

Retro Riley: Thanksgiving 2024

As you settle your fork into a piece of your favorite pie this Thanksgiving, impress your friends and family with a few “bites” of Riley Hospital’s “pie” history. Here’s one big bite:

The beautiful grandfather clock in the original lobby of Riley Hospital (just outside the Edward A. Block Family Library) has everything to do with pie. James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) loved pie, all kinds of pie. And he ate lots of pie everywhere he went but especially at downtown’s Union Station, once the center for all people coming and going daily by train. Trains were the only way Riley could travel across the country to his many public lectures during the last decades of the 19th century. He even wrote a poem called “The Train Misser” to commiserate about his missing a train at Union Station.

Long ago at Union Station, there once was a lunch counter at the old Depot Restaurant where Riley was a regular for his piece of pie and talk with good friends. One of those good friends was Tom Taggart (1856-1929), who early in his career managed that lunch counter. Taggart would go on to become a powerful political force for the Democratic Party in Indiana and the nation, but his lifelong friendship with Riley began at the lunch counter he once managed where he and Riley talked – over pie. Hilton Ultimous Brown (1850-1958), famed Hoosier journalist for over 75 years, recalled those early days with Taggart and Riley: “Back in the 80s, when James Whitcomb Riley was lecturing throughout the country, . . . I was a cub reporter and visited the Union station every day when . . . the trains . . . brought important people back after journeys afield. Riley frequently stopped at the station at Tom Taggart’s restaurant to get lunch. It was there over pumpkin pie that I first met him. He always took pie. Riley invariably took pie . . . I have known him to take one piece of pie after another and nothing else except milk. . . Sometimes Tom, himself, would appear behind the counter and what Riley and he said was more stimulating than Tom’s comestibles.”

Thanks to partners at the Indiana State Library Rare Books and Manuscripts which holds copies of original menus from Tom Taggart’s Union Station Dining Room for getting into the fun of this post and for reviewing Taggart’s menus to find that Taggart served up the following pies (no wonder Mr. Riley loved to go there!): Lemon (Frosted), Green Apple, Pumpkin, Blackberry, Apple, Cherry, Lemon Meringue, Rhubarb, Raspberry, Orange (Frosted), Mince, Coconut Custard, Grape, Huckleberry, Peach, Coconut Cream, Peach Meringue, Apricot Meringue, Plain Custard, Lemon Cream, Melon Banana, and Cranberry.

Andrew A. Fendrick took over managing the old Union Station Depot restaurant and lunch counter in 1902 after Taggart, a “warm friend,” left to move on to other things like becoming Auditor of Marion County, 3-time Mayor of Indianapolis and United States Senator. While Riley finished his last national lecture tour in 1903, he still traveled periodically to ceremonial events where he read his poetry, which probably meant a trip to Union Station from time to time for a piece of pie and conversation with good friends. Fendrick continued as manager under P. Merkle & Sons until 1920, when Mr. Fendrick and his son, Irvin, bought out the restaurant

holdings at Union Station. Fendrick would go on to establish two Fendrick restaurants in Indianapolis, one in Union Station and the other at the Traction Terminal Station, the largest interurban station in the world (now the location of the Hilton Indianapolis). Fendrick's helped promote racial equality in Indianapolis by taking such steps like opening its doors to serve African American patrons in 1949 and hosting the 1955 all African American State Champion Crispus Attucks High School basketball team of which basketball great Oscar Robertson was a member.

No date is available as to when the grandfather clock in Riley Hospital's original lobby was given in memory of Mr. and Mrs. A.A. Fendrick (Andrew A. Fendrick, 1861-1936 and Mary Veith Fedrick, 1862-1951 and son, Irvin A. Fendrick, 1896-1966). Best guess only but one can assume that the gift of the grandfather clock was most likely given by the Fendrick family to honor a friendship with Riley forged long ago at the lunch counter at Union Station that Fendrick (and before him, Tom Taggart, managed). The clock was precision-crafted by hand by the Herschede Hall Clock Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, a great American name in clock manufacturing. Inside the clock is a plate noting that the clock received the Grand Prize at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, a world's fair celebrating the completion of the Panama Canal. That plate was put on all clocks leaving the Herschede plant after the company won the award and was used for several years.

The Herschede Hall Clock Company made a 2 weight clock that could chime on the quarter hour —which is quite unusual as clocks that chime on the quarter hour normally require a 3 weight clock.

And, just a few other little bites of Riley Hospital's "pie" history:

Riley loved pie so much he wrote about pie in many of his poems, including – *A Gustatory Achievement* (Last Thanksgivin'-dinner we et at Granny's house, an' she had--ist like she alluz does--most an' best pies ever wuz); *The Diners in the Kitchen* (Our dog Fi do et the pie-dough); *Out to Old Aunt Mary's* (Ah! was there, ever, so kind a face and gentle as hers, or such a grace of welcoming, as she cut the cake or the juicy pies that she joyed to make just for the visiting children's sake); and *Our Hired Girl* (Our hired girl, she's 'Lizabuth Ann; An' she can cook best things to eat! She ist puts dough in our pie-pan, An' pours in somepin' 'at's good an' sweet). Riley even waged a campaign to sway his lifelong friend and 2-time Pulitzer Prize winner celebrated Hoosier author, Booth Tarkington, to cease smoking cigarettes and join him at the shrine of eating pie, but Tarkington blew smoke at Riley's efforts and refused.

So, this Thanksgiving, in tribute to Mr. Riley's love of pie: enjoy your favorite piece of pie, swap stories and Riley's "pie" poems with friends and family and celebrate the lasting power of a great piece of pie.

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Photographs:



Union Station, ca 1889

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Grandfather Clock in Original Hospital Lobby

Photo courtesy Richard L. Schreiner



Grandfather Clock Honors Memory of Mr. and Mrs. A.A. Fendrick

Photo courtesy Richard L. Schreiner



Taggart's Union Station Dining Room menus, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Indiana State Library.