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James Whitcomb Riley in 1876

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Biographers of James Whitcomb Riley usually note with considerable emphasis that Riley's life and poetry were greatly influenced by the encouragement and example of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. As for the poetry, now that almost a quarter century since Riley's death (July 22, 1916) makes possible a fairer perspective, there seems to be a tendency among critics to feel that Riley's allegiance to Longfellow is to be listed more to Longfellow's than to Riley's credit. Certainly, very few of the carefully metered, gently conventionalized, and usually rather florid, quatrains and sonnets which Riley practiced and polished after the Longfellow manner seem to have much continuing interest today. This holds for the popular reader, whom Riley once held in thrall, as well as for the more objectively minded literary student. In striking contrast, however, another line of Riley's writing consisting largely of folk material in an entirely different *genre*—which Riley himself probably never considered a very serious literary accomplishment and which he professedly practiced merely as a means to gain an economic end—is coming to be considered his most original and enduring verse.

Both of these literary tendencies—the loyalty to Longfellow and the recognition of color in native Hoosier life—were working side by side in the writing and other interests of the young, unrecognized Riley of 1876. One can judge this from the glimpses of him which have been preserved in the memories of Mrs. Cornelia Loder Wood of Marion, Indiana. Mrs. Wood is the only person living today who was a member of the Riley household in Greenfield during that crucial period just before the poet succeeded in attracting to his

writing a satisfactory public support. Miss Cornelia Loder (later Mrs. Wood) was teaching school in Greenfield during the fall and winter of 1876-1877 and living in the Riley home. Her recollections of Jim Riley and of the other members of the family circle at the time, and the several Riley family contributions to her autograph album, are printed here for the first time.¹

Jim Riley was then twenty-seven, his birth date being October 7, 1849. It was just at a time, when, having sampled a variety of occupations ranging all the way from sign painting to reading law, he had acquired a reputation for not being very successful at anything in particular. Everybody knew of his knack for versifying and reciting, but few beyond a number of intimately appreciative friends took these abilities seriously. True, he had already seen his verses printed in the *Greenfield Commercial and News*, in the *Danbury (Connecticut) News*, in the *Indianapolis Mirror, People*, and *Saturday Herald*, and in the magazine, *Hearth and Home*. He had also made a rather discouraging debut as a professional reciter. Neither occupation, however, had given promise of a way to a livelihood, and, in Greenfield, the ability to make a living was an important criterion for judging success, especially when the person weighed in the balance had reached his late twenties. Jim Riley had reason for his discouragement.

In the fall of 1876, however, Riley sent a small sheaf of his poems to Longfellow asking for criticism and suggestions, among them, "Destiny"², "If I Knew What Poets Know"³ and "The Iron Horse."⁴ Longfellow's reply, dated at Cambridge on November 30, arrived in Greenfield on December 5.⁵ Riley was delighted, we know, from a firsthand report by Mrs. Wood: "He came into the hall waving a letter to Elva, his sister, and saying, 'Some day you will be proud to be called the sister of the Hoosier Poet.' Then he gave the letter to me to read."⁶

¹ The writer has in his possession a photostatic reproduction of the Cornelia Loder autograph album. Mrs. Wood also recorded her recollections of her stay with the Riley family in 1876 for the writer several years ago. The wife of the writer is a niece of Mrs. Wood.

² Published in *A Child World* (1896) under the title "The Dreamer." The poem had already been printed in the magazine, *Hearth and Home*.

³ *Afterwhiles* (1887).

⁴ *Green Fields and Running Brooks* (1892).

⁵ Quoted by Riley in a letter to Benjamin S. Parker, December 5, 1876. *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*, edited by William Lyon Phelps (Indianapolis, 1917), 12-14.

⁶ This and other quotations from Mrs. Cornelia Loder Wood are from an unpublished letter to the writer of February 3, 1936.

Longfellow had taken the pains to criticize one of the poems, "Destiny", pointing out Riley's inexact use of the word, prone. The word means "face downward", Longfellow explained, and Riley should have used "supine". But more important still, Longfellow had written that Riley's work showed "true poetic faculty and insight." After that letter, for various reasons, partly psychological, it seemed, Jim Riley's fortunes began to shift rapidly toward the better.

In the meantime, it was Cornelia Loder's copy of Longfellow's poems which Jim Riley had been thumbing through day after day. She describes the popularity of the book in this way:

Elva and I were fond of Longfellow's poems and used to spend much of our spare time reading, reciting, and singing some of them. Whether our interest in Longfellow aroused a fresh interest in James Whitcomb or not, I do not know, but I believe it did. He came to me and asked me to loan him my volume of Longfellow's poems. He took it to his father's office where he and John Skinner, a friend of his, must have studied every line and verse in it, for by the time we two girls and the two young men were through with it, the book was almost beyond service. He told me his favorite of Longfellow's poems was "The Building of the Ship," and quoted the following lines:

"Build me straight, O Worthy Master!
Staunch and strong, a goodly vessel,
That shall laugh at all disaster
And with wave and whirlwind wrestle."

That law office, it might be added, was young Riley's literary sanctum. He did more than read Longfellow there. He was doing much writing. Among other things he had already completed "An Old Sweetheart of Mine."

Miss Loder had come to Greenfield first in the summer of 1875 to attend a "summer normal" conducted by John Binfield, later superintendent of schools of the town. She says:

That summer it rained almost continually, until the wheat shocks standing in the fields were growing out at the tops of them. I was boarding in the hotel where you could see the green mold on the edges of the side walls and ceiling. As a result I became ill with malaria. My brother and his wife came to see me, and when they saw the condition there, they took me home with them. So when I was able to return, I secured board with a private family by the name of Wilson, whose daughter Julia had married John Riley, a brother of James Whitcomb.

Since the Wilsons and Captain Reuben Riley's family lived but a short distance apart, Miss Loder came to know the latter well, with the result that when she was hired a year later under Superintendent Binfield to teach in the grade schools, she engaged board and lodging in the household of the Rileys.

The Riley home at the time was the old Greenfield Academy building which Captain Riley had bought after the Civil War and remodeled for a dwelling. The structure was long since destroyed by fire. The children had been born in a little story-and-a-half frame building a short distance away. That house had been torn down by 1875, Mrs. Wood recalls, and a new two-story home erected, which was occupied by a Crawford family. This house is still standing. Though James Whitcomb Riley himself never occupied it, he purchased the dwelling in later life and gave it to his sister-in-law, Mrs. Juila Riley, who lived there for many years. It is now a Riley shrine.

The remodeled academy building was a tall, old, dignified, block-shaped, frame structure, with a flat roof and a cupola-like belfrey. James Whitcomb had gone to school there under Lee O. Harris, the teacher to whom is given the credit of first interesting the boy in good reading. It was quite an imposing house, the pillar-like ornaments on the veranda-less front emphasizing an impression of height and dignity. It stood in a large grove of trees with a white picket fence running in front. The Riley children, upon whose imaginations the house had a romanticizing effect, called it the "Old Castle", or the "Castle in the Grove". There are several references to it as such in Cornelia Loder's old autograph album.

Mrs. Wood remembers Riley's appearance before the teacher's institute:

I began making my home with them one week before school began in order to attend the teacher's institute. The teachers had requested James Whitcomb to give his Bear story at the institute, and Elva said to me: "I wish Jim wouldn't do that. It sounds so silly." I had never heard it before and could see why everybody wanted to hear him tell it. It was that and other imitations of childhood which were already making him famous.

Although these early creative impersonations were the side of Riley's work which would lead to the poems which

seem now most likely to meet the tests of time, they were not then considered serious literary efforts by Riley himself beyond their power to win a hearing and to bring in cash returns. To a considerable degree they were a carry-over from an unfulfilled desire for a stage career. Riley's early adventures with a traveling medicine show are now, of course, almost a Hoosier legend. In Greenfield, he had been active for years both in amateur and professional theatricals. He had played in Charles Fenton's *Toodles*, in *The Chimney Corner*, in *A Child of Waterloo*, and in August Daly's famous melodrama, *Under the Gaslight*. His talent was well enough recognized that he was usually recommended whenever a traveling company happened to need a local assistant. Riley and Lee O. Harris, for example, had been among the "well-known local talent" who had once assisted a certain Harry Gilbert Company in the Production of *The Rough Diamond*, a popular farce. By 1876, however, it seems rather likely that Riley had taken the advice of a property man with a traveling troupe and had abandoned any thought of acting for a living.⁷

Nevertheless, he had continued to sharpen his powers as a reciter. For one thing, he had long been sensitive to the fact that many of the dialect and other narrative selections which he found in print seemed unsuited to platform delivery merely because they were not written naturally. Sometimes he tried mending the faulty lines but rarely with satisfaction. Then he tried constructing dialect readings of his own, intending them for recital purposes purely, with no thought at all, apparently, of publishing them. He was merely experimenting with his own powers to catch the interest of a listening audience. If he made a hit, he saved the work and polished it. Charles Dickens had caught his interest by this time, and had become his inspiration in platform caricature, just as Longfellow had become his guide in what Riley considered the genuinely creative side of his verse-writing. If either, it was Dickens, not Longfellow, who eventually led Riley to give the world such uniquely flavored bits as "The Raggedy Man," "Little Orphant Annie," and "When the Frost is on the Punkin."

By 1874, Riley had begun to take his powers as a reader

⁷ Marcus Dickey, *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis, 1922), Chapter I.

seriously enough to attempt a one-man entertainment at Monrovia, in Morgan County. Though the results were not encouraging, the next year, as "Delineator and Caricaturist", he had swung around the small town circuit of Anderson, Lebanon, and Crawfordsville.⁸ The outcome of all these efforts had been some local fame, to which Mrs. Wood refers, though not a lucrative degree of it.

The "Bear Story", published in *A Child World* in 1896, as "The Bear Story That Alex 'ist Maked Up His-own-se'f," was long to remain one of Riley's most popular items. It had originated years before in an imitation of the poet's little brother Humboldt. Riley never told the story twice the same, says Mrs. Wood. She adds:

He had some readings which were not original and of which he was fond. I remember one in particular entitled "The Lily Bud" which he said he had given in entertainment, and he recited it to me. It was a story of two brothers living on adjoining farms and who had not spoken to each other for a long time. A little baby came into one of the homes. The other brother happening to be working near that home one day could not resist his desire to see the baby and stepped through the back door up to the cradle, when the father saw him and stepped to his side, and as a result peace was made between them.

This selection, "The Lily Bud", by Anna Poe, proved to be a favorite in Riley's early repertoire. Its subject matter suggests, however, the degree of sentimentalism which was likely to appeal strongly to the unsophisticated country audiences of Indiana in the eighteen-seventies and 'eighties. Riley, in 1876, was fast becoming a master in the platform technique of playing upon simple emotions. Often the literary material used for the appeal was cheap and artificial with Riley's personality the real living force behind the lines. Much of Riley's own verse, as the years pass, suffers from the same fault.

This platform work, Riley did not consider, at least in earlier years, serious creative effort. He enjoyed it as a means of expression no doubt, but he continued it, or so he insisted time and again, merely because of the monetary consideration.

"I am simply compelled to ask a fair price," he wrote a committee in 1879, "since it is through this means that I

⁸ *Ibid.*

hope to gain a revenue sufficient to forward my literary studies."⁹

His advice to younger poets in later years always emphasized the necessity for some such means of subsistence. "Every author should have some certain means aside from his literary work whereby to 'put money in his purse,'" he wrote in 1888. "All successful ones have so provided, Longfellow, Bryant, Stoddard, Stedman, Twain—all. And that's what I'm trying to do and must. . . ."¹⁰

In the meantime, during the closing months of 1876, Riley was laboring hard as an apprentice to what he considered the true poetic craft. "He seemed to want to tell me about what he was writing," Mrs. Wood recalls, "and came to me once and asked what figure could be used for autumn. . . . 'I'm calling it the gypsy queen,' he said." This poem, in sonnet form, appeared as "Dead Leaves" in the Newcastle *Mercury* of November 16, 1876.

Another time he remarked, "There is one thing I dislike to do more than anything else, and that is to write poems requested for anniversaries or gatherings for any purpose." This sentiment had already been the theme of the poem "Job Work" which had appeared in the *People* (Indianapolis) on July 19, 1874.

In spite of Riley's discouragement, the year of 1876 had really been a rather productive one for him. At least sixteen poems, which eventually reached print, had been written during that year. Many of them seem very poor. Yet, he had already composed such selections as "Dot Leedle Boy", "If I Knew What Poets Know," "Squire Hawkins' Story," and "An Old Sweetheart of Mine", all of which were to be among his most popular selections once he had caught the public ear. That fall, too, Riley was planning with Benjamin S. Parker of Newcastle and Captain Lee O. Harris of Lewisville, at Parker's suggestion, a collection of verse to be published for the holidays. The project seems not to have materialized, but it was productive of much interesting correspondence.¹¹

In fact, Riley's letters to his "brace of correspondents", as he called them in a letter to Captain Harris,¹² constitute

⁹ Dickey, *op. cit.*, 81.

¹⁰ Riley to Alonzo Hilton Rice, May 18, 1888, *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*, 82.

¹¹ Riley to Harris, Oct. 26, 1876, *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley*, 10-12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

the most significant thing about James Whitcomb Riley's literary activities in the closing months of 1876. Parker, who was editor of the Newcastle *Mercury*, had been prompted by Harris to write to Riley about his poems in 1875. The correspondence had grown steadily in cordiality, and Parker was now using an occasional verse of Riley's in his columns. Another literary correspondent at this time was Mary Hannah Krout of Crawfordsville. Still another, whom Riley called "A highly intellectual woman living in Wisconsin,"¹³ was Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Riley was seeking not merely a hearing but sympathetic encouragement. The letter from Longfellow with its suggestion of approval was, of course, the crowning return from this period of epistolary groping. Indeed Riley was just at the eve of his first important successes at the end of 1876.

The Riley family group in Greenfield, of which Jim was at this time still an intimate and rather problematical member, has been preserved more or less characteristically in Cornelia Loder's autograph album.¹⁴

Captain Reuben A. Riley, the father, wrote in a firm, attractive, Spencerian hand:

If, through life's eventful race,
Our duties be well done,
He'll still vouchsafe His grace,
And Angels guard us home.
June 11th, 1877—

"Cap" Riley was a lawyer, whose abilities before the bar and on the orator's platform were of considerably more than local repute. Mrs. Wood testifies that he was not a money-maker—possibly he was too upright a man to dabble in some of the more lucrative activities open to legal practitioners—but his family were not at all poverty ridden. He had been able to give them not only a comfortable home but all the common advantages available to a respectable small town family. His captain's commission dated from the Civil War when he had commanded a company of Union cavalry. In appearance, he bore a remarkable likeness to John Wilkes Booth, he once told Miss Loder, and, after the assassination of President Lincoln, had on one occasion barely escaped arrest.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Unpublished Riley family autographs from original album in the possession of the writer.

The mother of the Riley children had died seven years before Miss Loder came to the Riley home, and the captain later remarried. The stepmother, Mrs. Wood characterizes as patient and kind. Her role of foster mother was difficult, of course, but she filled it efficiently, and the children were usually respectful to her. Her Quakerish "thee" and "thou", however, and various other old-fashioned ways of speech and manner contrasted strangely with the joyous humanity of the first Mrs. Riley. Elizabeth Marine Riley, mother of the poet, had been a woman of keen understanding and sympathy. From her had come the children's interest in poetry. Upon James Whitcomb, who was twenty at her death, she had exerted a powerful emotional influence. There was little wonder that the children in the middle seventies were still grieving keenly for her.

In the autograph album, the kindly foster mother recorded her name and sentiments thus:

To Cornelia

This little emblem of respect
 I give my valued friend to thee.
 Treat not its motto with neglect
 It is dear girl remember me.
 But say if Heaven should early doom,
 For all is just by His decree,
 My bosom to the silent tomb,
 Wilt thou drop one tear for me.

June 7th, 1877 Thy True friend, Mattie C. Riley

On another page, Humboldt, the youngest Riley son, inscribed an ornate "Hum Riley," with several decorative elaborations which recall the fact that James Whitcomb's earlier trade of sign painting had been passed on by this time to this younger brother.

The name *Marine* appears on several pages of this old album. This belonged to visiting relatives on the mother's side. Alice Marine of Mooresville, a cousin, signed herself appropriately enough, "One of the occupants of the *Old Castle* for a time." In another place, a young man caller recorded what was probably a pun, "Marine matters at Riley's—things rather 'Hazy'". There is enough of such evidence to suggest that the young people in the Riley household were an active, happy group, mingling freely in the normal social life of the town.

James Whitcomb was by no means the only one of the Rileys with a bent for verse making. A knack which had been possessed first by the mother had stimulated an interest in several of the children. The result was that sooner or later most of the family tried a hand at poetizing. Elva, according to Mrs. Wood, had practiced the art considerably, and it seems rather obvious that her contribution to the album, made on June 9, 1877, was an original effort for the occasion. Beginning with an appropriate curtsey to the beloved Longfellow in the line, "It rains and the wind is never weary," she then wrote:

In the dimly outlined vista of the future when alone
 In a mood of retrospection, you let your memory roam,
 You must not forget old Greenfield, and the Castle in the grove
 You *Will* not forget the "romance," you *must* not forget the love
 Of the many friends you left there, but keep in memories [*sic*] store
 One bud of recollection if you can keep no more.

The *Will* in the fourth line is a play upon a young man's name. Elva signed herself appropriately "La fille du château."

Little Mary Riley, the "kid sister," was about twelve at this time. She too penned an original expression of her sentiment:

I'm small I know, but then I may
 Make some noise in this world of ours.
 My compliments to you I give
 As plentifully as this day's showers
 Come down from out the weeping skies.

Little Mary was to live to be the last survivor of the Riley family. She died in 1936.

Outside the family circle itself the most important person, so far as the career of James Whitcomb at this particular period was concerned, was Captain Lee O. Harris, formerly his teacher and inspirer, but now his intimate friend and correspondent. Harris was teaching in Lewisville, where Miss Loder later met him and obtained his contribution to her collection. The Captain was, of course, a poet in his own right, with considerable fame, at least locally. He too had received an appreciative letter from Longfellow.

He filled two pages of the young schoolma'am's album with the following stanzas:

I

Fellow laborer in the field,
 There are sown the seeds of thought,
 May a bounteous harvest yield
 All the wealth thy toil hath sought.

II

I'll not wish thee free from pain,
 Since 'tis what we all must bear,
 And the beards that arm the grain
 Still must wound the harvester.

III

Neither will I wish thee rest,
 Since 'twere all in vain, my friend,
 And they always slumber best,
 Who have labored to the end.

IV

Dread not thou thy meed of toil—
 Souls are rusted in repose,
 But the plough, that turns the soil,
 Only brightens as it goes.

V

If a wish I might bestow,
 Only this the gift should be—
 Heart to labor and to know
 Duty weaves a crown to thee.

VI

Soul to battle with the wrong—
 Faith, a sword to arm thy will—
 Power to suffer and be strong—
 Brave and self reliant still.

James Whitcomb himself does not appear in the album, for the reason that by the time it was circulating in the Riley family in the spring of 1877, he had left Greenfield for a post with the *Anderson Democrat*. The fall and winter of 1876-1877 had carried him past the turning point in his career. He had received not only the praise of Longfellow but the recognition of the *Indianapolis Journal*. In September, after the death of Hamilton J. Dunbar, friend and schoolmate of Riley and a brilliant young attorney, Riley had written a poetic appreciation to read before a meeting of the Greenfield bar association. Among the visiting attorneys was Judge E. B. Martendale of Indianapolis, proprietor of the *Journal*, who met Riley and the following February published a sketch and poem by him. Encouraged by Martendale's praise and a ten dollar check, Riley selected another poem from his manuscripts and sent it to the *Journal*. It

was "An Old Sweetheart of Mine." Martendale wrote in reply: "I will take in the future any prose or poetry you may write and will compensate you for what you furnish." In April, Riley accepted a regular post on the *Anderson Democrat* while continuing to write for the *Journal* and other papers. A full-time place on the *Journal* was awaiting him, however, and fame itself was just ahead.

Several years passed before Cornelia Loder, Mrs. Wood by that time, met Jim Riley again. It was in Scott's Theatre in Fairmount, Indiana, after a program given jointly by Riley and Bill Nye. Riley, who never forgot an acquaintance, greeted his old friend, whose husband accompanied her, in characteristic fashion:

"Well!" he said drolly, "You married a better looking man than I am!"

* * *

RILEY AT THE BRIDGE

The Hoosier Poet knew the poem by Longfellow, of which the opening stanza reads:

I stood on the bridge at midnight,
As the clocks were striking the hour,
And the moon rose o'er the city,
Behind the dark church-tower.

While on a visit to Boston and Cambridge, Riley wrote to George C. Hitt of Indianapolis on January 1, 1882.¹ In a postscript, there is an intimation that Henry W. may have been out a bit late on the night in question:

I have seen Beacon Street—The Old South Church—Boston Common—and "The Bridge" where Longfellow "stood on his head at midnight" when the clocks were givin' the thing away, etc., etc.

¹ William Lyon Phelps, Editor, *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis, 1917), 86.