

= James Whitcomb Riley =

James Whitcomb Riley (October 7 , 1849 ? July 22 , 1916) was an American writer , poet , and best @-@ selling author . During his lifetime he was known as the " Hoosier Poet " and " Children 's Poet " for his dialect works and his children 's poetry respectively . His poems tended to be humorous or sentimental , and of the approximately one thousand poems that Riley authored , the majority are in dialect . His famous works include " Little Orphant Annie " and " The Raggedy Man " .

Riley began his career writing verses as a sign maker and submitting poetry to newspapers . Thanks in part to an endorsement from poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow , he eventually earned successive jobs at Indiana newspaper publishers during the latter 1870s . Riley gradually rose in prominence during the 1880s through his poetry reading tours . He traveled a touring circuit first in the Midwest , and then nationally , holding shows and making joint appearances on stage with other famous talents . Regularly struggling with his alcohol addiction , Riley never married or had children , and created a scandal in 1888 when he became too drunk to perform . He became more popular in spite of the bad press he received , and as a result extricated himself from poorly negotiated contracts that limited his earnings ; he quickly became very wealthy .

Riley became a bestselling author in the 1890s . His children 's poems were compiled into a book and illustrated by Howard Chandler Christy . Titled the Rhymes of Childhood , the book was his most popular and sold millions of copies . As a poet , Riley achieved an uncommon level of fame during his own lifetime . He was honored with annual Riley Day celebrations around the United States and was regularly called on to perform readings at national civic events . He continued to write and hold occasional poetry readings until a stroke paralyzed his right arm in 1910 .

Riley 's chief legacy was his influence in fostering the creation of a midwestern cultural identity and his contributions to the Golden Age of Indiana Literature . Along with other writers of his era , he helped create a caricature of midwesterners and formed a literary community that produced works rivaling the established eastern literati . There are many memorials dedicated to Riley , including the James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children .

= = Early life = =

= = = Family and background = = =

James Whitcomb Riley was born on October 7 , 1849 , in the town of Greenfield , Indiana , the third of the six children of Reuben Andrew and Elizabeth Marine Riley . Riley 's father was an attorney , and in the year before Riley 's birth , he was elected a member of the Indiana House of Representatives as a Democrat . He developed a friendship with James Whitcomb , the governor of Indiana , after whom he named his son . Martin Riley , Riley 's uncle , was an amateur poet who occasionally wrote verses for local newspapers . Riley was fond of his uncle who helped influence his early interest in poetry .

Shortly after Riley 's birth , the family moved into a larger house in town . Riley was " a quiet boy , not talkative , who would often go about with one eye shut as he observed and speculated . " His mother taught him to read and write at home before sending him to the local community school in 1852 . He found school difficult and was frequently in trouble . Often punished , he had nothing kind to say of his teachers in his writings . His poem " The Educator " told of an intelligent but sinister teacher and may have been based on one of his instructors . Riley was most fond of his last teacher , Lee O. Harris . Harris noticed Riley 's interest in poetry and reading and encouraged him to pursue it further .

Riley 's school attendance was sporadic , and he graduated from grade eight at age twenty in 1869 . In an 1892 newspaper article , Riley confessed that he knew little of mathematics , geography , or science , and his understanding of proper grammar was poor . Later critics , like Henry Beers , pointed to his poor education as the reason for his success in writing ; his prose was written in the

language of common people which spurred his popularity .

= = = Childhood influences = = =

Riley lived in his parents ' home until he was twenty @-@ one years old . At five years old he began spending time at the Brandywine Creek just outside Greenfield . His poems " The Barefoot Boy " and " The Old Swimmin ' Hole " referred back to his time at the creek . He was introduced in his childhood to many people who later influenced his poetry . His father regularly brought home a variety of clients and disadvantaged people to give them assistance . Riley 's poem " The Raggedy Man " was based on a German tramp his father hired to work at the family home . Riley picked up the cadence and character of the dialect of central Indiana from travelers along the old National Road . Their speech greatly influenced the hundreds of poems he wrote in nineteenth century Hoosier dialect .

Riley 's mother frequently told him stories of fairies , trolls , and giants , and read him children 's poems . She was very superstitious , and influenced Riley with many of her beliefs . They both placed " spirit rappings " in their homes on places like tables and bureaus to capture any spirits that may have been wandering about . This influence is recognized in many of his works , including " Flying Islands of the Night . "

As was common at that time , Riley and his friends had few toys and they amused themselves with activities . With his mother 's aid , Riley began creating plays and theatricals which he and his friends would practice and perform in the back of a local grocery store . As he grew older , the boys named their troupe the Adelphians and began to have their shows in barns where they could fit larger audiences . Riley wrote of these early performances in his poem " When We First Played ' Show ' , " where he referred to himself as " Jamesy . "

Many of Riley 's poems are filled with musical references . Riley had no musical education , and could not read sheet music , but learned from his father how to play guitar , and from a friend how to play violin . He performed in two different local bands , and became so proficient on the violin he was invited to play with a group of adult Freemasons at several events . A few of his later poems were set to music and song , one of the most well known being A Short 'nin ' Bread Song ? Pieced Out .

When Riley was ten years old , the first library opened in his hometown . From an early age he developed a love of literature . He and his friends spent time at the library where the librarian read stories and poems to them . Charles Dickens became one Riley 's favorites , and helped inspire the poems " St. Lirriper , " " Christmas Season , " and " God Bless Us Every One . "

Riley 's father enlisted in the Union Army during the American Civil War , leaving his wife to manage the family home . While he was away , the family took in a twelve @-@ year @-@ old orphan named Mary Alice " Allie " Smith . Smith was the inspiration for Riley 's poem " Little Orphant Annie " . Riley intended to name the poem " Little Orphant Allie " , but a typesetter 's error changed the name of the poem during printing .

= = = Finding poetry = = =

Riley 's father returned from the war partially paralyzed . He was unable to continue working in his legal practice and the family soon fell into financial distress . The war had a negative physiological effect on him , and his relationship with his family quickly deteriorated . He opposed Riley 's interest in poetry and encouraged him to find a different career . The family finances finally disintegrated and they were forced to sell their town home in April 1870 and return to their country farm . Riley 's mother was able to keep peace in the family , but after her death in August from heart disease , Riley and his father had a final break . He blamed his mother 's death on his father 's failure to care for her in her final weeks . He continued to regret the loss of his childhood home and wrote frequently of how it was so cruelly snatched from him by the war , subsequent poverty , and his mother 's death . After the events of 1870 , he developed an addiction to alcohol which he struggled with for the remainder of his life .

Becoming increasingly belligerent toward his father , Riley moved out of the family home and briefly had a job painting houses before leaving Greenfield in November 1870 . He was recruited as a Bible salesman and began working in the nearby town of Rushville , Indiana . The job provided little income and he returned to Greenfield in March 1871 where he started an apprenticeship to a painter . He completed the study and opened a business in Greenfield creating and maintaining signs . His earliest known poems are verses he wrote as clever advertisements for his customers .

Riley began participating in local theater productions with the Adelpheans to earn extra income , and during the winter months , when the demand for painting declined , Riley began writing poetry which he mailed to his brother living in Indianapolis . His brother acted as his agent and offered the poems to the newspaper Indianapolis Mirror for free . His first poem was featured on March 30 , 1872 under the pseudonym " Jay Whit . " Riley wrote more than twenty poems to the newspaper , including one that was featured on the front page .

In July 1872 , after becoming convinced sales would provide more income than sign painting , he joined the McCrillus Company based in Anderson , Indiana . The company sold patent medicines that they marketed in small traveling shows around Indiana . Riley joined the act as a huckster , calling himself the " Painter Poet " . He traveled with the act , composing poetry and performing at the shows . After his act he sold tonics to his audience , sometimes employing dishonesty . During one stop , Riley presented himself as a formerly blind painter who had been cured by a tonic , using himself as evidence to encourage the audience to purchase his product .

Riley began sending poems to his brother again in February 1873 . About the same time he and several friends began an advertisement company . The men traveled around Indiana creating large billboard @-@ like signs on the sides of buildings and barns and in high places that would be visible from a distance . The company was financially successful , but Riley was continually drawn to poetry . In October he traveled to South Bend where he took a job at Stockford & Blowney painting verses on signs for a month ; the short duration of his job may have been due to his frequent drunkenness at that time .

In early 1874 , Riley returned to Greenfield to become a writer full @-@ time . In February he submitted a poem entitled " At Last " to the Danbury News , a Connecticut newspaper . The editors accepted his poem , paid him for it , and wrote him a letter encouraging him to submit more . Riley found the note and his first payment inspiring . He began submitting poems regularly to the editors , but after the newspaper shut down in 1875 , Riley was left without a paying publisher . He began traveling and performing with the Adelpheans around central Indiana to earn an income while he searched for a new publisher . In August 1875 he joined another traveling tonic show run by the Wizard Oil Company .

= = Early career = =

= = = Newspaper work = = =

Riley began sending correspondence to the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow during late 1875 seeking his endorsement to help him start a career as a poet . He submitted many poems to Longfellow , whom he considered to be the greatest living poet . Not receiving a prompt response , he sent similar letters to John Townsend Trowbridge , and several other prominent writers asking for an endorsement . Longfellow finally replied in a brief letter , telling Riley that " I have read [the poems] in great pleasure , and think they show a true poetic faculty and insight . " Riley carried the letter with him everywhere and , hoping to receive a job offer and to create a market for his poetry , he began sending poems to dozens of newspapers touting Longfellow 's endorsement . Among the newspapers to take an interest in the poems was the Indianapolis Journal , a major Republican Party metropolitan newspaper in Indiana . Among the first poems the newspaper purchased from Riley were " Song of the New Year " , " An Empty Nest " , and a short story entitled " A Remarkable Man " .

The editors of the Anderson Democrat discovered Riley 's poems in the Indianapolis Journal and

offered him a job as a reporter in February 1877 . Riley accepted . He worked as a normal reporter gathering local news , writing articles , and assisting in setting the typecast on the printing press . He continued to write poems regularly for the newspaper and to sell other poems to larger newspapers . During the year Riley spent working in Anderson , he met and began to court Edora Myers . The couple became engaged , but terminated the relationship after they decided against marriage in August .

After a rejection of his poems by an eastern periodical , Riley began to formulate a plot to prove his work was of good quality and that it was being rejected only because his name was unknown in the east . Riley authored a poem imitating the style of Edgar Allan Poe and submitted it to the Kokomo Dispatch under a fictitious name claiming it was a long lost Poe poem . The Dispatch published the poem and reported it as such . Riley and two other men who were part of the plot waited two weeks for the poem to be published by major newspapers in Chicago , Boston , and New York to gauge their reaction ; they were disappointed . While a few newspapers believed the poem to be authentic , the majority did not , claiming the quality was too poor to be authored by Poe . An employee of the Dispatch learned the truth of the incident and reported it to the Kokomo Tribune , which published an expose that outed Riley as a conspirator behind the hoax . The revelation damaged the credibility of the Dispatch and harmed Riley 's reputation .

In the aftermath of the Poe plot , Riley was dismissed from the Democrat , so he returned to Greenfield to spend time writing poetry . Back home , he met Clara Louise Bottsford , a school teacher boarding in his father 's home . They found they had much in common , particularly their love of literature . The couple began a twelve @-@ year intermittent relationship which would be Riley 's longest lasting . In mid @-@ 1878 the couple had their first breakup , caused partly by Riley 's alcohol addiction . The event led Riley to make his first attempt to give up liquor . He joined a local temperance organization , but quit after a few weeks .

= = = Performing poet = = =

Without a steady income , his financial situation began to deteriorate . He began submitting his poems to more prominent literary magazines , including Scribner 's Monthly , but was informed that although he showed promise , his work was still short of the standards required for use in their publications . Locally , he was still dealing with the stigma of the Poe plot . The Indianapolis Journal and other newspapers refused to accept his poetry , leaving Riley desperate for income . In January 1878 on the advice of a friend , Riley paid an entrance fee to join a traveling lecture circuit where he could give poetry readings . In exchange , he received a portion of the profit his performances earned . Such circuits were popular at the time , and Riley quickly earned a local reputation for his entertaining readings .

In August 1878 , Riley followed Indiana Governor James D. Williams as speaker at a civic event in a small town near Indianapolis . He recited a recently composed poem , " A Childhood Home of Long Ago , " telling of life in pioneer Indiana . The poem was well received and was given good reviews by several newspapers .

" Flying Islands of the Night " is the only play that Riley wrote and published . Authored while Riley was traveling with the Adelphians , but never performed , the play has similarities to A Midsummer Night 's Dream , which Riley may have used as a model . Flying Islands concerns a kingdom besieged by evil forces of a sinister queen who is defeated eventually by an angel @-@ like heroine . Most reviews were positive . Riley published the play and it became popular in the central Indiana area during late 1878 , helping Riley to convince newspapers to again accept his poetry . In November 1879 he was offered a position as a columnist at the Indianapolis Journal and accepted after being encouraged by E.B. Matindale , the paper 's chief editor .

Although the play and his newspaper work helped expose him to a wider audience , the chief source of his increasing popularity was his performances on the lecture circuit . He made both dramatic and comedic readings of his poetry , and by early 1879 could guarantee large crowds whenever he performed . In an 1894 article , Hamlin Garland wrote that Riley 's celebrity resulted from his reading talent , saying " his vibrant individual voice , his flexible lips , his droll glance ,

united to make him at once poet and comedian ? comedian in the sense in which makes for tears as well as for laughter . " Although he was a good performer , his acts were not entirely original in style ; he frequently copied practices developed by Samuel Clemens and Will Carleton . His tour in 1880 took him to every city in Indiana where he was introduced by local dignitaries and other popular figures , including Maurice Thompson with whom he began to develop a close friendship .

Developing and maintaining his publicity became a constant job , and received more of his attention as his fame grew . Keeping his alcohol addiction secret , maintaining the persona of a simple rural poet and a friendly common person became most important . Riley identified these traits as the basis of his popularity during the mid @-@ 1880s , and wrote of his need to maintain a fictional persona . He encouraged the stereotype by authoring poetry he thought would help build his identity . He was aided by editorials he authored and submitted to the Indianapolis Journal offering observations on events from his perspective as a " humble rural poet " . He changed his appearance to look more mainstream , and began by shaving his mustache off and abandoning the flamboyant dress he employed in his early circuit tours .

By 1880 his poems were beginning to be published nationally and were receiving positive reviews . " Tom Johnson 's Quit " was carried by newspapers in twenty states , thanks in part to the careful cultivation of his popularity . Riley became frustrated that despite his growing acclaim , he found it difficult to achieve financial success . In the early 1880s , in addition to his steady performing , Riley began producing many poems to increase his income . Half of his poems were written during the period . The constant labor had adverse effects on his health , which was worsened by his drinking . At the urging of Maurice Thompson , he again attempted to stop drinking liquor , but was only able to give it up for a few months .

= = Indianapolis Journal = =

= = = Newspaper poet = = =

Riley moved to Indianapolis at the end of 1879 to begin his employment with the Journal . It was the only metropolitan newspaper in Indianapolis with daily editions , and had wide readership . For the newspaper he wrote a regular society column that often included verses of poetry . Thereafter Riley met many prominent people , and began a close friendship with Eugene V. Debs . Debs enjoyed Riley 's works and often complimented his sentiments . Riley had been using the pseudonym " Jay Whit " since he started authoring poetry , but finally began to write under his own name in April 1881 .

Riley renewed his relationship with Bottsford in 1880 , and the two corresponded frequently . Their relationship remained unstable , but Riley became deeply attached to her . She inspired his poem " The Werewife , " which told of a perfect wife who could suddenly become a demonic monster . Bottsford pressed Riley for marriage several times , but Riley refused . They broke off their relationship a second time in 1881 when she discovered his correspondence with two other women , and found that he had taken a secret vacation to Wisconsin with one of them .

Riley 's alcohol addiction influenced some of his poems during his time working for the Journal , including " On Quitting California , " " John Golliher 's Third Womern , " [sic] and " The Dismal Fate of Tit . " Each made references to the delirium caused by drinking . Although Riley rarely published anything controversial , some of his poems published from the same period , including " Afterwhiles " , allude to drug usage and make vague sexual references . During the early 1880s , Riley still made submissions to the elite literary periodicals , but continued to be rejected . Riley found the rejection discouraging , but persevered . He believed he would never be recognized as a true literary figure until one of the prestigious periodicals published his work .

= = = Lyceum circuit = = =

Riley made occasional reading tours around Indiana , and in August 1880 was invited to perform at

Asbury University . His performance there so impressed the local Phi Kappa Psi chapter , he was invited to join as an honorary member . Through the fraternity he met Robert Jones Burdette , a writer and minister in the Indianapolis area . Burdette was a member of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau of Boston , a prominent lecture circuit whose regular speakers included Ralph Waldo Emerson . Burdette encouraged Riley to join the circuit through its Chicago branch . Riley 's accumulated debt and low income began causing him trouble in 1881 , and he decided rejoining a lecture circuit would provide much needed funds . His agreement for continued employment with the circuit depended on his ability to draw audiences during the first season , beginning in April 1881 . He succeeded , drawing the largest crowds in Chicago and Indianapolis .

Because of his success in the midwest , the circuit leaders invited him to make an east coast tour , starting in Boston at the Tremont Temple in February 1882 . Riley agreed , signing a ten @-@ year agreement and granting half his receipts to his agent . Before his performance , he traveled to Longfellow 's home in Massachusetts and convinced him to agree to a meeting . Their brief meeting was one of Riley 's fondest memories , and he wrote a lengthy article on it after Longfellow 's death only a month later . Longfellow encouraged Riley to focus on poetry , and gave him advice for his upcoming performance . At the performance , Riley was well received and his poems were greeted with laughter and given praise in the city 's newspaper reviews . Boston was the literary center of the United States at the time , and Riley 's impression on the city 's literary community helped him finally to get his work accepted by prestigious periodicals . The Century Magazine was the first such periodical to accept his work , running " In Swimming @-@ Time " in its September 1883 issue . Until the 1890s , it remained the only major literary magazine to publish Riley 's work . Knowing the high standards of the magazine , Riley reserved his best work each year to submit , including one of his favorites , " The Old Man and Jim " in 1887 .

By the end of 1882 , Riley 's finances began to improve dramatically , thanks largely to the income from his performances . During 1883 he began writing his " Boone County " poems by the pseudonym " Benjamin F. Johnson of Boone . " The poems were almost entirely written in dialect and emphasized topics of rural life during the early nineteenth century , often employing nostalgia and the simplicity of country life as elements . " The Old Swimmin ' -Hole " and " When the Frost Is on the Punkin ' " were the most popular , and helped earn the entire series critical acclaim . The topics were popular with readers , reminding many of them of their childhood . Merrill , Meigs & Company (later renamed Bobbs @-@ Merrill Company) approached Riley to compile the poems into a book . Riley agreed and printing of his first book began in August 1883 , titled " The Old Swimmin ' -Hole and ' Leven More Poems " . The book 's popularity necessitated a second printing before the end of the year . During this period Riley determined that his most popular poems were those on topics of rural life , and he began to use that as a common theme throughout his future work .

The income from Riley 's book allowed him to ease his busy work schedule ; he submitted articles to the Journal less frequently and made fewer lecture stops . His poems became fewer but the quality of his poetry improved ; he wrote his most famous poems during the mid @-@ 1880s , including " Little Orphant Annie " [sic] . Riley attempted to secure a new job at a periodical and leave the Journal , but the magazines to which he submitted would not hire him unless he was willing to relocate . Riley was steadfast in his refusal to leave Indiana , and told reporters that his rural home was his inspiration and to leave would ruin his poetry .

Riley renewed his relationship with Bottsworth for a third and final time in 1883 . The two corresponded frequently and had secret lovers ' rendezvous . He stopped visiting other women and their relationship became more dedicated and stable . Bottsworth , however , became convinced Riley was seeing another woman , and they terminated their relationship in January 1885 . Riley 's sister , Mary , had become a close friend of Bottsworth and scolded him for his mistreatment of her . Her reputation was tarnished by the affair and she found it difficult to find employment once their relationship ended .

In 1884 , Riley made another tour of the major cities in the eastern United States . Following the lectures , he began compiling a second book of poetry . He completed it during July and Bowen @-@ Merrill published it in December with the title *The Boss Girl , A Christmas Story and Other*

Sketches . The book , which contained humorous poetry and short stories , received mixed reviews . It was popular around Indiana , where the majority of its copies were sold . One reviewer , however , called the poems " weird , nightmarish , and eerie , " and compared them to Edgar Allan Poe 's works .

While Riley was working on his book , he was unexpectedly invited by James B. Pond , the agent for many of the nations major performers , to join a one @-@ hundred nights ' engagement in New York City in a show that included Samuel Clemens and Dudley Warner . Riley , however , was unable to agree with the Redpath Bureau who had to authorize any other performance under the terms of their contract . Riley believed his contract with Redpath Bureau was limiting his opportunities , and his relationship with his agent became strained .

= = = Western Association of Writers = = =

Due partly to the limited success of his latest book outside Indiana , Riley was persuaded to begin working with other midwestern writers to attempt to form an association to promote their work . Popular Indiana writer Lew Wallace , author of Ben @-@ Hur , was a major promoter of the effort . During 1885 , more than one hundred writers joined the group . They held their first meeting in July , naming themselves the Western Association of Writers . At the meeting Maurice Thompson was named president , and Riley vice president . The association never succeeded in its goals of creating a powerful advertising force , but became a social club and a rival literary community to the eastern writing establishment . Riley was disappointed with the shortcomings of the group , but came to depend on its regular meetings as a escape from his normally hectic schedule .

Through the association , Riley became acquainted with most of the notable writers in the midwestern United States , including humorist Edgar Wilson Nye of Chicago . After completing his lecture circuit in 1885 , Riley formed a partnership with Nye and his agent to begin a new tour . The Redpath Bureau agreed to allow Riley to tour with Nye , provided he maintained his financial agreements with them . In addition to touring , Riley and Nye collaborated to write a book , Nye and Riley 's Railway Guide , a collection of humorous anecdotes and poems intended to parody popular tourist literature of the day . Published in 1888 , the book was somewhat successful and had three reprints .

In October 1887 , Riley and the association joined with other writers to petition the United States Congress to attempt to negotiate international treaties to protect American copyrights abroad . The group became known as the International Copyright League and had significant success in its efforts . When traveling to one of the league 's meetings in New York City that year , Riley was struck by Bell 's palsy . He recovered after three weeks , but remained secluded to hide the effects of the sickness which he believed was caused by his alcohol addiction . He made another attempt to stop drinking alcohol with the help of a minister , but again soon returned to his old habit .

After recovering , Riley remained briefly in New York to participate in a show at Chickering Hall with Edgar Nye , Samuel Clemens , and several others . Riley was introduced by James Russell Lowell before his performance , and Lowell gave Riley a glowing endorsement to the crowd . Riley 's poetry brought both tears and laughter according to The New York Sun . Critic Edmund Clarence Stedman , one of the foremost literary critics of the era , was present and wrote that Riley 's dialect poems were the finest he had ever heard , " in which a homely dramatis [sic] persona 's heart is laid open by subtle indirect , absolutely sure and tender " poetry . As a result of his New York performance , his name and picture were carried in all the major eastern papers and he quickly became well known throughout the United States . Sales of The Boss Girl increased , resulting in the fifth and largest printing , and Riley finally began to achieve the widespread fame he sought .

Clemens disliked being upstaged by Riley , and thereafter attempted to avoid any future joint performances with him . According to one review , Clemens " shriveled up into a bitter patch of melancholy in the fierce light of Mr. Riley 's humour . "

After returning home from his tour in early 1888 , Riley finished compiling his third book , titled Old @-@ Fashioned Roses . Arranged to appeal to British readers , it included only a few of his dialect poems and consisted mostly of sonnets . The book reprinted many poems Riley had already

published , but included some new ones he wrote specifically for the book , including " The Days Gone By , " " The Little White Hearse , " and " The Serenade . " The book was Riley 's favorite because it included his finest works and was published by the prestigious Longmans , Green Publishers in a high quality binding and print .

In late 1888 he finished work on a fourth book , Pipes o ' Pan at Zekesbury which was released to great acclaim in the United States . Based on a fictional town in Indiana , Riley presented many stories and poems about its citizens and way of life . It received mixed reviews among literary critics who wrote of it that Riley 's stories were not of the same quality as his poetry . The book was very popular with the public and went through numerous reprints .

Riley was quickly becoming wealthy from his books and touring , earning nearly \$ 20 @, @ 000 in 1888 . He no longer needed his job at the journal , and he left the job near the end of that year . The newspaper had served to earn him fame and had published hundreds of his articles , stories , and poems .

= = National fame = =

= = = Politics = = =

In March 1888 , Riley traveled to Washington , D.C. where he had dinner at the White House with other members of the International Copyright League and President of the United States Grover Cleveland . Riley made a brief performance for the dignitaries at the event before speaking about the need for international copyright protections . Cleveland was enamored by Riley 's performance and invited him back for a private meeting during which the two men discussed cultural topics . In the 1888 Presidential Election campaign , Riley 's acquaintance Benjamin Harrison was nominated as the Republican candidate . Although Riley had shunned politics for most of his life , he gave Harrison a personal endorsement and participated in fund @-@ raising events and vote stumping . The election was exceptionally partisan in Indiana , and Riley found the atmosphere of the campaign stressful ; he vowed never to become involved with politics again .

Upon Harrison 's election , he suggested Riley be named the national poet laureate , but Congress failed to act on the request . Riley was still honored by Harrison and visited him at the White House on several occasions to perform at civic events .

= = = Pay problems and scandal = = =

Riley and Nye made arrangements with James Pond to make two national tours during 1888 and 1889 . The tours were popular and generally sold out , with hundreds having to be turned away . The shows were usually forty @-@ five minutes to an hour long and featured Riley reading often humorous poetry interspersed by stories and jokes from Nye . The shows were informal and the two men adjusted their performances based on their audiences reactions . Riley memorized forty of his poems for the shows to add to his own versatility . Many prominent literary and theatrical people attended the shows . At a New York City show in March 1888 , Augustin Daly was so enthralled by the show he insisted on hosting the two men at a banquet with several leading Broadway theatre actors .

Despite Riley serving as the act 's main draw , he was not permitted to become an equal partner in the venture . Nye and Pond both received a percentage of the net profit , while Riley was paid a flat rate for each performance . In addition , because of Riley 's past agreements with the Redpath Lyceum Bureau , he was required to pay half of his fee to his agent Amos Walker . This caused the other men to profit more than Riley from his own work .

To remedy this situation , Riley hired his brother @-@ in @-@ law Henry Eitel , an Indianapolis banker , to manage his finances and act on his behalf to try and extricate him from his contract . Despite discussions and assurances from Pond that he would work to address the problem , Eitel had no success . Pond ultimately made the situation worse by booking months of solid

performances , not allowing Riley and Nye a day of rest . These events affected Riley physically and emotionally ; he became despondent and began his worst period of alcoholism . During November 1889 , the tour was forced to cancel several shows after Riley became severely inebriated at a stop in Madison , Wisconsin .

Walker began monitoring Riley and denying him access to liquor , but Riley found ways to evade Walker . At a stop at the Masonic Temple Theatre in Louisville , Kentucky , in January 1890 , Riley paid the hotel 's bartender to sneak whiskey to his room . He became too drunk to perform , and was unable to travel to the next stop . Nye terminated the partnership and tour in response . The reason for the breakup could not be kept secret , and hotel staff reported to the Louisville Courier @-@ Journal that they saw Riley in a drunken stupor walking around the hotel . The story made national news and Riley feared his career was ruined .

He secretly left Louisville at night and returned to Indianapolis by train . Eitel defended Riley to the press in an effort to gain sympathy for Riley , explaining the abusive financial arrangements his partners had made . Riley however refused to speak to reporters and hid himself for weeks . Much to Riley 's surprise , the news reports made him more popular than ever . Many people thought the stories were exaggerated , and Riley 's carefully cultivated image made it difficult for the public to believe he was an alcoholic . Riley had stopped sending poetry to newspapers and magazines in the aftermath , but they soon began corresponding with him requesting that he resume writing . This encouraged Riley , and he made another attempt to give up liquor as he returned to his public career .

The negative press did not end however , as Nye and Pond threatened to sue Riley for causing their tour to end prematurely . They claimed to have lost \$ 20 @,@ 000 . Walker threatened a separate suit demanding \$ 1 @,@ 000 . Riley hired Indianapolis lawyer William P. Fishback to represent him and the men settled out of court . The full details of the settlement were never disclosed , but whatever the case , Riley finally extricated himself from his old contracts and became a free agent . The exorbitant amount Riley was being sued for only reinforced public opinion that Riley had been mistreated by his partners , and helped him maintain his image . Nye and Riley remained good friends , and Riley later wrote that Pond and Walker were the source of the problems .

Riley 's poetry had become popular in Britain , in large part due to his book Old @-@ Fashioned Roses . In May 1891 he traveled to England to make a tour and what he considered a literary pilgrimage . He landed in Liverpool and traveled first to Dumfries , Scotland , the home and burial place of Robert Burns . Riley had long been compared to Burns by critics because they both used dialect in their poetry and drew inspiration from their rural homes . He then traveled to Edinburgh , York , and London , reciting poetry for gatherings at each stop . Augustin Daly arranged for him to give a poetry reading to prominent British actors in London . Riley was warmly welcomed by its literary and theatrical community and he toured places that Shakespeare had frequented .

Riley quickly tired of traveling abroad and began longing for home , writing to his nephew that he regretted having left the United States . He curtailed his journey and returned to New York City in August . He spent the next months in his Greenfield home attempting to write an epic poem , but after several attempts gave up , believing he did not possess the ability .

By 1890 , Riley had authored almost all of his famous poems . The few poems he did write during the 1890s were generally less well received by the public . As a solution , Riley and his publishers began reusing poetry from other books and printing some of his earliest works . When Neighborly Poems was published in 1891 , a critic working for the Chicago Tribune pointed out the use of Riley 's earliest works , commenting that Riley was using his popularity to push his crude earlier works onto the public only to make money . Riley 's newest poems published in the 1894 book Armazindy received very negative reviews that referred to poems like " The Little Dog @-@ Woggy " and " Jargon @-@ Jingle " as " drivel " and to Riley as a " worn out genius . " Most of his growing number of critics suggested that he ignored the quality of the poems for the sake of making money .

= = = Last tours = = =

Although Riley was wealthy from his books , he was able to triple his annual income by touring . He found the lure hard to resist and decided to return to the lecture circuit in 1892 . He hired William C. Glass to assist Henry Eitel in managing his affairs . While Eitel handled the finances , Glass worked to organize his lecture tours . Glass worked closely with Riley 's publishers to have his tours coincide with the release of new books , and ensured his tours were geographically varied enough to maintain his popularity in all regions of the nation . He was careful not to book busy schedules ; Riley only performed four times a week and the tours were short , lasting only three months .

During his 1893 tour , Riley lectured mostly in the western United States , and in his 1894 tour in the east . His performances were major events , and generally sold out within days of their announcements . In 1894 he allowed author Douglass Sherley to join his tour . Sherley was a millionaire who published his own books . The literary community had dismissed his work , but Riley was instrumental in helping him to be accepted .

In 1895 Riley made his last tour , making stops in most of the major cities in the United States . Advertised as his final performances , there was incredible demand for tickets and Riley performed before his largest audiences during the tour . He and Sherley continued a show very similar to those that he and Nye had done . Riley often lamented the lack of change in the program , but found when he tried to introduce new material , or left out any of his most popular poems , the crowds would demand encores until he agreed to recite their favorites .

= = = Children 's poet = = =

Following the death of his father in 1894 , Riley began regretting his choice not to marry or have children . To compensate for the lack of his own children , he became a doting uncle , showering gifts on his nieces and nephews . He had repurchased his childhood home in 1893 and allowed his divorced sister , Mary , his widowed sister @-@ in @-@ law , Julia , and their daughters to live in the home . He provided for all their needs and spent the summer months of 1893 living with them . He took his nephew Edmund Eitel as a personal secretary and gave him a \$ 50 @,@ 000 wedding gift in 1912 . Riley was well loved by his family .

Riley returned to live near Indianapolis later in 1893 , boarding in a private home in the Lockerbie district , then a small suburb . He developed a close friendship with his landlords , the Nickum and Holstein families . The home became a destination for local schoolchildren to whom Riley would regularly recite poetry and tell stories . Riley 's friends frequently visited his home , and he developed a closer relationship with Eugene Debs .

The same year , he began compiling his poems of most interest to children into a new book entitled Rhymes of Childhood . The book was richly illustrated by Howard Chandler Christy and Riley authored a few new poems for the book under the pseudonym " Uncle Sydney . " Rhymes of Childhood became Riley 's best selling book , and sold millions of copies . It has remained in print continually since 1912 , and helped earn Riley the nickname the " Children 's Poet . " Even Riley 's rival , Clemens , commented that the book was " charming " and made him weep for his " lost youth . "

= = Later life = =

= = = National poet = = =

Riley had become very wealthy by the time he ended touring in 1895 , and was earning \$ 1 @,@ 000 a week . Although he retired , he continued to make minor appearances . In 1896 , Riley performed four shows in Denver . Most of the performances of his later life were at civic celebrations . He was a regular speaker at Decoration Day events and delivered poetry before the unveiling of monuments in Washington , D.C. Newspapers began referring to him as the " National Poet " , " the poet laureate of America " , and " the people 's poet laureate " . Riley wrote many of his patriotic poems for such events , including " The Soldier " , " The Name of Old Glory " , and his most famous

such poem , " America ! " . The 1902 poem " America , Messiah of Nations " was written and read by Riley for the dedication of the Indianapolis Soldiers ' and Sailors ' Monument .

The only new poetry Riley published after the end of the century were elegies for famous friends . The poetic qualities of the poems were often poor , but they contained many popular sentiments concerning the deceased . Among those he eulogized were Benjamin Harrison , Lew Wallace , and Henry Lawton . Because of the poor quality of the poems , his friends and publishers requested that he stop writing them , but he refused .

In 1897 , Riley 's publishers suggested that he create a multi @-@ volume series of books containing his complete life works . With the help of his nephew , Riley began working to compile the books , which eventually totaled sixteen volumes and were finally completed in 1914 . Such works were uncommon during the lives of writers , attesting to the uncommon popularity Riley had achieved .

His works had become staples for Ivy League literature courses and universities began offering him honorary degrees . The first was Yale in 1902 , followed by a Doctorate of Letters from the University of Pennsylvania in 1904 . Wabash College and Indiana University granted him similar awards . In 1908 he was elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters , and in 1912 they conferred upon him a special medal for poetry .

Riley was influential in helping other poets start their careers , having particularly strong influences on Hamlin Garland , William Allen White , and Edgar Lee Masters . He discovered aspiring African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1892 . Riley thought Dunbar 's work was " worthy of applause " , and wrote him letters of recommendation to help him get his work published .

= = = Declining health = = =

In 1901 , Riley 's doctor diagnosed him with neurasthenia , a nervous disorder , and recommended long periods of rest as a cure . Riley remained ill for the rest of his life and relied on his landlords and family to aid in his care . During the winter months he moved to Miami , Florida , and during summer spent time with his family in Greenfield . He made only a few trips during the decade , including one to Mexico in 1906 . He became very depressed by his condition , writing to his friends that he thought he could die at any moment , and often used alcohol for relief .

In March 1909 , Riley was stricken a second time with Bell 's palsy , and partial deafness , the symptoms only gradually eased over the course of the year . Riley was a difficult patient , and generally refused to take any medicine except the patent medicines he had sold in his earlier years ; the medicines often worsened his conditions , but his doctors could not sway his opinion . On July 10 , 1910 he suffered a stroke that paralyzed the right side of his body . Hoping for a quick recovery , his family kept the news from the press until September . Riley found the loss of use of his writing hand the worst part of the stroke , which served only to further depress him . With his health so poor , he decided to work on a legacy by which to be remembered in Indianapolis . In 1911 he donated land and funds to build a new library on Pennsylvania Avenue . By 1913 , with the aid of a cane , Riley began to recover his ability to walk . His inability to write , however , nearly ended his production of poems . George Ade worked with him from 1910 through 1916 to write his last five poems and several short autobiographical sketches as Riley dictated . His publisher continued recycling old works into new books , which remained in high demand .

Since the mid @-@ 1880s , Riley had been the nation 's most read poet , a trend that accelerated at the turn of the century . In 1912 Riley recorded readings of his most popular poetry to be sold by Victor Records . Riley was the subject of three paintings by T. C. Steele . The Indianapolis Arts Association commissioned a portrait of Riley to be created by world famous painter John Singer Sargent . Riley 's image became a nationally known icon and many businesses capitalized on his popularity to sell their products ; Hoosier Poet brand vegetables became a major trade @-@ name in the midwest .

In 1912 , the governor of Indiana instituted Riley Day on the poet 's birthday . Schools were required to teach Riley 's poems to their children , and banquet events were held in his honor around the state . In 1915 and 1916 the celebration was national after being proclaimed in most

states . The annual celebration continued in Indiana until 1968 . In early 1916 Riley was filmed as part of a movie to celebrate Indiana 's centennial , the video is on display at the Indiana State Library .

= = = Death and legacy = = =

On July 22 , 1916 , Riley suffered a second stroke . He recovered enough during the day to speak and joke with his companions . He died before dawn the next morning , July 23 . Riley 's death shocked the nation and made front page headlines in major newspapers . President Woodrow Wilson wrote a brief note to Riley 's family offering condolences on behalf the entire nation . Indiana Governor Samuel M. Ralston offered to allow Riley to lie in state at the Indiana Statehouse ? Abraham Lincoln being the only other person to have previously received such an honor . During the ten hours he lay in state on July 24 , more than thirty @-@ five thousand people filed past his bronze casket ; the line was still miles long at the end of the day and thousands were turned away . The next day a private funeral ceremony was held and attended by many dignitaries . A large funeral procession then carried him to Crown Hill Cemetery where he was buried in a tomb at the top of the hill , the highest point in the city of Indianapolis .

Within a year of Riley 's death many memorials were created , including several by the James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association . The James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children was created and named in his honor by a group of wealthy benefactors and opened in 1924 . In the following years , other memorials intended to benefit children were created , including Camp Riley for youth with disabilities .

The memorial foundation purchased the poet 's Lockerbie home in Indianapolis and it is now maintained as a museum . The James Whitcomb Riley Museum Home is the only late @-@ Victorian home in Indiana that is open to the public and the United States ' only late @-@ Victorian preservation , featuring authentic furniture and decor from that era . His birthplace and boyhood home , now the James Whitcomb Riley House , is preserved as a historical site . A Liberty ship , commissioned April 23 , 1942 , was christened the SS James Whitcomb Riley . It served with the United States Maritime Commission until being scrapped in 1971 .

James Whitcomb Riley High School opened in South Bend , Indiana in 1924 . In 1950 , there was a James Whitcomb Riley Elementary School in Hammond , Indiana , but it was torn down in 2006 . East Chicago , Indiana had a Riley School at one time , as did neighboring Gary , Indiana and Anderson , Indiana . One of New Castle , Indiana 's elementary schools is named for Riley as is the road on which it is located . The former Greenfield High School was converted to Riley Elementary School and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 .

In 1940 , the U.S. Postal Service issued a 10 @-@ cent stamp honoring Riley .

As a lasting tribute , the citizens of Greenfield hold a festival every year in Riley 's honor . Taking place the first or second weekend of October , the " Riley Days " festival traditionally commences with a flower parade in which local school children place flowers around Myra Reynolds Richards ' statue of Riley on the county courthouse lawn , while a band plays lively music in honor of the poet . Weeks before the festival , the festival board has a queen contest . The 2010 ? 2011 queen was Corinne Butler . The pageant has been going on many years in honor of the Hoosier poet

According to historian Elizabeth Van Allen , Riley was instrumental in helping form a midwestern cultural identity . The midwestern United States had no significant literary community before the 1880s . The works of the Western Association of Writers , most notably those of Riley and Wallace , helped create the midwest 's cultural identity and create a rival literary community to the established eastern literari . For this reason , and the publicity Riley 's work created , he was commonly known as the " Hoosier Poet . "

= = Critical reception and style = =

Riley was among the most popular writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century , known for his " uncomplicated , sentimental , and humorous " writing . Often writing his verses in dialect ,

his poetry caused readers to recall a nostalgic and simpler time in earlier American history . This gave his poetry a unique appeal during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization in the United States . Riley was a prolific writer who " achieved mass appeal partly due to his canny sense of marketing and publicity . " He published more than fifty books , mostly of poetry and humorous short stories , and sold millions of copies .

Riley is often remembered for his most famous poems , including the " The Raggedy Man " and " Little Orphant Annie " . Many of his poems , including those , where partially autobiographical , as he used events and people from his childhood as an inspiration for subject matter . His poems often contained morals and warnings for children , containing messages telling children to care for the less fortunate of society . David Galens and Van Allen both see these messages as Riley 's subtle response to the turbulent economic times of the Gilded Age and the growing progressive movement . Riley believed that urbanization robbed children of their innocence and sincerity , and in his poems he attempted to introduce and idolize characters who had not lost those qualities . His children 's poems are " exuberant , performative , and often display Riley 's penchant for using humorous characterization , repetition , and dialect to make his poetry accessible to a wide @-@ ranging audience . "

Although hinted at indirectly in some poems , Riley wrote very little on serious subject matter , and actually mocked attempts at serious poetry . Only a few of his sentimental poems concerned serious subjects . " Little Mandy 's Christmas @-@ Tree " , " The Absence of Little Wesley " , and " The Happy Little Cripple " were about poverty , the death of a child , and disabilities . Like his children 's poems , they too contained morals , suggesting society should pity the downtrodden and be charitable .

Riley wrote gentle and romantic poems that were not in dialect . They generally consisted of sonnets and were strongly influenced by the works of John Greenleaf Whittier , Henry Wadsworth Longfellow , and Alfred , Lord Tennyson . His standard English poetry was never as popular as his Hoosier dialect poems . Still less popular were the poems Riley authored in his later years ; most were to commemorate important events of American history and to eulogize the dead .

Riley 's contemporaries acclaimed him " America 's best @-@ loved poet " . In 1920 , Henry Beers lauded the works of Riley " as natural and unaffected , with none of the discontent and deep thought of cultured song . " Samuel Clemens , William Dean Howells , and Hamlin Garland , each praised Riley 's work and the idealism he expressed in his poetry . Only a few critics of the period found fault with Riley 's works . Ambrose Bierce criticized Riley for his frequent use of dialect . Bierce accused Riley of using dialect to " cover up [the] faulty construction " of his poems . Edgar Lee Masters found Riley 's work to be superficial , claiming it lacked irony and that he had only a " narrow emotional range " . By the 1930s popular critical opinion towards Riley 's works began to shift in favor of the negative reviews . In 1951 , James T. Farrell said Riley 's works were " cliched . " Galens wrote that modern critics consider Riley to be a " minor poet , whose work ? provincial , sentimental , and superficial though it may have been ? nevertheless struck a chord with a mass audience in a time of enormous cultural change . " Thomas C. Johnson wrote that what most interests modern critics was Riley 's ability to market his work , saying he had a unique understanding of " how to commodify his own image and the nostalgic dreams of an anxious nation . "

Among the earliest widespread criticisms of Riley were opinions that his dialect writing did not actually represent the true dialect of central Indiana . In 1970 Peter Revell wrote that Riley 's dialect was more similar to the poor speech of a child rather than the dialect of his region . Revell made extensive comparison to historical texts and Riley 's dialect usage . Philip Greasley wrote that that while " some critics have dismissed him as sub @-@ literary , insincere , and an artificial entertainer , his defenders reply that an author so popular with millions of people in different walks of life must contribute something of value , and that his faults , if any , can be ignored . "