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THE FUNERAL OF BELOVED HOOSIER POET, JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

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Dreaming again, in anticipation,
The same old dreams of our boyhood's days
That never came true, from the vague sensation
Of walking asleep in the world's strange ways.
Away to the house where I was born! . . .

James Whitcomb Riley, "A Backward Look"²

In a sense, Riley's poems are provincial. They are intensely true to local conditions, local scenery and dialect, childish memories and the odd ways and characters of little country towns. . . . To all Americans who were ever boys; to all, at least who have had the good luck to be country boys and go barefoot; whether they dwell in the prairie states of the Middle West, or elsewhere, the scenes and characters of Riley's poems are familiar. . . . His muse was a truant, and he was a runaway schoolboy who kept the heart of a boy into manhood and old age, which is one definition of genius.

Henry A. Beers³

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² *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1.

³ Henry A. Beers, "The Singer of the Old Swimm' Hole," in his *The Connecticut Wits and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 34, 37.

News out of Indianapolis on Sunday, July 23, 1916, that late on the previous evening Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley had succumbed to the effects of a stroke suffered earlier in the day sent shock waves throughout the state and beyond it to every corner of the nation. The most acclaimed versifier in an American culture that honored and eagerly consumed poetry, the 66-year-old wordsmith had graduated in the minds of many readers and admirers from “Hoosier poet” to “national poet.”⁴ In preceding decades, only Whitman and, perhaps to an even greater degree, Longfellow had elicited the degree of public adulation routinely conferred upon the native of Greenville, a county-seat town lying just twenty miles east of the Indiana capital along the old National Road. Between 1860, when Riley was ten, and 1870, the little town’s population had grown from 738 to 1,203, and by the time of his death it had temporarily stabilized around 4,300.

During his final years, “Indiana’s beloved poet” had written little, as he happily basked in the public adulation accorded his more than a thousand poems, composed over a period of four decades. On the recommendation of esteemed literary scholars William Lyon Phelps and Henry A. Beers, Yale University in 1902 had been the first higher educational institution to distinguish him with an honorary degree.⁵ The University of Pennsylvania and, in his own home state, Indiana University and Wabash College, had followed with honors of their own. Prestigious scholarly organizations had added their encomiums. Writers and cultural arbiters ranging from Mark Twain and William Dean Howells to Hamlin Garland and Edgar Lee Masters had also sung his praises.⁶ He could call former President Benjamin Harrison of Indianapolis his friend. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, as authors such as Booth Tarkington, Meredith Nicholson, Lew Wallace, George Ade, and others like them were turning Indiana into a hotbed of literary production, Riley stood out among them as dean of the state’s literary elite.

⁴ Information on Riley is derived primarily from Elizabeth J. Van Allen, *James Whitcomb Riley: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See also Marcus Dickey’s two-volume biography, *The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley* and *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1919, 1922); Peter Revell, *James Whitcomb Riley* (New York: Twayne, 1970); Richard Crowder, *Those Innocent Years: The Legacy and Inheritance of a Hero of the Victorian Era, James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957); Jeannette Covert Nolan, Horace Gregory, and James T. Farrell, *Poet of the People: An Evaluation of James Whitcomb Riley* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951).

⁵ Van Allen, *James Whitcomb Riley*, 242; Crowder, *Those Innocent Years*, 183, 205-7.

⁶ Edgar Lee Masters, for example, wrote that Riley gave “pure joy and compassion and tenderness, and very often great beauty . . . to the life of Indiana of the pioneer days down to the dawn of the twentieth century. He put Indiana as a place and a people in the memory of America, more thoroughly and more permanently than has been done by any other poet before or since his day for any other locality or people.” “James Whitcomb Riley: A Sketch of His Life and an Appraisal of His Work,” *The Century Magazine* 114 (October 1927), 70.

Even as his output dropped precipitately after the turn of the century, Riley and his publishers continued to repackage old work of his within new covers and thereby keep the revenues flowing in, making him the best-paid poet in America. He was also the most popular one, his books having sold upwards of three million copies by the time of his death. Riley's stature in American popular culture was unsurpassed. In the parlance of a later era, however, his passing from the scene in 1916 may have been a "good career move," for his reign as the doyen of American poetry was soon to end. Cultural elitists had always questioned his standing. As cultural authority in the United States increasingly shifted away from amateur and highly eclectic newspaper and magazine writers and moved instead toward academic types whose critical tastes inclined them toward formalism, linguistic elegance, and critical sophistication, the work of popular and prolific poets like Riley lost much of its luster. Beers's highly sympathetic estimate of Riley in a book published in 1920 was one of the last academic bouquets thrown his way.⁷ After that, Riley's star among aficionados of high culture in America rapidly faded, and even middlebrow consumers began to regard him as passé. Meanwhile, Indiana boosters and many of their friends in the Middle West, along with hordes of ordinary readers who took their poetry plain and didn't mind old-fashioned and "corny" ways of saying things, continued to enjoy reading Riley. His poems showed up regularly in magazines such as *Ideals* and the *Saturday Evening Post* as well as on greeting cards and in Kiwanis Club songbooks.

July 1916 thus represented a major turning point in American culture, particularly in its Middle Western, small-town variety, although few people probably realized it at the time. In the words of historian Henry May, the period directly preceding American entry into World War I marked "the end of American innocence."⁸ No better example of the mindset of rural, small-town America could have been found than the funeral of James Whitcomb Riley. The geography of emotion at the time was easily mappable. From the epicenter of Indianapolis, where expressed opinion about the beloved Hoosier poet was unanimously adulatory, outward through the state of Indiana and to the far reaches of the Midwest, which to only a slightly lesser degree elevated Riley on a pedestal, the estimate of the man and his poetry tended to decline in direct relation to the individual's distance from the Hoosier poet's presence.

⁷ Beers, "The Singer of the Old Swimmin' Hole," 31-43.

⁸ Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959).

The day after Riley's demise, scores of letters, telegrams, and floral displays began to flood into his well-known residence on Lockerbie Street in downtown Indianapolis, where he had lived since 1893.⁹ Among telegrams of condolence addressed to his family were missives from bandmaster John Philip Sousa, the widow of Southern poet Joel Chandler Harris, novelist William Dean Howells (speaking for the American Academy of Arts and Letters), and Vice President of the United States and former governor of Indiana Thomas R. Marshall. In a message sent from the White House, President Woodrow Wilson praised Riley as someone who had "imparted joyful pleasure and a thoughtful view of many things that other men would have missed."

Newspaper comment from dozens of towns and cities in Indiana was effusive, characterizing Riley as the Midwest's and America's greatest poet. They eulogized him as a secular saint for his cheerfulness, geniality, sweetness, good-heartedness, high-mindedness, insight, sympathy, generosity, humility, and a dozen other virtues. Papers in the East remained somewhat more restrained. Generally emphasizing his democratic leanings, descriptive talents, regional identification, emotional power, and capacity for empathy, they willingly acknowledged his huge popularity with the general public and recognized his standing as a Midwestern poet. But many of them carefully qualified their praise by emphasizing his limitations and predicting that his reputation was bound to suffer as time went by. Pointing to his regional leanings and special association with the world of childhood, they denied him preeminence on the national scene. Although Riley "was a versifier of uncommon skill," the *New York Times* reflected, "Perhaps he was not really one of our poets." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* weighed in, "While it cannot be claimed for the late James Whitcomb Riley that he was gifted with great creative imagination or that his poetic imagery was along classic lines, there is no doubt that he was the most popular poet of this generation of America." While asserting that Riley's poetry was as important a contribution to American letters as Mark Twain's prose was and also noting that no contemporary author "was more typically American, more native to the soil," the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* judged him to be "homely rather than classic," adding that "within his limitations he got to the heart of things."¹⁰

Whatever the East may have thought about their hero and about them, residents of Indianapolis and Indianans in general were determined to do right by Riley. During the next several days, front

⁹ Details about the events surrounding Riley's death and public response to it are taken primarily from issues of the *Indianapolis Star* and the *News*, July 22-26, 1916. Riley resided at the Lockerbie Street home of his friends Charles and Magdalena Holstein as a permanent paying guest for the last twenty-three years of his life.

¹⁰ These editorials were reprinted in the July 25 issue of *News* and July 26 issue of the *Star*.

pages around the state focused upon his death and the funeral. On Sunday, ministers in Indianapolis and in towns across Indiana made the life of Riley and his shining example the theme of their sermons. This, despite the fact that he had notably avoided formal religious affiliation all his life. His poems, however, were known for expressing religious themes and moods. That day, thousands of people passed by the poet's Lockerbie street home, hoping to catch a glimpse of things going on there and simply wishing to express kinship with their fallen hometown hero who had been taken from them so suddenly. Beginning in 1911, when he turned sixty-two, schools across the state had celebrated his birthday on October 7, with students reading and reciting his poetry. In short order, the commemoration had become a national affair, and Riley had achieved almost saint-like status in the public mind.

Governor Samuel M. Ralston, responding quickly to a massive outpouring of public sentiment upon hearing of Riley's death, declared that his body would lie in state the following day in the Rotunda of the state capitol. Only two men before him—Abraham Lincoln and Spanish-American War General Henry W. Lawton—had been accorded that honor. Even Harrison, the former President, had not been granted the privilege. Monday, July 24, witnessed 35,000 people, voices hushed and faces grieving, passing slowly by the bier holding the 1,200-pound casket. More than eighty people a minute quietly passed the body, trying in the soft light to catch a glimpse of the serene visage of the famous poet, surrounded by the flower-drenched aroma of the dusky capitol building. Nearly 250 mourners from Greenfield arrived in automobiles and two chartered inter-urban train cars to pay their last respects to their hometown hero. All wore white ribbons printed in black with "Greenfield and Hancock County, THE HOME OF RILEY—HE STILL LIVES." With long lines still extending out into the street at the designated closing time of nine p.m., it was decided to keep the doors open for an additional hour.

That afternoon, the stately procession from Riley's home to the capitol had been impressive and moving. Leading it were sixteen mounted policemen followed by a white-gloved, forty-man drill team. There followed automobiles carrying the funeral director and his staff, Governor Ralston, and Indianapolis Mayor Joseph E. Bell. Next came the flag and crepe-draped hearse, with four pallbearers walking on each side of it. A detail of policemen brought up the rear. The march extended only several blocks, west on Lockerbie to East Street, south to Washington Street (a segment of the National Road that ran past Riley's birth home in Greenfield), and west to the south entrance of the statehouse. Thousands of people stood along the sidewalks to pay their respects.

The funeral on Tuesday was a small affair in Riley's home attended by only a handful of family members and intimate acquaintances and presided over by the poet's friend, Reverend Joseph A. Milburn, former pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis. His funeral oration recalled the deep love of the deceased for people and their love, in turn, for him. At Crown Hill Cemetery, on the outskirts of the city, where the body was taken, an immense crowd waited for the cortege to catch a glimpse of the casket, some of them having taken their positions three or four hours in advance. The ten pallbearers included publisher William C. Bobbs; George C. Hitt of the *Indianapolis Journal* (where Riley had worked early in his career); and authors George Ade and Meredith Nicholson. Among the fourteen honorary pallbearers were Vice President Marshall, former Vice President Charles W. Fairbanks, Governor Ralston, Indiana Senator John W. Kern, *Louisville Courier-Journal* editor Henry Watterson, and Indianapolis auto tycoon and Speedway founder Carl G. Fisher, who had induced his literary friend to spend his last several winters in the Florida town he had developed—Miami.

From the prominent elevation in Crown Hill Cemetery where his body would later be buried, Riley would be able to command a panoramic view of the rapidly expanding city of Indianapolis, which had grown from 48,244 in 1870 to 169,164 in 1900 and would further increase to 314,194 in 1920. Beginning in 1879, as he turned thirty, until his death, Riley was a two-city—or two-town—person. He spent most of his time when he wasn't on the road lecturing and reciting his poetry in the bustling city of Indianapolis, but he often visited his old home in Greenville and for a number of years he spent his summers there. While his life and his career centered around and depended upon navigating the treacherous shoals of the publishing world and cultural milieu of cities stretching from Indianapolis to Chicago, Boston, and New York, his emotional life remained focused, in large part, upon reveries of his remembered childhood growing up in Greenville.

He never got these feelings out of his system, and he didn't want to. Memories of the old swimming hole, chasing rabbits, strolls through the woods, and playing games with other boys inhabited his memories and dream world, which in turn became the basis for much of his work. According to one of his biographers, Riley was "a staunch advocate of the Midwest for Midwesterners." The poet advised one aspiring writer to be sure to stay away from New York. "You'd fall dead running for a ferry boat; you'd live twenty-five miles from the ferry," he cautioned. "You want to live where you can hear a bird whistle . . . see grass and trees and be with children. Stay in the West, and

you'll be sensible."¹¹ Riley's poetry constituted, in a sense, a love letter to small-town and rural America—a world that by the turn of the century was rapidly fading away. Titles of some of his best loved poems exemplified the mood: "When the Frost Is on the Punkin," "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," "Bin A-Fishin'," "Out to Old Aunt Mary's," and "The Little Town o' Tailholt," the first stanza of which read:

You kin boast about yer cities, and their stiddy growth and size,
And brag about yer County-seats, and business enterprise,
And railroads, and factories, and all sich foolery—
But the little Town o' Tailholt is big enough fer me!¹²

As with about half of Riley's poems, this last one was written in dialect, and like many of them, it reflected his appreciation of and partiality toward small towns and the rural way of life. In some cases, this translated into a distinct anti-urban bias, and at times sounded an anti-eastern lament, too. One of the memorable, defining episodes in Riley's life was the "Poe Hoax," in which he, as 28-year-old small-town newspaper editor in Anderson, Indiana, wrote a poem, "Leonainie," imitating the style of Edgar Allen Poe and sought to pass it off as genuine product of the idiosyncratic poet's pen. In addition to relieving boredom and "stirring things up" a little, Riley's more serious purpose was to take a swipe at the contemporary literary marketplace. Convinced that magazine editors paid too much deference to established authors while giving too little attention to aspiring writers like him, he wanted to demonstrate that quality could also reside in little towns like his own. The experiment was also, in a sense, a challenge by a Midwestern upstart to the Eastern literary elite.¹³ Although reverberations from the hoax cost him his job at the *Anderson Democrat*,

¹¹ Crowder, *Those Innocent Years*, 182.

¹² *Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley*, 149.

¹³ Riley was in good company in the Midwest in resenting what he perceived as Eastern cultural elitism and discrimination and in his desire to beef up the reputation of regional artists and writers. One example of this mentality was an editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* on July 26, 1916, scolding the *New York Times* for saying that James Whitcomb Riley had an air of mystery about him. "It will be news to Indianans that there is any mystery associated with Riley," the *Star's* editorialist remonstrated, suggesting that such a notion "must have originated in the circle of so-called literary workers who do not understand how success can be achieved by any writer who does not haunt Eastern publishing centers or seek personal publicity. . . . It happened that he liked his home state and the people among whom he was born, so stayed with them."

it also brought him some favorable notice and helped lead to a job as literary editor and contributor at the *Indianapolis Journal*, which turned out to be the key turning point in his literary career.¹⁴

Some of Riley's fascination with and preference for small-town living translated directly onto the printed page, such as in the poems that constituted *A Child-World*, a collection whose main characters included himself (as "Bud," who "was apt in make-believe"), his two brothers, "Johnty" and "Alex," and his two sisters, "Mayme" and "Lizzie," as well as his father ("A lawyer and a leading citizen") and his mother ("gentle" and "luminous"), along with assorted aunts, uncles, and cousins. The action in these poems revolved around the eight-room house his father had built for the family on the old National Road, the main route to the western frontier—an iconic trail that symbolized for Riley the tension that constantly drew him both away from and back toward a settled home throughout his life.

The poems that built Riley's fame, as well as his fortune, were the ones inspired by home, touching people's hearts as emblematic of an America they saw rapidly passing before their eyes. Just fifteen years before Riley's parents had settled in Greenfield, the area around it had been wilderness. By the time he died, Indianapolis and central Indiana had become heavily industrialized and, to a significant degree, urbanized. European immigrants had changed the tenor of society. Large corporations had taken the lead in bringing about an organizational revolution. And modern mass media had begun to transform the culture (telephones and movies were well in place, commercial radio was just around the corner).

These were not the things Riley wrote about in his poetry. Rather he memorialized the pioneer days. What he gave the public and what they loved him for was a picture of society as it once had been—a quieter, simpler, more easily understood and easily navigable society that called up nostalgic memories of family, community, face-to-face interaction, and social integration and harmony. All of these seemed endangered and even under siege in the minds of many people by the time Riley started writing during the 1870s. Realism was not what many people wanted to hear; rather, idealistic images of days gone by. That many of the images conjured up by Indiana's favorite poet obscured rather than illuminated life as it currently existed did not hinder his commercial

¹⁴ On the Poe Hoax, see Van Allen, *James Whitcomb Riley*, 100-10; Dickey, *The Youth of James Whitcomb Riley*, 359-400.

success; rather it facilitated it. Affirmation, consolation, encouragement, and celebration were Riley's intellectual currency. To the degree that some of his word pictures did describe at least part of reality they undergirded his efforts all the more.

Americans are many things. One thing they have been from the beginning is dreamers. James Whitcomb Riley's poems helped enshrine those dreams and fantasies in the public mind. He also learned over time how to translate those dreamy reveries into cold, hard cash. That made him a *practical* dreamer, and Americans, on the eve of their entrance into World War I, at the time of Riley's well-publicized demise, were practical dreamers par excellence. By the time the war was over, New York had displaced London as the capital of international finance, Henry Ford's Model T controlled half the world's automobile market, and people around the globe were beginning to look to Washington, D.C., to solve the world's problems. It would take another global war to complete that process of change, and in the meantime Riley's poetry lost its puissance and became an object of pure nostalgia, or worse, total neglect as the United States took up its novel role as leader on the world stage.