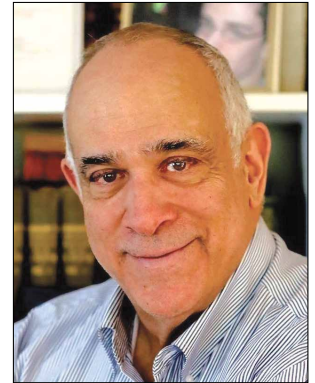
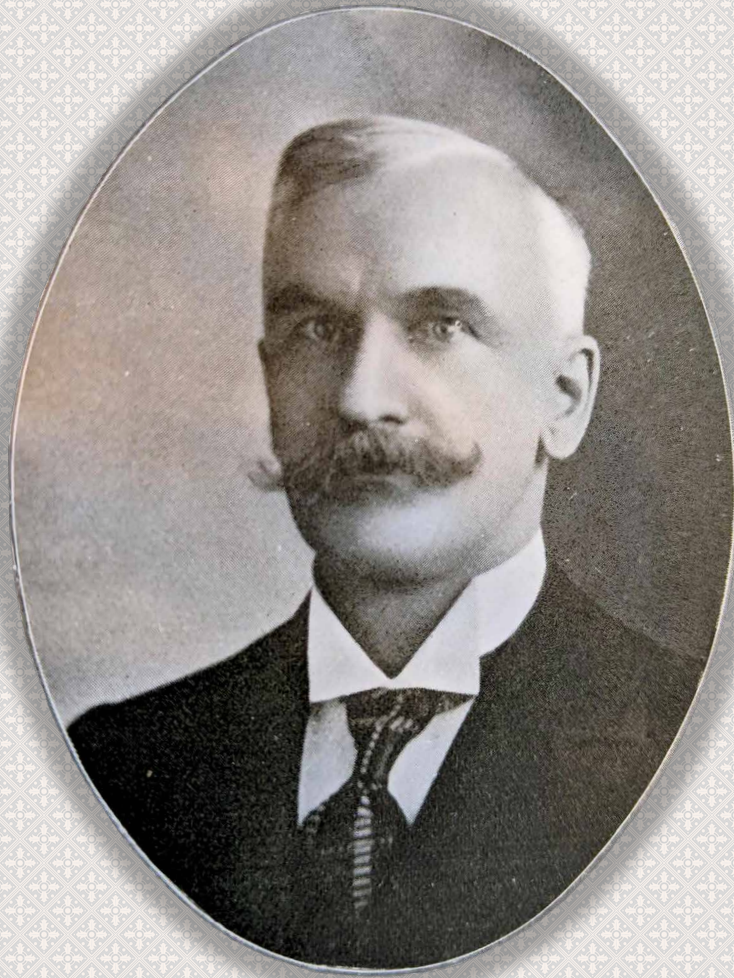




WHO WAS WILLIAM SHINKMAN?

# AMERICA'S GREATEST PROBLEMIST!?



By Pete Tamburro

Chess composition is a form of chess in which composers create chess problems and puzzles for others to solve. It is considered a separate discipline from over-the-board chess, and many players stand out in one but not the other. Those who excel in chess composition can be considered among the best in the field, and their names should be justly highlighted in chess history.

**W**ait! It's not Sam Loyd?? Actually, it's more like a Mantle/Mays baseball argument from the 1950s or a Judge/Ohtani argument from yesterday, today and tomorrow. From an American history perspective, it's Valley Forge vs. Morristown. The former got great historical writing about the tribulations there, but the winter encampment at Morristown was the worst winter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. None of these arguments are ever resolved for the fans of one or the other, but at least the fans know about the other guys. In William Shinkman's case, most chess players, and – sadly – a good many of today's chess historians don't know who he is. William Shinkman comes from a golden age





of problem solving in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when daily newspapers all over the U.S. had chess columns, and every chess column seemed to have a composed problem to solve and often not only a problem-solving competition, but a problem composing competition. In recent American chess history that sort of thing has pretty much disappeared, and so has William Shinkman. Let us revive this artistic chess genius and hopefully open some eyes as to his prodigious output and the wide variety of accomplishments in this special field.

The legendary Herman Helms, in his *American Chess Bulletin* (1933, page 93) gave us a quicksummary of Shinkman's life: "Shinkman, who was the uncle of Otto Wurzburg of Grand Rapids, another famous composer, was born at Reichenberg in Bohemia. His parents brought him to America at the age of 6. By profession he was an insurance agent, but in 1893 he was elected City Clerk of Grand Rapids. Music was another hobby. In 1870 he began composing, laying a foundation for a world-wide reputation. Learning chess at the age of 16, he developed into a strong player and was successful at correspondence play in the early part of his career. Trying his luck at blindfold play, he found no serious difficulty in this branch of the art."

Jeremy Gaige, in *Chess Personalia*, gives the basic data: "William Anthony Shinkman (pseudonym: M. Ham Hawkins) 12-25-1847 (Reichenberg-Liberrec, CSR [Czechoslovakia, then known as Bohemia – a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire] ) to 05-25-1933."

## A SPONTANEOUS GENIUS

The complete story of Shinkman's career is in the book *The Golden Argosy* (1929), where his nephew, Otto Wurzburg (also a well-known problemist) told his story and provided us with over 600 of Shinkman's compositions.

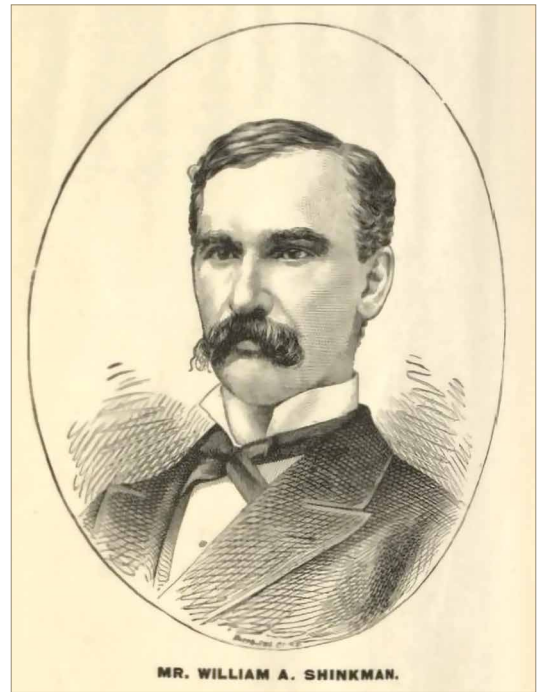
Shinkman was no slouch at playing the game either: "At 16 he was an expert game player and achieved many local successes. He carried off first prize in the 'Review' correspondence tourney with a total of 18 games won out of 20 played. At this turbulent time of the 60s chess was forgotten, and when later there was time for amusement again it was the composition of chess problems that proved the new attraction." (Howard L. Dolde in his chess column "Chess" for *The Pittsburgh Post*, July 17, 1927) Of course, the "turbulent time of the 60s" was the Civil War.



**"Shinkman is, I think, the only composer I have ever heard Loyd praise without some qualification."**



**"Shinkman is a bright, dazzling fellow, and I have seen some problems of his that were so full of fancy and originality that I felt the best of us would have to take a step higher or he would be above us."**



MR. WILLIAM A. SHINKMAN.

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1875, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Shinkman had been picked to be one of the U.S. representatives in the international correspondence chess tournament with Canada. A footnote on this match: "Mrs. J.W. Gilbert, who achieved international fame also played as the only woman representative."

In 1875, he also beat, over the board, in three games out of five, the strong master E. Alberoni.

After the Civil War, Shinkman's problem composing blossomed in earnest. As Kolty notes below, he had immediate success. One international honor worthy of note was his winning the first prize of "a splendid silver cup" in the International Chess Tournament which pitted him against "the great chess problem composers of the world." (*Detroit Free Press*, June 3, 1877)

"On the age of 23 years (1870, which he continued to 1924! –PT) he published his first chess problems and after he was awarded in September 1871 three first prizes in contest conducted by the *Dubuque Chess Journal*, in 1876 a first prize in a Lebanon Herald Tourney and in the same year two first in the Detroit Free Press Tourney, he was very soon known the world over as one of the greatest composers. Loyd, another famous composer who at his time was a dominant figure in the chess-problem world, appreciated and encouraged the young Shinkman." (George Koltanowski in *Chess World (The)*:



*International Chess Review*, 1933 [Kolty's brief but enjoyable chess magazine which went from 1932-33 -P.Tamburro])

This Kolty comment is backed up by Alain C. White's noting in his book on Loyd: "He (Shinkman) is, I think, the only composer I have ever heard Loyd praise without some qualification, unless it be, just before his death, the new work of W. Pauly. His first mention of Shinkman was in a letter to E.B. Cook (1876). 'Among the contributors to the *Journal*, a Mr. Shinkman has taken my fancy. I find the sparkle of genius in all his problems.'; and two years later Loyd wrote to Carpenter: 'Shinkman is a bright, dazzling fellow, and I have seen some problems of his that were so full of fancy and originality that I felt the best of us would have to take a step higher or he would be above us.'" (Loyd, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1878) – from Alain C. White's book, *Sam Loyd and His Chess Problems, 1913* (Dover reprint, 1962)

On December 22, 1878, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reported that Shinkman "has assumed charge of the problem department of the *Holyoke Transcript*."

Again from Kolty: "In 1882, Shinkman was given a place of honor in *Brentano's Chess Monthly*. At this time Shinkman and Loyd were accepted as the two greatest composers in America, if not in the world..."

Sam Loyd died in 1911. Shinkman thus stood alone at the pinnacle of composers. He spent his life as "The Wizard of Grand Rapids." He died at the age of 86 on May 25, 1933, after suffering from a years long illness.

The encomiums poured in upon the news of his passing. Some examples:

Helms quoted Alain C. White: "Shinkman has been far more fertile than Loyd... Loyd's characteristic was the spontaneous presentation of themes; often he discovered them himself, sometimes he only adapted them, but it was primarily his delightful touch in passing that gave them their irresistible charm. Shinkman, too, has often been an originator and his touch is delicate, and sure and spontaneous. But he was far more of a student, and an experimentalist than Loyd was. He approaches his theme from every side and is not satisfied till he is confident he has overlooked nothing. Loyd toyed with themes, Shinkman mastered them. Loyd's genius was a natural spring, bubbling up irrepressibly. Shinkman combines the genius with a painstaking talent and the combination reminds one of a quarry, offering some of its product



**"Shinkman has been far more fertile than Loyd..."**

**"Loyd toyed with themes, Shinkman mastered them."**



**"Shinkman's versatility, his universality, is so overwhelming, so overpowering that the very thought of argument is obliterated... and why I call him 'The Beethoven of the Problem Art'."**

spontaneously at the surface while much of it has to be mined from below... Loyd's finest problems were largely those early ones of 1856-60. After 1868, the date of *Chess Nuts*, Loyd composed relatively few problems. Since that date Shinkman has been almost incessantly active, so that he has surpassed Loyd's total output four or five times over."

In *Chess Review*, November 1933, Otto Wurzburg, his nephew, also quoted Alain C. White: "Shinkman's passing closes the age of the great problem figures of the world of the first generation after Loyd and Grimshaw. It is a privilege to have lived in his time and to have known a little of his spontaneous genius. In these days, it is well to stop sometimes and think of the past, and when we do so, the name of Shinkman will loom very large."

### **"THE BEETHOVEN OF THE PROBLEM ART"**

A *Chess Review* article (CR, August, 1934, pp. 140-141) by Maxwell Bukofzer noted Shinkman composed almost 4000 problems:

"I truly doubt that any other composer ever attained so many successes in so many countries... I yet do not hesitate to pronounce Shinkman the foremost composer of chess problems that ever lived. In my opinion, shared by countless others, he surpassed Loyd, Cook (my own beloved teacher!), Carpenter, Pauly, and Dobrusky, to name but a few of the best-known experts... in the Shinkman treasure trove you will find the counterpart of every specimen you selected from the above... masters, not merely of equal merit and glory, but quite frequently, of still superior texture and fabric... Shinkman's versatility, his universality, is so overwhelming, so overpowering that the very thought of argument is obliterated... and why I call him 'The Beethoven of the Problem Art'."

The legendary problemist T.R. Dawson wrote in *British Chess Magazine* (1933, p.327) that Shinkman was "America's oldest and greatest problemist." He went on to write: "Shinkman made every kind of problem with success – "Bohemian" gems, cunning "American" puzzles, self-mates (1001 Mats Inverses owes most of its greatness to him), problems in any length from 2 to 450 moves, Fairy problems of many types. It was his work in the latter field, and Loyd's, that destroyed my interest in any other kind,



and I treasure in my library a manuscript collection in Shinkman's own hand of his best Fairies, upwards of 300 in number... His first problem appeared in 1870, his first first-prizes were won in 1871, and he went on winning until 1924, a marvelous record of skill, appreciation of changing fashions, and imagination. If he had not quite the dash and showmanship of Loyd, he had far more patience and perseverance."

And make no mistake – he was recognized in his own time:

"No competitor in this tourney deserved a prize more than Mr. Shinkman, if a record of past achievement could have been taken into consideration by the judges. Mr. Shinkman is the best-known living American composer. He followed Sam Loyd but a few years, and in many respects is like unto him. However, Shinkman was more beneficial to chess problems, as he would never leave an idea until he had it worked out. Loyd would take an idea, the Organ Pipes, for instance, and make one or two versions, thinking the theme worked out, but Shinkman will present his ideas in every conceivable form. It is said that in Mr. Shinkman's study, at Grand Rapids, the Mecca of American problemists, there are thousands of unpublished problems, covering unheard of ideas, especially in suimate composition, in which Mr. Shinkman has become interested during the last few years." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 12, 1914.)

"William Shinkman, the *doyen* of problem composers... must, I think, hold the lead of living experts in his output of between two and three thousand problems, nearly a thousand of which are sui-mates (a type of "Fairy Chess," where White compels Black to mate him). His compositions are very much in the American style, full of point and wit, and economically rendered." (Brian Harley, *Chess Pie for the London 1922*, tournament.)

There was a real warmth and even praising humor toward Shinkman. A snippet from a column: "But this is not the first time I've found my friend Shinkman using some of my cleverest ideas long before they occurred to me. I suspect he is guilty of doing the same thing for other composers." (Gilbert Dobbs, *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, July 1, 1923, page 64)

As for his style as a composer, Dr. P.G. Keeney, in his "The Game of Chess" column in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of June 11, 1933 (p. 8), wrote:

"His fertility and versatility were amazing; embracing direct mates, sui-mates, help-



**"If he had not quite the dash and showmanship of Loyd, he had far more patience and perseverance."**



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mates, chess puzzles, conditionals, curios, examples of fairy chess, etc., all ranging from those in two or a few moves to others requiring a hundred or more moves to solve... he became a champion of 'unity' in the art of construction. He had a real preference for point, pith, piquancy and at one time wrote, 'economy and beauty of position, while at all times desirable in a chess problem should never be sought at the expense of idea and point.' ... He looked upon the three-mover as the standard number of moves for a perfect chess problem, and expressed the belief that there are few themes that cannot be better in three than in any other number of moves. Shinkman was also a great lover and composer of sui-mate strategy. His style in composing ran to lightness, terseness and conciseness. He sought and preferred clearness and sparkle to obscurity and elaborate difficulty."

As to which was superior – Loyd or Shinkman – this will remain a debate. Alain C. White, in *British Chess Magazine*, revealed that the two had – as he noted above – a mutual admiration society going: "Speaking of the very problems here printed, Shinkman wrote me: 'This was a wonderful discovery of Loyd's'; while Loyd wrote, 'His adaptations are brilliant, he stands second to none.'" Perhaps it would be best to leave it at that. ■

#### MAGAZINES, BOOK AND LINK REFERENCES:

Alain C. White, *Sam Loyd and his Chess Problems* (1962 Dover Reprint; Original from 1913);

Link to *The Golden Argosy* (ed. by Worzburg, White and Hume; 1929):

[http://problem64.beda.cz/silo/white\\_shinkman\\_the\\_golden\\_argosy\\_1929.pdf](http://problem64.beda.cz/silo/white_shinkman_the_golden_argosy_1929.pdf);

*Chess Pie for the London 1922 Tournament*;

*British Chess Magazine*, 1933, page 327;

*Chess World (The): International Chess Review*, 1933;

*American Chess Bulletin* (1933, page 93);

*Chess Review*, June, 1933, p.7;

*Chess Review*, 1934 pp 140-1;

*Chess Review*, Kenneth S. Howard, August-September, 1944, page 18



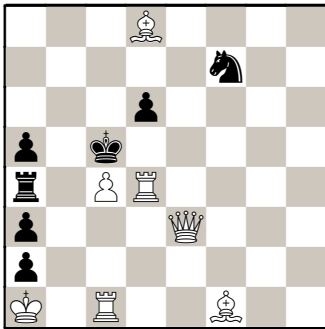


# Shinkman's Masterpieces

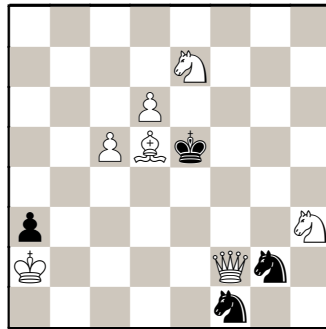
Here is a selection of nine Shinkman compositions. They were chosen so the non-chess problem fan would have a chance to solve them, but they are nonetheless challenging and worth appreciating for the artistry of the solutions.

A Sampler of 9 Shinkman Compositions:

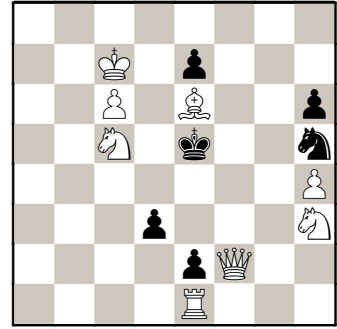
1) White to Play – Mate in Two  
*Illustrated American, 04.1890*



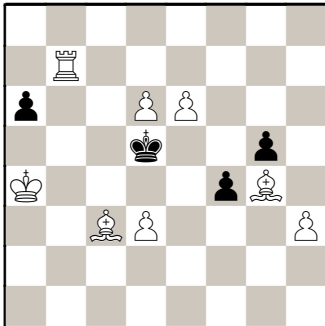
2) White to Play – Mate in Two  
*Dubuque Chess Journal, 11.1871*



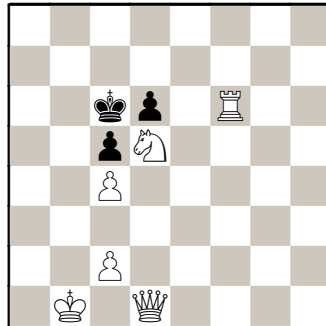
3) White to Play – Mate in Two  
*Tijdschrift v.d. N.S., 12.1907*



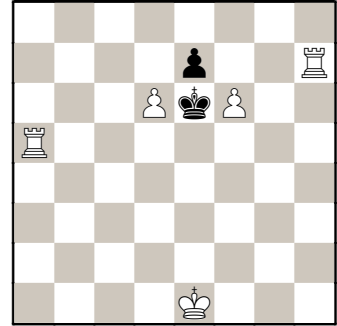
4) White to Play – Mate in Three  
*Hartford Times, 1878*



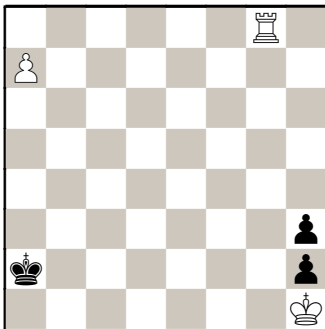
5) White to Play – Mate in Three  
*Deutsche Schachzeitung, 1875*



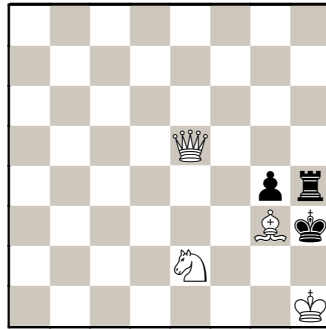
6) White to Play – Mate in Three  
*Deutsche Schachzeitung*



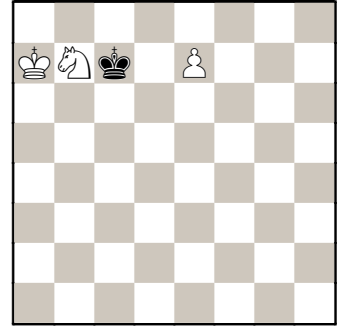
7) White to Play so that – Black can  
Mate in Four  
*Deutsche Schachzeitung, 1890*



8) White to Play to Help Black –  
Mate in Four Moves  
*Deutsche Schachzeitung, 1890*



9) White to Play – Mate in Six  
*Chicago Tribune, 11.1913*



Solutions on page 91