

James Whitcomb Riley's visits worth remembering

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was a wonder that the poet was willing to come back. In June 1907 he returned to Bloomington to receive an honorary doctor of letters degree from IU. (He had previously received honorary master of arts degrees from Yale University and Wabash College and another doctor of letters degree from the University of Pennsylvania.)

Actually the degree from IU was a considerable tribute to Riley. In a 20-year period the university had granted only one other honorary degree, and that one was to John W. Foster, an IU graduate and former U.S. secretary of state.

At the June 1907 commencement, Riley shared the spotlight with an old friend, Henry Watterson, editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, who was the main speaker. According to the June 19 edition

of the *Bloomington Telephone*, when IU President William Lowe Bryan presented Riley with his degree, the latter responded with only a bow.

APPARENTLY THE audience was surprised, and by way of explanation Bryan was quoted in the June 20 edition of the *Telephone* as saying, "Evidently many people were disappointed yesterday because James Whitcomb Riley did not have something to say after the degree had been conferred upon him. This is not the custom, and on such occasions, a talk is not expected. Mr. Riley had been asked before the program commenced if he would say a word, and said that he preferred not to be heard on this occasion."

Perhaps it was the good-humored poet's way of having the last word in Bloomington after all.