



20.1998.2 Ambrose G. Bierce
Elkhart County
Marker Text Review Report
09/25/15

Marker Text

Born in Ohio 1842; family moved to Kosciusko County, Indiana 1846. Bierce lived and worked in Elkhart 1860-1861. Union officer wounded in Civil War. Moved to California 1866; became nationally prominent as journalist, short story writer, and critic. Assumed dead, circa 1914, on trip to Mexico. This property purchased 1870 by his parents.

Report

The text of the marker is largely accurate and it highlights key events in Bierce's life, including his time in Indiana, his service during the Civil War, and his success as a nationally-known author and journalist. However, there are contextual and factual nuances that make some of the claims on the marker either slightly inaccurate or exaggerate the accuracy of the sources. This marker review also provides more context and examples of his literary work.

The marker's claim that he was born in 1842 in Ohio is accurate. Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce was born June 24, 1842 in Horse Cave Creek, Meigs County, Ohio. The 1850 Census indicates that this is accurate, as well as records of his time in the Civil War, and a passport application written by Bierce in 1872. Numerous secondary sources also support this claim, specifically Richard O'Connor's 1967 biography.¹

The Bierce family's time in Kosciusko County is hard to verify. The 1850 Census shows them in Akron, Ohio.² The earliest deed document dates their entry into Kosciusko County as 1858.³ However, a local Kosciusko County newspaper, entitled the *Northern Indianan*, has a business listing for an "A. Bierce" in its November 20, 1857 issue. This may push the date a little earlier.⁴ More research in the county deed books is needed, but is outside the scope of this review.

Alongside the *Census* and *Northern Indianan*, only secondary sources provide more detail into his early life in Indiana. Bierce reportedly lived on the family's settlement in Walnut Creek until he was 15, when he moved to Warsaw to work as a "printer's devil" (an apprentice tasked with multiple duties) for the aforementioned newspaper, the *Northern Indianan*.⁵ However, a biography by historian David M. Owens puts the family settlement in Goose Creek, not Walnut Creek.⁶ Secondary sources also indicate Bierce may have spent some time in Kentucky in 1859-60 learning typography at the Kentucky Military Institute.⁷ Further research is needed to verify this information.

There is little by way of primary sources to substantiate the claim that Bierce lived and worked in Elkhart during 1860-1861, which is often repeated in the secondary literature.⁸ Two newspaper articles published after his death, one from the *Elkhart Truth* (1922) and another from the *Indianapolis Sunday Star* (1923), suggest some of what the secondary sources detail.⁹ Both articles discuss his time as a restaurant clerk for A. E. Faber. An 1860 City Directory lists an A. E. Faber, along with his eating establishment. Also, an 1881 history of Elkhart County credits Faber as one of Elkhart's founding citizens who petitioned for its formal creation.¹⁰ In the *Star* article, Bierce's brother Andrew indicates that Bierce worked there. However, these newspaper articles are far removed from the 1860-61 timeframe.¹¹



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Bierce enlisted in C Company of the Ninth Indiana Regiment in April 1861 and served as a private for three months.¹² He was promoted to Sergeant in July 1861, when he reenlisted for a three year term. His upgrade in rank came as a result of his valor during the [Battle of Laurel Hill](#) on July 10, 1861.¹³ He was wounded at Kennesaw Mountain in 1864 and eventually opted not to reenlist, mustering out in January 1865 with the rank of First Lieutenant.¹⁴ Bierce's intense and often painful experiences during his service in the Civil War provided much fodder for his literary work, particularly his short fiction and journalism.

After the Civil War, Bierce did not immediately go to California. He reenlisted in the Army, but served as a "Topographical Engineer at Brigade and Division Head Quarters, 21st Army Corps."¹⁵ In his essay, "Across the Plains," Bierce refers to his role as an "engineer attaché to an expedition through Dakota and Montana, to inspect some new military posts."¹⁶ He worked under the leadership of General William B. Hazen, who named Bierce as an Acting Topographical Officer during the Civil War.¹⁷ After declining a second lieutenant commission in San Francisco in 1867, Bierce formally ended his career in the military and spent the rest of his career as a professional writer.¹⁸

While the marker accurately describes Ambrose Bierce's success as a "journalist, short story author and critic," it is unfortunately not the centerpiece of the marker. Thus, it is especially important to emphasize that his writing career is the most substantial historical aspect of Bierce's life and establishes the marker's state wide and national significance.

Bierce began his journalism career in 1867, writing poems and essays for the *Californian* and *Golden Era*, under newspaper editor James T. Watkins. From 1868-1872, Bierce wrote a local column for the *San Francisco News Letter* called the "Town Crier."¹⁹ One critic referred to his writing as "...humor [that] borders as nearly upon the blasphemous and sacrilegious as that of Swift or Sterne..." Another review considered his early works "The Haunted Valley" and "Broke" as offbeat pieces that showed his "capacity, acute observation, and descriptive powers of very unusual simplicity, grace, and effectiveness."²⁰

For the next three years, Bierce lived and worked in England, under the pseudonym "Dod Grile." The origins of such an unorthodox penname came from an 1872 letter, written by a friend and early employer of Bierce in England named Tom Hood, who addressed Bierce as "Dear God Rile." Bierce used an anagram of it, "Dod Grile," as a penname while in England. As Biographer Roy Morris speculates, Bierce may have chosen this simple name as a way to attract readers, same as Samuel Clemens did with "Mark Twain."²¹ His columns were published in English and American newspapers. Bierce also published three collected humor works while in Great Britain; his most successful was [Cobwebs from an Empty Skull](#), published in 1873. Prominent advertisements and reviews in *This Week's News* and *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* solidified their modest success.²²

After his time in England, Bierce returned to California and began work at the *Argonaut* and the *Wasp* and established his successful column, "Prattle." In 1887, he was employed by the newspaper magnate [William Randolph Hearst](#) at the *San Francisco Examiner*. Like in Britain, Bierce's columns were nationally syndicated, in outlets like the *Wichita Eagle*, *The Louisiana Democrat*, and the *Washington Herald*.²³ Even though Hearst gave Bierce nearly complete editorial freedom in his years at his newspapers, there always existed a growing antagonism between the two. This may have been due to



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Bierce's disgust with some of Hearst's other journalists, specifically after 1906.²⁴ Bierce formally left the employ of Hearst in March of 1909 to focus on compiling his collected works and memoirs.²⁵

His two best-known works are [*Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*](#) and [*The Devil's Dictionary*](#). Literature scholar Donald T. Blume notes that *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* went through multiple editions, with Bierce adding and editing the stories multiple times from their original publication in 1891 through 1909. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which Hoosier author [Kurt Vonnegut](#) called the "greatest American Short Story," is a great example of Bierce's style and grasp of the complexities of war.²⁶ Many publications also praised the work during its original printing. As a review from the *New York Tribune* noted, Bierce's stories are "elaborated pictures of what the American soldier actually experienced in the great war [Civil War]."²⁷ The New Orleans' *Daily Picayune* called Bierce a "genius" and considered *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* the "most noteworthy book of stories by an American writer published in ten years."²⁸

The Devil's Dictionary (1911), originally published as *The Cynic's Word Book* in 1906, displays Bierce's piercing wit and unorthodox point of view. Some entries in his lexicon include, "Apostate: A leech who, having penetrated the shell of a turtle only to find that the creature has long been dead, deems it expedient to form a new attachment to a fresh turtle," and, "Clergyman: A man who undertakes the management of our spiritual affairs as a method of bettering our temporal ones."²⁹ Selected entries also appeared in newspapers throughout the country, and its controversial definitions even inspired lectures by clergymen.³⁰

Bierce held irreverent opinions on religion and spirituality. In volume ten of his collected works, his essay, "A Dead Lion," defends the late agnostic orator [Robert Green Ingersoll](#). Also, in an essay entitled "Not All Men Desire Immortality," Bierce decries the spiritualism of his time, albeit with clever quips such as this: "If we have among us one who can put over a blaze by looking at it, the matter may not have any visible bearing on the question of life after death, but it is of the liveliest interest to the Fire Department."³¹ Bierce was also a critic of some of his fellow Indiana authors. In a January 20, 1893 article in the *Indianapolis Journal*, Bierce wrote a heavily critical barb about poet [James Whitcomb Riley](#). He refers to Riley as a part of a "pignoramous crew of malinguists," who "speak only to tangle their tongues and move only to fall over their own feet."³²

Bierce's work was celebrated both in his own time and generations afterward. [H. L. Mencken](#), the influential writer and critic, wrote that Bierce was the "first writer of fiction ever to treat war realistically." From a review of his collected works, the *San Francisco Call* notes that, "It is certain that he became the master of his time in the mechanics of writing and the English Language." Also, in a 1915 *Goodwin's Weekly* column, the editor notes that his success as an author also came with some level of obscurity: "Ambrose Bierce had a peculiarly anomalous position in the world of letters. The public, seeking out the best-sellers, was little acquainted with his writings. This was partly for the reason, strange as it may seem, he despised popularity and all that word stands for."³³ Bierce's literary legacy reveals an erudite, yet complicated man of letters, whose unique experiences undergird his entire body of work.

The text of the marker concerning Bierce's disappearance is accurate, but it is important to emphasize that he was "assumed" dead. After his last letters to family and friends in 1913, only one



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primary source suggests that he went to Mexico. The only indication that he was headed that way is in other letters from the fall and winter of 1913, where he repeatedly describes his future trip to Mexico. In his final letter to a family member, dated November 6, 1913, Bierce writes: "I shall not be here long enough to hear from you, and don't know where I shall be next. Guess it doesn't matter much."³⁴ However, a letter from December 26, 1913 to friend Blanche Partington places him in Chihuahua, Mexico, but the last sentence of the letter leaves it more ambiguous: "As to me, I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination."³⁵

Based on the evidence of this last letter, Bierce probably went to Mexico. However, as investigator Joe Nickell notes, the supposed last letter from Bierce was preserved by his daughter through transcription and is not the original.³⁶ Therefore, it is accurate to say that he disappeared after 1914 (no credible primary sources appear from Bierce after that) and that the claim that he went to Mexico is plausible but not confirmed, based on his letters from late 1913.

After his disappearance, numerous newspaper articles speculated about Bierce's disappearance, but most of them describe only rumors. For example, in the September 12, 1916 *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, some people described him as having been shot by Don Poncho Villa's forces in Mexico or laying in a hospital ward in France.³⁷ These speculations also underscore the mysterious circumstances of Bierce's final days.

The claim that the property at 518 West Franklin Street in Elkhart was purchased by his parents in 1870 is mostly correct, but the story is more complicated than the marker suggests. The Bierce's originally purchased the land in 1865. A *Goshen Times* newspaper listing from March 17, 1870, alongside the Elkhart Co. Indenture Records, place the official purchase of the home as that year. However, a personal letter from Marcus Aurelius Bierce (incorrectly identified as Laura Sherwood Bierce by the Indiana Historical Bureau records) to his daughter Laura from December 5, 1869 suggests an earlier deal with the Colburn family (whom they purchased the house from).³⁸ There may have been an informal agreement between the two parties in 1869 that was then officially recorded in 1870, but otherwise the 1870 date is more accurate.³⁹

¹ His parents, Marcus Aurelius Bierce and Laura Sherwood Bierce, were descendents of English immigrants, and his father had a love of literature. *1850 United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com; "Ambrose Bierce Passport Application, April 29, 1872," *Passport Applications, 1795-1905*, NARA, National Archives, [Fold3](#); Richard O'Connor, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 10-11; "Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Authors* (Volume 139), 42; Roy Morris, Jr., *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company* (New York: Oxford Press, 1995), 9, [Google Books](#); Robert L. Gale, *Ambrose Bierce Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), xv, [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Online Library](#); Robert A. Wiggins, *Ambrose Bierce* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), 6, [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Online Library](#).

² *1850 United States Federal Census*.



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- ³ *1850 United States Federal Census*, ancestry.com; Deed Book 18, Kosciusko County Recorder, Warsaw, Indiana, quoted in Paul Fatout, *Ambrose Bierce: the Devil's Lexicographer* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 31.
- ⁴ "Business Directory," *Northern Indianan (Warsaw, Indiana)*, November 20, 1857, 1, Indiana State Library Newspaper Microfilm Collection.
- ⁵ O'Connor, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, 17; Wiggins, *Ambrose Bierce*, 7; Gale, *Ambrose Bierce Companion*, 1857.
- ⁶ David M. Owens, *The Devil's Typographer* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 8.
- ⁷ Fatout, *The Devil's Lexicographer*, 392; O'Connor, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, 18; "Ambrose Bierce," *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 139, 44.
- ⁸ O'Connor, *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*, 18; Gale, *Ambrose Bierce Companion*, xv; Wiggins, *Ambrose Bierce*, 7.
- ⁹ "New Volume of Bierce Letters Issued," *Elkhart Truth*, October 7, 1922, Indiana State Library Newspaper Microfilm Collection; Maurice M. Frink, "Little Recalled of Ambrose Bierce, Hoosier Author, in Home Town, Elkhart," *Indianapolis Sunday Star*, February 16, 1923, 22, Newspaperarchive.com.
- ¹⁰ *History of Elkhart County, Indiana* (Chicago: Chas. C. Chapman & Company, 1881), 743, Google Books.
- ¹¹ The 1860 Census still places Bierce in Kosciusko County, but his enlistment records indicate that he enlisted for the Union Army in Elkhart County in April of 1861. He may have moved in between the Census data and his enlistment date, but there are no primary sources to prove that. The earliest Elkhart City Directory available is 1874. The 1870 Census places his father in Elkhart, but again, there are few sources that document exactly when they moved. (*1860 United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com; *1870 United States Federal Census*, Ancestry.com).
- ¹² W.H.H. Terrell, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana, Volume 4- 1861-1865* (Indianapolis: Samuel L. Douglass, 1866), 41; *Letters Received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant Generals Office, 1863-1870*, NARA, National Archives, Fold3.
- ¹³ "Good Boy," *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, July 27, 1861, Indiana State Library Newspaper Microfilm Collection.
- ¹⁴ *Letters Received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant Generals Office, 1863-1870*, NARA, National Archives, accessed August 28, 2015, Fold3.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ambrose Bierce, "Across the Plains," in *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce, Volume One* (New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1909), 363, Archive.org.
- ¹⁷ Owens, *The Devil's Typographer*, 10.
- ¹⁸ "Letter to Adjutant General's Office, April 1867," *Letters Received by the Commission Branch of the Adjutant Generals Office, 1863-1870*, NARA, National Archives, Fold3.



¹⁹ “Ambrose Bierce,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Authors*, 44-45; Gale, *Ambrose Bierce Companion*, xvi-xvii; Wiggins, *Ambrose Bierce*, 11.

²⁰ “The Overland Monthly,” *Arizona Citizen*, March 11, 1871, [Chronicling America](#); “July Magazines,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1871, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers](#).

²¹ Morris, *Ambrose Bierce: Alone in Bad Company*, 139.

²² “List of New Books,” *This Week’s News [London]*, October 25, 1873, 1356; “Dod Grile,” *Elkhart Observer*, June 10, 1874, 1; “Holiday Literature,” *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper*, November 29, 1874, 5.

²³ “Ambrose Bierce,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Authors*, 44-45; Gale, *Ambrose Bierce Companion*, xvi-xvii; Wiggins, *Ambrose Bierce*, 11; Ambrose Bierce, “At Coulter’s Notch,” *Wichita Eagle*, January 7, 1890, 7, [Chronicling America](#); Ambrose Bierce, “A Comfortable Creed for Some,” *Louisiana Democrat*, July 1, 1891, 4, [Chronicling America](#); Ambrose Bierce, “Wrong Rejections,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 30, 1893, 13, [Chronicling America](#); Ambrose Bierce, “His Human Side,” *Washington Herald*, November 4, 1906, 1, [Chronicling America](#).

²⁴ In an March 30, 1908 letter, Bierce wrote to Hearst about his growing dissatisfaction with journalists [Samuel Chamberlain](#), [Perriton Maxwell](#), and [Rudolph Block](#), whom he regarded as low-rate journalists who cheated their employer (Ambrose Bierce, *A Much Misunderstood Man: Selected Letters of Ambrose Bierce*, edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), 174).

²⁵ “Ambrose Bierce,” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Authors*, 44-45. In a letter from March 23, 1909, Bierce writes that he is “no longer in Mr. Hearst’s service” (Ibid., 193).

²⁶ Ambrose Bierce, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (San Francisco: E.L.G. Steele, 1891), 21-40, [Archive.org](#); Donald T. Blume, *Ambrose Bierce’s Civilians and Soldiers in Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2004), xxi; Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 7-8.

²⁷ “New Publications,” *New York Tribune*, March 21, 1892, 8, [Chronicling America](#).

²⁸ “Ambrose Bierce,” *Daily Picayune*, April 24, 1892, 16.

²⁹ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1911), 24, 50, accessed August 19, 2015, [Archive.org](#).

³⁰ Ambrose Bierce, “Some Modern Definitions,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 13, 1911, 2, [Chronicling America](#); Ambrose Bierce, “From the Devil’s Dictionary,” *Washington Herald*, January 20, 1907, 7, [Chronicling America](#); Ambrose Bierce, “Queer Definitions from Devil’s Dictionary,” *Hartford Republican*, March 15, 1912, 2, [Chronicling America](#); “Church Services- Continued,” *San Francisco Call*, June 12, 1910, 58, [Chronicling America](#).

³¹ Ambrose Bierce, “A Dead Lion,” in *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce, Volume Ten* (New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1909), 212-233, [Archive.org](#); Ambrose Bierce, *Skepticism and Dissent: Selected Journalism from 1898-1901*, edited by Lawrence I. Berkove (Ann Arbor, MI: Delmas Books, 1980), 282-283.



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³² *Indianapolis Journal*, January 20, 1893, 4, [Chronicling America](#).

³³ H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Sixth Series (1927)*, edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers (New York: The Library of America, 2010), 517; "Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce," *San Francisco Call*, December 3, 1911, 23, [Chronicling America](#); "Ambrose Bierce," *Goodwin's Weekly*, March 13, 1915, 10, [Chronicling America](#).

³⁴ Ambrose Bierce, *The Letters of Ambrose Bierce*, edited by Bertha Clark Pope (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1922), 198, [Archive.org](#).

³⁵ Ambrose Bierce, *A Much Misunderstood Man*, 246.

³⁶ Joe Nickell, *Ambrose Bierce is Missing and Other Historical Mysteries* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 28.

³⁷ "Man of Mystery," Thrice Reported Dead, Promises That He'll Soon Return Once More," *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, September 12, 1916, page 12, accessed August 28, 2015, Fold3.

³⁸ Elkhart County Deed Records, County Recorder's Office, May 11, 1865; Marcus Aurelius Bierce, letter to "My Dear Daughter," December 6, 1869; "Real Estate Transfers," *Goshen Times*, March 17, 1870, [Newspaperarchive.com](#); Record of Indenture of Assignment to Laura S. Bierce, Elkhart County, March 5, 1870.

³⁹ As for the current status of the home, it is not listed as a landmark on the [National Historical Landmark Database](#), the [Indiana Landmarks' Historical Site Listing](#), or the [Indiana Department of Natural Resources Database of Historic Register Properties](#). Using [Google Maps](#), a photograph from October 2011 shows the house in largely good order, but the windows are boarded.