

Riley James Whitcomb

# Neighborly Poems and Dialect Sketches



James Riley

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**Riley J.**

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# Riley James Whitcomb

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### PREFACE

As far back into boyhood as the writer's memory may intelligently go, the "country poet" is most pleasantly recalled. He was, and is, as common as the "country fiddler," and as full of good old-fashioned music. Not a master of melody, indeed, but a poet, certainly —

"Who, through long days of labor,  
And nights devoid of ease,  
Still heard in his soul the music  
Of wonderful melodies."

And it is simply the purpose of this series of dialectic studies to reflect the real worth of this homely child of nature, and to echo faithfully, if possible, the faltering music of his song.

In adding to this series, as the writer has, for many years, been urged to do, and answering as steadfast a demand of Benj. F. Johnson's first and oldest friends, it has been decided that this further work of his be introduced to the reader of the volume as was the old man's first work to the reader of the newspaper of nearly ten years ago.

Directly, then, referring to the Indianapolis "Daily Journal," — under whose management the writer had for some time been employed, — from issue of date June 17, 1882, under editorial caption of "A Boone County Pastoral," this article is herewith quoted:

Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone county, who considers the Journal a "very valubul" newspaper, writes to enclose us an original poem, desiring that we kindly accept it for publication, as "many neghbor and friends is astin' him to have the same struck off."

Mr. Johnson thoughtfully informs us that he is "no edjucated man," but that he has, "from childhood up tel old enough to vote, allus wrote more er less poetry, as many of an alburn in the neighborhood can testify." Again, he says that he writes "from the hart out"; and there is a touch of genuine pathos in the frank avowal, "Thare is times when I write the tears rolls down my cheeks."

In all sincerity, Mr. Johnson, we are glad to publish the poem you send, and just as you have written it. That is its greatest charm. Its very defects compose its excellence. You need no better education than the one from which emanates "The Old Swimmin'-Hole." It is real poetry, and all the more tender and lovable for the unquestionable evidence it bears of having been written "from the hart out." The only thing we find to — but hold! Let us first lay the poem before the reader:

Here followed the poem, "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," entire — the editorial comment ending as follows:

The only thing now, Mr. Johnson — as we were about to observe — the only thing we find to criticise, at all relative to the poem, is your closing statement to the effect that "It was wrote to go to the tune of 'The Captin with his Whiskers!'" You should not have told us that, O Rare Ben. Johnson!

A week later, in the "Journal" of date June 24th, followed this additional mention of "Benj. F. Johnson, of Boone":

It is a pleasure for us to note that the publication of the poem of "The Old Swimmin'-Hole," to which the Journal, with just pride, referred last week, has proved almost as great a pleasure to its author as to the hosts of delighted readers who have written in its praise, or called to personally indorse our high opinion of its poetic value. We have just received a letter from Mr. Johnson, the author, inclosing us another lyrical performance, which in many features even surpasses the originality and spirit of the former effort. Certainly the least that can be said of it is that it stands a thorough proof of our first assertion, that the author, though by no means a man of learning and profound literary attainments, is none the less a true poet and an artist. The letter, accompanying this later amaranth of blooming wildwood verse, we publish in its entirety, assured that Mr. Johnson's many admirers will be charmed, as we have been, at the delicious glimpse he gives us of his inspiration, modes of study, home-life, and surroundings:

"To the Editer of the Indanoplus Jurnal:

"Respected Sir – The paper is here, markin' the old swimmin'-hole, my poetry which you seem to like so well. I joy to see it in print, and I thank you, hart and voice, fer speakin' of its merrits in the way in which you do. I am glad you thought it was real poetry, as you said in your artikle. But I make bold to ast you what was your idy in sayin' I had ortent of told you it went to the tune I spoke of in my last. I felt highly flatered tel I got that fur. Was it because you don't know the tune refered to in the letter? Er wasent some words spelt right er not? Still ef you hadent of said somepin' aginst it Ide of thought you was makin' fun. As I said before I well know my own unedjucation, but I don't think that is any reason the feelin's of the soul is stunted in theyr growth however. 'Juge not less ye be juged,' says The Good Book, and so say I, ef I thought you was makin' fun of the lines that I wrote and which you done me the onner to have printed off in sich fine style that I have read it over and over again in the paper you sent, and I would like to have about three more ef you can spare the same and state by mail what they will come at. All nature was in tune day before yisterday when your paper come to hand. It had ben a-raining hard fer some days, but that morning opened up as clear as a whissel. No clouds was in the sky, and the air was bammy with the warm sunshine and the wet smell of the earth and the locus blossoms and the flowrs and pennyroil and boneset. I got up, the first one about the place, and went forth to the plesant fields. I fed the stock with lavish hand and worterred them in merry glee, they was no bird in all the land no happier than me. I have jest wrote a verse of poetry in this letter; see ef you can find it. I also send you a whole poem which was wrote off the very day your paper come. I started it in the morning I have so feebly tride to pictur' to you and wound her up by supertime, besides doin' a fare day's work around the place.

"Ef you print this one I think you will like it better than the other. This ain't a sad poem like the other was, but you will find it full of careful thought. I pride myself on that. I also send you 30 cents in stamps fer you to take your pay out of fer the other papers I said, and also fer three more with this in it ef you have it printed and oblige. Ef you don't print this poem, keep the stamps and send me three more papers with *the other one* in – makin' the sum totul of six (6) papers altogether in full. Ever your true friend,

*Benj. F. Johnson.*

"N. B. – The tune of this one is 'The Bold Privateer.'"

Here followed the poem, "Thoughts Fer The Discouraged Farmer"; – and here, too, fittingly ends any comment but that which would appear trivial and gratuitous.

Simply, in briefest conclusion, the hale, sound, artless, lovable character of Benj. F. Johnson remains, in the writer's mind, as from the first, far less a fiction than a living, breathing, vigorous reality. – So strong, indeed, has his personality been made manifest, that many times, in visionary argument with the sturdy old myth over certain changes from the original forms of his productions, he has so incontinently beaten down all suggestions as to a less incongruous association of thoughts and words, together with protests against his many violations of poetic method, harmony, and grace, that nothing was left the writer but to submit to what has always seemed – and in truth still seems – a superior wisdom of dictation.

*J. W. R.*

*Indianapolis, July, 1891.*

## SALUTATION TO BENJ. F. JOHNSON

### THE OLD MAN

Lo! steadfast and serene,  
In patient pause between  
The seen and the unseen,  
What gentle zephyrs fan  
Your silken silver hair, —  
And what diviner air  
Breathes round you like a prayer,  
Old Man?

Can you, in nearer view  
Of Glory, pierce the blue  
Of happy Heaven through;  
And, listening mutely, can  
Your senses, dull to us,  
Hear Angel-voices thus,  
In chorus glorious —  
Old Man?

In your reposeful gaze  
The dusk of Autumn days  
Is blent with April haze,  
As when of old began  
The bursting of the bud  
Of rosy babyhood —  
When all the world was good,  
Old Man.

And yet I find a sly  
Little twinkle in your eye;  
And your whisperingly shy  
Little laugh is simply an  
Internal shout of glee  
That betrays the fallacy  
You'd perpetrate on me,  
Old Man!

So just put up the frown  
That your brows are pulling down!  
Why, the fleetest boy in town,  
As he bared his feet and ran,

Could read with half a glance —  
And of keen rebuke, perchance —  
Your secret countenance,  
Old Man!

Now, honestly, confess:  
Is an old man any less  
Than the little child we bless  
And caress when we can?  
Isn't age but just a place  
Where you mask the childish face  
To preserve its inner grace,  
Old Man?

Hasn't age a truant day,  
Just as that you went astray  
In the wayward, restless way,  
When, brown with dust and tan,  
Your roguish face essayed,  
In solemn masquerade,  
To hide the smile it made  
Old Man?

Now, fair, and square, and true,  
Don't your old soul tremble through,  
As in youth it used to do  
When it brimmed and overran  
With the strange, enchanted sights,  
And the splendors and delights  
Of the old "Arabian Nights,"  
Old Man?

When, haply, you have fared  
Where glad Aladdin shared  
His lamp with you, and dared  
The Afrite and his clan;  
And, with him, clambered through  
The trees where jewels grew —  
And filled your pockets, too,  
Old Man?

Or, with Sinbad, at sea —  
And in veracity  
Who has sinned as bad as he,  
Or would, or will, or can? —  
Have you listened to his lies,  
With open mouth and eyes,  
And learned his art likewise,  
Old Man?

And you need not deny  
That your eyes were wet as dry,  
Reading novels on the sly!  
And review them, if you can,  
And the same warm tears will fall —  
Only faster, that is all —  
Over Little Nell and Paul,  
Old Man!

O, you were a lucky lad —  
Just as good as you were bad!  
And the host of friends you had —  
Charley, Tom, and Dick, and Dan;  
And the old School-Teacher, too,  
Though he often censured you;  
And the girls in pink and blue,  
Old Man.

And – as often you have leant,  
In boyish sentiment,  
To kiss the letter sent  
By Nelly, Belle, or Nan —  
Wherein the rose's hue  
Was red, the violet blue —  
And sugar sweet – and you,  
Old Man, —

So, to-day, as lives the bloom,  
And the sweetness, and perfume  
Of the blossoms, I assume,  
On the same mysterious plan  
The master's love assures,  
That the self-same boy endures  
In that hale old heart of yours,  
Old Man.

**"THE OLD SWIMMIN'-HOLE"  
AND  
'LEVEN MORE POEMS  
BY  
BENJ. F. JOHNSON, OF BOONE**

The delights of our childhood is soon passed away,  
And our gloryus youth it departs, —  
And yit, dead and burried, they's blossoms of May  
Ore theyr medderland graves in our harts.  
So, friends of my bare-footed days on the farm,  
Whether truant in city er not,  
God prosper you same as He's prosperin' me,  
Whilse your past haint despised er fergot.

Oh! they's nothin', at morn, that's as grand unto me  
As the glorys of Nachur so fare, —  
With the Spring in the breeze, and the bloom in the trees,  
And the hum of the bees ev'rywhare!  
The green in the woods, and the birds in the boughs,  
And the dew spangled over the fields;  
And the bah of the sheep and the bawl of the cows  
And the call from the house to your meals!

Then ho! fer your brekfast! and ho! fer the toil  
That waiteth alike man and beast!  
Oh! its soon with my team I'll be turnin' up soil,  
Whilse the sun shoulders up in the East  
Ore the tops of the ellums and beeches and oaks,  
To smile his godspeed on the plow,  
And the furry and seed, and the Man in his need,  
And the joy of the swet of his brow!

## THE OLD SWIMMIN'-HOLE

Oh! the old swimmin'-hole! whare the crick so still and deep  
Looked like a baby-river that was laying half asleep,  
And the gurgle of the worter round the drift jest below  
Sounded like the laugh of something we onc't ust to know  
Before we could remember anything but the eyes  
Of the angels lookin' out as we left Paradise;  
But the merry days of youth is beyond our controle,  
And it's hard to part ferever with the old swimmin'-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin'-hole! In the happy days of yore,  
When I ust to lean above it on the old sickamore,  
Oh! it showed me a face in its warm sunny tide  
That gazed back at me so gay and glorified,  
It made me love myself, as I leaped to caress  
My shadder smilin' up at me with sich tenderness.  
But them days is past and gone, and old Time's tuck his toll  
From the old man come back to the old swimmin'-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin'-hole! In the long, lazy days  
When the hum-drum of school made so many run-a-ways,  
How plesant was the jurney down the old dusty lane,  
Whare the tracks of our bare feet was all printed so plane  
You could tell by the dent of the heel and the sole  
They was lots o' fun on hands at the old swimmin'-hole.  
But the lost joys is past! Let your tears in sorrow roll  
Like the rain that ust to dapple up the old swimmin'-hole.

Thare the bullrushes growed, and the cattails so tall,  
And the sunshine and shadder fell over it all;  
And it mottled the worter with amber and gold  
Tel the glad lillies rocked in the ripples that rolled;  
And the snake-feeder's four gauzy wings fluttered by  
Like the ghost of a daisy dropped out of the sky,  
Or a wownded apple-blossom in the breeze's controle  
As it cut acrost some orchurd to'rds the old swimmin'-hole.

Oh! the old swimmin'-hole! When I last saw the place,  
The scenes was all changed, like the change in my face;  
The bridge of the railroad now crosses the spot  
Whare the old divin'-log lays sunk and fergot.  
And I stray down the banks whare the trees ust to be —  
But never again will theyr shade shelter me!  
And I wish in my sorrow I could strip to the soul,  
And dive off in my grave like the old swimmin'-hole.

## THOUGHTS FER THE DISCOURAGED FARMER

The summer winds is sniffin' round the bloomin' locus' trees;  
And the clover in the pastur is a big day fer the bees,  
And they been a-swiggin' honey, above board and on the sly,  
Tel they stutter in theyr buzzin' and stagger as they fly.  
The flicker on the fence-rail 'pears to jest spit on his wings  
And roll up his feathers, by the sassy way he sings;  
And the hoss-fly is a-whettin'-up his forelegs fer biz,  
And the off-mare is a-switchin' all of her tale they is.

You can hear the blackbirds jawin' as they foller up the plow —  
Oh, theyr bound to git theyr brekfast, and theyr not a-carin' how;  
So they quarrel in the furries, and they quarrel on the wing —  
But theyr peaceabler in pot-pies than any other thing:  
And it's when I git my shotgun drawed up in stiddy rest,  
She's as full of tribbelation as a yellor-jacket's nest;  
And a few shots before dinner, when the sun's a-shinin' right,  
Seems to kindo'-sorto' sharpen up a feller's appetite!

They's been a heap o' rain, but the sun's out to-day,  
And the clouds of the wet spell is all cleared away,  
And the woods is all the greener, and the grass is greener still;  
It may rain again to-morry, but I don't think it will.  
Some says the crops is ruined, and the corn's drownded out,  
And prophasy the wheat will be a failure, without doubt;  
But the kind Providence that has never failed us yet,  
Will be on hands onc't more at the 'leventh hour, I bet!

Does the medder-lark complane, as he swims high and dry  
Through the waves of the wind and the blue of the sky?  
Does the quail set up and whissel in a disappointed way,  
Er hang his head in silunce, and sorrow all the day?  
Is the chipmuck's health a-failin'? – Does he walk, er does he run?  
Don't the buzzards ooze around up thare jest like they've allus done?  
Is they anything the matter with the rooster's lungs er voice?  
Ort a mortul be complanin' when dumb animals rejoice?

Then let us, one and all, be contentud with our lot;  
The June is here this mornin', and the sun is shining hot.  
Oh! let us fill our harts up with the glory of the day,  
Any banish ev'ry doubt and care and sorrow fur away!  
Whatever be our station, with Providence fer guide,  
Sich fine circumstances ort to make us satisfied;  
Fer the world is full of roses, and the roses full of dew,  
And the dew is full of heavenly love that drips fer me and you.

## A SUMMER'S DAY

The Summer's put the idy in  
My head that I'm a boy again;  
And all around's so bright and gay  
I want to put my team away,  
And jest git out whare I can lay  
And soak my hide full of the day!  
But work is work, and must be done —  
Yit, as I work, I have my fun,  
Jest fancyin' these furries here  
Is childhood's paths onc't more so dear: —  
And as I walk through medder-lands,  
And country lanes, and swampy trails  
Whare long bullrushes bresh my hands;  
And, tilted on the ridered rails  
Of deadnin' fences, "Old Bob White"  
Whissels his name in high delight,  
And whirrs away. I wunder still,  
Whichever way a boy's feet will —  
Whare trees has fell, with tangled tops  
Whare dead leaves shakes, I stop fer breth,  
Heerin' the acorn as it drops —  
H'istin' my chin up still as deth,  
And watchin' clos't, with upturned eyes,  
The tree where Mr. Squirrel tries  
To hide hisse'f above the limb,  
But lets his own tale tell on him.  
I wunder on in deeper glooms —  
Git hungry, hearin' female cries  
From old farm-houses, whare perfumes  
Of harvest dinners seems to rise  
And ta'nt a feller, hart and brane,  
With memories he can't explane.

I wunder through the underbresh,  
Whare pig-tracks, pintin' to'rds the crick,  
Is picked and printed in the fresh  
Black bottom-lands, like wimmern pick  
Theyr pie-crusts with a fork, some way,  
When bakin' fer camp-meetin' day.  
I wunder on and on and on,  
Tel my gray hair and beard is gone,  
And ev'ry wrinkle on my brow  
Is rubbed clean out and shadded now  
With curls as brown and fare and fine  
As tenderls of the wild grape-vine

That ust to climb the highest tree  
To keep the ripest ones fer me.  
I wunder still, and here I am  
Wadin' the ford below the dam —  
The worter chucklin' round my knee  
At hornet-welt and bramble-scratch,  
And me a-slippin' 'crost to see  
Ef Tyner's plums is ripe, and size  
The old man's wortermelon-patch,  
With juicy mouth and drouthy eyes.  
Then, after sich a day of mirth  
And happiness as worlds is wurth —  
So tired that heaven seems nigh about, —  
The sweetest tiredness on earth  
Is to git home and flatten out —  
So tired you can't lay flat enough,  
And sorto' wish that you could spred  
Out like molasses on the bed,  
And jest drip off the aidges in  
The dreams that never comes again.

## A HYMB OF FAITH

O, Thou that doth all things devise  
And fashion fer the best,  
He'p us who sees with mortul eyes  
To overlook the rest.

They's times, of course, we grope in doubt,  
And in afflictions sore;  
So knock the louder, Lord, without,  
And we'll unlock the door.

Make us to feel, when times looks bad  
And tears in pity melts,  
Thou wast the only he'p we had  
When they was nothin' else.

Death comes alike to ev'ry man  
That ever was borned on earth;  
Then let us do the best we can  
To live fer all life's wurth.

Ef storms and tempusts dred to see  
Makes black the heavens ore,  
They done the same in Galilee  
Two thousand years before.

But after all, the golden sun  
Poured out its floods on them  
That watched and waited fer the One  
Then borned in Bethlyham.

Also, the star of holy writ  
Made noonday of the night,  
Whilse other stars that looked at it  
Was envious with delight.

The sages then in wurship bowed,  
From ev'ry clime so fare;  
O, sinner, think of that glad crowd  
That congergated thare!

They was content to fall in ranks  
With One that knowed the way  
From good old Jurden's stormy banks  
Clean up to Jedgmunt Day.

No matter, then, how all is mixed  
In our near-sighted eyes,  
All things is fer the best, and fixed  
Out straight in Paradise.

Then take things as God sends 'em here,  
And, ef we live er die,  
Be more and more contenteder,  
Without a-astin' why.

O, Thou that doth all things devise  
And fashion fer the best,  
He'p us who sees with mortul eyes  
To overlook the rest.

## WORTERMELON TIME

Old wortermelon time is a-comin' round again,  
And they ain't no man a-livin' any tickleder'n me,  
Fer the way I hanker after wortermelons is a sin —  
Which is the why and wharefore, as you can plainly see.

Oh! it's in the sandy soil wortermelons does the best,  
And it's thare they'll lay and waller in the sunshine and the dew  
Tel they wear all the green streaks clean off of theyr breast;  
And you bet I ain't a-findin' any fault with them; air you?

They ain't no better thing in the vegetable line;  
And they don't need much 'tendin', as ev'ry farmer knows;  
And when they ripe and ready fer to pluck from the vine,  
I want to say to you theyr the best fruit that grows.

It's some likes the yeller-core, and some likes the red.  
And it's some says "The Little Californy" is the best;  
But the sweetest slice of all I ever wedged in my head,  
Is the old "Edingburg Mounting-sprout," of the west.

You don't want no punkins nigh your wortermelon vines —  
'Cause, some-way-another, they'll spile your melons, shore; —  
I've seed 'em taste like punkins, from the core to the rines,  
Which may be a fact you have heerd of before.

But your melons that's raised right and 'tended to with care,  
You can walk around amongst 'em with a parent's pride and joy,  
And thump 'em on the heads with as fatherly a air  
As ef each one of them was your little girl er boy.

I joy in my hart jest to hear that rippin' sound  
When you split one down the back and jolt the halves in two,  
And the friends you love the best is gethered all around —  
And you says unto your sweethart, "Oh, here's the core fer you!"

And I like to slice 'em up in big pieces fer 'em all,  
Espeshally the childern, and watch theyr high delight  
As one by one the rines with theyr pink notches falls,  
And they holler fer some more, with unquenched appetite.

Boys takes to it natchurl, and I like to see 'em eat —  
A slice of wortermelon's like a frenchharp in theyr hands,  
And when they "saw" it through theyr mouth sich music can't be beat —  
'Cause it's music both the sperit and the stummick understands.

Oh, they's more in wortermelons than the purty-colored meat,  
And the overflowin' sweetness of the worter squshed betwixt  
The up'ard and the down'ard motions of a feller's teeth,  
And it's the taste of ripe old age and juicy childhood mixed.

Fer I never taste a melon but my thoughts flies away  
To the summertime of youth; and again I see the dawn,  
And the fadin' afternoon of the long summer day,  
And the dusk and dew a-fallin', and the night a'comin' on.

And thare's the corn around us, and the lispin' leaves and trees,  
And the stars a-peekin' down on us as still as silver mice,  
And us boys in the wortermelons on our hands and knees,  
And the new-moon hangin' ore us like a yeller-cored slice.

Oh! it's wortermelon time is a-comin' round again,  
And they ain't no man a-livin' any tickleder'n me,  
Fer the way I hanker after wortermelons is a sin —  
Which is the why and wharefore, as you can plainly see.

## MY PHILOSOFY

I ain't, ner don't p'tend to be,  
Much posted on filosofy;  
But thare is times, when all alone,  
I work out idees of my own.  
And of these same thare is a few  
I'd like to jest refer to you —  
Pervidin' that you don't object  
To listen clos't and rickollect.

I allus argy that a man  
Who does about the best he can  
Is plenty good enough to suit  
This lower mundane institute —  
No matter ef his daily walk  
Is subject fer his neighbor's talk,  
And critic-minds of ev'ry whim  
Jest all git up and go fer him!

I knowed a feller onc't that had  
The yeller-janders mighty bad, —  
And each and ev'ry friend he'd meet  
Would stop and give him some receet  
Fer cuorin' of 'em. But he'd say  
He kindo' thought they'd go away  
Without no medicin', and boast  
That he'd git well without one doste.

He kep' a-yellerin' on – and they  
Perdictin' that he'd die some day  
Before he knowed it! Tuck his bed,  
The feller did, and lost his head,  
And wundered in his mind a spell —  
Then rallied, and, at last, got well;  
But ev'ry friend that said he'd die  
Went back on him eternally!

Its natchurl enough, I guess,  
When some gits more and some gits less,  
Fer them-uns on the slimmest side  
To claim it ain't a fare divide;  
And I've knowed some to lay and wait,  
And git up soon, and set up late,  
To ketch some feller they could hate  
Fer goin' at a faster gait.

The signs is bad when folks commence  
A-findin' fault with Providence,  
And balkin' 'cause the earth don't shake  
At ev'ry prancin' step they take.  
No man is grate tel he can see  
How less than little he would be  
Ef stripped to self, and stark and bare  
He hung his sign out anywhare.

My doctern is to lay aside  
Contensions, and be satisfied:  
Jest do your best, and praise er blame  
That follers that, counts jest the same.  
I've allus noticed grate success  
Is mixed with troubles, more or less,  
And it's the man who does the best  
That gits more kicks than all the rest.

## WHEN THE FROST IS ON THE PUNKIN

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,  
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,  
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,  
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;  
O, its then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,  
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,  
As he leaves the house, bare-headed, and goes out to feed the stock,  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere  
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here —  
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the trees,  
And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the bees;  
But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through the haze  
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airly autumn days  
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock —  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

The husky, rusty russel of the tossels of the corn,  
And the raspin' of the tangled leaves, as golden as the morn;  
The stubble in the furries – kindo' lonesome-like, but still  
A-preachin' sermons to us of the barns they growed to fill;  
The strawstack in the medder, and the reaper in the shed;  
The hosses in theyr stalls below – the clover overhead! —  
O, it sets my hart a-clickin' like the tickin' of a clock,  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!

Then your apples all is getherd, and the ones a feller keeps  
Is poured around the celler-floor in red and yeller heaps;  
And your cider-makin' 's over, and your wimmern-folks is through  
With their mince and apple-butter, and theyr souse and sausage, too!..  
I don't know how to tell it – but ef sich a thing could be  
As the Angels wantin' boardin', and they'd call around on *me*—  
I'd want to 'commodate 'em – all the whole-indurin' flock —  
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock!

## ON THE DEATH OF LITTLE MAHALA ASHCRAFT

"Little Haly! Little Haly!" cheeps the robin in the tree;  
"Little Haly!" sighs the clover, "Little Haly!" moans the bee;  
"Little Haly! Little Haly!" calls the kill-deer at twilight;  
And the katydids and crickets hollers "Haly!" all the night.

The sunflowers and the hollyhawks droops over the garden fence;  
The old path down the gardenwalks still holds her footprints' dents;  
And the well-sweep's swingin' bucket seems to wait fer her to come  
And start it on its wortery errant down the old bee-gum.

The bee-hives all is quiet; and the little Jersey steer,  
When any one comes nigh it, acts so lonesome-like and queer;  
And the little Banty chickens kindo' cutters faint and low,  
Like the hand that now was feedin' 'em was one they didn't know.

They's sorrow in the wavin' leaves of all the apple-trees;  
And sorrow in the harvest-sheaves, and sorrow in the breeze;  
And sorrow in the twitter of the swallers 'round the shed;  
And all the song her red-bird sings is "Little Haly's dead!"

The medder 'pears to miss her, and the pathway through the grass,  
Whare the dewdrops ust to kiss her little bare feet as she passed;  
And the old pin in the gate-post seems to kindo'-sorto' doubt  
That Haly's little sunburnt hands'll ever pull it out.

Did her father er her mother ever love her more'n me,  
Er her sisters er her brother prize her love more tendurly?  
I question – and what answer? – only tears, and tears alone,  
And ev'ry neighbor's eyes is full o' tear-drops as my own.

"Little Haly! Little Haly!" cheeps the robin in the tree;  
"Little Haly!" sighs the clover, "Little Haly!" moans the bee;  
"Little Haly! Little Haly!" calls the kill-deer at twilight,  
And the katydids and crickets hollers "Haly!" all the night.

## THE MULBERRY TREE

O, it's many's the scenes which is dear to my mind  
As I think of my childhood so long left behind;  
The home of my birth, with its old puncheon-floor,  
And the bright morning-glorys that growed round the door;  
The warped clab-board roof whare the rain it run off  
Into streams of sweet dreams as I laid in the loft,  
Countin' all of the joys that was dearest to me,  
And a-thinkin' the most of the mulberry tree.

And to-day as I dream, with both eyes wide-awake,  
I can see the old tree, and its limbs as they shake,  
And the long purple berries that rained on the ground  
Whare the pastur' was bald whare we trommpt it around.  
And again, peekin' up through the thick leafy shade,  
I can see the glad smiles of the friends when I strayed  
With my little bare feet from my own mother's knee  
To foller them off to the mulberry tree.

Leanin' up in the forks, I can see the old rail,  
And the boy climbin' up it, claw, tooth, and toe-nail,  
And in fancy can hear, as he spits on his hands,  
The ring of his laugh and the rip of his pants.  
But that rail led to glory, as certin and shore  
As I'll never climb thare by that rout' any more —  
What was all the green lauruls of Fame unto me,  
With my brows in the boughs of the mulberry tree!

Then its who can fergit the old mulberry tree  
That he knowed in the days when his thoughts was as free  
As the flutterin' wings of the birds that flew out  
Of the tall wavin' tops as the boys come about?  
O, a crowd of my memories, laughin' and gay,  
Is a-climbin' the fence of that pastur' to-day,  
And a-pantin' with joy, as us boys ust to be,  
They go racin' acrost fer the mulberry tree.

## TO MY OLD FRIEND, WILLIAM LEACHMAN

Fer forty year and better you have been a friend to me,  
Through days of sore afflictions and dire adversity,  
You allus had a kind word of counsul to impart,  
Which was like a healin' 'intment to the sorrow of my hart.

When I burried my first womern, William Leachman, it was you  
Had the only consolation that I could listen to —  
Fer I knowed you had gone through it and had rallied from the blow,  
And when you said I'd do the same, I knowed you'd ort to know.

But that time I'll long remember; how I wundered here and thare —  
Through the settin'-room and kitchen, and out in the open air —  
And the snowflakes whirlin', whirlin', and the fields a frozen glare,  
And the neighbors' sleds and wagons congergatin' ev'rywhare.

I turned my eyes to'rds heaven, but the sun was hid away;  
I turned my eyes to'rds earth again, but all was cold and gray;  
And the clock, like ice a-crackin', clickt the icy hours in two —  
And my eyes'd never thawed out ef it hadn't been fer you!

We set thare by the smoke-house – me and you out thare alone —  
Me a-thinkin' – you a-talkin' in a soothin' undertone —  
You a-talkin' – me a-thinkin' of the summers long ago,  
And a-writin' "Marthy – Marthy" with my finger in the snow!

William Leachman, I can see you jest as plane as I could then;  
And your hand is on my shoulder, and you rouse me up again;  
And I see the tears a-drippin' from your own eyes, as you say:  
"Be rickonciled and bear it – we but linger fer a day!"

At the last Old Settlers' Meetin' we went j'intly, you and me —  
Your hosses and my wagon, as you wanted it to be;  
And sence I can remember, from the time we've neghored here,  
In all sich friendly actions you have double-done your sheer.

It was better than the meetin', too, that 9-mile talk we had  
Of the times when we first settled here and travel was so bad;  
When we had to go on hoss-back, and sometimes on "Shanks's mare,"  
And "blaze" a road fer them behind that had to travel thare.

And now we was a-trottin' 'long a level gravel pike,  
In a big two-hoss road-wagon, jest as easy as you like —  
Two of us on the front seat, and our wimmern-folks behind,  
A-settin' in theyr Winsor-cheers in perfect peace of mind!

And we pinte out old landmarks, nearly faded out of sight: —  
Thare they ust to rob the stage-coach; thare Gash Morgan had the fight  
With the old stag-deer that pronged him – how he battled fer his life,  
And lived to prove the story by the handle of his knife.

Thare the first griss-mill was put up in the Settlement, and we  
Had tuck our grindin' to it in the Fall of Forty-three —  
When we tuck our rifles with us, techin' elbows all the way,  
And a-stickin' right together ev'ry minute, night and day.

Thare ust to stand the tavern that they called the "Travelers' Rest,"  
And thare, beyent the covered bridge, "The Counterfitters' Nest" —  
Whare they claimed the house was ha'nted – that a man was murdered  
thare,  
And burried underneath the floor, er 'round the place somewhere.

And the old Plank-road they laid along in Fifty-one er two —  
You know we talked about the times when the old road was new:  
How "Uncle Sam" put down that road and never taxed the State  
Was a problem, don't you rickollect, we couldn't *dimonstrate*?

Ways was devius, William Leachman, that me and you has past;  
But as I found you true at first, I find you true at last;  
And, now the time's a-comin' mighty nigh our journey's end,  
I want to throw wide open all my soul to you, my friend.

With the stren'th of all my bein', and the heat of hart and brane,  
And ev'ry livin' drop of blood in artery and vane,  
I love you and respect you, and I venerate your name,  
Fer the name of William Leachman and True Manhood's jest the same!

## MY FIDDLE

My fiddle? – Well, I kindo' keep her handy, don't you know!  
Though I ain't so much inclined to tromp the strings and switch the bow  
As I was before the timber of my elbows got so dry,  
And my fingers was more limber-like and caperish and spry;  
Yit I can plunk and plunk and plink,  
And tune her up and play,  
And jest lean back and laugh and wink  
At ev'ry rainy day!

My playin' 's only middlin' – tunes I picked up when a boy —  
The kindo'-sorto' fiddlin' that the folks calls "cordaroy";  
"The Old Fat Gal," and "Rye-straw," and "My Sailyor's on the Sea,"  
Is the old cowtillions I "saw" when the ch'ice is left to me;  
And so I plunk and plunk and plink,  
And rosum-up my bow  
And play the tunes that makes you think  
The devil's in your toe!

I was allus a romancin', do-less boy, to tell the truth,  
A-fiddlin' and a-dancin', and a-wastin' of my youth,  
And a-actin' and a-cuttin'-up all sorts o' silly pranks  
That wasn't worth a botton of anybody's thanks!  
But they tell me, when I ust to plink  
And plunk and plunk and play,  
My music seemed to have the kink  
O' drivin' cares away!

That's how this here old fiddle's won my hart's indurin' love!  
From the strings acrost her middle, to the schreechin' keys above —  
From her "apern," over "bridge," and to the ribbon round her throat,  
She's a woin', cooin' pigeon, singin' "Love me" ev'ry note!  
And so I pat her neck, and plink  
Her strings with lovin' hands, —  
And, list'nin' clos't, I sometimes think  
She kindo' understands!

## THE CLOVER

Some sings of the lilly, and daisy, and rose,  
And the pansies and pinks that the Summertime throws  
In the green grassy lap of the medder that lays  
Blinkin' up at the skyes through the sunshiney days;  
But what is the lilly and all of the rest  
Of the flowers, to a man with a hart in his brest  
That was dipped brimmin' full of the honey and dew  
Of the sweet clover-blossoms his babyhood knew?

I never set eyes on a clover-field now,  
Er fool round a stable, er climb in the mow,  
But my childhood comes back jest as clear and as plane  
As the smell of the clover I'm sniffin' again;  
And I wunder away in a bare-footed dream,  
Whare I tangle my toes in the blossoms that gleam  
With the dew of the dawn of the morning of love  
Ere it wept ore the graves that I'm weepin' above.

And so I love clover – it seems like a part  
Of the sacerdest sorrows and joys of my hart;  
And wharever it blossoms, oh, thare let me bow  
And thank the good God as I'm thankin' Him now;  
And I pray to Him still fer the stren'th when I die,  
To go out in the clover and tell it good-bye,  
And lovin'ly nestle my face in its bloom  
While my soul slips away on a breth of parfume.

**NEIGHBORLY POEMS  
ON FRIENDSHIP, GRIEF AND FARM-LIFE  
BY  
BENJ. F. JOHNSON, OF BOONE**

Us farmers in the country, as the seasons go and come,  
Is purty much like other folks, – we're apt to grumble some!  
The Spring's too back'ard fer us, er too for'ard – ary one —  
We'll jaw about it anyhow, and have our way er none!  
The thaw's set in too suddent; er the frost's stayed in the soil  
Too long to give the wheat a chance, and crops is bound to spoil!  
The weather's eether most too mild, er too outrageous rough,  
And altogether too much rain, er not half rain enough!

Now what I'd like and what you'd like is plane enough to see:  
It's jest to have old Providence drop round on you and me  
And ast us what our views is first, regardin' shine er rain,  
And post 'em when to shet her off, er let her on again!  
And yit I'd ruther, after all – considern other chores  
I' got on hands, a-tendin' both to my affares and yours —  
I'd ruther miss the blame I'd git, a-rulin' things up thare,  
And spend my extry time in praise and gratitude and prayer.

## ERASMUS WILSON

'Ras Wilson, I respect you, 'cause  
You're common, like you allus was  
Afore you went to town and s'prised  
The world by gittin' "reckonized,"  
And yit perservin', as I say,  
Your common hoss-sense ev'ryway!  
And when that name o' yourn occurs  
On hand-bills, er in newspapers,  
Er letters writ by friends 'at ast  
About you, same as in the past,  
And neighbors and relations 'low  
You're out o' the tall timber now,  
And "gittin' thare" about as s'pry's  
The next! – as *I say*, when my eyes,  
Er ears, lights on your name, I mind  
The first time 'at I come to find  
You – and my *Rickollection* yells,  
Jest jubilunt as old sleigh-bells —  
"Ras Wilson! Say! Hold up! and shake  
A paw, fer old acquaintance sake!"  
My *Rickollection*, more'n like,  
Hain't overly too apt to strike  
The what's-called "cultchurd public eye"  
As wisdom of the deepest dye, —  
And yit my *Rickollection* makes  
So blame lots fewer bad mistakes,  
Regardin' human-natchur' and  
The fellers 'at I've shook theyr hand,  
Than my *best jedgemunt's* done, the day  
I've met 'em – 'fore I got away, —  
'At – Well, 'Ras Wilson, let me grip  
*Your* hand in warmest pardnership!

Dad-burn ye! – Like to jest haul back  
A' old flat-hander, jest che-whack!  
And take you 'twixt the shoulders, say,  
Sometime you're lookin' t'other way! —  
Er, maybe whilse you're speakin' to  
A whole blame Courthouse-full o' 'thu-  
Syastic friends, I'd like to jest  
Come in-like and break up the nest  
Afore you hatched anuther cheer,  
And say: "'Ras, *I* can't stand hitched here  
All night – ner wouldn't ef I could! —  
But Little Bethel Neighborhood,

You ust to live at, 's sent some word  
Fer you, ef ary chance occurred  
To git it to ye, – so ef you  
*Kin* stop, I'm waitin' fer ye to!"

You're common, as I said afore —  
You're common, yit oncommon *more*. —  
You allus kindo' 'pear, to me,  
What all mankind had ort to be —  
Jest *natchurl*, and the more hurraws  
You git, the less you know the cause —  
Like as ef God Hisse'f stood by  
Where best on earth hain't half knee-high,  
And *sein'* like, and knowin' *He*  
'S the Only Grate Man really,  
You're jest content to size your hight  
With any feller-man's in sight. —  
And even then they's scrubs, like me,  
Feels stuck-up, in your company!  
Like now: – I want to go with you  
Plum out o' town a mile er two  
Clean past the Fair-ground whare's some hint  
O' pennyrile er peppermint,  
And bottom-lands, and timber thick  
Enough to sorto' shade the crick!  
I want to *see* you – want to set  
Down somers, whare the grass hain't wet,  
And kindo' *breathe* you, like puore air —  
And taste o' your tobacker thare,  
And talk and chaw! Talk o' the birds  
We've knocked with cross-bows. – Afterwards  
Drop, mayby, into some dispute  
'Bout "pomgrannies," er cal'mus-root —  
And how *they* growed, and *whare?* – on tree  
Er vine? – Who's best boy-memory! —  
And wasn't it *gingsang*, insted  
O' cal'mus-root, growed like you said? —  
Er how to tell a coon-track from  
A mussrat's; – er how milksick come —  
Er ef *cows* brung it? – Er why now  
We never see no "muley" – cow —  
Ner "frizzly" – chicken – ner no "clay-  
Bank" mare – ner nothin' thataway! —  
And what's come o' the *yellow-core*  
Old wortermelons? – hain't no more. —  
Tomattusus, the same – all *red-*  
Uns nowadays – All past joys fled —  
Each and all jest gone k-whizz!  
Like our days o' childhood is!

Dag-gone it, 'Ras! they hain't no friend,  
It 'pears-like, left to comperhend  
Sich things as these but you, and see  
How dratted sweet they air to me!  
But you, 'at's loved 'em allus, and  
Kin sort 'em out and understand  
'Em, same as the fine books you've read,  
And all fine thoughts you've writ, er said,  
Er worked out, through long nights o' rain,  
And doubts and fears, and hopes, again,  
As bright as morning when she broke, —  
You know a teardrop from a joke!  
And so, 'Ras Wilson, stop and shake  
A paw, fer old acquaintance sake!

## MY RUTHERS

[Writ durin' State Fair at Indanoplis, whilse visitin' a Sonin-law then residin' thare, who has sence got back to the country whare he says a man that's raised thare ort to a-stayed in the first place.]

I tell you what I'd ruther do —  
Ef I only had my ruthers, —  
I'd ruther work when I wanted to  
Than be bossed round by others; —  
I'd ruther kindo' git the swing  
O' what was *needed*, first, I jing!  
Afore I *swet* at anything! —  
Ef I only had my ruthers; —  
In fact I'd aim to be the same  
With all men as my brothers;  
And they'd all be the same with *me*—  
Ef I only had my ruthers.

I wouldn't likely know it all —  
Ef I only had my ruthers; —  
I'd know *some* sense, and some base-ball —  
Some *old* jokes, and – some others:  
I'd know *some politics*, and 'low  
Some tarif-speeches same as now,  
Then go hear Nye on "Branes and How  
To Detect Theyr Presence." *T'others*,  
That stayed away, I'd *let* 'em stay —  
All my dissentin' brothers  
Could chuse as shore a kill er cuore,  
Ef I only had my ruthers.

The pore 'ud git theyr dues *sometimes* —  
Ef I only had my ruthers, —  
And be paid *dollars* 'stid o' *dimes*,  
Fer childern, wives and mothers:  
Theyr boy that slaves; theyr girl that sews —  
Fer *others*— not herself, God knows! —  
The grave's *her* only change of clothes!  
... Ef I only had my ruthers,  
They'd all have "stuff" and time enough  
To answer one-another's  
Appealin' prayer fer "lovin' care" —  
Ef I only had my ruthers.

They'd be few folks 'ud ast fer trust,  
Ef I only had my ruthers,  
And blame few business-men to bu'st  
Theyrselves, er harts of others:

Big Guns that come here durin' Fair-  
Week could put up jest anywhare,  
And find a full-and-plenty thare,  
Ef I only had my ruthers:  
The rich and great 'ud 'sociate  
With all theyr lowly brothers,  
Feelin' *we* done the honorun —  
Ef I only had my ruthers.

## ON A DEAD BABE

Fly away! thou heavenly one! —  
I do hail thee on thy flight!  
Sorrow? thou hath tasted none —  
Perfect joy is yours by right.  
Fly away! and bear our love  
To thy kith and kin above!

I can tetch thy finger-tips  
Ca'mly, and bresh back the hair  
From thy forr'ed with my lips,  
And not leave a teardrop there. —  
Weep fer *Toms and Ruth*— and *me*—  
But I can not weep fer *thee*.

## A OLD PLAYED-OUT SONG

It's the curiousest thing in creation,  
Whenever I hear that old song  
"Do They Miss Me at Home," I'm so bothered,  
My life seems as short as it's long! —  
Fer ev'rything 'pears like adzackly  
It 'peared in the years past and gone, —  
When I started out sparkin', at twenty,  
And had my first neckercher on!

Though I'm wrinkelder, older and grayer  
Right now than my parents was then,  
You strike up that song "Do They Miss Me,"  
And I'm jest a youngster again! —  
I'm a-standin' back thare in the furries  
A-wishin' fer evening to come,  
And a-whisperin' over and over  
Them words "Do They Miss Me at Home?"

You see, *Marthy Ellen* she sung it  
The first time I heerd it; and so,  
As she was my very first sweethart,  
It reminds me of her, don't you know; —  
How her face ust to look, in the twilight,  
As I tuck her to Spellin'; and she  
Kep' a-hummin' that song tel I ast her,  
Pine-blank, ef she ever missed *me*!

I can shet my eyes now, as you sing it,  
And hear her low answerin' words;  
And then the glad chirp of the crickets,  
As clear as the twitter of birds;  
And the dust in the road is like velvet,  
And the ragweed and fennel and grass  
Is as sweet as the scent of the lillies  
Of Eden of old, as we pass.

"*Do They Miss Me at Home?*" Sing it lower —  
And softer – and sweet as the breeze  
That powdered our path with the snowy  
White bloom of the old locus'-trees!  
Let the whipperwills he'p you to sing it,  
And the echoes 'way over the hill,  
Tel the moon boolges out, in a chorus  
Of stars, and our voices is still.

But oh! "They's a chord in the music  
That's missed when *her* voice is away!"  
Though I listen from midnight tel morning,  
And dawn tel the dusk of the day!  
And I grope through the dark, lookin' up'ards  
And on through the heavenly dome,  
With my longin' soul singin' and sobbin'  
The words "Do They Miss Me at Home?"

## "COON-DOG WESS"

"Coon-dog Wess" – he allus went  
'Mongst us here by that-air name.  
Moved in this-here Settlement  
From next county – he laid claim, —  
Lived down in the bottoms – whare  
*Ust* to be some coons in thare! —

In nigh Clayton's, next the crick, —  
Mind old Billy ust to say  
Coons in thare was jest that thick,  
He'p him corn-plant any day! —  
And, in rostneer-time, be then  
Aggin' him to plant again!

Well, – In Spring o' '67,  
This-here "Coon-dog Wess" he come —  
Fetchin' 'long 'bout forty-'leven  
Ornriest-lookin' hounds, I gum!  
Ever mortul-man laid eyes  
On sence dawn o' Christian skies!

Wife come traipsin' at the rag-  
Tag-and-bobtail of the crowd,  
Dogs and childern, with a bag  
Corn-meal and some side-meat, —*Proud*  
And as *independunt—My!*—  
Yit a mild look in her eye.

Well – this "Coon-dog Wess" he jest  
Moved in that-air little pen  
Of a pole-shed, aidgin' west  
On "The Slues o' Death," called then. —  
Otter- and mink-hunters ust  
To camp thare 'fore game vam-moosd.

Abul-bodied man, – and lots  
Call fer *choppers*– and fer hands  
To git *cross-ties* out. – But what's  
*Work* to sich as understands  
Ways appinted and is hence  
Under special providence? —

"Coon-dog Wess's" holts was *hounds*  
And *coon-huntin'*; and he knowed  
*His* own range, and stayed in bounds

And left work for them 'at showed  
*Talents* fer it – same as his  
Gifts regardin' coon-dogs is.

Hounds of ev'ry mungel breed  
Ever whelped on earth! – Had these  
*Yeller* kind, with punkin-seed  
Marks above theyr eyes – and fleas  
Both to sell and keep! – Also

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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