



The earliest Abigail, circa 1932, with blue eyes is the most firmly stuffed. She has a dart in the center of her neck which forms a chin and "darts" on the side of her head which suggest ears. She is stuffed with wool and has delicately painted features (her patch of hair was added). Another Abigail seen recently had a small vertical dart on each side of the neck to fashion a slimming effect. These slight variations in the early dolls are attributable to the fact that the doll bodies were made by various members of the community who had varying degrees of sewing skills. She is 18 inches tall.



Abigail

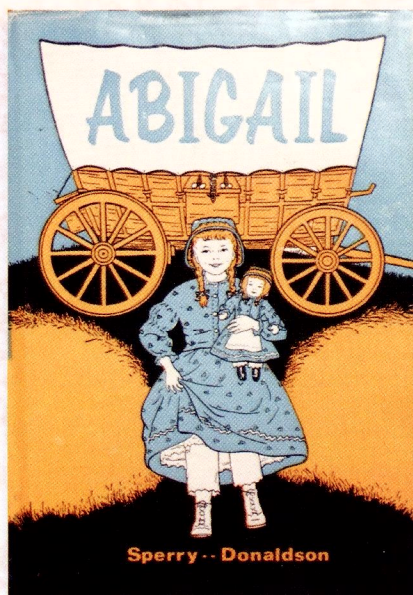
The Log Cabin Doll of Brown County

by Sue Popp

Several years ago, while shopping for a new doll, I noticed a softly colored, sweet-faced cloth girl shyly smiling from across the room. I went over to get a better look and decided that she would be going home with me. When I asked the dealer if any information about her was available, I was told that perhaps she should have cloth hair, but nothing was known about how she might have been dressed originally. I felt that she was probably from the 1930's and that with or without hair, she was charming.

When I brought her home, I could find no information or pictures for reference, but I was always on the lookout, and a little over a year later, I spotted the same face on a doll with cloth hair! She had a yellow cotton fabric "wig" which had been sewn to fit her head, split at the bottom to make braids, and fringed at the forehead to create bangs. She was dressed in a calico prairie style outfit and attached to her hand was a tag which read "Abigail, Brown County Folks Shop, Nashville Indiana."

At that time, I drew a picture of the hair and copied the writing on the tag, but came home from the show, only to misplace my information. After several months, I found my notes, and then started searching the internet for bits of information. I began to find some answers to the questions I had about my mystery girl. A photo and caption posted by the Indiana Historical Society showed that "Abigail"



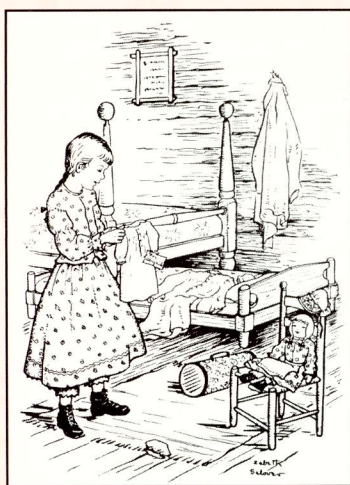
"Abigail" was first published in 1938.

was created by a woman from Brown County, Indiana. I contacted the director of the historical society who was kind enough to assist me with my search for additional information. I also discovered a book called "Abigail", written by the doll's creator, and have spoken to the grand daughters of the remarkable woman who not only authored the Abigail book, but designed both the Abigail and Nancy Hanks dolls.

Abigail's story starts with Portia Howe Sperry. She and her husband, Ralph Waldo Emerson Sperry, moved to the village of Nashville in Brown County, Indiana with their four children in 1931. Ralph had achieved national recognition for his piano designs, but because of the Great Depression, lost his job. He briefly worked as a radio cabinet designer for RCA, but this job, too, was short lived. Ralph was

devastated by the loss of his position with RCA, and Portia decided that the family would go to Nashville, as they had fond memories of previous time spent there. She felt sure that the family would do well in Brown County.

After working at various seasonal jobs within the community, the Sperrys had gained a reputation as hard working, honest people. Because of that reputation, the manager of the Nashville House, a local hotel, asked Portia to fill in for one week as a cook. When the week was over, she was offered another job – managing the gift shop for a few months. She agreed, but had the notion that the shop



This page from the book shows the doll's portmanteau under the bed.

This 18-inch Abigail has the most complete original outfit, although missing her apron. Her shoes are made of oil cloth, the material that her son, Jim Sperry, recalls his mother using to complete the dolls' portmanteaus.



An Abigail with brown eyes, also stuffed with wool. She does not have the darts forming the chin and ears. I believe she was made between 1932 and 1938.



Side view showing the cloth wig.

could be more successful selling hand crafted, locally produced items. The manager thought her idea was a good one, and soon offered Portia a permanent job at the Brown County Folks Shop.

Brown County was home to a flourishing artist's colony. So Portia Sperry approached the artisans, who agreed to sell the items they created at the shop. Pottery, woven cloth, braided rugs, wood carvings and paintings were all available, as well as "folk type" toys. Portia was inspired to create a child's rag doll after finding a tattered, old cloth doll in one of the log cabins in Brown County. She knew from experience with her own children that rag dolls were popular. Over several months, she developed a doll that she would name "Abigail". Many hours were spent in the back room of the Nashville House perfecting the design of the doll's jointed body using the old rag doll she found as a model. The torso and head of the doll were created using three pattern pieces. There is a center seam in the back, and the front of the doll is a flat piece of cloth which uses darts to create contours. She also worked at sewing pieces of clothing for her to wear.

Portia felt that the doll could be a playmate and a teaching tool so her design was child friendly, using muslin and soft, washable wool stuffing to construct her. She decided to use buttons and ties on the clothing and shoes, and cloth hair cut into strips that were braided so children could learn these skills. She also wanted to teach a bit of

history, so Abigail became the Log Cabin Doll, dressed as an early pioneer. Later in life, Mrs. Sperry would tell her grandchildren that Abigail "might just as well be a doll that told a story and served a purpose".

Portia worked extremely hard on the pattern and clothing, but she just could not get Abigail's face to look quite right. Because of her affiliation with the artist colony, she had strong friendships with several people there. One of her good friends was Carolyn Griffith, the wife of painter L.O. Griffith. When Carolyn saw the doll, she realized that Portia was putting the eyes in the middle of the forehead. Carolyn offered to design and paint the face of the Abigail doll using "fast dyes".

As production began, Mrs. Sperry realized that it would be necessary to enlist the help of local women. She went door to door with a finished doll and pattern pieces to recruit employees. Soon women in the community were approaching her to be part of her workforce. Not only were the dolls being made, but also a portmanteau was created to carry Abigail around. After experimenting with several methods, the portmanteau was eventually made by taping two empty Quaker Oat containers together, covering them with wallpaper and adding leather carrying handles.

In February of 1932, the Nashville House held a "Christening Party" for Abigail, the Log Cabin Doll. Local newspapers printed an invitation to the party along with an article about Portia, the local women, and the artisans



This is the newest of the Abigails shown, circa 1950's. She is loosely stuffed with synthetic material, rather than wool. The body is not as well sewn as the earlier examples nor does the cloth wig fit as well. She is nearly 20 inches tall. The back of her head shows the cloth wig.



The 1950's doll has printed on features rather than painted.

of Brown County who worked together to create her. Abigail became somewhat of a celebrity and soon retailers such as Marshall Fields and L.S. Ayres and Company were ready to sell the doll and her carrying case. Portia was confident that her workers could meet the demand for the dolls, but she was worried about her inventory of oatmeal boxes for the portmanteaus. She approached the Quaker Oats company to obtain a supply of containers, and the Quaker

Oats people were so enthusiastic about her entrepreneurial spirit, they agreed to adjust the measurements of the cardboard oatmeal containers to fit the doll and then donated the first hundred boxes to support the community effort. Portia was also able to obtain donated leather scraps to make the handles for the portmanteaus.

Abigail, who retailed for \$3.50, had become so successful that Portia's first Christmas season payroll was \$2000.00. The Brown County Folks Shop was expanding, carrying an increased inventory of local crafts, so Portia decided to produce another doll, too.

She created a small rag doll she called Nancy Hanks, hoping to inspire children to learn about the real Nancy Hanks and her famous son, Abraham Lincoln. Ralph Sperry used his experience in wood and cabinet design to create furniture for the Nancy Hanks doll as well as children's furniture which was then featured in the shop.

In 1934, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Brown County Folks Shop. She was intrigued by the concept of locals and artists working together to earn a living.

Mrs. Roosevelt felt that this partnership could serve as a model to encourage communities to create hand crafted, local products as a way to earn a living. Upon entering the shop, Portia Sperry recalls that Mrs. Roosevelt's first words were "Oh, I recognize Abigail". Before leaving the shop, she purchased several items, including a Nancy Hanks doll.

By the mid 1930's, the Sperry's were on more firm financial footing and Ralph had a new job with the Wurlitzer Piano Company. With Ralph employed and the continuing success of the Brown County Folks Shop, Portia was able to hire a friend to help manage the store. During this time, she began to write a book based on the Abigail doll. The book tells the story of the Calvin Family who were early pioneers traveling from Kentucky to Brown County, Indiana in the 1830's. The main characters were Susan Calvin and her doll, Abigail. Portia wrote the tale with historical accuracy and specific details of the period. The book was as successful as the doll, and in fact was used for many years in the fourth grade classes of Indiana schools. There were several printings of "Abigail" and The Indiana Historical Society reprinted a revised edition in 2000.

Through the years, the Abigail doll was hand made by various workers using the original patterns developed by Portia Sperry. All Abigail dolls were made in Nashville Indiana, and were available from 1932 through 2006. Early faces were hand painted with dye by Carolyn Griffith, however the faces of the later dolls were silk screened. Also, later dolls were not stuffed with wool, but synthetic materials. Although production of Abigail was stopped for several years, Portia and Ralph Sperry's grand daughters, Abigail and Sarah are now in the process of recreating and reintroducing Abigail, along with her portmanteau, and her history to the public. Their website is currently under construction.

Through conversations and correspondence with Abigail Sperry (who was named after the doll) and her sister, Sarah Sperry Mitchell, I learned a little bit more about the Sperry Family. Ralph indeed made furniture for not only the Nancy Hanks and Abigail dolls, but for his grandchildren, too. Abigail Sperry still has the chair made for her by her grandfather, and three Abigail dolls from different time periods.



All three dolls undressed from the earliest, c. 1932, to the latest which was likely made in the 1950's. One piece of cloth was used for the head and torso in front, and two pieces sewn with a center seam in the back. Hands are mitten type and feet are squared off in the front. Arms and legs are attached at the end, then a flat piece is left before the limb is stuffed. The flattened areas allow for better positioning.

The "Abigails" that belong to the family are all blue eyed, and in fact, Abigail and Sarah had never seen a brown eyed doll. I asked if perhaps the brown eyes were a special order. Abigail Sperry said she had no knowledge of special order dolls being created, so I would speculate that perhaps they were painted by Carolyn Griffith prior to the 1938 "Abigail" book, when Portia wrote that the "doll had blue eyes".

In 1960, on the occasion of Ralph's 80th birthday, he and Portia created their own little book titled "For Our Grandchildren", recounting the story of the Sperry Family. On the cover is the Sperry "Coat of Arms" which was designed in the 1930's and includes an image of Abigail because she was such a big part of their lives. A copy of the book was given to each of the grandchildren and is still cherished by them.

Abigail and Sarah have many relatives, but there are few examples of the Abigail rag doll to be found. The sisters feel that any dolls owned by the children were so "well loved" that they are no longer around.

Also, the dolls were thought of by the family as toys and not collectibles. Portia and Ralph had many friendships with the artisans of Brown County and acquired collections of paintings by various artists and photographs by Frank Hohenburger. The Sperry family has several early photographs of Portia with her dolls in the family archives as well as photos of Ralph and the Sperry children working at the shop. Abigail and Sarah still talk with their Uncle Jim Sperry about the family's history and continue to gather additional information about their grandparent's remarkable story of surviving and thriving in the most difficult of times by sticking together as a family and as a community.

Coming soon: a new website:
www.abigaildoll.com



Nancy Hanks doll, all original with hang tag, created by Portia Sperry. Note the tag has a handwritten inscription, "bought in 1934." The author sold this doll to Abigail Sperry and Sarah Sperry Mitchell so they would have one in the family. It measures 11.5 inches tall.