

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY: THE HOOSIER POET



“The rhythms are familiar on the page to most Hoosiers, but there’s nothing like hearing the beloved James Whitcomb Riley verse, full of dialect and cadence, out loud — especially if you’re hearing it from the lips of Danny Russel, Riley impersonator extraordinaire. After more than a decade of playing the famous scribe, Russel’s got the poems (and the poet) down pat.”

— Indianapolis Monthly

He once claimed he possessed “neither intellectual brilliance nor physical prowess” and “cared nothing for school, and deserted it at the first opportunity to take up a wandering life,” so how did Riley become the most popular poet in America?

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Mark Twain called his friend James Whitcomb Riley “the funniest man in America!” With his depictions of Hoosiers as a kindly and wholesome people, Riley’s vast output made him nationally famous — the 19th century’s best-selling poet.

Danny Russel will bring this whimsical portrayal to your venue as he captures our Hoosier Poet’s charming sense of mischief. He initially spent months researching and compiling the show during visits to Riley’s boyhood home in Greenfield (built by his father Reuben during the 1850s), his adult residence in Indianapolis at Lockerbie Square, and in Bloomington at the Lilly Library, which features the world’s largest collection of manuscripts directly from the poet’s hand.

James Whitcomb Riley looks back at his difficult childhood, his work as an itinerant sign painter, his time as a musician and actor with traveling medicine shows, his newspaper stints, overwhelming popularity on the lecture circuit and unprecedented book sales. In a sentimental, humorous and completely captivating manner, he recites and performs *A Nonsense Rhyme*, *The Hired Man’s Faith in Children*, *When the Frost is on the Punkin*, *The Raggedy Man*, and *Little Orphant Annie*. Or request your favorite from among Riley’s immense treasure trove of nostalgic verses (1,044 in all).

Riley’s dialect poetry inspired the creation of Raggedy Ann, and with his gift to the

Indianapolis/Marion County Public Library, he revealed how important it was that future generations have free access to books. The Riley Memorial Association, Riley Hospital, and Camp Riley for Youth all still operate in his name, making the poet’s legacy unique because of what he symbolizes for the children of his home state.



Our Hoosier Poet entertained at the White House on numerous occasions; acquired honorary degrees from Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, Wabash College and Indiana University;

was elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters; and in 1912 was awarded a special medal commemorating his artistic merit.

His esteemed friend Booth Tarkington wrote, “Riley had a literally unmatched power over his audience for riotous laughter or for actual copious tears.”

In addition to his illustrious acting career and numerous tours, Mr. Russel is a six-time grant recipient honored by the Indiana Arts Commission.