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Article Summary: Nathan Kirk Griggs, a Beatrice attorney who had become president of the Nebraska State Senate, received a nomination from President Grant to be Consul to Chemnitz Germany. He eventually did accept the appointment, knowing that certain powerful interests wanted him removed from Nebraska because of his views in favor of regulation of railroads.

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Photographs / Images: Nathan Kirk Griggs, about 1890 from his book *Lyrics of the Lariat*; panoramic view of Griggs' home town Beatrice, about 1875; Epsie Saunders Griggs in a reproduction of the photograph which appeared on a china cup presented to her by Chemnitz, Germany, dignitaries; the three Griggs children, Nellie, Dorothy, and Era



N. K. Griggs.

Nathan Kirk Griggs, about 1890, from his book, Lyrics of the Lariat.

**NATHAN KIRK GRIGGS,
CONSUL TO CHEMNITZ, GERMANY,
1876-1882**

By Ruth Moore Stanley

In the summer of 1876 President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Nathan Kirk Griggs,¹ a Beatrice attorney who had recently been president of the Nebraska State Senate, as United States consul to Chemnitz, Saxony. If to modern ears the appointment sounds unimportant and even uninteresting, it did not so sound in the 1870's. Chemnitz, now Karl-Marx-Stadt (renamed by the Russians after World War II) was one of the world's leading textile centers in 1876. The present gray and scruffy East German city had then an enormous export trade to Britain, Ireland, and the United States, and was a flourishing peer of its neighbors Leipzig and Dresden.

Griggs, 31 years old at the time, did not immediately accept the appointment. It had come without solicitation on his part, but he was well aware of the motives behind the offer. In Nebraska his political star had been rising rapidly since 1872. Looming ahead was a vacancy in the state supreme court, as well as Republican nominations for both houses of Congress. For these offices his name was being put forward with increasing frequency in the newspapers and wherever people talked politics. Now, with the offer of a foreign consulate, it took no great discernment to see that certain powerful interests wanted him removed from the scene.

Politics, a natural attraction for young lawyers, had been for Griggs a swift road to prominence in his chosen western state of

Nebraska. Armed with a new law degree from Indiana University he had arrived in Beatrice on June 3, 1867, to become one of the first three practicing lawyers in Gage County. Griggs was a Republican, and almost at his first appearance among the politicians he was chosen as president of his party's state convention. The recognition was bestowed at regular intervals thereafter until September, 1876, when, according to the October 4 issue of the *Omaha Bee*, Jay Gould picked Editor Charles H. Gere of Lincoln for the honor.

Griggs had been a member of the Nebraska constitutional convention in 1871, elected to the state Senate a year later, re-elected in 1874, and "unanimously" chosen president of the Senate in January, 1875. Presumably it was his political leadership as spotlighted in the Senate presidency, plus his reputation for incorruptibility, which started the machinery rolling to get him out of the country.

The vantage point of the Senate presidency offered Griggs scope for his formidable talents as a political tactician. His skill was shown, for example, in the strategy by which he got Algernon Paddock elected U.S. senator over the entrenched party regular, General John M. Thayer. In 1875 U.S. senators were elected by the state legislatures rather than by direct popular vote.² Significantly, his backers promised reform: "Paddock's election meant cleaner state politics."³

There was also the troublesome matter of Griggs' large personal following. "The 12th Senatorial District is more than three times larger than any district in the State," the *Beatrice Express* pointed out at the time of Griggs' renomination as state senator:

Its interests are more important than those of any district in the state. That these interests have been faithfully attended to in the State Senate by Mr. Griggs, and that his constituents have confidence in his ability and purpose to so attend to them in the future, was amply evident in the convention at Hastings. . . . By his straight-forward course in general—his opposition to all jobbery and political "ways that are dark"—(he) has won for himself a position of influence.⁴

The same paper commented after his election as president of the state Senate a few months later, "We expect him to make the best President that body has had for years."⁵

A reporter for the *Lincoln Daily State Journal* described him thus:

He is tall, rather slim, neat and trim in his build, dark hair and eyes, quick in motion, nervous, energetic, and a most capital presiding officer. His height is over 6 feet, and his weight 180 pounds. . . . It is to be hoped that his great popularity will not spoil him, as it has so many young men before. If he continues to merit hereafter as heretofore the public approval we shall yet hear of him in positions of greatest honor and usefulness.⁶

“There must have been something irresistible about the young man,” his son-in-law Professor Hartley Burr Alexander wrote in a biographical essay published a year after Griggs’ death in 1910:

His energies were inexhaustible and his activities multifarious. He was delivering addresses in many fields, patriotic, agricultural, Masonic, as well as political, and was known as an effective orator. . . . He was well known, too, for his musical powers, a paper of the opposition remarking that ‘his glory as a senator is entirely eclipsed by his renown as a Sabbath school songster.’⁷

His leadership and popularity would have been assets to “the interests,” if only in this age of Grantism he had been a little more flexible; but as a newspaper commentator of opposing views grudgingly admitted, “Due consideration convinces one that [Griggs’] actions are his belief, and that he believes in doing what he ought, let what will come of it.”⁸

By the end of 1875, Griggs had come to be known politically as “The Stormy Petrel.” A stormy petrel is inconvenient in politics at any time, but in the particular climate of the 1870’s an able young legislator who “believed in doing what he ought, let what will come of it,” had to be disposed of in some way. Jay Gould was doubtless particularly displeased with Griggs’ views on regulation of the railroads. An editorial in the *Beatrice Express* had summarized them toward the end of 1874:

We consider Sen. Griggs’ views on the railroad question, as set forth in his speeches in the western part of the State, sound and practicable. In fact, as we have often maintained, we believe the proposition to regulate railroad transportation by Congressional enactment, involves the only effectual plan for settling the legal relations between railroad corporations and the people. Regulation of some sort is a necessity, and in view of the fact that State legislation to this end works injustice to large masses of the people, the only power left to deal with the question is Congress.⁹

Griggs had done more than make speeches on regulation of the railroads. As president that September of the state Republican convention, he had helped put together a platform containing four planks which must have alarmed promoters of

western railroads. The second half of the seventh plank probably seemed especially disturbing:

5th, That while we recognize and appreciate the advantages derived by the people from a well regulated system of railways, we demand that these public highways should be rendered subservient to the public good. That while we disavow any hostility toward railroad corporations, we proclaim our determination to resist by all lawful means all efforts to impose oppressive or extortionate transportation tolls.

6th, That taxation to be just must be equally imposed upon all classes of property; we therefore demand such national and state legislation as will compel railroads and all other corporations to pay the same proportion of tax as is imposed on individuals.

7th, That we favor the proper exercise of the powers conferred upon the national government by the constitution to regulate commerce between the states, and to this end we recommend that the government establish and operate a double track railway from the Missouri River to the Atlantic seaboard.

8th, That we earnestly request that our senators secure the passage of [Lorenzo] Crouse's railroad land tax bill.¹⁰

To emphasize their determination, the delegates had nominated Representative Crouse by acclamation for a second term.

Since Jay Gould is said to have controlled the Nebraska state Republican convention at which Crouse was defeated in September, 1876,¹¹ and since Griggs was enroute to Germany within ten days after that convention, a natural inference would be that Gould and his cohorts were at least prominent among "the interests" who obtained Griggs' acceptance of the consulate at Chemnitz.

The best evidence of Griggs' incorruptibility is his record, both before and after the years in Germany. Also, there is nothing written which even hints that the European appointment was a bribe offered by Gould and finally accepted by Griggs. The original letters of recommendation for most U.S. diplomatic appointments may be found in the National Archives. In N. K. Griggs' "appointment" folder there is only one sheet, a telegram marked, "rec'd Dept. of State, July 21, 1876":

U.S. Senate
July 21, 1876

Hon Hamilton Fish¹²

My excellent friend Gov. Morrill,¹³ says his man shall wait for my relief, in complication referred to by me personally, in our conversation.

May it not be done today so that I may telegraph.

A. S. PADDOCK

The telegram had been folded, and on the other side were two notations, the first in ink: "22 July 1876—Probably in reference

to Nathan K. Griggs." Below this was a second notation in pencil, in a different hand: "This is the only paper rec'd at this date relative to Mr. Griggs."¹⁴ A number of weeks later, when Griggs finally decided to accept the appointment, the *Beatrice Express* in releasing the news was careful to point out, "This appointment was tendered him by Senator Paddock as a mark of appreciation."¹⁵

There is more to the story than this meager record, of course. Nebraska newspaper references to the Griggs appointment, during July-September, 1876, are fairly instructive. First mention occurred in the *Beatrice Express* eight days after Senator Paddock's telegram to Secretary Hamilton Fish: "Senator Griggs, of this city, has been tendered the appointment of U.S. Consul to Chemnitz, Germany. We believe that he has not yet decided whether to go, or not (July 29, 1876)." A few days later the *Beatrice Courier*, a weekly paper less friendly to the Republicans, reported the same news in different terms: "Hon. N. K. Griggs has received a very flattering appointment as consul to Chemnitz, Germany. Mr. G's inclination is to take the appointment and avail himself of a trip to Europe, but whether he will neglect his other interests for pleasure remains to be seen."¹⁶

On August 3 the *Express* reported that Senator Griggs, accompanied by his wife and mother, started East to visit Philadelphia and Washington and other places of interest. The family visited the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and stayed in the East almost a month. They called it their &Centennial trip," but during much of the time Griggs himself was in Washington gathering information on which to base his decision to accept or reject the offer.

Meanwhile Louis E. Cropsey of Nebraska, the incumbent U.S. consul at Chemnitz,¹⁷ was removed from his post and brought back to Lincoln, ostensibly to act as private secretary to Governor Silas Garber, but actually to vacate the post for Griggs or some other appointee.

On August 13 "Argus," a gossip columnist for the *Omaha Bee*, reported from Beatrice, "It is stated that Hon. N. K. Griggs will not accept the position of consul to Chemnitz, Germany. As to the truth of this . . . I am not able to state."¹⁸ On August 21 it appeared that Griggs tentatively decided to stay in Nebraska and fight the Gould-Hitchcock machine by running for Congress

from his district. The editorial column of the *Beatrice Express* said: "We have learned—away from home, of course—that Senator Griggs will be a candidate for Member of Congress."

A week later Griggs returned to Beatrice, seemingly in good spirits over his decision. But he learned some hard facts during the next two weeks which led him to change his mind. The *Omaha Bee* warned in May that "Nebraska's Greatest Danger" was control by Jay Gould, the financier.¹⁹ Gould control now loomed a possibility as he moved toward capture of the Nebraska Legislature. Old friends of Griggs' by the score had fallen into line and would go along with Gould and Senator Phineas Hitchcock when the state Republicans convened September 25-26.

Two papers recorded Griggs' change of heart. On September 11 the *Beatrice Express*, as usual, wrote favorably:

The many friends of Senator N. K. Griggs were opposed to his accepting the German consulate, notwithstanding that they heartily congratulated him. Mr. Griggs came to Beatrice more than eight years ago, without money or friends, and has since (achieved) prominence and success in his profession. . . . This appointment was tendered him by Senator Paddock as a mark of appreciation, and it could not have been proffered a more competent person.

"Argus," reporting from Beatrice to the *Omaha Bee*, on September 12 was less kind:

"The Hon. N. K. Griggs has finally accepted the long-talked-of consulship to Germany, contrary to the wishes of his many friends, and we predict that the honorable Senator (?) has for once in his life made a mistake by taking the advice of his enemies instead of his friends."²⁰

The truth, or a part of the truth, was that Griggs, in addition to being an honorable man, was a tough-minded realist. This was one of the secrets of his success as a politician and lawyer. During the Nebraska constitutional convention of 1871, when he saw that a large number of delegates had been mustered to endorse a plan for inequable legislative apportionment which he had been vigorously opposing, Griggs bowed before superior strength, with equanimity: "I do not presume that anything that could be said would change this. I see that the tide has set in and is carrying everything with it. But I want to enter my protest." Adding a sharp thrust calculated to damage his opponents "back home" where it counted, he said no more.²¹

In the present instance he probably learned early in September that the railroad interests had won—in Nebraska, in other states, and in Washington.²²

Professor Alexander, the University of Nebraska philosophy professor who in 1908 married Griggs' daughter Nelly, believed that despite his father-in-law's talents as a political leader, "he was not fundamentally anxious for political advancement."²³ Judging by subsequent events, this must have been true. Alexander also believed that the real reason that Griggs accepted the foreign consulate was that "the lure of the Old World was too strong."²⁴ Certainly his "restless, eager temperament," his strong wish to see the world, were shown some years before with the publication of his travel letters from Utah, Nevada, and California.²⁵

At all events, Griggs, his wife Epsie, and their infant daughter Nelly steamed out of New York harbor, bound for Germany, early in October. Dr. Alexander's biographical memoir quotes a curiously uncharacteristic letter written by Griggs to a friend, shortly after the family arrived in Chemnitz. It is unlike any other Griggs writing, personal or public, in its pervasive note of cynicism, similar in ironic tone to the letters of James Russell

Panoramic view of Griggs' home town Beatrice, about 1875. The man is lying on the bank along the Big Blue River.



Lowell, W. W. Story, and Henry Adams when commenting on American political corruption in the 1870's:

I am in receipt of yours inquiring how I came to be a consul. A short time before I was appointed to my present position certain influential persons, who apparently took great interest in my welfare, suggested that I was a very proper person to represent the great American nation abroad, and that, if I so desired, they would secure my appointment to a consular position across the ocean. As I did not at once signify my desire to "leave my country for my country's good" they gave me many reasons why it would be to my interest to do so. They said it was far more economical to live abroad than at home; that, in fact, I would very rarely have any use for money as the exporters, to our country, would consider it a great honor to be allowed to make me a present of whatever I wanted. As the prospects of being degraded to the position of an official alms-taker—the quaggy receiver of a polluted stream—did not have the desired effect, I was then drenched with a certain nostrum which has scarcely ever been known to fail in the disease known, politically, as "enlargement of the conscience." They hinted at the champagne suppers which would be given in my honor. They said they did not doubt but the people of my district would even bare their heads, in my presence, in token of their great respect for me. They declared that, as our Yankee Doodle nation was the greatest and the best, the lions and the bears and the poorly fledged birds, of other nations, take a back seat when our glorious eagle puts in an appearance, and that the crowns of Kingdoms and Empires were always apologetically lifted whenever an American representative was around. They said the "consules *missus*" were the acknowledged leaders of society and therefore—as I should be a "consul *missus*" myself—it would be necessary for me to overcome any aversion I might have to dancing, and, with a queen or a duchess in my arms, waltz at the first court ball which I attended; this, they intimated, would probably satisfy the noble ladies and would doubtless be accepted by the public generally as a token of my willingness to take that position in society to which my exalted rank entitled me. The persuasive words used by Pygmalion to induce the goddess of beauty to imbue his chisel-formed Venus with life, were not more seductive than were those of my friends. Obesant crowns! Leader of society! Waltzing with queens! Duchess in my arms! I cared to hear no more.²⁶

While Griggs may have accepted the consulate in order to visit Europe, or because he saw that the cards were stacked at home for a game he did not care to play, while he may have approached "the diplomatic life" with mental reservations, nevertheless his career in the self-styled "greatest industrial city of Germany" was a pronounced success. The Chemnitz city fathers described him thus at a banquet given in his honor: "On the one side accuracy and honor in official business, on the other a talent for comradeship, social virtues and an uprightness in private life which, in so brief a time, (have) won the respect and friendship of all."²⁷

Back home, a Nebraska newspaper commentator remarked: "If there is anything on earth that is likely to disgust the Germans, it is Consul Griggs' capacity for lager beer. He has neither diameter nor circumference."²⁸ But the Chemnitzers forgave him this inadequacy. At a farewell celebration the toasts

to Griggs were actually drunk in water instead of the customary champagne and choice German wines. To explain this startling departure from tradition, the Chemnitz dignitaries said that they were abstaining on this occasion in deference to "our most amiable and honoured friend Consul Griggs" known sentiments and practice.

At the same banquet Griggs was presented with an ornate album, a replica of one prepared for Kaiser Wilhelm I, containing portraits of the city's leading citizens and photographs of its parks and buildings. The album was described in the *Chemnitzer Tageblatt* as "*ein Meisterstueck deutscher Kunstindustrie.*" The same paper commented:

Herr Griggs may well be proud that such a token of honor is bestowed upon him, and this from the manufacturers of the greatest industrial city of Germany. All the more so, since this is the first time that in our city such a distinction has been bestowed upon a consul, and especially the first banquet which the manufacturers have prepared in honor of the services of one man.²⁹

Mrs. Griggs was presented with a china cup on which her photograph had been faithfully reproduced under colored glaze.³⁰

For Epsie Griggs the Chemnitz years were chiefly years of bringing up babies. Nelly was scarcely a year old when they first arrived and settled down in a house on Wiesen Strasse. By the time their son Era was born in 1880 they had moved to a larger house on Schutzen Strasse, where they were still living when the youngest child, Dorothy, arrived in 1882. Dorothy Griggs Buckmaster's daughter,³¹ who has read the lifelong diaries kept by her grandmother Epsie Griggs, said that the Chemnitz entries sound much the same as those written in Beatrice, "mostly about sewing, cleaning and children with bad colds and teething." But now and then there was a concert or an occasional trip, "when she was able to leave her ailing babies." The longest trip was to England in 1879, when she took 4-year-old Nelly and went to visit her cousin William Shelbourn near Belvoir in Nottinghamshire. Nelly was to visit beautiful Belvoir a number of times in her later life. From Nottingham, Epsie wrote to her husband in Chemnitz:

I think I can stay very well until October but I really don't think it right to leave you alone so long. . . . Mrs. Shelbourn would not accept any present in money so when you come you must not forget to bring something—stockings would do but by that time it will be cold enough for woolen ones, which can be purchased here better than there. A little embroidery perhaps might suit if you could bring it. No more tonight Love.³²

Epsie also had at least one trip to Switzerland in 1880 in the company of her Chemnitz friend, Mrs. Otto Pabst.³³

As for Consul Griggs, he soon found that his official duties were pleasant and far from onerous. The routine, in fact, was much less demanding than his previous crowded daily life of law and politics in Nebraska. By 1877, when the Grant administration was about to go out of office, Griggs had begun to feel that he did not want to relinquish the Chemnitz place. He could see opening in Europe many new worlds which he had not yet had time to explore. Yet no one knew better than he, in these days before civil service reform, that most foreign consulates were patronage posts. Fortunately he had been rather active in the Gage County Hayes-Wheeler Club before the November, 1876, elections.³⁴ Even more fortunately, President Rutherford B. Hayes abhorred the spoils system and was not inclined to sweep out all Grant appointees in order to make room for his own. The *Beatrice Express*, of March 22, 1877, reported soon after the Hayes inaugural: "Hon. N. K. Griggs has written a letter to his friends here that he will be back on a furlough the 1st of May, and then return to his consulate duties. He has not resigned and does not intend to, as has been reported."

But when James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur took office four years later it was a different story. Now Consul Griggs had to fight to keep his post. The interesting "Griggs Reinstatement" folder of 1881 in the National Archives reveals to what lengths he went—successfully—to stay in Chemnitz, or failing that, to be appointed U.S. consul to Nottingham, England. The first letter in the "Reinstatement" series was written to President Garfield by the Rev. E. M. Cravath, president of Fisk University at Nashville, Tennessee. Cravath, who had traveled in Germany in 1878 and met Griggs in Chemnitz, urged the President to keep him at his post.³⁵

A week later President Garfield received a letter from George L. White, director of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. Writing from Fredonia, New York, White stated that he had met Consul Griggs while the Jubilee Singers were on tour in Saxony, and that his group had much appreciated the consul's courtesies to them. "We noticed his removal from Chemnitz . . . with surprise," the letter went on, "and have since learned that his retirement at this time is the cause of much embarrassment to him, and his family, to the latter, for particular reasons, especially and painfully so."

He went on to praise Griggs' efficiency, declaring that the consul "worthily cared for the interests of our Government at that important commercial point," and ended with a request that the President prevent the necessity of removing Griggs' family to the United States "at this time."³⁶

What the especially painful family reasons were, are unknown, since no letters or family records for 1881 are available. When the Victorians spoke thus in veiled terms about "family matters," they often referred to the imminent birth of a child; however, the three Griggs children of whom we have record were born in 1875, 1880, and June, 1882.

Two weeks after President Garfield received George L. White's letter, a "black calamity" occurred in a Washington railway station: Garfield was shot by a "madman," also described as a "disappointed office-seeker." The wound was to prove fatal, but Garfield lived on for some eleven weeks, and for a time it was thought that he might recover. Events in the United States during these months were in a state of confusion and suspense. Griggs evidently decided he must return and personally mobilize support for himself.

The letters of July, 1881, in the "Reinstatement" folder are addressed not to the stricken President but to Secretary of State James G. Blaine, and they come from more potent quarters than those of the loyal but non-political Jubilee Singers. First in the series to Blaine was dispatched by Senator Charles H. Van Wyck of Nebraska. Van Wyck, Griggs' staunch friend of long standing, was also indebted to him politically. The senator informed Secretary Blaine that he "would be much gratified if we could reach another consulship. I know that Senator Saunders would be equally pleased." Significantly, Van Wyck added that the Nebraska senators would be "obligated" if they could help influence a favorable decision on reinstating Griggs.³⁷

Consul Griggs, meanwhile, was active in his own behalf among the many friendly importers he knew in New York. He also called on Secretary Blaine in Washington and handed him two letters:

Washington
July 18th, 1881

Hon James G. Blaine

Dear Sir,

Thinking you might possibly yet have some use for the letter which I handed to you

today, from the N.Y. Importers, I take the liberty to enclose it to you herewith.

While I have faith to believe that you will either give me the Chemnitz Consulate or the one at Nottingham, even should you not be willing to do so, I shall never cease to be thankful to you for the courtesy you showed me in granting me so much time to lay before you my wishes.

I am, with great respect, Your most ob't Servt

N. K. Griggs³⁸

New York
July 1881

Hon James G. Blaine
Secretary of State
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

Your petitioners of the City of New York state that we have been for many years engaged in the importation of goods from the Consular district of Chemnitz in the Kingdom of Saxony: that during the time that Nathan K. Griggs has acted as Consul at said place he has transacted the duties of his office in a manner not only satisfactory to ourselves, but as we believe, to all those who have transacted business at his office & that therefore we regret to learn that some other person has been appointed in his stead. Believing as we do that the business interests of our Country are best subserved by the retention in office of such Consular officers as have proven themselves efficient & trustworthy, we respectfully ask that Mr. Griggs either be reinstated in office at Chemnitz or that he be appointed at Nottingham, England, where the same classes of exports are manufactured and sent to our country as in the Consular district of Chemnitz.

(signed)

Miles Gibb Lord & Taylor
E. S. Jaffray & Co.
W. H. Tallor & Co.
Butler, Pitkin & Co.
H — K Haines Co.
Bates, Reed & Cooley
345 Broadway NY

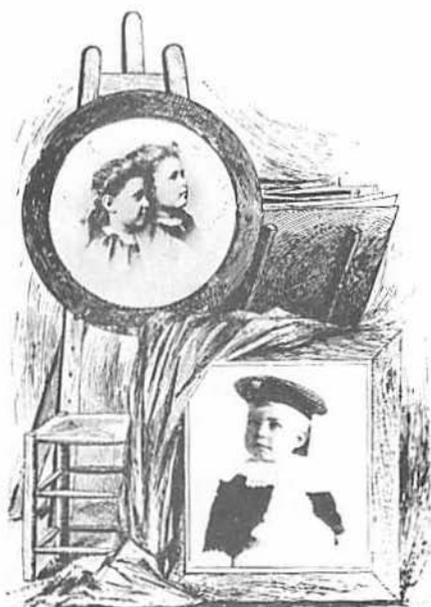
Jeff Miller Co
326 to 330 Broadway NY
J. F. Claflin Co.
cor Church & Winter Sts
————— (illegible)
Morrison Herriman³⁹

Not wishing to leave a stone unturned, Griggs next visited his birthplace in Frankfort, Indiana, securing there two more strong letters to the secretary of state.⁴⁰ Finally, Blaine received a letter from James G. Dawes, chairman of the Nebraska state Republican central committee, written on left-over "Garfield & Arthur, 1880" campaign stationery, and replete with a long list of the twenty-six chairmen of the Nebraska districts. Dawes put it to Blaine straight: He understood that the two Nebraska senators had asked for Griggs' reinstatement, and he requested that Blaine write him giving some indication of what action was intended.⁴¹

Judging from the two final letters in the "Reinstatement" folder, Secretary Blaine was unresponsive to these vigorous



Epsie Saunders (Mrs. Nathan) Griggs. A reproduction of the photograph of Mrs. Griggs also appeared on a china cup presented to her by Chemnitz, Germany, dignitaries. (Illustrations from Lyrics of the Lariat, 1893, by Nathan Kirk Griggs).



*The three Griggs children,
Nellie, Dorothy, and Era.*

efforts.⁴² Consul Griggs was not immediately dislodged, however, because of two unexpected events—the sudden death of the man appointed to take his place, and the surprising turnabout of Chester A. Arthur on the subject of civil service reform. National mourning after President Garfield's death on September 19, 1881, no doubt, also played its part.

With Arthur as the new President, Consul Griggs decided it might be worthwhile to renew his efforts to stay on in Chemnitz. True, Arthur was known primarily as an organization Republican "whose code of ethics, while calling for the strictest personal honesty, tolerated freely the time-honored custom of rewarding the faithful with the spoils of office."⁴³ Griggs, while certainly a faithful Republican, had held the Chemnitz consulate for five years, and he did not intend to give it up without a struggle. He felt reasonably sure that James G. Blaine would soon resign as secretary of state.⁴⁴ In any case petitions could now go directly to the President himself. Arthur soon received a letter from the same group of New York importers who had written to Blaine in July. The letters were nearly identical, except for several additional signatures and a new introductory paragraph:

Learning that the gentleman who was named as the successor of Mr. Griggs died shortly after his appointment, and before Mr. Griggs had left his post of duty and that your excellency will be called to name a Consul at Chemnitz, we most respectfully ask that you reappoint Mr. Griggs to the position he has so satisfactorily filled.⁴⁵

A letter of almost the same date was sent to President Arthur by A. T. Stewart & Co. of New York, asking for retention of N. K. Griggs in his post at Chemnitz. The Stewart letterhead boasted branch offices in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Paris, Lyon, Manchester, Nottingham, Belfast, Berlin, and Chemnitz.⁴⁶

Chester A. Arthur, as events proved, became less the party regular and more the statesman when elevated to the office of President. He "refused to indulge in a wholesale proscription of Garfield's appointees, and took up the cudgels for civil service reform . . . with wholly unexpected zeal."⁴⁷ Amid the general shifting of policies, Consul Griggs was kept on at Chemnitz for almost another year.

Why did Griggs go to such extraordinary lengths to remain in Europe for six years? What were the wonderful new worlds which in 1877 he had not yet had time to explore? One was time to

read, as there had never been time before. In Chemnitz, wrote Professor Alexander, his father-in-law "laid the foundation for what was to grow into a really fine private library—placing his volumes, chiefly of the Tauchnitz series, with a struggling young binder, who became his lifelong friend."⁴⁸

Also, as Griggs had hoped, there was ample time for travel, both on the continent and in Great Britain. Letters to his mother, Mrs. Mary Kirk Griggs of Beatrice,⁴⁹ bear a remarkable resemblance to tourists' letters of all time:⁵⁰

Pisa, Italy

Oct. 15th 1880 9.40 A.M.

My Dear Kind Mother,

I write this to you from a place I never hoped to be—the top of the celebrated leaning tower of Pisa, Italy. It is 179 ft. high and leans so much that I can't help feeling timid, although of course I know it is so solid that it has [*sic*] since the year 1174—Even on the top of it there is grass growing—I only write this to you as a kind of a remembrance that I think of you even when I am standing on the most curious and celebrated structure in the world—

I go to Rome tonight.

Much love to you all

Ever affectionately

N. K. GRIGGS

I send you a leaf
from a sensitive plant
plucked in Genoa—

Naples, Oct. 22/80

My Dear Kind Mother—

Yesterday I ascended Mount Vesuvius with two American ladies. We went from here in a carriage at 7:15 A.M. and got to the beginning of the Mt. Railway at 11 o'clock. We passed over miles of lava, black and twisted. The railway is frightfully steep. It is worked by a wire rope. . . . The road is 985 yards long, and had then to walk 100 yards higher—Making our ascent in all, about 4200 feet. Mother, I have no words to tell you how the volcano looked. It was frightfully grand. Six large streams of lava were hissing and sputtering as they flowed, red and glowing, down the mountain. Every two minutes the Mount would thunder, and throw hundreds of feet high, burning masses of lava. I stood within ten feet of the red hot stuff while around me the sulphurous smoke encircled, and at my feet the cracked block of lava seemed ready to swallow me. I never before saw such a grand and wondrous a scene. I was glad when I got down again. When I get home I will give my Beatrice friends an interesting lecture on Vesuvius.

Today a party of us (4) went out to the ruins of Pompeii. The city has been under the lava since the year 79—over 1800 years. A large part has been exhumed, and it seemed to me very odd to walk in the streets of that long dead and buried place. I plucked two flowers and some cotton from the land still lying over the unexcavated part of the city for you & send them herewith. The leaves I pulled from a crevice in the walls of the amphitheater of Pompeii—a building 2000 years ago, one of the most famous in the world.

Good bye, my dear mother. God bless & keep you all.

Affectionately your son

N. K. GRIGGS

The travel sketches written by Griggs for the *Beatrice Express* are more interesting and more revealing. Unschooling as he was in the arts, he did not hesitate to form opinions as he visited European art galleries, and to express them even if they differed from accepted canons. The letters show that he was becoming aware of art critics and art historians:

In art galleries two kinds of fools are met—indiscriminating and critical. The indiscriminating fool says of every picture, "Oh, how beautiful!" although there may be no more beauty in the picture admired than there is in a circus poster; the critical fool criticizes every painting he sees, although he knows no more of the merits and demerits of that which he criticizes than does a dog of modesty. As the second class has the advantage of variety and originality, I should prefer to be of that rather than of the first class.⁵¹

"As a matter of fact," wrote Professor Alexander, "his impressions were usually just. He was unwilling to admire a Raphael just because it was a Raphael, while having the highest appreciation of that painter's greater works. He liked Rubens . . . and from every work he carried away an individual impression":⁵²

Rubens' "Elevation" and "Descent" from the Cross are not beautiful paintings, but they are mournful, fascinating, and yet almost repulsive in their ghastliness. Rubens displays his grim humor by painting his own portrait as one of the miscreants who is assisting in raising the cross on which is nailed the suffering Savior. I am not enough of an artist to say in what these pictures excel, but I do know that I was more impressed by them than by all the paintings in the exposition at Philadelphia combined. In the Cathedral [Notre Dame, Antwerp] there is a painting by Leonardo da Vinci; it is a portrait of the head of Christ. It is painted on marble, and startles you with its earnestness and beauty. From whatever position you see it, it seems to be looking at you with the intensity and intelligence of life. Whosoever has seen this painting once can never forget it.⁵³

There were letters for the home press on social and historical subjects: "Labor in Saxony," "Coffee and Bavarian Beer," "Free Masonry in Germany."⁵⁴ Consul and Mrs. Griggs were attending concerts, at first because this was expected of the local diplomats, later because they became fond of the music. He wrote for the *American Register*:

The greatest pleasure of a residence in Germany is to hear and to learn to understand the works of the great composers. . . . The brush of the painter may faithfully picture all the human passions—this also may the pen of the composer do. The words of the orator may move you with their sadness, may touch you with their sweetness, may arouse you with their passion, may inspire you with their grandeur—and all this, also, may the measures of the musician do.⁵⁵

An essay accompanying one of Griggs' poems, "High Mass of the Muses," in his book, *Lyrics of the Lariat*, illustrates the intensity of his response to music:

For fifty years, Prof. Mendal had presided over that greatest of church organs—the one at Berne, Switzerland. . . . One lovely evening, with the idling crowd, the writer was swept into the magnificent minster, just as the shadows of the Alps were falling across the valleys of that wonderland. In the great room and almost hidden within the groined vaulting, a half dozen feeble tapers lent their flickering rays. . . . Presently the familiar melody, "Must I Depart from My Mountains," began to steal thro' the silent chamber, as if from the lips of some divine Diva. . . . The song again came pulsing thro' the shadowy darkness, the notes of all the singers being . . . melted into a chorus of moving power and wondrous beauty, to which a myriad of wind and stringed instruments lent their softest strains, all trilling forth enchanting variations of that same Tyrolean lay.

Shortly, a far-away peal of thunder half-startled the entranced throng, the distant rumble being quickly followed by louder and more threatening warnings of the nearing tempest. . . . But these sounds were soon lost in the rhythmic roar of a classical tornado, which then came charging on, fairly shaking the building in its mad wrath, despite of which ever crept out the beautiful notes of that Alpine song.

Then . . . the storm began to abate, even as woods of feathered songsters come forth, and . . . warbled praise to the hidden Apollo. . . . O, it was glorious! Ay, that song was even more enchanting than ever a siren wafted winningly across the wave to woo a Ulysses. . . .

When the writer spoke to that master, in eulogy of the performance, the latter modestly replied: "*Ah, the instrument is a very fine one.*"⁵⁶

The most pronounced effect of what Professor Alexander called Griggs' "belated university education" in Europe was the consul's conviction that he had a gift for poetry. While in Germany he began to write and publish verses, several appearing in *The North British Advertiser*, many in American papers. A home paper commented in 1881:

Hon. N. K. Griggs, U.S. Consul at Chemnitz, is at home on a visit. When he went to Europe, five years ago, he was known as an energetic lawyer and politician. That he had ability, nobody doubted, but that it would ever find expression in anything but plain prose, nobody mistrusted. But since his residence abroad, he has developed a wonderful streak of poetry—no mere amateur's verse either.⁵⁷

Griggs did not overestimate his poetic gift, but he came to feel that "what poetry is in a man ought to come out, for his own benefit and for that of his fellows."⁵⁸ His best known volume of verse, *Lyrics of the Lariat*, is not, as its title would indicate, a collection of western poetry. Of the seventy-nine subjects, only ten can properly be called western; the others are divided among religious, philosophical, autobiographical, love, and family themes.

When Griggs came home to Nebraska in 1882, the course of his life was changed. On the surface things seemed the same at first. He resumed his law practice in Beatrice; old Republican friends welcomed him to the state convention in Omaha in September, 1882, and as before elected him president. Charles H. Gere, however, was chairman of the resolutions committee.

A few months later Griggs allowed friends to put forward his name for a vacancy in the state Supreme Court. But the man who won was the arch-conservative Amasa Cobb, whom Griggs had been instrumental in defeating for a state party chairmanship six years before. It was a sign of the new power alignment in Nebraska. The Chemnitz consulate, as those who planned it anticipated, had served its purpose. N. K. Griggs never again sought or held public office.

But his law practice constantly widened, and in 1890 he accepted the position of attorney for the northwestern division of the Burlington Railroad, while continuing the practice of corporation law which took him from coast to coast and abroad. After 1890 he spent the greater part of his time on business journeys.

While his brilliant gifts as a lawyer won wide recognition, legal work was no longer the core of his life. Often he deplored the constant travel, the long absences from home, but it was on these journeys that he found time and solitude for the work he now considered most important. In solitary hotel rooms during long waits for juries and witnesses, or for rail connections and stages in the West, he wrote his verses and composed his songs.

In Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Washington, he also became noted after 1895 for his unique lecture-recitals. On most business trips, new audiences asked him to sing, to give an illustrated lecture on art, a patriotic program, or the prime favorite, a blend of his own poetry and music. He was "as full of music as the woods are of birds," one friend said of him. A Lincoln resident who heard his lecture-recital in her youth retained a vivid memory of his "vitality and presence."⁵⁹

"Only a man of great physique and unquenchable energy could have answered to such demands . . . throughout his life," Professor Alexander wrote. "At home and abroad he was constantly in call for entertainment or instruction. Of course he enjoyed it, but it was diversion in which no ordinary man could

indulge, making constant requisition upon strength and ability."⁶⁰

A young nephew, Attorney Burt Griggs of Buffalo, Wyoming, probably summed up his uncle's mature life as well as anyone. Trying in his artless way to console his recently widowed aunt, Epsie Griggs, the young man wrote:

Since I have known a little more of the workings of law I realize more acutely that what I formerly said was true, that Uncle's greatest and best work was in the profession. Though he loved his other work more, yet it was only an amusement so to speak, as compared with his law. For he was a great lawyer. I only wish that I may become half as good a one.⁶¹

"He *loved* his other work more." Here is the key, perhaps, to Griggs' decision to leave politics and enter upon the profession which with all its demands left time for the pursuits he now valued most. He was far from regarding these pursuits as "only an amusement," and yet, he did not overestimate his creative gifts. Writing to Epsie on June 1, 1910—a few months before his death—he added the postscript: "Today 43 years ago, I was just getting ready, down in Pawnee Co., to start for Beatrice, for wealth and fame. Tho finding neither, the world has gone well with me, and you, my dear, well know."⁶²

Actually, he accumulated considerable wealth and fame in his lifetime. Had he stayed with politics, made compromises, fought it through, his name now would doubtless be in Nebraska histories—certainly in a footnote, possibly written larger.

NOTES

1. Nathan Kirk Griggs b. Oct. 25, 1844, Frankfort, Ind.; LL.B., University of Indiana, 1867; came as pioneer to Beatrice, Nebraska, June 3, 1867; admitted to practice in district court of Nebraska, Oct. 7, 1867, and in the U.S. Court, Nov. 11, 1873; m. Epsie Emily Saunders, Delhi, Iowa, Dec. 21, 1869; children, Nelly K. (Mrs. Hartley Burr Alexander), Era E., Dorothy W. (Mrs. Bert E. Buckmaster); in banking business with Hiram P. Webb, ca. 1870-1876, Beatrice, Nebr.; in law practice with W. H. Ashby, 1871-1875, Beatrice, Nebr.; member, Nebraska Constitutional Convention, 1871; elected to Nebraska state senate, 1872, and re-elected 1874; president state senate, 1875; appointed by Pres. Grant as U.S. consul in Chemnitz, (now Karl-Marx-Stadt) Saxony, 1876-1882; in law practice with Hugh J. Dobbs, 1882-1884, Beatrice, Nebr., and with Samuel Rinaker, 1885-1893, Beatrice, Nebr.; attorney for the northwestern division of the Burlington Railroad (western Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana), 1890-1910; died Sept. 4, 1910, enroute to Alliance, Nebraska. Author, *Lyrics of the Lariat* (Chicago, 1893 and 1904); *Hell's Canyon* (Chicago, 1899). Author and composer, *The Lilies* (1890); *Voices of the Winds*, 8 folios (Leipzig, Chicago and York, Nebr., 1896-1904); *Four New Songs* (Chicago, 1907); *The Pole King: A Christmas Cantata* (English and German versions prepared for publication, 1910).

2. On January 7, 1875, "the Republican members (of the 6th state legislature) were in a large majority in the joint assembly of the two houses, but could not unite a majority for either of the candidates (for the U.S. Senate); so that the opposition members, Democrats, and Independents, dictated the choice." Chief candidates were John M. Thayer, Elmer S. Dundy, Algernon S. Paddock and Oliver P. Mason. "Two days before the election Thayer's supporters became discouraged because his vote did not increase, and agreed to go to Dundy in sufficient force to elect him; but Paddock's friends, led by Nathan K. Griggs from his advantageous position as president of the Senate persuaded the Thayer men to hold together for another ballot, and after that Paddock's friends would go to him (Thayer) rather than to Dundy. Thayer's vote rose to 21, and then Dundy's men became alarmed and forthwith signed an agreement to support Paddock, which was carried out the next day. This paper had 33 signatures. . . . Abbott . . . on being convinced by Griggs that Paddock would surely win on the next (the Fifth and decisive) ballot . . . agreed to desert and lead off for Paddock, his name being first on the roll call." Paddock received 38 votes, Thayer 11. J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: 1913), III, 147-148.

3. *Ibid.*, 147.
4. *Beatrice Express*, September 17, 1874.
5. *Ibid.*, January 14, 1875.
6. *Daily State Journal*, Lincoln, January 20, 1875.
7. Hartley Burr Alexander, "Introductory Biography," *Five Addresses and Devotional Poems*, by Nathan Kirk Griggs (Lincoln: 1911), 15-16.
8. *Ibid.*, 14.
9. *Beatrice Express*, October 15, 1874.
10. Morton and Watkins, 138-139. Rep. Crouse's "railroad land tax bill," according to Watkins, was "the bill for taxing non-patented subsidy railroad lands in the state, which had been introduced in Congress by Mr. Crouse."
11. *Omaha Bee*, September 27, 1876, and October 4, 1876; *Lincoln Daily State Journal*, October 4, 1876.
12. Secretary of state in President Grant's Cabinet, 1869-1877.
13. Lot M. Morrill, governor of Maine, 1858-1860, U.S. senator from Maine, 1860-1876, named secretary of the treasury by President Grant, 1876.
14. National Archives, Diplomatic, Legal and Fiscal Collections: hereafter referred to as National Archives.
15. *Beatrice Express*, September 11, 1876.
16. *Beatrice Courier*, quoted in *Lincoln Daily State Journal*, August 3, 1876.
17. A son of Colonel A. J. Cropsey, Lincoln banker and land speculator.
18. *Omaha Bee*, August 23, 1876.
19. *Ibid.*, May 24, June 7, 1876, *passim*.
20. *Omaha Bee*, September 20, 1876.
21. *Nebraska Constitutional Conventions* (Lincoln: 1906), III, 318.
22. "It was at this convention (September, 1876) that the railroad interests obtained a grip, a control of, and influence and power in the politics of the state, which was not loosened or relaxed, for any appreciable length of time, no matter what political party was in power, until the abolition of the free pass evil in 1907." Samuel Bassett of Buffalo, Nebraska, one of the delegates to the September, 1876, state Republican convention in Lincoln, *Nebraska State Journal*, March 27, 1910, cited by Morton and Watkins, 111, 178.
23. Hartley Burr Alexander, 16.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Beatrice Express*, August 6, 1874; August 13, 1874, August 20, 1874; September 3, 1874.
26. Hartley Burr Alexander, 16-18.
27. *Ibid.*, 20. Mrs. Griggs, writing to Nelly and Hartley Alexander twenty-seven years later, when Chemnitz was revisited by the couple, said, "Papa hears from several sources

that he was the most popular consul ever here, which is certainly very gratifying." August 1, 1909. From the collection of Professor Hubert Griggs Alexander of the University of New Mexico; hereafter, collection referred to as HGA.

28. Hartley Burr Alexander, 19.
29. *Ibid.*
30. For the photograph reproduced on the presentation cup, see *Lyrics of the Lariat*, by N. K. Griggs, 199. (Chicago: 1893, 1904.)
31. Mrs. Lyman Louis of Seattle, Washington.
32. HGA, August 8, 1879.
33. Other close friends in Chemnitz who greeted the Griggs couple with delight when they returned in 1909 were the Schusters, the Guldens, the Bruno Uhles, and the English-speaking Lutheran pastor and wife, William and Anna Hepworth.
34. *Beatrice Express*, September 25, 1876.
35. National Archives, N. K. Griggs Reinstatement folder, June 8, 1881.
36. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1881.
37. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1881.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, July 23, 1881, and July 25, 1881.
41. *Ibid.*, July 30, 1881.
42. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1881. James W. Dawes, chairman of the Nebraska Republican central committee, complained to Blaine that his two letters of "the previous August" had never been answered. He asked to be advised whether Blaine had received letters relative to N. K. Griggs' reinstatement.
43. John D. Hicks, George E. Mowry and Robert E. Burke, *The American Nation* (Boston: 1963), 63.
44. Blaine's position in the Cabinet had become untenable with the accession to power of Chester Arthur, close ally of Blaine's old enemy, Roscoe Conkling. Blaine resigned from Arthur's Cabinet in December, 1881.
45. National Archives, October 18, 1881.
46. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1881.
47. Hicks, Mowry and Burke, *The American Nation*, 63.
48. Hartley Burr Alexander, 18.
49. A pioneer settler of Beatrice in 1867.
50. From the collection of N. K. Griggs' grandson, Professor Hubert Griggs Alexander of the University of New Mexico.
51. Hartley Burr Alexander, 20-21.
52. *Ibid.*, 21.
53. *Beatrice Express*, February 15, 1877.
54. Hartley Burr Alexander, 22.
55. *Ibid.*, 22.
56. Nathan K. Griggs, *Lyrics of the Lariat* (Chicago: 1893 and 1904), 259-261.
57. Hartley Burr Alexander, 23.
58. *Ibid.*, 24.
59. Mamie J. Meredith, letter, 1965.
60. Hartley Burr Alexander, 24.
61. HGA, December 18, 1910.
62. Collection of Mrs. Lyman Louis.