

James Whitcomb Riley's visits to area worth remembering

A part of Hoosier heritage slipped away unnoticed when celebration of James Whitcomb Riley's birthday — Oct. 7 — was dropped from the Monroe County school calendar.

IN ITS HEYDAY the date was an occasion for at least a half-day respite from the classroom for programs of readings and pageants in honor of the Greenfield poet. At McCalla School, for example, several generations of pupils dutifully memorized stanzas of such Riley favorites as *Little Orphan Anne*, *Out to Old Aunt Mary's* and the children's favorite, *The Bear Story*.

Many a now-grown-up Monroe Countian can still recite verses memorized in those days of Riley adulation. His poems — many in dialect — were written in a simpler time when the Hoosier twang was more distinctive than it is today. Too, at the turn of the century, when Riley wrote, almost everyone had an "old Aunt Mary" not too far away.

Perhaps one special reason why Monroe County school children were thoroughly saturated with Riley lore

Looking Back

By Rose McIlveen

was because the poet made several visits to this area. Two of them, at least, may have been rather hard on his poetic ego.

Early in Riley's career — in December 1879 — he was booked into Bloomington for an evening of his readings. Admittedly he did not have cooperation from the weather.

AN ACCOUNT of his visit here is included in *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley*. Once the program was over, he drove through slush and freezing rain to Spencer. There his path crossed that of Robert J. Burdett, also on a speaking tour.

In describing his Bloomington stop, Riley told Burdette, "I succeeded in holding the janitor spellbound for an

hour and a half. I would have had two in my audience, but the town marshal slipped as he reached the top step and shot like a bullfrog down the stairway and across the street. Had it not been for the courthouse fence, he would have slid half-way to Brown County."

Another visit to Bloomington on Nov. 6, 1903, must have been equally disappointing. In the afternoon Indiana University's football team had played the University of Illinois. IU historian Thomas Clark described the occasion in his book, *Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer, Vol. II*. "The Hoosiers beat Illinois 17-0 and the campus was thrown in turmoil. A mob of 1,200 students and townsmen trailed the band to the square for an orgy of yelling and speechifying . . . Orders were given for everybody to return after supper, and following James Whitcomb Riley's lecture, to take up the yelling all over."

HAVING BEEN ignored on the first visit to Bloomington and sandwiched between pep rallies on the second, it

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