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PHOTO BY NICK FIALA

Actor Danny Russell performs as legendary Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley on Saturday.

Actor embodies ‘Little Cousin Jasper’ author during festival reading

By Nick Fiala
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Actor Danny Russell returned to the Little Cousin Jasper Festival on Saturday to perform as the legendary poet, James Whitcomb Riley. As Riley, Russell recalled the poet's humble beginnings, his love for his idyllic childhood and his contributions to popular culture. He was born in 1849 in Greenfield, Indiana. He would go on to be known by many labels including simply “The Hoosier Poet.”

Near the beginning of Riley's speeches, he noted that his family desired for him to become either a politician or an attorney, neither of which he was apt to become.

“You see, to be a good politician, you have to be a fairly decent student,” he said. “And I hated school. I spent most of my days cutting class and going swimming in Brandywine Creek.”

Riley made a living at odd jobs, including a traveling medicine show, where he gave grand speeches promising the benefits of mysterious medicines that could supposedly cure just about any ailment.

“This puts a spring in your step, it puts bounce in your hop,” he said. “Best of all, puts your money in my pocket.”

For these shows, Riley also read his early poetry and taught himself to play guitar, banjo drums, violin

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and piano, despite not actually being able to read music. His father, however, was deeply displeased and forced Riley back home to become an attorney.

"I just turned those legal documents over and wrote verses of poetry on the back," he said. "Then my father sent me away."

Eventually, though, he took a job writing poetry for a newspaper in Madison County in 1877.

"But in just six weeks, thanks to my frivolous little contributions, that newspaper had four times as many readers," he said.

Riley went on to write for the Indianapolis Journal. And, in 1883, his first book, "The Old Swimming Hole," was published.

"I think the key to my success is that so much of my poetry is based on my childhood memories," Riley said. "I often said I had a perfect childhood and a perfect recollection of it."

A pivotal moment in Riley's life came earlier, though, when he and his father met a tramp by the side of the road while on their way back to the family farm from Indianapolis. Riley's father took pity on the tramp and invited him to work on the 194-acre farm, where he stayed for seven months. Despite being about 75 years old, the tramp insisted on doing the most demanding chores.

"He seemed to thrive on hard physical labor," Riley said. "He impressed me so much that, years later, I wrote a poem in his honor called 'The Raggedy Man.'"

Later on, Riley would write another tribute to the tramp, entitled "The

Hired Man's Faith in Children."

"Out of everything I've published, it's my personal favorite," he said, "because, through the raggedy man's eyes, I'm describing how we both feel about kids."

Riley himself went on to amass a fortune of millions from his successful writing career. And this would lead to the founding of Riley Hospital for Children.

"It's 93 years old this year," he said. "Doctors come from all over the planet to work at the only hospital founded by a poet. My name is forever connected to poetry, to Indiana, to kids and to the best medical care available — That's Riley Hospital for Children."

To tie into the festival's theme of honoring first responders, Russell read from Riley's poem "The Soldier" near the end of his performance. Then he read from the poem that the festival itself is named after, which Riley wrote during one of his many trips to Rensselaer. In many ways, it's a true love letter to the town where the speaker in the poem meets his idol, Little Cousin Jasper.

"Wisht our town ain't like it is!/
Wisht it's ist as big as his!/
Wisht 'at his folks they'd move *here*/
An we'd move to Rensselaer!"