

# Entertainment options blossomed in February 1896

The weather in February of 1896 may have been awful, but the citizens of Bloomington didn't have to suffer from the midwinter doldrums. There was plenty of entertainment available.

## Poetry

There was, for example, "Bloomington's Hoosier prodigy, poet and composer" featured in the Feb. 2, 1896, edition of Bloomington's *The World*. Under a picture of a handsome young man was a description of Ralph C. Williams' accomplishments.

Born in Indiana (but not here) in 1874, Williams and his mother turned up in the 1900 census when he was 25 years old. The *World* editor suggested that the young man had already overcome a handicap, "Being a poor boy, he was not fortunate to receive an education."

Education or not, Williams' muse kept his pen moving at a frightening pace. "He has written in the past year over four hundred poems, through which gleam glints of sunshine, of wit, pathos and stern reality.

Living in a university town had affected



## LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

his life, even though he hadn't passed through its halls as a student. Noted *The World's* editor, "When I used to sit under the shade of an IU tree" was one of the young man's poems.

Williams' outpourings sounded like another Indiana poet. "Many of his selections are mirth-provoking and lead one to suppose that James Whitcomb Riley is the author."

According to *The World*, some of Williams' poems had been subjected to critics in other parts of the country. They had been pronounced "gems of thought."

Like Riley, Williams planned a tour of Indiana stages to entertain with programs of poetry readings and impersonations. He had, in fact, made a trial run "for the benefit of a *World* reporter."

George W. Riley, also of Bloomington, was Williams' manager. The son of an Irish immi-

grant who was a night watchman, George Riley projected a 25-stop tour.

## Theater

During that February of 1896, Bloomingtonians had the opportunity of trudging downtown to see a production of the moral play *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* at the Opera House. The *World* article of Feb. 6 indicated that the "temperance drama" was not new to Bloomington theater-goers. "This oft-repeated play seems to gain rather than decrease in popularity, and like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, will continue to teach its great moral lesson for years to come."

For a review of the production, *The World's* article must have been the shortest one on record. It said, "Miss Mabel Frost is a very clever actress and possesses a handsome face. A.L. Fanshaw is the leading man of the company, and his impersonation of his characters is superb."

## Literature

Bloomingtonians who would just as soon stay at home during the cold weather could

read a book by local attorney John R. East.

The flamboyant courtroom orator had written a novel titled *Theophilus Wallop* which was called "a romantic story of a country neighborhood" by the newspaper. (Had Mr. East been reading the works of Anthony Trollope?)

Actually, East's book was not new in 1896, having been published in 1890 by a New York City firm, John B. Alden. What prompted *The World* article was the local reprinting of the book by the Cravens Brothers, probably at East's expense.

*Theophilus Wallop* was not the lawyer's only published work. He was also the author of an account of the Monon train robbery.

Many dreary Februaries have come and gone since 1896. There may be occasional revivals of *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* as a period piece, but that is what it remains. Ralph C. Williams seems to have gotten lost in Indiana's literary history.

But *Theophilus Wallop* has its place in Bloomington, at least. It can be found in the IU Library.

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