard had followed the Theodore Roosevelt-Alton B. Parker campaign for the Indianapolis *News*—he traveled with the candidates in Indiana—and had accumulated a notebook full of drawings, including the figure of the eventual Abe Martin.⁵ Never one to waste things, Hubbard introduced this character to the newspaper shortly after the election. In the years that followed “Abe” became famous for such classic political observations as “It’s purty hard t’ underpay a city official” and “We’d all like t’ vote fer th’ best man, but he’s never a candidate.”⁶

³ For a description of the crackerbarrel figure and the comic antihero, described below, see Gehring, *Leo McCarey and the Comic Anti-Hero in American Film*, 41-87.

⁴ Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (New York, 1937; reprint, San Francisco, 1960), 168-69.

⁵ Fred C. Kelly, *The Life and Times of Kin Hubbard: Creator of Abe Martin* (New York, 1952), 81-82.

⁶ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin’s Almanack for 1908* (Indianapolis, 1907), [8]; Hubbard, *Abe Martin’s Primer* (Indianapolis, 1914), [62].



Abe Martin
Of Brown County, Indiana

Reproduced from Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin on Things in General* (Indianapolis, [1925]), [6].

Although Abe Martin was born in the political arena, political perspective did not play the dominant part in the Hoosier character's comedy world as it did in the humor of other crack-barrel figures such as Will Rogers and Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley. Political observations occur in Hubbard's work as *one* of the fixtures of life, not *the* fixture. Even in the humorist's first collection of sayings, *Abe Martin of Brown County, Indiana*, where one would expect a political focus due to the origins of the character, politics is not an overriding theme. In fact, the book opens with a nonpolitical question: Have you ever had a "bald-headed barber talk for an' hour t' git you t' try some hair restorer?"⁷ In the World War I collection, *Abe Martin on the War and Other Things*, politics retains

⁷ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin of Brown County, Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1906), [1].



You can't mix politics with nothin'
but office gittin'.

Reproduced from Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin on Things in General*, (Indianapolis, [1925]), [68].

its secondary status. Instead of being "on the war," a topic which would logically lend itself to political observation, the book is primarily about "other things."⁸

Despite the balance of subject matter in Hubbard's humor, when Abe Martin emerges from his relative obscurity in the late twentieth century, he is usually quoted in a political context. Two possible reasons occur. First, audiences have come to expect a political emphasis from the crackerbarrel humorists; hence, readers focus on politics even though Hubbard did not. Second, the political observations that Hubbard did make have weathered the passage of time somewhat more gracefully than those of other, more political, crackerbarrel figures such as Will

⁸ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin on the War and Other Things* (Indianapolis, 1918), [16].

Rogers, Seba Smith's Jack Downing, and Dunne's Mr. Dooley. The political sayings of Rogers and Dunne are more readily available and more frequently quoted than Hubbard's; but politics was their main theme, and they dealt with more topical—although quickly dated—subjects. Hubbard, on the other hand, generally wrote in political generalities; such as, "How'd you like t' be marooned in Napoleon, Indianny, an' dependin' on th' Congress t' git you out?"⁹ When he did deal with politics, he was thus seldom off the mark; for example, "You can lead a feller to the polls, but you can't make him think."¹⁰

That Abe Martin and his friends resided in rural, isolated Brown County, Indiana, was in keeping with another basic trait of the crackerbarrel figure—residency in small-town, rural America, of which Hubbard himself was a product. Idealization of country life was a characteristic of eighteenth-century rationalism, which saw the city as an unhealthy, unnatural place to live. The key to freedom was an agriculturally oriented America in need of little government. Throughout his life Hubbard strongly believed in the superiority of this self-reliant, small-town America. Abe Martin comments in 1907: "Th' biggest 'rubes' at a State Fair er city people";¹¹ in 1929, near the end of his career, he cracks: "I'm continually readin' o' fellers who've made good in the city, but makin' good in a little town is the real test."¹² Hubbard populated Martin's small-town America with a large collection of other eccentric, crackbarrel neighbors reminiscent of the family Seba Smith gave Yankee Jack Downing in his tales. It is from one of Abe's friends, the Reverend Wiley Tanger, that the most thorough praise of the rural way of life is presented.

Some folks jist seem t' be cut out fer th' artificiality o' th' city, an' that's where they ought t' live. But if you want t' live an honest, quiet, peaceful life an' enjoy th' love an' confidence o' your friends an' neighbors, ther's no place like th' little town where one-half th' people knows how th' other half lives, where respectability is a real asset, where a K. of P. watch charm won't save you if you can't toe th' mark, an' where you're remembered long after th' hearse gits back t' th' livery stable.¹³

Hubbard consistently practiced what he preached. The national popularity of his writing created lucrative opportunities in New

⁹ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin: Hoss Sense and Nonsense* (Indianapolis, 1926), 126.

¹⁰ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Town Pump* (Indianapolis, 1929), 44.

¹¹ Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Almanack for 1908*, [62].

¹² Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Town Pump*, 138.

¹³ Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Primer*, [160].

York City on more than one occasion, but his answer to the possibility of moving to the city was always the same: "I'd rather stay here where I'm known [small-town Indiana] and can play in the band."¹⁴

In true crackerbarrel tradition Abe Martin is an older, fatherly figure. His crackerbarrel wisdom is a product of tried and tested experience, a valid premise in a world considered to be rational. Situations and experiences repeated themselves, rationalists thought; thus, cause and effect became predictable. In the crackerbarrel world, therefore, age is equated with wisdom and is venerated because it represents an accumulation of experiences. Abe Martin neighbor Tell Binkley perhaps best expresses this philosophy in a short essay entitled "Sixty." (Hubbard "just happened" to be sixty at this time.) Binkley noted: one "has only reached the shank o' young manhood at sixty," a condition with "judgment an' experience . . . piled up" ¹⁵ Hubbard had earlier claimed that people only improve with age: "Cato took up Greek an' learned it at eighty; Goethe wuz eighty when he put the finishin' touches on Faust; Sophocles wrote Oedipus at four-score an' Theophrastus wuz ninety before he became popular as a writer."¹⁶

A major axiom for Abe Martin was that life is the only real teacher: "Ther hain't no favorites in th' school o' experience"¹⁷ and "Experience is a dear teacher but he delivers th' goods."¹⁸ Thus, like the vast majority of crackerbarrel figures, from Sam Slick to Will Rogers, Martin questions formal education: "Lester Mopps has been out o' school fer nigh on two years an' he can't even play a saxophone," Hubbard wrote in 1924.¹⁹ In fact, in typical crackerbarrel style, Abe often suggests that formal schooling is a liability: "Miss Tawney Apple's cousin says he's never been able t' find as good a job as he had before he went

¹⁴ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 107. Hubbard's comment could possibly have influenced the musical reluctance of a celebrated fictional crackerbarrel figure to go to New York. Film director Frank Capra's Longfellow Deeds, of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), is not impressed by the monetary windfall beckoning from the city. In this film Deeds (played by Gary Cooper) consents to visit New York, but his chief concern about leaving home is his place in the small-town band.

¹⁵ Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Town Pump*, 41.

¹⁶ Hubbard, *Abe Martin on the War and Other Things*, [16].

¹⁷ Kin Hubbard, *Short Furrows* (Indianapolis, 1912), [9]. There is also a volume published in 1911 that is entitled *Short Furrows*. It is somewhat different from the 1912 edition.

¹⁸ Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Brown County Almanack* (Indianapolis, 1909), [111].

¹⁹ Kin Hubbard, *Fifty-Two Weeks of Abe Martin* (Indianapolis, 1924), 25.

thro' college."²⁰ Hubbard himself had profited little from formal education: he had dropped out of school during the grades, and his one attempt at an advanced academic setting (the Jefferson School of Art in Detroit) did not last a week.²¹ He had, nevertheless, achieved great critical and commercial success through the time-honored crackerbarrel "school o' experience." Hubbard and Abe Martin obviously understood each other.

Martin's crackerbarrel credentials have thus far been impeccable. He has personified the wise, elder statesman of rural, small-town America. Two final characteristics associated with the traditional crackerbarrel figure, career and success, are not, however, consistently apparent in Abe Martin. Though Hubbard's drawings of Abe suggest that he is a farmer, they also depict a perennial loafer; and Martin's sayings often underline this inactivity: "more people die from overwork than all th' loafin' put t'gether."²² That the posture of a loafer was a conscious move is implied by Hubbard biographer Fred C. Kelly, who notes that early in the humorist's career he experimented with, but discarded, a more "industrious farmer."²³ Comedy historian Norris Yates thus seems justified in calling Martin a "pensive loafer."²⁴ Yates might also have added that Abe was often a most "frustrated pensive loafer."

Martin's deviation from the crackerbarrel mold in terms of leisure and frustration reflects events in and characteristics of Hubbard's own personal life. Leisure-time activities had always been a central focus in the humorist's life; certainly his love affair with this antiheroic trait predates the Abe Martin period. From childhood Hubbard had had a special weakness for circuses and traveling theater productions, and his lifestyle had always been structured to meet that fascination. As a young man he had become something of a carnival vagabond, moving from job to job and place to place—always in or on the fringes of the entertainment world. During this period he was employed as gatekeeper at an amusement park, ticket seller for a traveling show that featured a mummified Aztec mother and child, and manager and performer in his own minstrel show. Not surprisingly, people close to the young humorist often saw

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

²¹ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 50, 59-60.

²² Hubbard, *Abe Martin: Hoss Sense and Nonsense*, 127.

²³ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 82.

²⁴ Norris W. Yates, *The American Humorist* (New York, 1964; reprint, Ames, Iowa, 1964), 100.

him as something of a pensive loafer. When Hubbard eventually moved into newspaper work, several of his early positions often seemed contingent on his ability to get free passes to local vaudeville performances; moreover, he had a tendency to spend much of his early, modest newspaper salary on flashy clothing that he felt replicated that of the touring vaudevillians.²⁵ By the time of Abe Martin's success at the Indianapolis *News* leisure had actually become a problem for Hubbard. His comedy work came so easily that he had trouble keeping busy. Much of his time at the *News* was spent in practical jokes and popular entertainment for the rest of the staff, especially in relating the latest vaudeville stories and routines.²⁶

Abe Martin's great success allowed Hubbard to feed his vagabond nature in a grander style. In 1924 he took a trip around the world. Unlike most crackerbarrel figures, who used travel to report on national politics (such as Rogers's fame for covering each party's presidential convention), Abe focused his travel reports on such leisure activities as girl-watching in Florida: "One don't have t' loaf around Miammy Beach very long t' appreciate what an awful time Flo Ziegfield must have in findin' material t' glorify."²⁷

The second antiheroic characteristic in Hubbard's work—frustration—is more a product of changes that the humorist experienced while writing the Martin material than an innate characteristic of the man. Comedy references about wives and/or marriage—generally a key focus of frustration for the antihero although virtually nonexistent in crackerbarrel humor—best exemplify this developing frustration. Marriage was a rare institution among the always independent Hubbard clan. None of the humorist's five older brothers and sisters ever married, and Kin did not find his way to the altar until 1905 when he was in his late thirties. Even then he felt so embarrassed about being a bridegroom that wedding guests were not allowed to watch the ceremony.²⁸ His union with Josephine Jackson, though generally considered quite happy, seemed to have a fair share of conflicts; for example, the couple bought

²⁵ " 'Kin' Hubbard, Hoosier Humorist and Creator of 'Abe Martin,' Dies," *Editor & Publisher: The Fourth Estate*, LXIII (January 3, 1931), 10; Richard E. Banta, comp., *Indiana Authors and Their Books, 1816-1916* (Crawfordsville, Ind., 1949), 162.

²⁶ " 'Kin' Hubbard, Hoosier Humorist," 10; Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 107-11.

²⁷ Hubbard, *Abe Martin: Hoss Sense and Nonsense*, 56.

²⁸ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 18.

two complete sets of furniture for their first home because neither one would give up his or her preference. At the same time, as Kelly notes in his Hubbard biography, "Married life gave Kin a new source of material for Abe Martin."²⁹ It was, of course, material based in comedy frustration. Marriage was also a key source of frustration in the world of Abe Martin in his role as a comic antihero. Martin jabbed at the wedded state throughout his career. In 1906 he quipped: "O' all the woman's clubs th' rollin' pin is th' wust";³⁰ in 1926: "Marriages are made in Heaven, an' very few o' them ever git back t' th' factory."³¹



**Where ignorance is bliss it's foolish to
borrow your neighbor's newspaper.**

Reproduced from Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Almanack*
(Indianapolis, 1907), [36].

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91, 99.

³⁰ Hubbard, *Abe Martin of Brown County, Indiana*, [89].

³¹ Hubbard, *Abe Martin: Hoss Sense and Nonsense*, 31.

As crackerbarrel-type political comments grew fewer as Abe's career progressed so the antiheroic cracks about marriage represent an increasing percentage of his material.

A host of marriage-related "domestic" problems also plagued both Hubbard and Martin the antihero. The rather tightfisted Hubbard found it difficult, for example, to accept the increased expense involved in marriage. Thus Abe Martin noted: "Two can live cheaper than one—but not as long."³² When the Hubbards built their first home, it was quite an ordeal for Kin; and his alter ego said: "After a feller gets through havin' a house built he reads ever'thing he signs."³³ Houses need furniture and decorations, and as already noted, the Hubbards did not always agree. Not surprisingly, Martin



Th' worst feature of a new baby is it's
mother's singin'.

Reproduced from Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Almanack*
(Indianapolis, 1907), [100].

³² Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Brown County Almanack*, [104].

³³ *Ibid.*, [40]; Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 99.

joked: "I guess pickin' out wall paper hez caused 'bout ez many tragedies ez liquor."³⁴ Children, too, created special frustrations; the Hubbards had three such "blessings." Again, Abe capsulizes things nicely: "Th' worst thing about bein' a parent is havin' a little tired child come home from school ever' evenin' loaded down with algebras, histories, French text books, an' writin' pads, an' believin' we know enough t' help it."³⁵

As the years passed, the frustrations visited upon Hubbard and Abe Martin were not limited to the domestic scene. The most dramatic example stemmed from another real event in Hubbard's life: during the 1920s he was robbed at gunpoint in his own home. The humorist drew several comic sayings based in frustration from this incident as well as from the apparent increase in crime during the 1920s. Martin noted: "The first thing a feller does when he's held up is change his mind about what he used to think he'd do."³⁶ Automobiles also gave Hubbard problems. His alter ego moaned: "Why does a tire allus go flat on the side where we're liable to git bumped off changin' it?"³⁷ The ever-increasing sense of absurdity in the world—the whole Hubbard clan was considered to be eccentric—was a constant source of comment: "Th' Father o' Oscar Kite wuz found dead in two feet o' water, t'day, weighed down by a sack o' doughnuts."³⁸

Although Abe Martin's frustrations and his focus on leisure are not enough to make this crackerbarrel-based figure a true comic antihero, Hubbard's comedy tended more in that direction with each successive year of the twentieth century. By incorporating the relatively new, antiheroic motifs into the more established milieu of the crackerbarrel figure, the Hoosier humorist emerges as something of an innovator. His significance as a major figure of transition between two worlds of comedy should be recognized.

³⁴ Hubbard, *Abe Martin of Brown County, Indiana*, [71].

³⁵ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 97-98, 139; Hubbard, *Fifty-Two Weeks of Abe Martin*, 142.

³⁶ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 145-46; Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Town Pump*, 183. The fear of robbery at home also characterized the frustration of other comic antiheroes, especially those in the work of James Thurber. See, for example, James Thurber, "Mr. Monroe Holds the Fort," *Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities* (New York, 1931), 55-63; Thurber, "The Night the Bed Fell," *My Life and Hard Times* (New York, 1933), 19-32. In fact, Hubbard's recognition that a victim of a crime rarely does what he thought he would do anticipates Thurber's most famous antihero, Walter Mitty, the milquetoast husband whose only bravery came in daydreams.

³⁷ Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 129-36; Kin Hubbard, *Abe Martin's Broadcast: Kin Hubbard Announcing* (Indianapolis, 1930), 54.

³⁸ Hubbard, *Fifty-Two Weeks of Abe Martin*, 28; Kelly, *Life and Times of Kin Hubbard*, 25-36.