

Facebook Post Idea #1: Little Orphant Annie

Everyone loves a good scary story. This Halloween, be sure to include a reading of “*Little Orphant Annie*,” one of James Whitcomb Riley’s most popular poems, among the goblins and ghost stories you might dare to tell to the children big and small in your life.

Written by Riley in 1885, the poem immortalizes Mary Alice “Allie” Smith, a young girl who boarded with the Riley family in exchange for carrying out of household chores. Over the light of the evening lamp, “Little Orphant Annie” told children tales of the scary endings awaiting mischievous children at the hands of goblins and ghosts and warned them that the “goggle-uns ‘at gits you ef you don’t watch out!”

“Little Orphant Annie” captured the hearts of many, so much so that shortly after Riley died in 1916, one of the ideas initially proposed and reported in *The Indianapolis News* was to create a children’s hospital and name it “Little Orphant Annie” Hospital, “glorifying one of Mr. Riley’s most beloved characters.” The idea for a children’s hospital did take shape in 1917 and in the audience at the 1922 cornerstone laying ceremony for the James Whitcomb Riley Hospital for Children was the real “Little Orphant Annie” herself, Mary Alice “Allie” Smith Gray, now a widow, who died nine months before the hospital opened in 1924. Many early Halloween celebrations at the hospital often featured readings of “Little Orphant Annie.”

Actress Colleen Moore starred as “Little Orphant Annie” in the 1918 silent film of the same name, which also included film footage shot of Riley before his passing in 1916. Moore went on to find fame in flapper-era silent films in the early 1920s. She later visited Indianapolis for 2 weeks in 1936 with her “fairy castle” dollhouse valued at the time at \$435, 000 to L.S. Ayres for the public to tour as a benefit to Riley Hospital for Children. Today, Moore’s palatial dollhouse is on display at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry.

The many lives of Little Orphant Annie continued. The Little Orphant Annie comic strip debuted in 1924 in the *Chicago Tribune*, was syndicated nationwide, and continues, off and on, to the present. “Little Orphant Annie” and the “Raggedy Man,” another Riley poem, are said to have inspired the Raggedy Ann doll, which appeared in 1918. The Little Orphan Annie radio show was popular in the 1930s and 1940s. The Broadway musical, *Annie*, also based on Riley’s character, ran from 1977 to 1983; the film, *Annie*, came out in 1982. The “Little Orphant Annie” 1918 silent film was restored in 2018 by Indianapolis-based film historian, Eric Grayson.

Sources:

Mary Alice Smith, Find a Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/11636232/mary-alice-gray>

Mary Alice Smith: The real-life Little Orphant Annie, Hoosier History Live:
<https://hoosierhistorylive.org/mail/2011-10-01.html>

Little Orphant Annie: <https://indianapublicmedia.org/momentofindianahistory/little-orphant-annie/>

Colleen Moore’s Fairy Castle Dollhouse/Chicago Museum of Science and Industry:
<https://www.msichicago.org/explore/whats-here/exhibits/colleen-moores-fairy-castle/the-story/>

Little Orphant Annie film 1918 restoration by Eric Grayson:

<https://silentology.wordpress.com/2018/05/22/dvd-review-little-orphant-annie-1918/>

Original poem, The Elf Child, *Indianapolis Journal*, November 15, 1885:

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/09/10/little-orphant-annie-james-whitcomb-riley>

John Tarkington home:

<https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/ILWDPeat/id/32/rec/5>

Mr. Riley was a frequent guest at the house, and, it is said, composed verses and prose on the south porch, which was part of the original house, but which has been removed. "Katie's wish" and "The Flying Islands of the Night" were among them. Mrs. Jameson has the manuscript of the "Boss Girl," which was later developed into the story of "Little Orphan Annie," which was also written on the porch. Booth Tarkington made the design for the covers of that story in its original form.

Photos:

Mary Alice "Allie" Smith:

https://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/lilly/exhibitions_legacy/riley/docs/1_orphanie.html

Little Orphan Annie/Illustration: <https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/V0002/id/1970/>