

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Where 'Orphant Annie' Lived

When we think of Greenfield, Indiana in the future we will think of the James Whitcomb Riley homestead on West Main street, where there is perhaps the most complete collection of Rileyana available for public inspection.

It is a homey, two-storied house, painted white with green shutters and has an inviting front porch and upper balcony. Originally there was a white fence and two tall maple trees between the house and the street, but when modern paving and sidewalks became a necessity, sentiment was discarded and the fence and trees are things remembered by the past generation.

A few years ago the home was purchased by the City of Greenfield, and its restoration and management rests with a historical society. The committee which planned the collection of furniture and personal belongings for the decoration of the several rooms of the house have completed a living museum which has given pleasure to thousands of tourists, school children and residents of Greenfield alike.

The capable curator who conducted us through the house told us the story of the poet's life and work as though it was the first time that day she repeated it. Although she had not known all the characters in Mr. Riley's poems she was well acquainted with the "Old Swimming' Hole" and she knew every corner of the house, including "the rafter-room an' cubby-hole and press." She told the story of the house and its occupants delightfully and with genuine enjoyment. The house was built by Mr. Riley's father and he also made most of the furniture. His chest of crude tools is displayed in the cubby-hole under the stairs. Hanging in a closet off the boy's room on the second floor are "the pants an' round-about" of the "little boy who wouldn't say his prayers." James Whitcomb Riley's small single spool bed is in one corner of this room and his brother John's is in the other.

"Our hired girl, she's 'Lizabuth Ann' slept under the rafters and had a back stair to go up and down. The curator told us a true story about "Little Orphant Annie," the hired girl, which we think is worth repeating "Lizabuth Ann" had been with the Riley household for many years when all of a sudden one day she just

disappeared – causing much sadness among young and old Rileys alike. After years had passed, the poet who had thought of her many times, inserted an ad in the Indianapolis newspaper, asking for her. Orphant Annie read it and came back, apologizing for her sudden departure and explaining that she just couldn't say goodbye. She had been married and had lived the intervening years not many miles from the Riley home. She spent her declining years in Greenfield where she was always known as Orphant Annie. If you have not read the poem about "witch tales 'at Annie tells about, an' the Gobble-uns' at gits you, ef you don't watch out!," you had better get down your volume of Riley's works and do it right now. Many is the child of 50 years ago who was brought up on these charming verses.

We drove through the park which has been set aside by the city of Greenfield to the memory of her native son. It surrounds the "Old swimmin' hole where the crick so still and deep looked like a baby-river that was laying half asleep."

As we rode through this delightful countryside we could imagine what prompted James Whitcomb Riley to write "When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock, and you hear the kyouch and the gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock," for that is just what is happening in the state of Indiana at this season of the year. There are pumpkins, hay shocks, corn stocks and rich, ripe grain everywhere you look, and you think of Halloween and Thanksgiving – the joy of a child's life.