

History 101



Bret Harte

Francis Brett Hart, known as Bret Harte (August 25, 1836 – May 5, 1902), was an American short story writer and poet, best remembered for his short fiction featuring miners, gamblers, and other romantic figures of the California Gold Rush. In a career spanning more than four decades, he wrote poetry, plays, lectures, book reviews, editorials, and magazine sketches in addition to fiction.

As he moved from California to the eastern U.S. to Europe, he incorporated new subjects and characters into his stories, but his Gold Rush tales have been most often reprinted and admired.

Harte moved to California in 1853, later working as miner, teacher, messenger, and journalist. He spent part of his life in the northern California coastal town of Union (now Arcata), a settlement on Humboldt Bay that was established as a provisioning center for mining camps in the interior. *The Wells Fargo Messenger*, July 1916, relates that, after an unsuccessful attempt to make a living in the gold camps, he signed on as a messenger with Wells Fargo & Co. Express. He guarded treasure boxes on stagecoaches for a few months, then gave it up to become the schoolmaster at a school near Sonora. He created his character Yuba Bill from his memory of an old stagecoach driver.

The 1860 massacre of 80 to 200 Wiyots at the village of Tuluwat was well documented historically and was reported in San Francisco and New York by Harte. When serving as assistant editor for the *Northern Californian*, Harte editorialized about the slayings while his boss Stephen G. Whipple was temporarily absent, leaving Harte in charge of the paper. Harte published a detailed account condemning the event. After he published the editorial, his life was threatened, and he was forced to flee. Harte moved to San Francisco, where an anonymous letter published in a city paper is attributed to him, describing widespread community approval of the massacre. In addition, no one was ever brought to trial.

He traveled with his family in 1871 to New York and eventually to Boston where he contracted with the publisher of *The Atlantic Monthly* for an annual salary of \$10,000, "an unprecedented sum at the time". His popularity waned, however, and by the end of 1872 he was increasingly desperate. After months of soliciting for such a role, Harte accepted the position of United States Consul in the town of Krefeld, Germany, in May 1878. Mark Twain had been a friend and supporter of Harte's until a substantial falling out, and he had previously tried to block any appointment for Harte.

He died in Camberley, England in 1902 of throat cancer, and is buried at Frimley.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bret_Harte]

