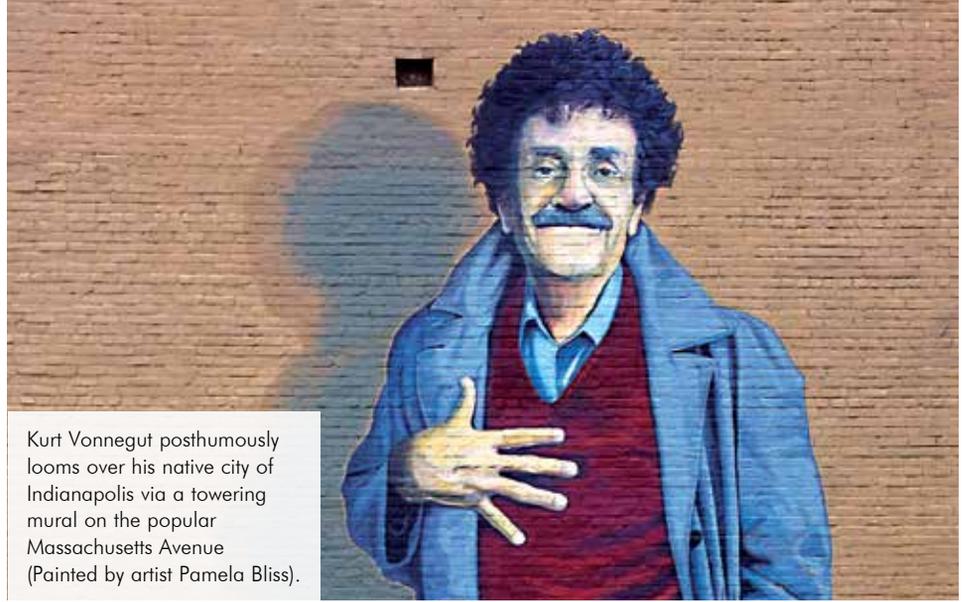


# READING IS A JOURNEY

Literary Tributes Reveal Intriguing Stories

By Matt Ottinger

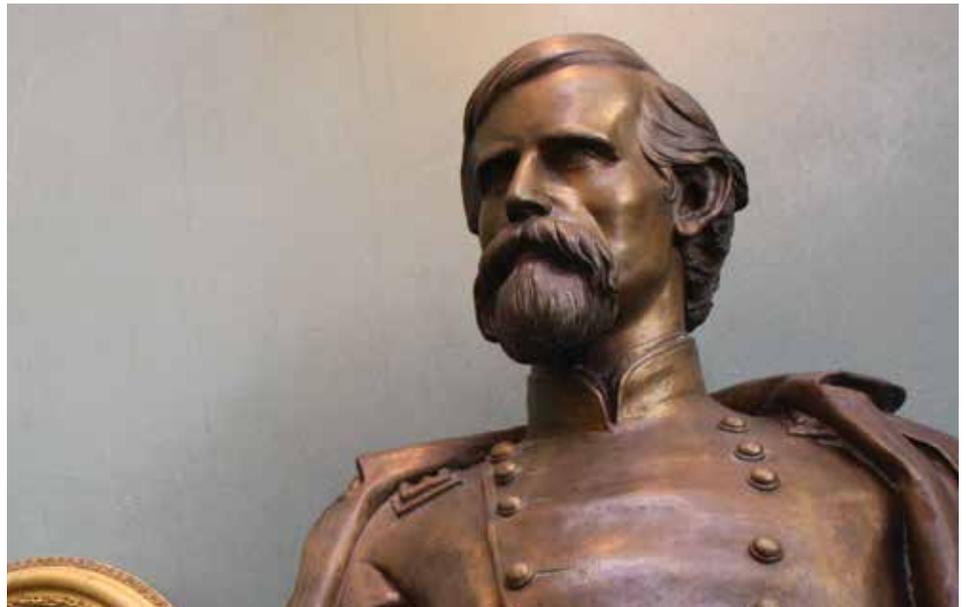


Kurt Vonnegut posthumously looms over his native city of Indianapolis via a towering mural on the popular Massachusetts Avenue (Painted by artist Pamela Bliss).

In an effort to capture the essence of prominent Hoosiers influenced by their Indiana upbringing, I visited three of the state's most notable literary stops. The following documents my experiences.



Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley (left, shown with author Meredith Nicholson and editor Hewitt Hanson Howland) enjoyed a hefty impact on popular culture during his time (*Indiana State Library*). Civil War General Lew Wallace proved just as handy with a pen as a sword, capturing the imagination of readers across the country. His study in Crawfordsville now displays many of his artifacts.





Visitors to the James Whitcomb Riley Boyhood Home and Museum are treated to a tour from hostess Frieda Pettijohn. Many objects that inspired Riley's work are on display as well.

### Hoosier Poet

Hostess Frieda Pettijohn has been leading tours of the James Whitcomb Riley Boyhood Home and Museum in Greenfield for nearly 20 years.

In most rooms of the house, she offers context for Riley's famed "Little Orphant Annie" poem, capping each verse with what is thankfully not a veiled threat to me: "And the goblins'll get ya if ya don't watch out!"

Walking up the spiral staircase feels like you're climbing into a different world. Although that's when memories of a childhood field trip to this very facility come creeping back into my head. But in speaking with Brigitte Cook Jones, a historian who performs many duties for the museum, I realize I have a lot to learn about Riley. For starters, I never grasped the broad reach of his popularity.

He traveled a great deal, and became friends with contemporaries like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling. Mark Twain, with whom he actually performed, called him "the funniest man in America."

"A lot of people don't realize that," Jones informs. "We have a ticket dated in 1902 from Madison Square Garden in New York City, where he was the headline act and Mark Twain was the warm-up act. Twain said he didn't like going on tour with Riley because he got more laughs than he did. I'd compare (Riley) today to Jeff Foxworthy. He gets up on stage, makes jokes and tells stories. Except all of his stuff rhymed, so he gave a novel twist to it."

Riley was so popular, he also did product endorsements. The museum has examples on display of the poet's exceptional branding.

"There are Hoosier Poet brands of coffee, canned goods, spices, cigars – he was

one of the first celebrities to lend his image," Jones explains. "We've also found advertisements for cars and pianos where companies would use a Riley verse to promote their product."

The home is owned by the city, and the Riley Festival is held in his honor each fall.

"It's important because Greenfield is his boyhood home," Jones concludes. "It's where he got most of his inspiration for his poetry. 'Little Orphant Annie' worked in that house. 'The Raggedy Man' worked in the backyard. 'The Old Swimmin' Hole' is down the way. These are all parts of his poems and it's important for us to preserve that because it shows what pioneer life was like in an 1850s-type home. We have actual artifacts in there that belonged to his family, so you're seeing the real deal."

Officials are working to raise over \$40,000 to design and build a new statue of Riley to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his death in 2016 and honor Indiana's bicentennial. Call (317) 462-8539 for more information about how you can help.

### 'So it goes'

A stroll around downtown Indianapolis circa November 2015 reveals how the spirit of Indianapolis native and Shortridge High School alum Kurt Vonnegut, who died in 2007, unquestionably remains.

A towering mural of his likeness graces a building on Massachusetts Avenue, and a tour of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library begets an intriguing look at the past of the man and his influences: war, hope and even rejection – as evidenced by the box of letters on display of those who said his writing simply wasn't up to their standards.

I'm greeted at the door by Kate Newman,

the library's community relations associate. She shows me the gift shop, a profitable endeavor that contains all of his books, saving a rare gem of short stories, *Canary in a Cat House*.

The museum includes many artifacts, including a Nazi SS sword Vonnegut smuggled out of Europe following his harrowing experience as a prisoner of war in World War II. Vonnegut was famously held in an underground slaughterhouse in Dresden, Germany. The city was decimated by bombs from Allied forces, yet he survived. (His experience inspired his classic novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.)

Many related effects are on-site via a digital archive developed by students at Ball State University. A reproduction of his workspace is also visible, surrounded by a community lending library.

I'm told curator Chris Lafave has read all of Vonnegut's books, so I ask him how the author's Indianapolis upbringing shaped his writing. Lafave asserts his family's connection to the city was a point of pride for Vonnegut.

"His family had such influence," Lafave says. "His great grandfather founded a popular chain of hardware stores here, and his grandfather and father were prominent architects. Can you imagine the pride of looking around your city's skyline and saying, 'I'm related to the people who did that?'"

Although he spent most of his adult life in East Coast cities like Cape Cod and New York, it's evident Vonnegut carried his Hoosier sensibilities with him.

"While you'll occasionally hear him take a shot at Indy or Indiana's politics in an essay, most of the time in both his essays and novels, he seems to refer to Indianapolis in a fond sense, as a place of civility and decency



Artwork and some of the author's belongings are on display at the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library. The mantra "So it goes" pays homage to his book, *Slaughterhouse-Five* – inspired by his time as a prisoner during World War II.

– a city that his family built," Lafave adds. "My favorite Indianapolis moment is in *The Sirens of Titan*, at the very end. I won't spoil it for you with the details."

Ever a humorist, Vonnegut's writing is often acclaimed for its comedy. Lafave concurs, noting *Cat's Cradle* is his favorite of the author's books, largely because "it has the ability to make you laugh at some of the tough things in life."

Visit [www.indianachamberblogs.com](http://www.indianachamberblogs.com) for the full Q&A interview with Lafave.

### Under the beech tree

It's a pristine fall Saturday in November, and I'm driving around downtown Crawfordsville in search of the General Lew Wallace Study & Museum. I approach a brick wall sequestering a property from the other residences in the neighborhood, and it's

apparent I've found my destination.

In some ways, it seems Lew Wallace himself was as sturdy as that very wall. A brave Civil War general. A governor (of the New Mexico Territory). An avid fisherman. A man's man of sorts. But he was also a creative. Not just in scribing his epic novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, which as many know went on to become a critically-acclaimed success in print, theater and on the big screen. But also as an inventor (he held patents on innovative models of railroad ties and a fishing pole), artist and sculptor.

I'm led around the grounds and into his study by Amanda McGuire, associate director. The study itself reflects Wallace's world travels, with Greek, Roman and Byzantine architectural influences. His relics, paintings and the high ceiling give it a cathedral-like

feel, illuminating the experience for the facility's nearly 7,000 annual visitors.

Despite his many adventures, it was Crawfordsville where Wallace was most creative – and to where he kept returning. It was home.

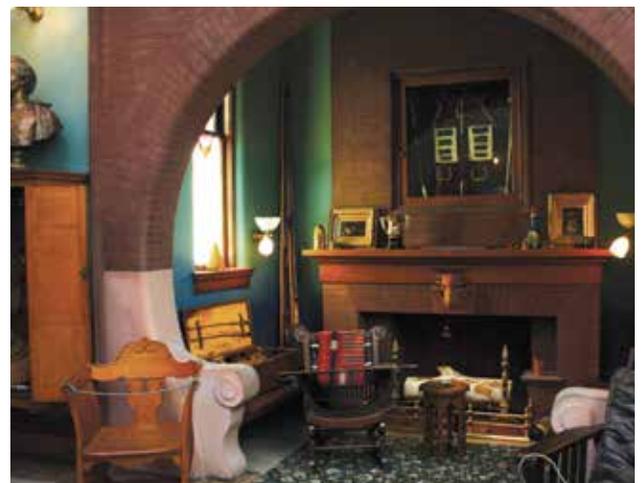
"He felt very comfortable here," McGuire notes. "Sitting under the beech tree was a sanctuary for him; he felt like it was kind of a protector. It was peaceful and he felt at ease here."

As I gaze at artifacts from the *Ben-Hur* movie set, I ponder: What was it about that book that resonated so well with readers in the late 1800s and beyond?

"I think the reason the book became so popular was because it had this religious theme to it, and a lot of churches were accepting of it and encouraged their congregations to read it ..." McGuire surmises. "So then you had a whole new population of people reading fiction. Then the same happened when it became a Broadway play. It ran for 21 years and was incredibly popular."

McGuire explains she makes the daily trek to her post all the way from the south side of Indianapolis – an hour commute one way. But to her, it's well worth it.

"I'm always discovering something new," she relays. "Talking with the visitors and school tours is a lot of fun. I grew up in Indiana and don't remember learning about (Wallace), so I enjoy telling people about him. He was a renaissance man, so no matter who you are, you can find some way to relate to him."



Relics of battle, from both the fictional *Ben-Hur* film as well as Lew Wallace's time leading the Union Army into conflict, are contrasted in the study with symbols of tranquility – like Wallace's writing chair and his many works of art.

**RESOURCES:** Brigette Cook Jones, James Whitcomb Riley Boyhood Home and Museum, at [www.jwripleyhome.org](http://www.jwripleyhome.org) | Chris Lafave and Kate Newman, Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, at [www.vonnegutlibrary.org](http://www.vonnegutlibrary.org) | Amanda McGuire, General Lew Wallace Study & Museum, at [www.ben-hur.com](http://www.ben-hur.com)