

Remembering Agnes Mahoney

Agnes Mahoney (13 Sept 1895-5 Sept 1981) never stopped loving and caring for children, especially Indiana's children of all ages and abilities who needed a hand of help for a better life. From age 16 until she passed at age 85, she was always there for the children of Indiana as a Riley Cheer Guild member, teacher, school principal, friend, advocate, and leader, a true and unrivaled champion for children. When the Riley Cheer Guild formed in April 1924, Mahoney was there as one of the 12 founding members; she also served as Secretary-Treasurer, one of the Guild's founding officers.

An appreciation for James Whitcomb Riley and his poetry began early on and remained a constant throughout her life. Mahoney had childhood memories of Riley coming into her grandfather's downtown grocery store to order groceries and she and her brother would deliver groceries to Riley's Lockerbie home. Later, the 1912 graduating class of Shortridge High School in Indianapolis of which Mahoney was a member, dedicated their school yearbook to none other than James Whitcomb Riley, honoring him for his enduring impact on their lives.

When the Riley Cheer Guild celebrated the hospital's first Christmas in December 1924, Mahoney was there as the hospital's *first* Santa Claus. She dressed up as Santa Claus and on one of her patient visits, she went to the Boy's Ward where there were four boys. One boy burst out in laughter, saying "*I never saw Santa with lace on his pants.*" Mahoney's slip had slipped out from her Santa costume and was showing. She quickly recovered and said, "*Santa was just doing that to see if you were paying attention. And since you were, you get an extra gift.*"

Mahoney once described the work of the Riley Cheer Guild in a 1953 *Indianapolis Star* article like this, "*The Guild is indeed a rose in a vast world of misery, a rose that helps many to forget the thorns of life.*" Mahoney herself was a "rose" for over six decades not only inside Riley Hospital for Children as a long-standing Cheer Guild leader but outside the hospital in her work as one of Indiana's finest educators. In her long life, she persevered in efforts to help young people – in schools, courts, hospitals, Sunday school classes, and reformatories. She worked as a teacher and principal in the Indianapolis Public School system for 48 years (1913-1961) and of no coincidence spent 27 of those years as principal of Clemens Vonnegut School No. 9 from 1934 until she retired in 1961. School No. 9 was located at Vermont and Fulton Streets, about 2 blocks away from the James Whitcomb Riley Lockerbie home. At School No. 9, Riley day observances were a special ritual and tradition for students dating back to the first Riley Day celebrations in 1915, with older students getting the opportunity to parade to Riley's home and participate in festivities there, including presentation of plays directed by Miss Mahoney that featured children reciting some of Riley's poetry. The Riley Memorial Association could always count on Mahoney and her students to be a part of many special events at the hospital, such as the dedication of the hospital's hydrotherapy pool on October 7, 1935.

A 60-year volunteer at the Indiana Boys' School in Plainfield, Mahoney traveled from Indianapolis to Plainfield every weekend without fail to teach Sunday school classes and serve as a counselor and mother to many of the boys with no family ties. It was a commitment that she would keep no matter what. Once, many years ago, the interurban train (i.e. an electric street car) she was taking to the Boy's School was unable to cross a bridge that had iced over. She and another Sunday school teacher crawled across the bridge on their hands and knees to get to the Sunday services. A new hospital clinic at the Boys School Hospital was named in honor of Agnes Mahoney in 1971 for her dedicated years of service.

Mahoney was quick on the uptake with kids, not only at Riley Hospital but at school as well. Stories are many and legendary of her caring, compassion, and unconventional methods as a teacher and principal to reach children at high risk. Mahoney never talked with children at her desk. Instead, she played baseball with them in the schoolyard, basketball in the gym, and asked them to help her in the supply room. In later years, she admitted her timing had gotten off a bit but she still could take a firm batter's stance and make a hefty swipe at the ball. She knew the name of every child she had taught and most of the names of the some 900 children who attended School 9, where she was principal for 27 years.

On Mahoney's second day as a teacher at School 9, one of her boys slid a snake into her snack packet. She removed the snake with a self-confidence she was far from feeling, took the hint and installed a regular menagerie of white rats, pigeons, chipmunks, alligators and rabbits that gave the children just the incentive they needed to learn to read and find out more about animals.

Once, Mahoney followed into a tavern the father of a child whose textbook rental fee was unpaid and pointed out to the startled man that if he could afford to go in a tavern, he could afford to pay for his child's books. On one occasion, she told a group of Junior League members visiting her school, "We have lice." She thereupon explained the manner in which the school coped with such an unwelcome problem.

Miss Mahoney earned many honors from her profession, community and church, receiving awards and citations from such organizations as B'nai B'rith, the American Legion, Freedoms Foundation and Theta Sigma Phi (later known as Women in Communication). Probably her most distinctive honor took place in a 1945 ceremony in Indianapolis when the Archbishop of Indianapolis conferred on Mahoney the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* ("For Church and Pope") papal medal on behalf of Pope Pius XII—the highest honor that can be given to Catholic laity. Mahoney was recognized by the Pope for her distinguished service and dedication to the community and church.

But Mahoney's many honors pale in comparison to what she accomplished in a lifetime of being there for kids in all kinds of places, including Riley Hospital for Children, to transform thousands of lives of children at high-risk through her rock steady presence, abilities to reach kids, and persistent belief in the potential of all children. At her passing in 1981, the *Indianapolis Star* wrote on its editorial pages in tribute: "If greatness is measured by one's influence for good, Agnes Mahoney was in the ranks of the great."

Photo credit lines: Photos courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives.

Also, Agnes Mahoney (at high school graduation), 1912 Shortridge High School Annual, p. 54, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library at: <https://www.digitalindy.org/digital/collection/shs/id/1874/rec/9> Public Domain.

References:

"Indianapolis planning Christmas Cheer for All," *Indianapolis Star*, December 17, 1924, p. 3, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

Yearbook of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis (July 1, 1970-September 30, 1971), Archdiocesan Chancery, Indianapolis, (see February 12), p. 84, available at:

<https://archindy.org/archives/documents/Yearbook1971.pdf>

“Boys School Honor Due Volunteer Aide,” *Indianapolis Star*, February 13, 1971, p. 8, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Proclamation Issued: Indiana Honors Agnes Mahoney,” *The Criterion*, February 12, 1971, accessed through Indiana State Library.

Indiana Governor Edgar D. Whitcomb Proclamation (honoring Agnes Mahoney), February 5, 1971, accessed through Indiana State Library and Indiana State Archives.

“What one woman gave to the public schools” (and) “Tributes to Miss Mahoney,” *The Criterion*, Vol. 1, No. 37, (June 16, 1961, p. 2, available at:

<https://www.archindy.org/criterion/files/1961/pdfs/19610616.pdf>

Oral History interview with Agnes Mahoney, February 28, 1975, courtesy Plainfield, Indiana Public Library.

“Pupils of Vonnegut School to give Riley Day Program,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 5, 1946 p. 28, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Riley Birthday to be marked,” *Indianapolis Star*, September 24, 1935, p. 12, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“School to pay honor to Riley,” *Indianapolis Star*, September 25, 1934, p. 22, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“School #9, with memories of Riley, cherishes something others miss,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 2, 1935, p. 5, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

““Frost is on the Punkin” – Children will laugh again in Famous Old House on Lockerbie Street,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 6, 1940, p. 10, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Hugh Shields, Riley Interpreter, to Head Birthday Observance Monday,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 2, 1940, p. 26, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Agnes N. Mahoney dies; was teacher,” *Indianapolis Star*, September 7, 1981, pp. 25-26, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Agnes Mahoney,” (editorial), *Indianapolis Star*, September 9, 1981, p. 12, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Archbishop Ritter formally confers honors on 7 priests and 4 laymen,” *Indianapolis Star*, March 12, 1945, p. 9, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Woman and 3 Layman Given Papal Honors,” *Indianapolis Times*, February 9, 1945, p. 12, accessed through Hoosier State Chronicles.

“Shortridge Alumna Wins Church Medal,” *Daily Echo*, February 14, 1945, p. 3, Indianapolis Public Library Digital Collections: <https://www.digitalindy.org/digital/collection/shs/id/73195/>

“Largest Hospital Auxiliary Spreads Good Cheer,” *Indianapolis Star*, November 22, 1953, p. 67.

“Riley Cheer Guild to mark 10th year,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 18, 1934, p. 6, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Riley Cheer Guild to mark 16th year,” *Indianapolis Star*, March 31, 1940, p. 51, accessed through Indianapolis Public Library.

“Agnes Mahoney,” in Hubert H. Hawkins and Robert R. McClarren, eds., *Indiana Lives*, (Historical Record Association, Hopkinsville, KY, 1967), p. 506.

Agnes Mahoney, Find a Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/105026188/agnes-mahoney>