

# RILEY ON RILEY

Indiana Division, Indiana State Library



In 1893, James Whitcomb Riley moved into the home of Major and Mrs. Charles Holstein, on Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis. The photograph above shows Riley's room. Here Riley wrote his poems in "the ambrosial dark" (Dickey, *Maturity*, 316). Look carefully at the photograph. What does the room tell you about Riley? This photograph also reveals what life was like in the early 1900s. How was this room heated? How was the room lighted? Note the painting of the white dog on the wall. That was Lockerbie, Riley's dog.



## THE INDIANA HISTORIAN EXPLORING INDIANA HISTORY

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# Focus

People who know of James Whitcomb Riley generally divide into two groups. The first group adores his poetry; the second group considers his poetry unworthy of notice. Riley, the Hoosier Poet, however, is important and interesting beyond the few dialect poems that school children may still be required to read.

Riley was a superstar of his day. He experienced many of the same triumphs and tragedies that superstars today experience. His many letters, poems, and oral history (preserved in books by his secretary Marcus Dickey) reveal a complex man.

This issue uses Riley's words primarily to tell his story. It is

important to remember some cautions regarding this approach. People generally convey about themselves a mixture of what they are, what they want to be, and what they think people want to hear. The definitive study providing balance to Riley's life story has not yet been written.

Below is a note on the legacy preserved by the Riley Memorial Association. On page 3 is a brief assessment of Riley's importance.

Pages 4 and 5 cover Riley's early life and careers. On page 6 Riley's early hoax on the literary world is noted.

Riley's performance career is surveyed on pages 7 through 10, noting some high and low points.

On page 11, the honors of his life and death are mentioned. Pages 12 and 13 provide brief glimpses of the two places Riley called home.

A poetry game and some historical activities are provided on page 14. The Apple on page 15 provides general resources for further work.

Harper's Magazine, March 1910, p. 472.



A CARTOON OF RILEY DRAWN BY HIMSELF

## In Honor of the Poet

James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) remained devoted to his native state of Indiana, making it his permanent home despite the fame and fortune he achieved during his lifetime as poet and performer. After his death, a small group of his friends honored him by founding the James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association.

Because Riley was often identified as a "children's poet," Riley Memorial Association has always been committed to improving children's lives. During the 1920s, the association raised money, with the help of Indiana's children and adults, to build James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children. The association continues to support the hospital, which has become one of the best in the United States.

Through Camp Riley for Youth with Physical Disabilities, at Bradford Woods in Morgan County, the association provides an opportunity for disabled children to participate in summer camping. Camp Riley is widely recognized.

Riley Memorial Association also operates the Riley Museum Home on Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis. At this museum, the public may see the house in which Riley lived almost exactly as it was when he died there in 1916. The association faithfully preserves the home, enabling visitors to better appreciate James Whitcomb Riley's life and times.

Elizabeth J. Van Allen  
James Whitcomb Riley  
Memorial Association History Project



## “To the popular mind he represented Indiana; indeed, he *was* Indiana!”\*

Today the name, James Whitcomb Riley draws blank looks from most Americans. Some Hoosiers remember Riley, the poet who wrote “When the frost is on the pun’kin” and “Little Orphant Annie.” One hundred years ago, however, James Whitcomb Riley was one of the most famous poets and entertainers in the United States.

During his lifetime, Indianapolis publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, put more than ninety titles by Riley into print. By 1894, the royalties on Riley’s books reportedly earned him more money than any other American poet except for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Many of Riley’s poems were also set to music. Riley’s name and image were used to advertise products.

The popularity of Riley’s poems was a direct result of his national popularity as a performer. From the 1880s to 1903, Riley—sometimes with a partner, sometimes alone—crisscrossed the United States, reciting his poetry.

Riley’s recitations, in “Hoosier” dialect, presented a picture of small town midwestern life. His depictions of rural personalities from childhood to old age brought standing-room-only crowds to the best stages in America. Riley was the guest of presidents at the White House for almost twenty-five years.

Indiana author, Booth Tarkington, a friend of Riley’s, described the performer and his talent. “He held a literally unmatched power over his audience for riotous laughter or for actual copious tears; and no one who ever saw an exhibition of that power will forget it—or forget him. There he stood, alone upon the stage, a blond, shortish, whimsical man in evening clothes . . . suddenly face and figure altered, seemed to merge completely . . . a Hoosier farm hand,

perhaps, or a thin little girl stood before you . . .” (Dickey, *Maturity*, 384-85).

James Whitcomb Riley was the first Indiana poet to achieve broad national popularity. Many critics have questioned the quality of Riley’s poetry. Few have denied, however, the popularity of his sentimental depictions of the midwestern rural lifestyle. Author Edgar Lee Masters described Riley’s significance this way: “He put Indiana as a place and a people in the memory of America, more thoroughly and more permanently than has been done by any other poet before or since his day for any other locality or people” (Shumaker, 219).

Sources: Peter Revell, *James Whitcomb Riley* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970) 19, 38, 146; Shumaker, *Indiana Literature*, 203, 209, 219.

\* Shumaker, *Indiana Literature*, 216.

*Riley was in Washington, D.C. January 11, 1910 for the unveiling of a statue of Lew Wallace.*



Indiana Historical Society Library, Negative CSS 10.

## “My hair was just white as a dandelion ball, My face freckled worse than an old kitchen wall.”\*

James Whitcomb Riley was born to Elizabeth and Reuben Riley, October 7, 1849. He was named for Indiana Governor, James Whitcomb, 1843-1849.

“I was born . . . and reared at Greenfield—a motherly little old town, at whose apron-strings I am still tied” (54).

“The first thing I remember . . . was my father’s riding up to the woodhouse door with a deer hanging from the pommel of his saddle; and about the second thing I remember was the bugler who galloped west on the National Road with news of the death of President Taylor” (21).

“I was not quite a country boy . . . I lived in a little village, just across the alley from the country. I associated with country boys and girls” (43).

“I wanted a pair of boots with red tops. I slipped away . . . to a shoe store where my father bought on credit. After looking in vain for them I selected a pair with *green* tops and told the clerk to charge them. At home I stole upstairs to my bedroom and there wore them all alone with great joy. I strode around the room proud as a knight with a spur on his heel. When any one came up the stairway I quickly pulled them off and hid them under the feather bed. Thus I enjoyed them for two weeks before my purchase was discovered. My father insisted on returning them, but my mother’s love prevailed, and . . . I was permitted to wear them in public” (25-26).



Young James and his mother.



Riley’s birthplace in Greenfield, Indiana.

“A peculiar man was my father. About the third thing I remember was that he made my first suit of clothes. I was three years old at the time—too young, in fact, to be taken out of pinafores, but my father insisted that I should have a pair of pants. . . . He stepped off quietly to a store and bought the cloth . . . Then he cut out the suit and made it with his own hands. The coat was a marvel of art. Imagine it . . . with



Riley’s father, Reuben.

long pants, a vest with a red back and buckle, and cut like a man’s. Then he took me day after day to the courtroom where at that impressionable age I saw many people with many eccentricities” (182).

“My school life . . . was a farce all the way through. . . . I never heartily learned a school-book lesson in my life. When I did answer a question the answer was whispered in my ear by some one. I copied my blackboard work from the classmate next to me. I could have learned had I tried, but my obstinate nature could not brook the fact that I was sent to school. My nature was full of perversity” (53-54).

\* Dickey, *Youth*, 25; all quotations, *ibid.*



**"They did not think I would amount to much at home."\***

Riley was an avid reader. Great works of literature, not school, fired his vivid imagination, and he fell in love with the written word, especially poetry. "My father did not encourage my verse-making for he thought it too visionary . . . I doubted if anything would come of the verse-writing myself" (*Complete Works*, 1: Sketch).

Riley loved music. When he was about twenty years old he thought seriously of becoming a musical performer. "My father was thinking of something else . . . and one day I found myself with a 'five-ought' paint brush under the eaves of an old frame house that drank paint by the bucketful, learning to be a painter" (*ibid.*).

Riley next learned the trade of sign-painting and opened his own business. "While waiting for the turn of fortune . . . I covered all the barns and fences with advertisements. All the while I was nibbling at the rhyme-maker's trade, and this was a source of irritation to my father" (*Dickey, Youth*, 77-78).

"It was my father's ambition . . . to make me a lawyer, and I struggled to satisfy his wishes; but bless you, that profession was not my bent. I could not learn the stuff fast enough to forget it" (*ibid.*, 182).

The study of law became unbearable to Riley, and he walked out in the summer of 1875.

"The immediate instigator of my flight was a traveling medicine man who appealed to me . . . The medicine man needed an assistant and I plucked up courage to ask if I could join the party and paint advertisements for him.

"I rode out of town with that glittering cavalcade without saying good-by to

Riley painted this sign to advertise his business. Look closely to see that the silhouettes spell "Riley."



*Dickey, Youth*, 274.

any one, and though my patron was not a diplomaed doctor . . . he was a man of excellent habits, and the whole company was made up of good straight boys, jolly chirping vagabonds like myself. . . . I laughed all the time. . . .

"My proper duty was the manipulation of two blackboards, swung at the sides of the wagon during our street lecture and concert. . . . Sometimes I assisted . . . with dialect recitations and character sketches from the back step of the wagon. These selections in the main originated from incidents and experiences along the route" (*Complete Works*, 1: Sketch).

\**Dickey, Youth*, 73.

In 1872, Riley used his sign-painting skills to secure a travelling job with Dr. S. B. McCrillus of Anderson, Indiana. Riley and some friends formed The Graphic Company, and travelled the countryside for a couple of years painting signs for merchants. (*Dickey, Youth*, 105, 132.)



*Indianapolis, Marion County Public Library Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Negativer C00018.*

**“I have long fondled the actual belief that I am a poet, but . . . I have no hope of ever proving it to the world.”\***

In April 1877, Riley received his first regular salary as writer and editor of the *Anderson Democrat*. He continued to write poems.

Although Riley was gaining some public notice of his poems in Indiana, he was discouraged that eastern critics were ignoring his work. He knew that to become well known, he must be accepted by the eastern literary circles.

In the summer of 1877, he devised a plan to bring recognition to his poetry. He wrote the editor of the *Kokomo Dispatch* on July 23, 1877.

“This idea has been haunting me:—I will prepare a poem—carefully imitating the style of some popular American poet deceased, and you may ‘give it to the world for the first time’ through the columns of your paper—asserting in some ingenious manner that the original MS. was found in some old album, in the poet’s own handwriting, signature, etc., and that you now have it in your possession. . . . If we succeed,—and I think sheer audacity and tact sufficient capital to assure that end,—after fooling the folks a little, and smiling o’er the encomiums of the press, you understand, we will ‘rise up William

Riley’ and bu’st our literary bladder before a bewildered and enlightened world!!!” (Phelps, *Letters*, 15).

The *Dispatch* joined the plot. Riley wrote the poem *Leonainie* in the style of Edgar Allen Poe. It was published in 1877. The literary community accepted the poem as authentic Poe work.

Riley explained his motives—and the consequences—in a letter to C. B. Foote, November 22, 1886. Foote wrote to Riley indicating that he had found the handwritten poem used to start the Poe hoax.

“I devised the Poe-poem fraud simply to prove, if possible, that critics of verse would praise from a notable source what they did not hesitate to condemn from an emanation opposite [an unknown]. . . . the friendly editor of a paper . . . assisted me in foisting the hoax on the public through his columns . . . And so it went . . . till at last the necessary exposé. Papers everywhere lit into me—friends read all this, and stood aside—went round the other way. The paper upon which I gained the meager living that was mine excused me—and no other paper wanted such a man—wouldn’t even let me print a card of explanation . . . I stood outside alone, and walked around the Court-House square at night, and through the drizzle and the rain peered longingly at the dim light in the office . . . All of which is smiling material now” (*ibid.*, 64).

Many of Riley’s poems were set to music. This illustration is the cover of sheet music for *Leonainie* published in 1879.



### Leonainie

Leonainie—Angels named her;  
And they took the light  
Of the laughing stars and framed her  
In a smile of white . . .

*Complete Works*, 216.

\*Dickey, *Youth*, 262.



**“My journalistic work gave me an insight into human nature, which I could have acquired in no other way. It taught me also to try to give the public what it wants.”\***

Riley's poems first appeared in the *Indianapolis Journal* in January 1877. The *Journal* continued to publish Riley's work. In November 1879, he joined the *Journal* staff as a poet and humorist. Riley worked for the *Journal* until 1888.

"I had a peculiar position . . . My editor-in-chief was one of the most indulgent men in the world and let me do pretty much as I pleased. I wrote when I felt like it, and when I did not, nothing was said. At first when called on for a certain thing by a certain time I grew apprehensive and nervous, but I soon solved the problem. I learned to keep a stack of poems and prose on hand, and when there was a big hole in the paper and they called for 'copy' I gave them all they wanted" (72).

Riley had performed successfully in his early travels with medicine shows. He, therefore, decided to try earning a living on the lecture circuit.

During the winter of 1880-1881, Riley went on tour in Indiana. Playing everything from school halls to skating rinks, he made almost no money on the venture. Riley experienced how lonely and depressing touring could be. His use of liquor, referred to in the last three lines of this quotation, became a lasting problem.

"I recall a dreary midnight at a little station down on the Old Jeff. Road. It was a raw cheerless night. The utter darkness of everything on the outside gave to the stranger a sense of blank desolation. . . . The lonely ticking of the instrument in the office was unbearable. . . . No agent to tell you the train was four hours late. Wait there in those grim, hysterical conditions till three o'clock in the morning as I did, and perhaps it will not seem so

unclassical in a poet to uncork a calabash, take a few potatoes and climb on the train three sheets in the wind" (96).

Riley's lectures became increasingly successful in Indiana and the Midwest. Riley desperately wanted recognition from eastern literary critics. He also hoped his growing popularity would bring a publisher for his poems.

"My first book . . . I sent East (down to Cincinnati was East) where even my sponsor could not give it away—could not get them to look at it—much less print it . . . So I turned my attention to as nearly a practical vocation as I could (public reading), hoping to widen my reputation until I should be known to the general public—then only could I hope my name would secure a publisher to help me out" (173).

\* Dickey, *Maturity*, 73; all quotations, *ibid.*

*This broadside advertises Riley's performance in Kokomo in 1878. His efforts there marked the beginning of his success as an entertainer. (Dickey, Maturity, 20-22.)*

J. W.  
**RILEY!**  
The Poet,  
Reader, and  
Recitationist,

Will unveil his voice, in Kokomo,  
At the Opera House,  
on the night of  
**14 THURSDAY, FEB. 14**

Upon this occasion he will read some of his own productions, a feat seldom, if ever, accomplished by outsiders.

He will also twitter a number of selections "from the humbler poets, whose songs gush from their hearts," don't you know?

He is a complete master of the humorous and pathetic, and can tangle these elements, till you laugh at grief and weep at mirthfulness.

TESTIMONIALS.

—

In conjunction with the price list, we append a few testimonials:

"I have staid in the greatest month, without a doubt, but in Riley's month!"—*Geo. Dodge.*

"You may go in safety. His humor is not contagious!"—*Dr. J. Brown.*

"He is a Poet, and we never hear him like without a sigh."—*Edw. T. Brown.*

"His droll on the vulgar customs of the west, with many other remarks, and also on the 'saw' feelings like a bear skin."—*Edw. T. Brown.*

"I want to say to you to-night, that his humor grows at the very roots of your being, and his pathos in the grandest manner with tears in it."—*John Brown.*

"Who is the man Riley?"—*Ed. Brown.*

SCALE OF PRICES.

Reserved Seats, . . . . .	25 CENTS
General Admission, . . . . .	15 CENTS

Tickets not to be issued at the Opera House Drug Store, Post Office News Stand, Tribune Office, and W. & H. Pope's Book Store, on and after Saturday, Feb. 9th.

Chicago Book Print.

## "Is not that a great big and all-swelled-up honor for the little bench-leg poet out of this blessed Hoosier Nazareth?"\*

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This photograph of Riley appeared as a promotion by publisher Bobbs-Merrill. It was taken while Riley was touring with Edgar Nye.

Since 1878, the International Copyright League had held annual meetings in New York. This prestigious group invited the best of the literary world to "Authors' Readings." An invitation to read one's work was a great honor.

Riley received such an invitation in November 1887. He answered, "In the matter of my readings . . . I will try very hard not to disappoint you, for I feel as gravely conscientious as I am grateful for the opportunity so generously offered" (216).

Riley was scheduled to read only once, but the reaction to him was so enthusiastic that he was scheduled for two more readings. James Russell Lowell, considered the foremost American writer of the time, introduced Riley on the second day.

"Ladies and Gentlemen—I . . . desire to thank Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, who has so generously consented to favor us again to-day with one of his delightful selections. . . yesterday afternoon . . . I was almost a stranger to his poems. Since then I have been reading one of his books . . . To-day, in presenting him, I can say to you of my own knowledge that you are to have the pleasure of listening to the voice of a true poet" (221).

Riley at last had been accepted by the eastern critics. At that one meeting, he achieved his place in the literary world, a true American poet. The *Indianapolis Herald*, December 3, 1887, reported Riley's success.

"The Hoosier Poet, our own James Whitcomb Riley, has just scored a brilliant success in New York . . . Mr. Riley not only acquitted himself with honor, but left an impression behind him which will largely tend to give him the acknowledged position in American literature which his genius and versatility deserve."

The *Indianapolis Herald* also printed reviews from some New York papers.

"James Whitcomb Riley was the last course and made a very fitting dessert to so splendid a repast. . . Mr. Riley did it so well as to excite screams of laughter; but in representing the 'Educator,' a specimen of teachers he met with in the west, he tickled the intellectual palate with as excellent a piece of mimicry as Chickering hall ever saw" (*New York Herald*).

". . . he speaks the Hoosier dialect, in which he has written, as if it were his mother tongue" (*New York Sun*).

". . . and then the stranger and the success of the occasion was introduced.

". . . Mr. Riley wasn't more than tolerably well known to the fashionable audience. He is better known to them to-day . . . The fun of Mark Twain shriveled up into a bitter patch of melancholy in the fierce light of Mr. Riley's humor" (*New York World*).

Riley wrote to his friend Edgar Nye two weeks after his New York debut. "The whole town—and State . . . has been upside-down about the New York success, and in consequence I have been giving my full time to shaking hands and trying to look altogether unswollen by my triumph—if I may so term it" (223).

\* Dickey, *Maturity*, 216; other quotations, *ibid.*, except where noted.



**"I am especially blest in the number of my warm friends.  
They need no explanation of these reports."\***

In February 1886, Riley teamed up with his good friend and popular humorist Edgar Wilson Nye. Both men had established reputations as performers, and the combination proved to be very successful. The popular tour was cut short when Nye fell ill in the fall of 1886.

Riley continued to tour through the winter of 1886-1887. He was making about \$50 a night. Riley and Nye were reunited, appearing at Chickering Hall, New York in April 1888.

Riley had signed a contract with the Western Lyceum Agency in April 1885. The contract stated that Riley would split the receipts with the agency, fifty-fifty. Riley said of himself regarding the business deal, "I signed the papers. In those days I believed implicitly in men. My faith and ignorance were such that had a man brought me my death warrant I would have signed it without reading" (255).

Riley's contract was eventually transferred to manager Major James Pond. Under Pond's management, Riley and Nye began a thirty-week tour during 1889 and 1890. The Riley and Nye team played city after city on a whirlwind of sold-out performances. Riley was aware of how little profit he was making compared to Pond. In Chicago, for example, out of the \$1,600 in one night's receipts, Riley only received \$40. He remarked that "an oyster would know that that was not a square division of the profits" (256).

Under the stress of years of constant traveling and disillusionment with his manager, Riley began to drink heavily. His drinking, in fact, broke up his partnership with Nye in 1890. The newspaper reports of the split distressed Riley:

"I have seen only the first reports and they shocked me so terribly that I have not had the courage to review any more of them . . . .

Indianapolis Sentinel, February 2, 1890, p. 6.

**"AND PITY 'TIS, 'TIS TRUE."**

**NYE AND RILEY HAVE SEPARATED**

**The Post's Love of Liquor Overcomes the  
Humorist's Patience—Riley's Neat Little  
Scheme of Changing Rooms To Get  
Liquor—The Tour Abandoned.**

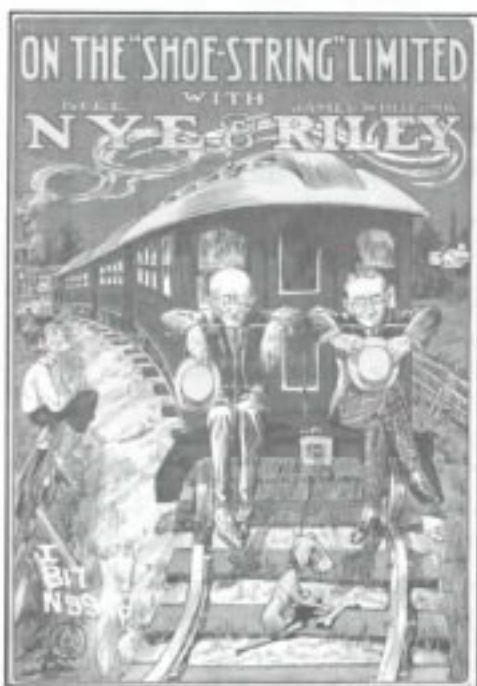
Saturday's *Enquirer* contained a dispatch from Louisville to the effect that the Nye and Riley combination had canceled all engagements and disbanded. The many friends of both parties will be sorry to hear that the direct cause of the separation was Riley's fondness for whisky.

"I desire to stand before the public only as I am. My weaknesses are known, and I am willing for the world to judge whether in my life or writings there has been anything dishonorable. I do not say that in this blight which has fallen on me, I am innocent of blame. I have been to some degree derelict and culpable. The whole affair is to be regretted and for the present I have to accept the responsibility" (258-59).

It is a testament to Riley that his Hoosier state, as well as other cities, friends, and acquaintances stood by him, accepting him as a human being with faults and weaknesses.

\*Dickey, *Maturity*, 258; other quotations, *ibid.*

**“Packed house to-night. A great compliment, considerin’ I’m plum’ wore out here.”\***



*Riley and Nye created their own railroad guide. It was a collection of stories and poems which “will be good for one to read after one has missed one’s train by reason of one’s faith in other guides.”*

Source: [Edgar Nye and James Whitcomb Riley], *On the “Shoe-String” Limited with Nye and Riley* (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1900), cover illustration above, 11-12.

Although Riley traveled extensively for twenty years, he was forever confused by train schedules and the unfamiliar streets of hundreds of cities.

“But the making of trains, which were all in conspiracy to outwit me, schedule or no schedule, and the rush and tyrannical pressure of inviolable engagements, some hundred to a season and from Boston to San Francisco, were a distress to my soul” (*Complete Works*, 1: Sketch).

“Nine times out of ten, when I travel with a trunk, the thing is lost. . . . I go about the country with a grip, and I keep a tenacious hold on it all day, but I never feel quite safe about it at night. If there is ever a horrible railway accident

and among the debris is discovered a valise with an arm attached to it, they may bury it without further identification as the fragments of the Hoosier Poet” (Dickey, *Maturity*, 376).

Riley’s sense of direction was so poor that when he arrived in a city, he was met at the station and taken to his hotel. He was also escorted to the theatre where he

was performing, then back to his hotel.

“Even ventured half a dozen squares from the hotel all by myself—and, mystery of mysteries! here I am, safe back again, all calmly setting forth the almost incredible fact” (272).

The price of Riley’s fame and its toll on him is recorded in letters to the Holsteins in Indianapolis.

“First week out filled five consecutive nights, and never missed a meal or late night lunch. Sunday in Omaha—good hotel, and never out o’ my good-ole-snuggledy-woolly-worm-wrapper, only to go down to dinner and supper. . . . had my breakfast sent up to me so I simply englutted that like a boa constrictor, and rolled over in a comatose condition again” (167).

“All has gone, and is going, well with the little man. . . . he also dreams that this dodgasted show-life is a thing of the awful past, and he’s livin’ like other folks—At Home—where all God’s children ought to be in both this life and the next” (189).

**“Fame, says I, go ‘way from me—  
Please go ‘way and lem me be,  
I’m so tired out, and so  
Dam’ infernal sick of ‘show’  
That the very name of you  
Palls, and turns my stomach, too”**  
(192).

\* Phelps, *Letters*, 189; other quotations, *ibid.*, except where noted.



**"I am still bewildered that any such thing should ever have come to me."\***

Although his last public performance was in 1903, Riley spent the last thirteen years of his life reaping the rewards of his brilliant career. He received the following honors:

- 1902 Honorary Master of Arts from Yale University
- 1904 Honorary Doctor of Letters, University of Philadelphia
- 1907 Honorary Doctor of Laws, Indiana University
- 1908 Elected to National Institute of Arts and Letters
- 1911 Elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters; Indiana State Superintendent of Public Instruction decrees October 7 as first Riley Day
- 1915 National Commissioner of Education directs Riley Day to be observed in all American schools.

Source: Revell, *Riley*, Chronology.

After suffering a stroke on the morning of July 22, 1916, James Whitcomb Riley died later that evening.

On July 23, his body was placed in a bronze coffin and carried from his home on Lockerbie Street to the State House. The Governor and the Mayor of Indianapolis, as well as a platoon of policemen, accompanied the body. Riley lay in state for six hours with 35,000 mourners paying tribute.

Riley's coffin was returned to the Lockerbie home for a funeral service on July 25. Then his coffin was carried to Crown Hill Cemetery, where he was buried.

\*Phelps, *Letters*, 318.

*This undated photograph shows Riley's coffin being moved from the Lockerbie Street home.*



Indiana Division, Indiana State Library

*On Riley's sixty-sixth birthday, October 7, 1915, Indiana Governor Samuel Ralston proclaimed Riley Day. Indianapolis hosted a birthday party for the poet that evening at the Murat Theatre. Riley is pictured here with his nephew, Edmund Eitel, and his chauffeur, George Ray, as they arrived for the celebration.*



Indiana Division, Indiana State Library

**"It will always be a dear old home to me because it contains the best, the kindest and most forbearing friends that I have ever known."\***

\* Dickey, *Maturity*, 373; other quotations, *ibid.*

When Riley first went to work at the *Indianapolis Journal* in November 1879, the editor said Riley "would stamp up and down our reportorial rooms moaning for the sight of sunflowers." Riley, homesick, would leave a note on the editor's desk, "Going down home for a day or two to smoke my segyar" and head back to Greenfield (76).

Riley's father had sold the old homestead. Riley purchased it in 1894, after his father's death. He restored the home, and his sister and her family lived there, with Riley as a frequent visitor.

In 1936, the city of Greenfield purchased the property and formed the Riley Old Home Society, which maintains the house.

*The photograph shows the library at Riley's home in Greenfield in 1919. Look carefully. A magnifying glass may be helpful. What does this room tell you about the poet? What clues can you find about the lifestyles of people in the early 1900s? Compare this room to the one pictured on page 13.*



Indiana Division, Indiana State Library



**"I am getting tired of this way of living . . . clean, dead tired, and fagged out and sick of the whole Bohemian business."\***

In 1893, Riley was "a poet who had no home, no children and no flowers" (Dickey, *Maturity*, 290).

When his good friends, Major and Mrs. Charles Holstein invited him in 1893 to move into their beautiful home at 528

Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis, he happily accepted. He lived there until his death in 1916.

The home is still maintained as a museum by the Riley Memorial Association.

\* Dickey, *Maturity*, 289.

*This photograph shows the drawing room in Riley's home on Lockerbie Street in Indianapolis, circa 1916. Guests were entertained in this room. What does this room tell you about the Holsteins? Compare the library in Riley's Greenfield home to this room. What are the differences? What are the similarities?*



Indiana Division, Indiana State Library

# Playing with Poetry



In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people played a poetry game. Each person wrote a poem using a list of rhymed words. Sometimes each participant was asked to submit two words that rhymed. The words were read aloud, and each player wrote a stanza using all of the word pairs. Use some of these pairs of rhymed words from Riley's "The Raggedy Man" to create your own poem.

Pa—saw	too—do
day—hay	tree—me
laugh—calf	is—his
can—Ann	clothes—knows

Locate a copy of Riley's poem and compare it to your poem.

Illustration from Edgar Nye and James Whitcomb Riley, *Nye and Riley's Railway Guide* (Chicago: Dearborn Publishing Co., 1888), 13.

## You Be The Historian

- Conduct a survey about Riley's reputation today. Ask adults and students whether they know about Riley and whether they have read and enjoyed his poetry. Is there any evidence of Riley's fame in your community—street or building name, for example?
- Get a book of Riley's poems and read some of his poetry. Does the language make it difficult to understand? Why?
- Riley excelled as a performer and manipulated his audiences' emotions with each poem. Perform some of Riley's poems. Did you enjoy his poetry more reading it—or performing it? Try to locate something of Riley's set to music and perform that.
- Riley was part of an exciting cultural period in Indiana. Investigate the artists and writers who were friends and contemporaries of Riley and the history of that time period.
- Riley also knew the most prominent men and women of literature throughout the world. Investigate the who's who of the literary world during Riley's time.
- Compare Riley with a current superstar from Indiana, such as Michael Jackson, John Mellencamp, and Axl Rose. What similarities and differences are there between their poetry and their lifestyles? How has technology affected the superstar concept?



# An Apple for Everyone

## Selected Resources

### Student Reading

- Augarde, Tony. *The Oxford Guide to Word Games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

History of word games, including poetry games.

- Cosman, Anna. *How to Read and Write Poetry*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1979.

A delightful introduction to poetry for readers of any age.

- Harris, Aurand. *Ride A Blue Horse*. New Orleans: Anchorage Press, Inc., 1986.

Riley's youth is examined in this play written for student audiences. It is available on inter-library loan from the library at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. Ask your local librarian for assistance.

- Livingston, Myra Cohn. *Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

Different types of poetry and mechanics of writing poetry for a middle-school or young adult reader.

- Nolan, Jeannette Covert. *James Whitcomb Riley: Hoosier Poet*. New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1941.

Comprehensive biography suitable for middle-school to young adult readers.

### General Sources

- Dickey, Marcus. *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1922.

Dickey, Riley's secretary, begins with Riley's first solo public

appearance in 1874 and follows his career until his death in 1916. Good Riley quotations.

- \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1919.

Gives a detailed, but romantic look at Riley's childhood and early careers. Wonderful stories and quotations.

- Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Pass the Poetry, Please!* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987.

An interesting resource for teachers.

- Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children To Write Poetry*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, [1970].

Delightful suggestions for attracting children to writing poetry.

- Phelps, William Lyon, ed. *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1930.

Contains letters written 1876-1915, many to his friends, the most influential literary writers of the time. Gives insight into Riley as a man and reveals his wonderful sense of humor.

- Riley, James Whitcomb. *Complete Works*. Memorial ed. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1916. 10 volumes.

Includes poems and prose sketches, illustrated.

There are many editions of Riley's work. Indiana University Press has an edition of Riley's complete work and a book of

selections from Riley's work.

- Russo, Anthony J., and Dorothy R. Russo. *A Bibliography of James Whitcomb Riley*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1944.

A wonderful resource for anyone researching Riley's work. Publication information with detailed footnotes.

- Shumaker, Arthur W. *A History of Indiana Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1962.

Details significant contributions of Indiana authors to American literature.

### Of Special Interest

- The James Whitcomb Riley Lockerbie Street Home, 528 Lockerbie Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202; 317-631-5885.

- James Whitcomb Riley Birthplace and Museum, 250 W. Main Street, Greenfield, IN 46140.

### Special Thanks

- To Elizabeth J. Van Allen, James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association History Project.



**A Note Regarding Resources:** Items are listed on this page that enhance work with the topic discussed. Some older items, especially, may include dated practices and ideas that are no longer generally accepted. Resources reflecting current practices are noted whenever possible.

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