

### JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

In Character Sketches

Editor's Note—Hoyt King of Wilmette, one of the best known men in New Trier township by virtue of his many years' service as Township Collector, is the author of Character Sketches of James Whitcomb Riley which will appear frequently in issues of WILMETTE LIFE.

Mr. King comes by his enthusiasm for Riley quite naturally since he is a native of Indiana and the son of one of the poet's most intimate friends. Mr. King's father was associated with the Indianapolis Journal—where Riley was a familiar figure for many years—and purchased the first volume of the first edition of Riley's poems, a work now in possession of Mr. King. "As a boy I often saw Mr. Riley," says Mr. King, "though I did not know him intimately. I have always prized his works and have made quite an exhaustive study of his career. I hope these brief character sketches may be of interest to other Riley lovers on the north shore."

Some years before "The Old Swimmer's Hole," on August 7, 1877, the poem "Leonanie" appeared in the "Kokomo Dispatch" published by J. C. Henderson. Riley was employed at the time by the "Anderson Democrat" at \$10 a week. His verses appeared occasionally and Henderson of Kokomo liked them. He reprinted one, crediting the Anderson Democrat, and wrote an editorial in praise of the gem from a country paper. Riley wrote and thanked him. Thus they became acquainted. Later Henderson received the poem "Leonanie" from Riley, who proposed that he publish it as one by Edgar Allen Poe. His reason, he stated, was to prove that a work of merit, carrying with it a distinguished name, would be received as such by the literary world, where a work of merit, by an unknown, would not. Henderson entered into the spirit of the thing and published it, as a reprint of a manuscript discovered on the fly leaf of an old Ainsworth Dictionary. The whole story was made plausible by complete details.

One verse runs like this:

"Leonanie, angels named her,  
And they took the light  
Of the laughing stars and framed  
her  
In a smile of white,  
And they made her hair of gloomy  
Midnight, and her eyes of bloomy  
Moonshine, and they brought her  
to me  
In the solemn night."

When Riley professed to be the author of the widely-accepted Poe poem, he was disbelieved. Riley says later, "I suppose I shall never hear the last of the Poe hoax. Even as it is now, there is nothing for me to do but acknowledge that I wrote it, as I do, but that does not stand, as I once denied being the author. I wrote it, but I did not. I did not write it, but I did, and I am a liar either way you put it."

Indianapolis was the home of Riley after Judge Martindale called him there to enter the service of the Indianapolis Journal. He longed for his native town, Greenfield, so much during his boarding house days that he went back every fortnight. He was restless in the rush of Indianapolis and did not get to feel homey there until he was invited to become the permanent guest of Maj. Charles Holstein in his home in Lockerbie street.

Frequent excursions carried him to Delphi on Deer Creek and here nature provided him with inspiration. Here he wrote, "On the Banks of Deer Creek is good enough fer me." He slept with Doc Smith in a little room partitioned off from the doctor's office.

Doc Smith may have been, in part, the character "Old Doc Sifers," though Sifers is probably a composite of different country doctors Riley knew. Here he wrote "Knee Deep in June", published in "Afterwhites". One verse

runs like this, in the words of a resident of the local community:

#### "KNEE DEEP IN JUNE"

Tell you what I like the best  
Long about knee deep in June,  
Bout the time strawberries melts  
On the vine—some afternoon  
Like to jes git out and rest,  
And not work at nothin' else.

Orchard's where I'd ruther be—  
Necdn't fence it in fer me—  
Jes the blue sky overhead,  
And the whole airth underneath  
Sorto so's a man kin breathe  
Like he ort, and kindo has  
Elbow room to keerslessly  
Sprawl out len'thways on the grass  
Where the shadders thick and soft  
As the kiverers on the bed  
Mother fixes in the loft  
Allus, when they's company!

Miss Margaret Prindeville of Chicago, was the week-end guest of the Misses Hallinan of 840 Ash street.

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