

Cressy & Dayne



An old advertisement for a show featuring Will Cressy & Blanche Dayne, both from Bradford, NH.

CRESSY AND DAYNE

By John Warren

"I can remember that as I looked out of the window I saw a country road winding up the hill past our house and disappearing over the hill beyond... I wondered where that road went; what strange places it passed through and by, and where the end of it was. Two years later I got my first licking - for running away UP THAT HILL. After I was retrieved and brought back, father asked me what I was looking for up there. I told him I was looking 'for the end of the road.' And for the next fifty years that was my life, looking for the end of the road!"

Will Cressy was born in Bradford, NH in 1863 during the Civil War, was schooled in Concord, and at the ripe old age of six got his introduction to show biz. He and his brother Harry were billed as a musical team in a local minstrel show, earning a review that "the Cressy boys were real good". Launching their career, the boys had cards printed up announcing "The Cressys, Harry and Will, Musical Artists and Comedians." Over the next several years

they balanced schooling, paying jobs as store clerks and traveling salesman, respectively, and any bookings they could engage.

In 1888 they joined Frost and Fanshawe of the Ideal Comedy Company. "An offer came... we packed a trunk, rented two alto horns, and started our training," with salary never being mentioned. You were paid according to your value to the troupe, so out of 32 weeks on the road the boys got four weeks' wages. They were paying their dues toward future success by traveling from town to town, performing in churches, halls, and tents, and - as luck would have it - Will met and fell in love with the leading lady, Miss Blanche Dayne, who also had grease paint in her blood.

By 1890, however, the Cressy Brothers were flat broke, the sum total of their worldly goods consisting of one overcoat, the clothes on their backs, and two grubby hats. And Will had a wife to support, having married Blanche in Lee, Mass. on January 19, 1890. Dear old Dad, Will's father, bailed them out with three train tickets back to Concord, and put Will to work

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Will Cressy & Blanche Dayne - husband and wife.

unloading carloads of grain for the magnificent sum of a dollar a day. Here their fortunes changed in the person of A. J. Sawtelle, who offered Blanche and Will \$18 a week to join his company; they never looked back.

By August of 1890 they were performing before a crowd of 1400 in a tent theatre in Oneonta, NY to greater and greater praise until Denman Thompson, the Father of Yankee Humor, chose them out of seven hundred applicants to play the parts of Cy Prime and Rickety Ann in his fashionable play, *The Old Homestead*. In the next six years they perfected the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the Yankee characters they would become in vaudeville. Will's roots in New Hampshire were never forgotten. He loved "rube" humor, the Yankee philosophical way of life, and the parts he adopted were based on people from the country, such as Squire Mason Tappan of Bradford. In fact, time and again he returned to Bradford to refill the tank of ideas and refine his alter ego.

By now money was no longer an issue, for in 1898 they were headlining at \$135 a week, thence to Keith's Providence Theatre at \$150 a week, now with the imprimatur of the New York Dramatic Mirror welcoming the Cressys

to the list of vaudeville stars. Will was also writing playlets for their own use as well as for other actors. One of the Playlets, *Grasping an Opportunity*, earned them \$17,000. From 1899 forward over the next ten years Will wrote some 125 playlets, sketches, and monologues, selling them outright with no royalties. He felt his work was worth \$20 per minute with a one-act play averaging 20 minutes, so a \$500 fee was quite normal, and the price varied depending on whether he liked or didn't like the customer. In one year Will and Blanche earned \$47,000 from writing original plays, doctoring others, and starring in their own- not too shabby for the turn of the century. As Will put it: *"Do you realize that there are at least six people in vaudeville in America who were getting more than twice the amount this nation pays its Presidents?"*

They were not above reproach, as a few reviews reveal. In 1908 Charles Dainton, critic of the New York Evening World wrote:

"Strangers may be right in saying that New York is a 'rube' town, but they may be wrong in thinking that it likes a 'rube' play, just for old time's sake. It has grown out of the habit of going to a show with a lantern. But it hasn't grown out of the habit of going to vaudeville. It's a good habit and we recommend it to Mr. Cressy. He ought to take it up again... not that he is bad at what he is doing, but that he was better at what he used to do."

An anonymous voice commented:

"A free ticket to 'The Village Lawyer' as an inducement to purchase a pound of tea would be considered an imposition in a one-night stand remotest from the railroad... The piece won't remain long. Good jobs are awaiting some of the actors in the new Hudson River Subway. Possibly vaudeville may engulf Mr. Cressy again. He's ripe for a change."

By and large, though, the public loved them:

*"The best known team in vaudeville."
Chicago Inter-Ocean.*

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"Nothing like 'A Village Lawyer' has ever been seen upon any vaudeville stage."

Providence News

"The Wyoming Whoop' looks like the best thing Cressy has ever given us." Geo. M Young, *New York Variety*

"Miss Dayne plays with consummate skill." *New York Dramatic Mirror*

"Miss Dayne has become one of the cleverest women on the American stage." *New York Morning Telegraph*

"Will Cressy is a vaudeville genius, perhaps the greatest of his time." *L.A. Times*

They toured the country and eventually in 1910 made excursions to Europe with "Town Hall Tonight", in countries such as Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales, France, Belgium, Holland, to the Pacific and Hawaii, China, Japan, and the Philippines. They "autoed" in 14 countries starting in 1907 with an 18 horsepower rattle cart, but within ten years were rolling along in a luxuriously appointed 60 h.p. car over level, smooth state roads. "We glide along fertile valleys, beside beautiful lakes and rivers, climb winding easy grades to the tops of the highest mountains... and it is still as fascinating to us as it was way back then."

In the good years they summered at Blodgett Landing on Lake Sunapee, where Will founded the Cottage Owners Association in 1892. Thirty years later he was the driving force in the development of a six-acre park at Blodgett's, resulting in eight bath houses, volleyball courts, athletic fields, a 550 foot sandy



Will & Blanche in their touring car.

beach, and the piece de resistance, a casino with a completely equipped stage and a 500 seat auditorium. In 1921 over 600 well known performers spent their summer at Blodgett and, as Will put it - "We always have a show ready."

He was an historian of sorts as *Cressy's History of Florida* attests:

"Florida is six hundred miles long, two hundred miles wide, and three feet high.

You can purchase a good ten-cent cigar in Tampa for two bits. At Palm Beach cigars are kept in the safe and only issued on written orders from the Secretary of the United States Treasury.

Florida was once the bottom of the sea. It was covered with oyster beds. Many of the hotels are using the same beds yet.

The official emblem of Palm Beach is a hand extended - PALM UP - in welcome."

When World War I entered the scene Will was too old to be a combatant but that hardly deterred him from doing his duty in whatever way possible, with articles on the importance



The Casino at Blodgett's Landing, Entertainment & Dancing venue - torn down in the 1970s.

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of enlisting, and becoming a "Four Minute Man":

"A Four Minute Man is a fellow

Who wants to do his bit,

He's too old to fight

And too young to run

And he doesn't know how to knit.

He hasn't got any money,

Can neither sink, swim, fly, nor walk,

And the only thing he can do on earth

Is to Talk, Talk, Talk."

He did go overseas and was responsible for transporting 1000 actors and actresses to France to perform for the troops. At Saint-Mihiel while he was on stage a shell exploded near Will and he was badly gassed, never fully recovering from the ordeal. The scars on his lungs also necessitated that he and Blanche move to St. Petersburg, Florida for the winters, as he could no longer manage the snow and cold of New England.

Of his success Will says:

"Now you know as well as I do that I'm not much of an actor. I can't act a little bit. About all I can do is sit around and say dry, quaint, philosophical things. I can almost make an audience cry - I can't quite, but almost. And I can generally make them laugh. But I think most of our success has come from having the knack of knowing how to mix the laughs and cries up together..."

Five years before his death he talked about Blanche:

"I couldn't get along without my wife. She was the first woman to act with me and I married her. That's a good reason why there was never a second woman in any of my acts... all kissing scenes must be made in the presence of my wife."

He had the wisdom and common touch not to take himself too seriously given his guidelines for *Being a Film Star*:

"I do not go up in air ships, I do not ride a horse, I cannot swim.

I do not go within a mile of dynamite, gunpowder, lyditte, or other explosives.



William Cressy - Performer & Writer.

All blueberry pie episodes shall be played by my understudy.

In all houses charging ten cents or less, I am to be billed as 'Willie' Cressy. In houses charging over ten cents, as 'William Cressy'.

All close-ups of me are to be retouched, taking out all wrinkles, warts, moles, freckles, or other facial blemishes."

He loved to tell stories or write them, such as this example from his book, *Continuous Vaudeville*:

"An old unsuccessful actor finally gave up and jumped overboard from a ferryboat. Just as he came up for the last time a searchlight on a passing steamer picked him up. For the first time in his life he was in the spotlight; so he took three bows and went down smiling."

A few days before he died Will clipped an article from the *New York Herald*, titled *Uncommon Sense* by John Blake. Its subject was two men, one an actor, the other a playwright, retired in Florida, and their wealth, which consisted not of money but in the deep interest in all life, thought and action. "And if their money were swept away they would still be wealthy, for it is laid up beyond the reach of thieves, fire, or any possible destruction." Perhaps more than any other this thought epitomizes the "end of the road" for Blanche and Will.