

Famous Mooresvillians

Mooresville's  
Painter Poet:

James Whitcomb  
Riley

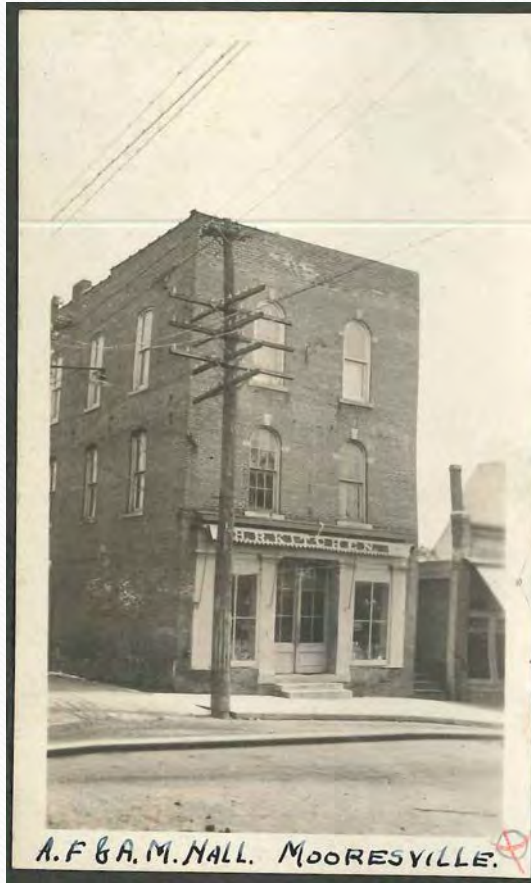


# James Whitcomb Riley in Mooresville

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- “The Perce Building” (Mooresville Moments #4), by Mooresville Public Library (video): <https://youtu.be/CyQsZNwRLQ0>
- Although famous Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) grew up in Greenfield, Indiana, in Spring 1874 he moved to Mooresville to live with his aunt and uncle, Jim and Ann Marine, while he worked as a sign painter in a shop located at 25 South Indiana Street downtown. The building is known as the Perce Building (for owner Dr. B. H. Perce, who had it constructed around 1865).

# The Perce Building (built ca. 1865)



# Examples of Signs Painted by James Whitcomb Riley



**Admiring the Gift** - Librarian James Sloan and two members of the library staff, Mrs. Alice Siders, at left and Mrs. Grace Nye, examine the sign which James Whitcomb Riley painted for the Phillipson store in Warsaw long before he became Indiana's most famous poet.

*Warsaw Times Union* Saturday August 8, 1959

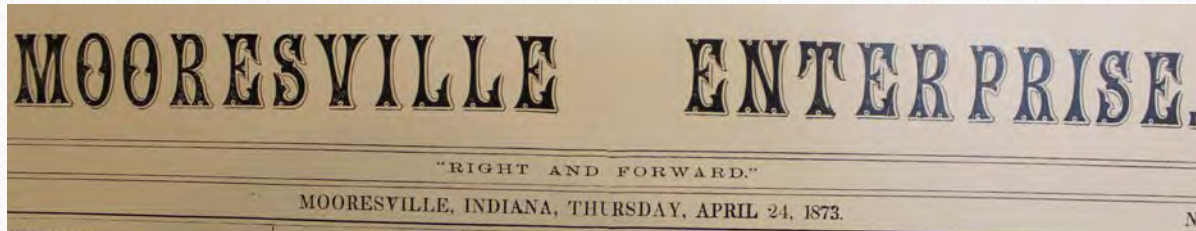


James Whitcomb Riley worked as a sign painter in his early 20s. Image courtesy James Whitcomb Riley Old Home Society Collection.



J. P. Calvert

- In addition to sign painting, Riley wrote articles and humorous quips for the local newspaper, the *Mooreville Enterprise*, as well as for other Morgan County newspapers. When trade was slack, Riley would slip around the block to hang out with local photographer and Civil War veteran Jarvis P. Calvert at his art and photographer studio on East Harrison Street.



James Whitcomb Riley (ca. 1874)



# James Whitcomb Riley's "Business Card" (1871)

Source:  
Elizabeth Van  
Allen, *James  
Whitcomb  
Riley: A Life.*  
(1999)  
Bloomington:  
Indiana  
University  
Press.



# Painter Before Poet

- The Press remembers James Whitcomb Riley's career as a sign painter

James Whitcomb Riley began life as a painter of fence advertisements, and slowly developed into a poet. The common course of rhymesters is to begin life as a poet and rapidly develop into fence painters, or something more insignificant.

*Detroit (MI) Free Press, Monday, March 2, 1885, p. 4.*

James Whitcomb Riley began his career as a sign painter, and for a time traveled through Indiana with a patent medicine man. He looks more like a comic actor than a poet, and he adds many of the qualities of the former to those of the latter.

*Elkhart (IN) Daily Review, April 2, 1888, p. 3.*

# Painter Before Poet

- The Press remembers James Whitcomb Riley's career as a sign painter (con't.)

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, the Indiana poet who thinks and writes in the peculiar dialect of that State, was launched into life as a sign painter.

*St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch*, Monday, December 21, 1885, p. 4.

James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier poet, is a man of thirty-seven years, of slight build, not tall, with long thin hands, a pale complexion, large and brilliant gray eyes, a prominent nose, thin lips and blonde hair. He is a fluent and interesting talker, and likes queer people; was taught sign painting as a trade, but didn't encourage his parents by special proficiency therein.

*Selma (AL) Times-Argus*, Friday, December 18, 1885, p. 2.

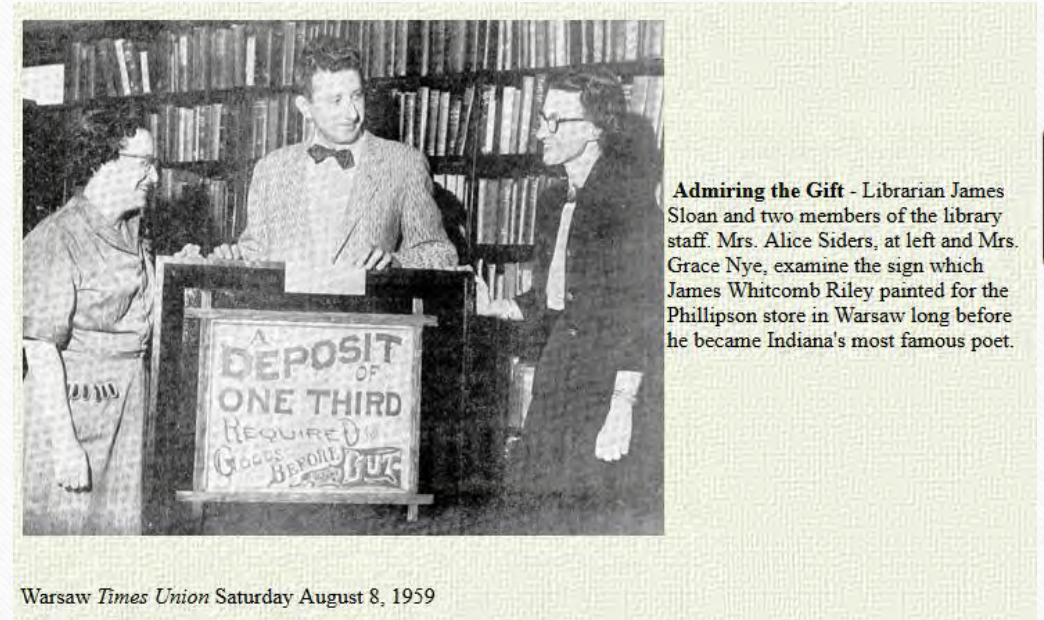


# Painter Before Poet

- The Press remembers James Whitcomb Riley's career as a sign painter (con't.)

—James Whitcomb Riley, the poet, who lectured in Princeton a few years ago, painted fence advertisements in early life. This shows that although a man may begin well, in nine cases out ten he degenerates.

*Princeton (IN) Clarion-Leader*, Thursday, March 19, 1885, p. 4.



Admiring the Gift - Librarian James Sloan and two members of the library staff Mrs. Alice Siders, at left and Mrs. Grace Nye, examine the sign which James Whitcomb Riley painted for the Phillipson store in Warsaw long before he became Indiana's most famous poet.

*Warsaw Times Union* Saturday August 8, 1959

*Warsaw (IN) Times Union*, Saturday, August 8, 1959.

# Painter Before Poet

• The Press remembers James Whitcomb Riley's career as a sign painter (con't.)

[by S. B. McManus in the *Warsaw (IN) Times*, reprinted in the *Evansville (IN) Journal*, March 20, 1889, p. 5]

## WHEN JAMES WAS "JIM."

A Reminiscence of James Whitcomb Riley's Sign-Painting Days.

S. B. McManus, in *Warsaw Times*: I have wondered a good many times how many people in Warsaw remember when James Whitcomb Riley was a resident, for a time, of that place? I have forgotten how long he was there, and it is more than probable in writing this I am, figuratively, "carrying coals to Newcastle," repeating something better known to others than myself. But there is one little incident of his sojourn there that I like to think of. It is this: It was in the spring of 1878—when I was reading medicine there and Riley was in town filling an engagement, or engagements, painting window-signs. He was handy at this sort of thing, and did some nice jobs. Later, with a very deft and cunning hand, he made drawings for his poems, which were as

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full of artistic strength and quaintness as his "Old Swimmin' Hole" is full of poetry. About this time the Indian printed some little things of mine—picturesquely little, some of them, from a literary stand-point. But out of charity, or to encourage me, or to get rid of me, the rhymes were printed, and one day Riley and I were talking about them while he was painting a sign of the Boss jewelry store, near Mr. Wynant's drug store. In a mild, friendly way, he was a trifle envious of my success in getting into print, and I posed beside him while he painted the "RY" in jewelry, as a person whose literary standing was assured. When he had made a marine blue period, he took off his apron, and we went over to the Wright House together to get a little bit of rhyme which he said he had there. He wanted my opinion and criticism on it, and as I had

more opinion and criticism to give than anything else, I was willing to bestow it even on a sign painter. Riley read the poem. It was called "The Argonaut," and inexperienced as I was I knew that only a poet and a genius could have written it. I was unstinted in my praise, and I knew the Hoosier poet was born—very much born, and was only waiting the recognition of the public, which in a few years it so magnificently and munificently gave. After this episode we became warm friends, and an abiding and deep-rooted friendship was the result. I have met him since then, and have read about all he has ever written, but nothing ever pleased me as much—no "reading" I have ever heard of his—pleased me as well as that little poem, "The Argonaut," read one raw spring day, up in a cold room, by a curtainless window, in the Wright House block.

# James Whitcomb Riley's Comedy Routine: "The World's Only Blind Sign Painter"

(from the *Pittsburg [PA] Despatch*, reprinted in the *Knoxville [TN] Daily Chronicle*, Friday, August 14, 1885, p. 7)

## POET AND SIGN-PAINTER.

James Whitcomb Riley as the "Only Blind Sign-Painter on Earth."

[Cor. Pittsburg Despatch.]

I was running a weekly paper in a small northern Indiana town at the time I first met him. You know how the inhabitants of small places go wild over anything of a freakish nature, and the reigning sensation just then was the work of a blind sign painter. A party of advertising fakirs had just struck the village, who decorated the dead walls and fences in the most gaudy way imaginable, the finishing and artistic touches being done by a member of the party who was known as the "Only Blind Sign Painter on Earth." Business with them was rushing, every merchant in town coming around and wanting work done, for when the blind sign painter, who was none other than Riley, felt his way up a ladder and dashed off an artistic sign, half the inhabitants of the place turned out to witness the feat.

The scheme of the fakirs, which was an original one and calculated to catch the multitude, all depended on the histrionic ability of the Hoosier poet. He had large, frank gray eyes, and the vision of an eagle. When the surface was selected he was brought out and led to the foot of the ladder. A part of his business was to go up a step, carefully feeling his way, then turning, stare into vacancy in an aimless, moony sort of style, and bring to bear on the crowd a face full of pain and pathos. This rarely failed to draw expressions of sympathy, and what was more to the point, additional advertising contracts. Slowly climbing the ladder he fingered the surface, measuring with hands the dimensions of the letters, and then, suddenly seizing the brush, the sign was reeled off much more rapidly than the average painter could do it.

Another catching bit of "business" was to stumble on coming down, when one of the party gave him a shoving below, with an imprecation and a brutal order to be more careful.

"Shame, shame! Some one ought to take the poor man away from those ruffians," were sample remarks from the crowd on such occasions. One day, when he was up the ladder, I caught his eye. My suspicions had been aroused, and he saw it in my face. Slowly and deliberately, with owlish solemnity, he winked that great gray eye of his in a way which spoke whole libraries. After that I was taken in his confidence, and finding that he was a gold mine of talent induced him to leave the painters and go to work in my office, a task which was not difficult, for he only regarded the "Blind Painter" dodge as a boyish lark, and was getting tired of the fun. That was the beginning of his newspaper career.

# Questions?

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