

# RIDE A BLUE HORSE

BY AURAND HARRIS

## James Whitcomb Riley

### INDIANA'S FAVORITE SON

**J**ames Whitcomb Riley, nationally loved by both children and adults, was a Hoosier poet at the turn of the century. Riley captured the spirit of the common man and the voice of middle America. He spoke to the reader in the dialects of the Midwest and told stories about the lives of young people growing up in small-town America.

Riley's own childhood, as told in the play *Ride a Blue Horse*, reveals much about Indiana history. The title of the play is taken from a Riley poem of the same name—a poem that dares the reader to ride a “horse of a different color,” to do the unusual and thereby fulfill his or her dreams. Much of Riley's life was about facing up to that very challenge. He strove to live his life, not according to the wishes of others, but according to his own wishes.

James Whitcomb Riley was born on October 7, 1849, in a log cabin in Greenfield, then a small Indiana village in Hancock County. The third of six children born to Reuben Alexander and Elizabeth Marine Riley, he was named after his father's friend, James Whitcomb, the governor of Indiana. Riley's father, a lawyer and representative to the state legislature, was a prominent member of the community. Riley's mother, the daughter of a boat builder, preacher, and poet, herself wrote poetry. Riley inherited his mother's love of words and rhyme. The two had much in common and were very close. Riley's father, however, was distant, unable to understand a son who wanted to write poetry.

As a young boy, James (nicknamed ‘Bud’ by his siblings) was slight of build with cornsilk hair and an abundance of

freckles. Riley loved living in a small town. There was always something to do. He enjoyed swimming, fishing, stealing watermelons, and playing Indians in the woods. Riley also liked to watch people. Details from his early childhood visits to the Hancock County Courthouse with his father may be found in poems he wrote years later.

Unfortunately, school was not nearly as interesting to Riley. Although he enjoyed reading, he hated math, history, having to be at school on time, and doing assigned lessons. His vivid imagination made it difficult to concentrate on school work. Finally, Riley found a teacher who understood his disposition. Captain Lee O. Harris told Riley that if he was going to read, he should read the best literature. Riley quickly abandoned his dime-store novels for the works of Charles Dickens, James Fenimore Cooper, and Washington Irving.

At the age of sixteen, Riley quit school. He stayed in Greenfield and wrote poems which he submitted to newspapers and magazines. His father, wor-

ried that his son had no skills, sent him to work as a sign painter's apprentice. In 1870, Riley's mother died. Soon after, Riley left Greenfield as a sign painter and entertainer with a traveling medicine show.

When newspapers began to print Riley's poems, he decided to quit his traveling medicine show and attempt a career in the newspaper industry. In 1877 he was hired by the *Democrat* in Anderson county for \$40 per month. His

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entertaining writing style increased the circulation of readers from 400 to 2,400 within two months. Also, his poems were being published throughout Indiana.

The east coast newspapers, however, refused to print his work. They felt it was a "Hoosier" style for Hoosiers only. Frustrated with this rejection, Riley wrote a poem, *Leonainie*, in the style of Edgar Allan Poe. The poem turned out so well that Riley decided to have it published as a newly discovered work by the late Poe. Unfortunately, the prank was too successful. The poem was printed nationwide and scholars declared its authenticity. When Riley was discovered to be the author, he lost his job with the newspaper and returned to Greenfield in disgrace.

Soon after this incident, however, the *Indianapolis Journal* offered Riley a job, and several newspapers began to publish his work. The prank had spread his name and people

were now eager to read his poems.

In the 1880s Riley began a speaking tour with his poetry and stories. He shaped his program according to audience responses. Booth Tarkington, another famous Indiana author, said of Riley's presentation, "He did not 'read' his poems; he did not recite them, either; he took his whole body into his hands, as it were, and by his wizard mastery of suggestion left no James Whitcomb Riley at all upon the stage; instead the audiences saw and heard whatever the incomparable comedian wished them to see and hear."

Riley stopped making speaking tours in the 1890s. Instead, he focused his attentions on writing and collecting his works into books. Still a bachelor, Riley was living in a hotel in Indianapolis and hating it. Two friends, Major Charles L. Holstein and his wife, Magdalena, invited Riley to live and board at their mansion on Lockerbie Street. He remained there as a "paying guest" for

twenty-three years.

It was at this home that Riley was visited by many children. He loved reciting his poems for these audiences and hearing their enthusiastic responses. Riley was also visited by many famous people—from Presidential candidates to the head of the Socialist party, Eugene Debs. He corresponded with many other famous writers, including Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling.

In 1911, Riley suffered a stroke. When he recovered, public schools showed their affection for him by celebrating his birthday. Four years later, October 7 was declared Riley day. On July 22, 1916, Riley suffered a second, fatal stroke. More than 35,000 people filed by Riley's casket which lay in state under the dome of the Indiana State Capitol.

James Whitcomb Riley was a remarkable man and poet who gave us over 1,040 poems. His warmth and joy of living remain through his great legacy of words. ★

# RIDE A BLUE HORSE

## The Story of James Whitcomb Riley

### A SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

**R**ide a Blue Horse is a play about the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley. It is written by America's foremost playwright of children's plays, Aurand Harris. In 1984, the White River State Park Arts Festival asked Harris to write a play about Indiana. The result was *Ride a Blue Horse*.

*Ride a Blue Horse* is a memory play. James Whitcomb Riley narrates the play and also interacts with characters from his life from the years 1849 to 1870. The play opens on Riley's 66th birthday. This was a special birthday for Riley because it was on this day that he was honored by schools across the United States.

Riley "travels" back in time to his birth to introduce both himself and his family. He then takes the audience on a journey through his years growing up in Greenfield, Indiana. He takes us to the county fair where he first beholds the wonder of a merry-go-round; where he rides a blue horse (the horse that appears in one of his poems and is the title of Harris's play.) Riley takes us to the swimming hole where he watches the boys swimming and meets a

gypsy who foretells his future as a poet. We attend school with Riley and experience with him the humiliation of having to wear the dunce cap and endure the taunting of other students.

We see his attempt to remove his freckles with a special ointment. When the ointment doesn't work, his mother teaches Riley that he must embrace his individuality. We meet Alice Smith, an orphan who comes to work for the Riley family in return for room and board, who inspired Riley's poem "Little Orphant Annie." We watch a young Riley and his brother present a play for their family about a little boy and a bear. Through the events surrounding Riley's performance, we learn about the workings of the Underground Railroad in Indiana.

Finally, Riley shares with us his memories of joining a traveling medicine show. It is at this time that Riley first discovers his ability to captivate audiences with his poems. Through his talent for words and performance, Riley would become one of the most beloved poets of all time. ★

## <sup>a</sup> glossary of words & phrases in **RIDE A BLUE HORSE**

**dunce cap:** a cone-shaped hat that children slow at learning were forced to wear in school

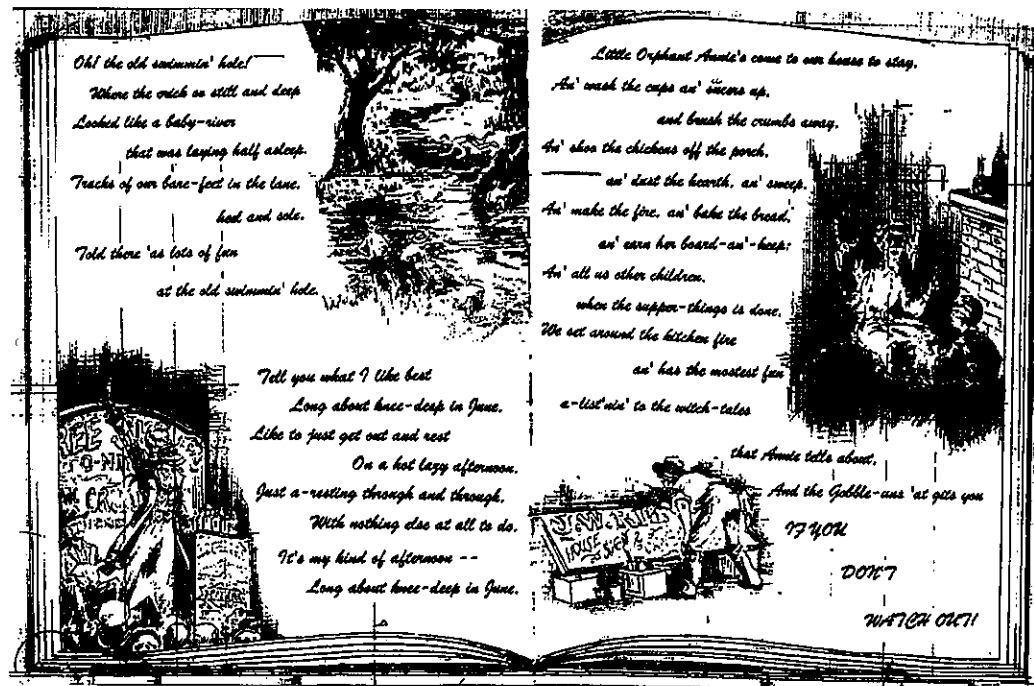
**gypsy:** a member of a wandering people found throughout the world and believed to have originated in India: they are known as musicians and fortunetellers

**medicine show:** a show given by entertainers who traveled from town to town in order to sell cure-alls and remedies

**room and board:** sleeping accommodations and meals

**swimming hole:** a pond or deep place in a river or creek that is used for swimming

**Underground Railroad:** a pre-Civil War system set up by certain opponents of slavery to help fugitive slaves escape to free states and Canada; escapees traveled secretly by night, hiding by day in barns and cellars



Scenic designer for Ride a Blue Horse at the IRT is Robert A. Koharchik. The set features a giant, three-dimensional book (left) fronted by an open, grassy field. "My original image was a small boy—Riley himself—lying on his back in an open meadow, reading a book," says the designer. "The background of the pages of the book is a sky filled with puffy white clouds, the kind of clouds that lead one to imagine all kinds of figures and characters. The characters of the clouds come to life, becoming both the characters of Riley's poems and the characters of the play itself."

## from the pen of James Whitcomb Riley

Such a dear little street it is, nestled away  
From the noise of the city and heat of the day,  
In cool shady coverts of whispering trees,  
With their leaves lifted up to shake hands with the breeze  
Which in all its wide wanderings never may meet  
With a resting-place fairer than Lockerbie Street!

—"Lockerbie Street"

Ride a blue horse,  
There's one waiting for you;  
Ride a blue horse,  
Make a dream come true.

—"Ride a Blue Horse"

All is bright and pleasant  
With the sound of song and jest,  
Yet a feeling's ever present  
That the Old Times were the best.

—"The Old Times Were the Best"

Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to stay,  
An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the crumbs away,  
An' shoo the chickens off the porch, an' dust the hearth, an' sweep,  
An' make the fire, an' bake the bread, an' earn her board-an'-keep;  
An' all us other children, when the supper-things is done,  
We set around the kitchen fire an' has the mostest fun  
A-list'nin' to the witch-tales 'at Annie tells about,  
An' the Gobble-uns 'at gits you

Ef you  
Don't  
Watch  
Out!

—"Little Orphant Annie"

## "The Circus-Day Parade"

Oh, the Circus-Day Parade! How the bugles played and played!  
And how the glossy horses tossed their flossy manes and neighed,  
As the rattle and the rhyme of the tenor-drummer's time  
Filled all the hungry hearts of us with melody sublime!

How the grand band-wagon shone with a splendor all its own,  
And glittered with a glory that our dreams had never known!  
And how the boys behind, high and low of every kind,  
Marched in unconscious capture, with a rapture undefined!

How the horsemen, two and two, with their plumes of white and blue,  
And crimson, gold and purple, nodding by at me and you,  
Waved the banners that they bore, as the knights in days of yore,  
Till our glad eyes gleamed and glistened like the spangles that they wore!

How the graceless-graceful stride of the elephant was eyed,  
And the capers of the little horse that cantered at his side!  
How the shambling camels, tame to the plaudits of their fame,  
With listless eyes came silent, masticating as they came.

How the cages jolted past, with each wagon battened fast,  
And the mystery within it only hinted of at last  
From the little grated square in the rear, and nosing there  
The snout of some strange animal that sniffed the outer air!

And, last of all, The Clown, making mirth for all the town,  
With his lips curved ever upward and his eyebrows ever down,  
And his chief attention paid to the little mule that played  
A tattoo on the dashboard with his heels, in the Parade.

Oh! the Circus-Day Parade! How the bugles played and played!  
And how the glossy horses tossed their flossy manes and neighed!  
As the rattle and the rhyme of the tenor-drummer's time  
Filled all the hungry hearts of us with melody sublime!

# MOMENTS IN HISTORY FROM the Life of Riley

**1849**

- \*James Whitcomb Riley is born in Greenfield, Indiana.
- \*There are 30 states in the union.
- \*Zachary Taylor is president.
- \*The US population is approximately 22,569,000.

**1850-54**

- \*James "Bud" Whitcomb Riley is a child in Greenfield, Indiana.
- \*California becomes a state in 1850.
- \**Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe is published in 1852.
- \*The first Indiana State Fair is held in 1852.

**1855-70**

- \*Bud attends school in Greenfield.
- \*The Civil War is fought (1861-1865).
- \*Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis is incorporated in 1863.
- \*President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.
- \*President Lincoln is assassinated in 1865.
- \**The Indianapolis News*, the city's first afternoon newspaper, publishes its first edition on December 7, 1869.

**1871-76**

- \*Riley works as a sign painter and travels with medicine shows.
- \*Ulysses S. Grant is president.
- \*Indianapolis's Trade Palace changes its name to L. S. Ayres and Company in 1874.
- \*Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone in 1876.

**1877-78**

- \*Riley works as newspaper reporter in Anderson, Indiana
- \*Rutherford B. Hayes is president
- \*Bicycles first made in United States, 1878.

**1879-82**

- \*Riley gives lectures and readings about Indiana and the United States.
- \*Thomas Edison invents the electric light bulb in 1879.
- \*Clara Barton starts the American Red Cross in 1881.

**1883**

- \*Riley's first collections of poetry are published.
- \*First electric street railway in United States is operated in Baltimore in 1885.
- \*The Indiana State House is completed in 1888.

**1893**

- \*Riley moves to Lockerbie Square.
- \*Henry Ford builds his first gas engine in 1893.
- \*Indianapolis lawyer Benjamin Harrison is President of the United States 1889-93.
- \*The Soldiers and Sailors Monument in downtown Indianapolis is completed in 1901.
- \*The Indianapolis Indians Baseball Club plays its first season in 1902.
- \*Wilbur and Orville Wright fly the first airplane in 1903.

**1911**

- \*October 7 is declared "Riley Day."
- \*The first Indianapolis 500-Mile Race is held in 1911.
- \*World War I begins in 1914.

**1916**

- \*James Whitcomb Riley dies on July 22.
- \*There are 48 states in the union.
- \*Woodrow Wilson is president.
- \*The US population is approximately 100,215,000.

*Adapted from a timeline in James Whitcomb Riley Hoosier Boy by Minnie Bell Mitchell, 1962.*

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