

# RILEY O. LAUGHNER

## "Swappy"

by Donna Monday

He was a Lutheran, a democrat, a farmer, and a musician--probably in that order. He was one of Whites-town's most upstanding citizens, and he lived to be 101 years old. He was Riley O. Laughner. He was born on October 12, 1868; and he died on Christmas Day in 1969.

He was as faithful, too, in his church attendance as he was in his appearances at the polls. In fact, he taught Sunday school until he was 94 years old. He was a member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Whitestown and was a member of the original committee which planned the erection of the church in 1904. He attended church every Sunday until he was one hundred years old. (After that he watched services on television.) He sang in the church choir for many years and was a member of the quartet. He spent some time as a member of the church council.

Concerned about the spirit and welfare of youth, Mr. Laughner once made a promise to his Sunday school class.

"I'll give \$100," he said, "to any student of mine who goes on to become a minister."

That was a promise he had to keep.

Many years after making the offer, when Riley was 91 years old to be exact, he paid that \$100 to Rev. Lewis Westenbarger, who was himself 66 years old at the time. (Riley had forgotten his promise, but had come across a note among some papers which reminded him. He sat down immediately and wrote a check.)

Rev. Westenbarger, needless to say, was a bit surprised to hear from his old teacher and friend. He used the money to buy a new robe, surplice, and set of stoles.

Riley O. Laughner was a man of his word.

He was a very curious man who always kept--and read--both the dictionary and the Bible, side by side. His loves were simple: his wife, his family, his church, his grandchildren--children, books, words, and music. He loved birthday parties with the glee of a child, and the entire family celebrated everyone's birthday with joy. The family all



RILEY O. LAUGHNER

had pet names, and Riley's was "Swappy", which is what the grandchildren always called him.

His own life was a happy one for the most part, though tragedy did strike twice. His wife Lulu (Ottinger) died at the age of 54, leaving Riley with three children: Verner, Audra, and Mardelle. Mardelle, the youngest, was a freshman in high school when her mother died.

Verner died in 1962, and Mr. Laughner never really got over the fact that a child had preceded him in death.

The son of Ambrose and Roanna (Nease) Laughner, Riley was himself one of 11 children. A number of the children lived to be octogenarians and nonagenarians. He was the only one to reach the century mark.

As to what he attributed his longevity to, Mr. Laughner did not say, except to state that "I don't drink or smoke. I figure that I should take care of this body that God gave me."

He never worked on the Sabbath, and he always felt it was sinful to do so. Stem in faith, he was kind in spirit. Mr. Laughner was "into" ecology long before the word be-



**THE WHITESTOWN BAND, about 1916**

came popular, and a garden was of great importance to him. He appreciated the beauty of nature and did not like to see it destroyed.

He loved good music and played a cornet in the Whites-town Band in the years before World War I. Both daughters seem to have picked up something from their father in that each is an accomplished musician. Audra (widow of Brian Smith) studied at the Metropolitan School of Music in Indianapolis and gave piano lessons for years. Mardelle (Mrs. Charles Kouns) is presently the organist at St. Mark's.

In addition to church and music, Riley O. Laughner enjoyed sports. A highlight of his life had to be watching

son Verner's team play in the State Championship Bas-ketball Finals in both 1911 and 1912. Lebanon won the championship in 1912, beating Franklin 51-11, to be-come the second basketball champions in the state of Indiana.

Later years would find Riley attending all of the games while Mardelle was in high school, and much later than that he could be found cheering on the grandchildren's favorite team.

He spent his life after 1935 with Mardelle and Charles in their home. His final days were lived within yards of his own birthplace, as the Kouns home is within sight of

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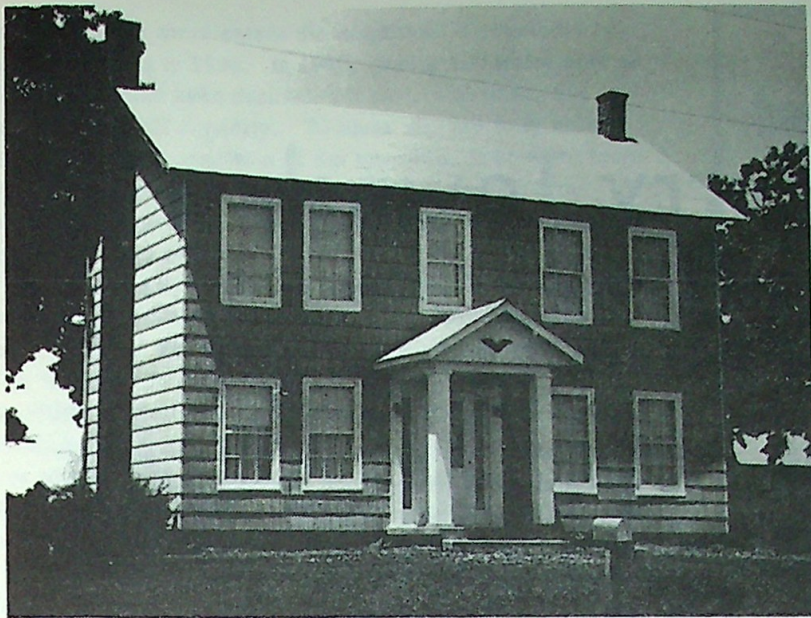
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## THE RILEY O. LAUGHNER FAMILY

From left: Lulu, Verner, Riley and Audra.  
(Mardelle was not yet born.)



The birthplace of Riley O. Laughner



Rev. Lewis Westenbarger and Riley O. Laughner



Audra, Riley and Mardelle

the old homestead. That was a real source of pride to the elderly gentleman.

On his 100th birthday, dressed in a white shirt and black tie, Mr. Laughner posed for the camera. Neither his appearance nor his manner suggested his years, as he stated what had come to mean the most to him.

"My family," said Riley O. Laughner, ten years ago this month, "is worth all the money in the world..."

He knew what mattered. ☆

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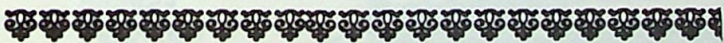
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