Indiana - Poets
Riley, James Whitcomb
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Poet of the People

His popularity has waned over the years, but James Whitcomb Riley was a legend in his own time

By Peter Delevett

There is a grave in Indianapolis that every Hoosier should see. Take a trip to Crown Hill Cemetery and follow the winding road through the rows of tombstones. As you go, you will see the burial places of famous Americans, such as President Benjamin Harrison and Vice President Thomas Marshall. On the highest hill in the cemetery is a gray marble tomb which commands a view of the city skyline. A single name is carved on the crypt: Riley. James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier Poet, the People's Laureate, the Children's Poet — at rest in a tomb paid for with pennies given by Indiana schoolchildren. Riley lies here in Indiana soil, the same soil from which sprang his Little "Orphant" Annie and Raggedy Man, part of the rich harvest of Hoosierana that Riley reaped and gathered to share with the world.

The poem of Riley's life begins in a log cabin in Greenfield, Indiana. On October 7, 1849, Reuben and Elizabeth Marine Riley welcomed their second son into the world. Young James was named for Governor James Whitcomb, a friend of Reuben Riley's, but the boy was so tiny that he was given the nickname "Bud." He shared his home with five brothers and sisters, an "uncle" who was actually an adopted runaway, farm animals, hired hands, and a multitude of fairies and goblins.

His belief in fairies was an early sign of his active imagination. "Fairies whisper to us to do good deeds," he would later write. "Fairies are the creative power which has caused the building of great structures, the painting of great pictures, the composition of great music, and the production of great poems."

They all climbed up on a high board fence —
Nine little goblins, with green-glass eyes —
Nine little goblins that had no sense,
And couldn't tell coppers from cold mince pies.
From "Nine Little Goblins"

Perhaps his poetic imagination came from his mother, who herself had a poet's spirit and encouraged young Riley's talent for

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James Whitcomb Riley, Indiana's folk poet, died in 1916. The above photograph was taken around 1912.

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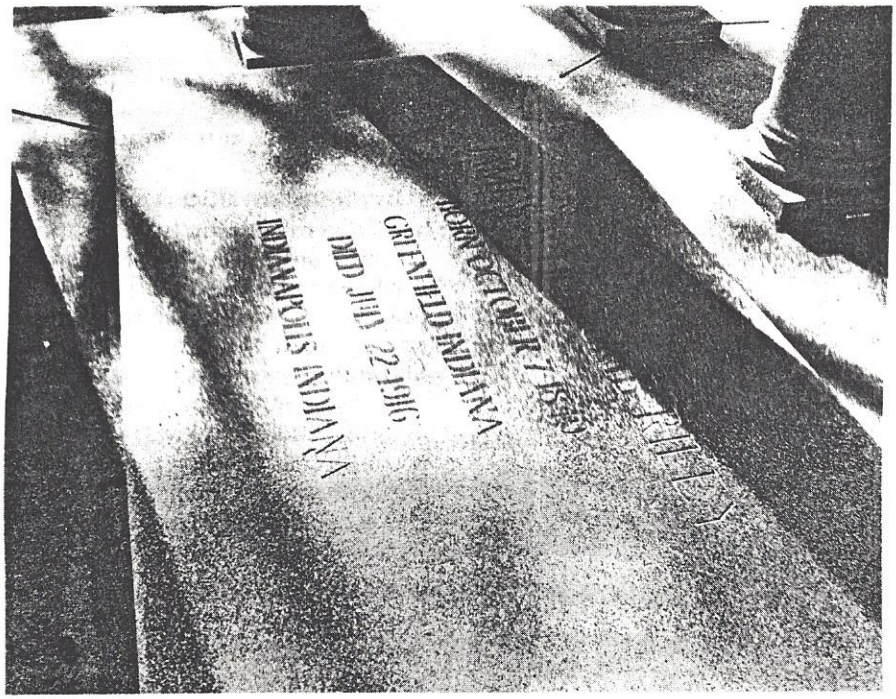
writing, music and art. Perhaps it was an offshoot of his love of nature, which often led him to play hooky or abandon his chores to walk in the woods and swim in the Brandywine River. Riley began writing poetry while still a child, his head filled with dreams of the future. He felt that life held promise for him, and that the fairies would guide him.

Because of his imagination and drive, Riley had little patience for formal education. He chose instead to learn through observation and imitation. His trips to the county courthouse with his lawyer father exposed him to the people of Indiana, and he built his later writing on the impressions they made on him.

Riley understood the literary value of rural life and people, and he wrote often of the little farm in Greenfield, drawing many of his characters from memories of actual farmhands.

For instance, there is the story of Little Orphant Annie, probably Riley's best-known and most enduring creation. Annie, with her stories of "the Gobble-uns 'at gits ya ef you don't watch out," was based on a young girl named Mary Alice Smith, an orphan who lived with the Rileys as a hired girl during the early years of the Civil War. Mary Alice fascinated the Riley children with her weird stories and eerie ways. She spoke to imaginary people, turned everyday tasks into grand adventures, and convinced the children that gnomes lived beneath the spiral stairs in the Riley's front hall. When Mary Alice's uncle took her from the Riley home in the dead of night, the young Riley believed that the goblins had finally gotten the strange little girl.

Riley's acuteness of observation helped him to understand and imitate the speech and thought of country folk, giving his works an honest, almost childlike perspective. "The public desires nothing but what is absolutely natural," he said, "and so perfectly natural as



PATTY DIRIENZO

Riley's marble tomb, which is located in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, was financed by pennies donated by schoolchildren.

to be fairly artless. It demands simple sentiments that come from the heart."

Riley's interest in the simple folk increased as he grew older and wandered farther and farther from Greenfield. He and several friends formed a traveling group called "the Graphics" and painted advertisements on barns and fences throughout Indiana, Ohio and Illinois.

At age 23 and again at 26 he joined itinerant medicine shows, for which he created and performed skits and painted signs. These travels brought Riley in touch with the rural populace of the Midwest, whose delight in his creativity fed his growing desire for literary success.

In 1874, James became associate editor of the small Greenfield newspaper. By this time he had written volumes of poetry, most of it in Hoosier dialect, and he often featured his work in the paper. He also submitted great amounts of both poetry and prose to national publications, but widespread exposure evaded him. He hungered for recognition from the Eastern literary establishment, sardonically signing his letters, "Yours obscurely." Riley saw himself as the voice "for the inarticulate masses," and he fluctuated between hope of realizing this vision and his fear of "the tragedy of unrecognized genius." His frustration continued to build, even after he moved to the Anderson *Democrat,* a larger newspaper.

Riley was convinced that his failures were caused by his obscurity, not by flaws in his writing. "I tell you," he once said to a rival editor, "all that is required to make a poem successful and popular is to prove its author a genius known to fame." He thought it unfair that better-known writers received enormous sums for stories that he considered inferior to his own work. "Had some anonymous author submitted the manuscript," he argued, referring to a work by Henry Ward Beecher, "the first five pages would have consigned it to the waste basket."

In frustration, Riley conceived what is now called the Poe poem hoax. To prove that editors would judge a work merely by its author's reputation, he wrote a poem entitled "Leonainie" in the style of Edgar Allan Poe.

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

Riley sent the poem to a friend who edited the Kokomo *Dispatch.* They planned to print the bogus poem as one of Poe's undiscovered works, wait until it was accepted by the critics as legitimate, and then reveal the poem's true author "as proof of my position." Riley would both demonstrate his point and gain recognition for his work. To divert suspicion from himself, Riley would attack the poem and question its authenticity in the *Democrat.*

Much to Riley's surprise, the hoax sparked a nationwide controversy. The *Dispatch* editor sent copies of the poem to newspapers and magazines, including *Scribner's, Harper's,* and the *Atlantic.* News of the "discovery" appeared in papers in New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco. "The ablest critics in the land have leveled their senses upon it," wrote the *Dispatch* editor. Most were divided on the question of the poem's authenticity. William F. Gill, a Poe biographer, demanded to see the original manuscript, and Riley and a friend worked desperately to produce one.

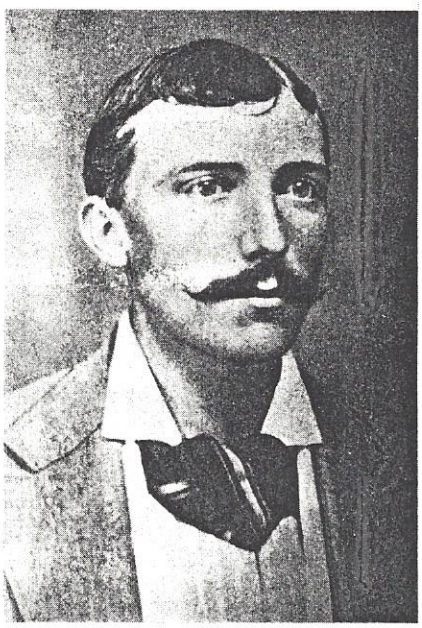
The hoax was exposed a month later when another friend of Riley's revealed the truth to the *Anderson Herald,* a rival of the *Dispatch.* Riley became the victim of nationwide outrage. He was dismissed from his position at the *Democrat,* and many journals predicted that his literary career was finished. One New York daily wrote that "the poem effectually

sets at rest whatever suspicion there may have been that the author had the material out of which a poet is made." As Riley said later, "It was the most dismal period of my life."

But Riley's gamble paid off in the end, perhaps more handsomely than he had expected. The editor of the *Indianapolis Journal,* interested in the source of the national controversy, began to study the young poet's locally published work. "Come over to Indianapolis," the editor wrote, "and we'll give you a place on the *Journal.*" Riley accepted the position with relish.

The job with the *Journal* proved to be the breakthrough Riley had been seeking. In 1882, the first poem of Riley's "Boone" series, "The Old Swimmin' Hole," was published in the newspaper. These poems, published under the fictitious name "Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone," vividly depicted scenes from Hoosier life.

When the frost is on the punkin
And the fodder's in the shock
And you hear the kyouck and gobble
Of the struttin' turkey-cock . . .



This photograph of Riley was taken in 1871, when he was 22.

Readers so warmly received the poems that within a year the entire Boone series was published in book form. From then on, Riley published a new book almost every year.

By 1891, royalties from Riley's books were running into the thousands of dollars. At last, it seemed, Riley had achieved his dream of popularity, a wave that he rode until his death in 1916. He was acclaimed by readers nationwide and by well-established literary figures. Said Mark Twain of Riley's work, "This is art — and fine and beautiful, and only a master can compass it." James Russell Lowell called him "a true poet." Riley received honorary degrees from several universities and election into both the American Academy of Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. His birthday, October 7, became a nationally celebrated holiday.

But successful as Riley became, he took care that his literary repu-

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tation remained secure. While traveling on the oratory circuit, Riley carefully observed the effect of his poems on his listeners. Should a poem not meet with acceptance from an audience, Riley struck it from his repertoire. He hoarded every poem he wrote, never throwing away old drafts, preserving his past work to draw upon and revise in case he ran out of creative ideas. He had not forgotten the despair of obscurity and thwarted ambition.

As a young man Riley dreamed of fame, even immortality; before his death he found himself a folk legend. Yet Riley was never regarded as a brilliant writer. Even at the height of his career, he feared that he would remain a regional poet. Perhaps the most famous, but a regional poet nonetheless.

True to his fear, Riley has not maintained a reputation as a great poet. His popularity has waned gradually in this century. Today it is not uncommon to find a Hoosier schoolchild or even a university professor who has never heard of James Whitcomb Riley. Without his oratorical skill and fiery drive to bring them to life, Riley's poems slipped back into the pack of lesser American literature. His lovingly crafted bits of nostalgia became relics from a simpler past.

The childish faith in fairies, and Aladdin's magic ring,
The simple, soul-reposing, glad belief in everything,
When life was like a story holding neither sob nor sigh,
In the golden olden glory of the days gone by.
From "The Days Gone By"

From Riley's tomb atop Crown Hill, there is a wonderful view of the Hoosier capital. It is fitting that James Whitcomb Riley is buried at the pinnacle of this hill, as though to look out at the land and people he loved so dearly. □

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