

Keepers of the Fire

PASSING ON BROWN COUNTY TRADITIONS

By Peter Sebert

Portia Sperry hesitantly mailed her first experiment in writing to the Women's Home Companion magazine. It was the summer of 1934. She headed back to her shop, Brown County Folks Shop located in the Nashville House, just across the street from the post office and courthouse. Was the story good enough for what she saw and felt?

Unbeknownst to her, the title (Doing it Together) and the story captured the essence of her adopted home. The editors published it in October 1934; over 500 letters were received at that same post office over the next couple years. Some of those letters requested permission to reprint the story and pass it out at their places of work. November 1934 the Reader's Digest printed the story and sold thousands of reprints as well.

She hoped to tell the struggles, the courage and the simple joys of her family and her home during the depression years of 1931-34.



How in the making of the rag doll, Abigail, the talented weavers and sewers cooperated to produce this rag doll. It made a big difference in



Almanack File Photo

The old State Bank Building, when it wasn't so old. The establishment is on East Main Street and used to house the post office.

all their lives. They had taken the craft industry to another level, adding to the mystique of Brown County while giving hope and cash in hard times. Now this story was spreading across the country.

A counter point to Abe Martin?

The Sperry family tapped the springs of the Brown County spirit and drank deeply from these hills.

They learned the lessons taught by pioneers and the artists. This success story proved to be an interesting counterpoint to the country philosopher, Abe Martin. He was an imaginary character living in a fictional Brown County — the Sperry's as real people in a unique, yet a typical community as thousands of other places across America demonstrated you can make a come back.

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In addition, Brown County was not just for country folks, but all folks.

A Fire in Paradise

Within a year or two of the new business success and the "Getting it Together" story multiplying that accomplishment, Portia received a call at the shop from the local telephone operator. Her son Ralph had called reporting a fire. Young Ralph was burning trash in the stove at their home, a mile west of town on Helmsburg Road. Creosote caused by wood smoke had earlier leaked from a temporary stove pipe chimney. It caught the wood shingle roof on fire. After getting the message Portia ran into the street shouting, "Help me, my house is on fire, Please help me, my house is on fire!"

Many ran for their cars or horses following her to the burning house. Young Ralph had carried furniture, important papers and family treasures outside, others grabbed clothes and other items.

They lost hundreds of jars of canned vegetables and fruit, fire damaged the upper section of house primarily. They had resources they did not have in 1931 the helping hands of many friends in their community to overcome this setback.

Second Generation of Sperrys

Family Coat of Arms

Portia Sperry seemed to be always planning and directing, yet had a way to include others and what was often best for all involved. Her children Charles, young Ralph, Emily and Posey were her main concern. How could she make sure these lessons were passed on from generation to generation within her beloved family? This seemed to be her goal as she gathered her children around her to develop a family coat of arms. Charles suggested a Shakespearean phrase from *As You Like It*, "Sweet are the uses of

adversity." They all agreed.

What were the items to go on the new family coat of arms? What best suggested what had happened and what they now believed? Four symbols were chosen to graphically portray their life together since coming to Brown County. First a hoe, without a garden they could not have survived because it saved money and their spirits. The home grown taste of ripe tomatoes is the sweet reward for some planning and hard work while watching nature do her magic. Next a cow, she provided milk, strong bones and several



stories of how city folks learned to milk and chase a runaway cow, she also needed care and feeding everyday.

A doll, Abigail put together by many members of the Brown County community, made their family known and respected locally and even nationally by providing what they needed in the depression, money and a place in the community. Fourth symbol on the coat of arms, a spinet piano created and produced by their father, Ralph for Wurlitzer at their DeKalb plant in 1937. He whose health problems and struggles to find work had brought them to Brown County. He designed not just the cabinetry of the piano, but the sound board, set the strings and movement of the instrument. He was recognized again as leader in his profession.



RALPH SPERRY AT A PIANO FACTORY

Karl Martz drew the coat of arms with the four symbols, hoe, cow, doll and spinet piano. Young Ralph wanted to have a part in this project. He asked L.O. Griffith to teach him how to etch the coat of arms in copper so he could make book prints to go in the book of Abigail's trip to Brown County. Griffith at first discouraged him as it would take too long and the end product may not be publishable. The boy's persistence and creativity prevailed. His mentor remarked later, "It was remarkably well done." (The original copper plate now rests in a desk in Indianapolis at the home of young Ralph who is now 87 years old.)

Christmas card

The artists of Brown County often drew and printed their own Christmas cards. Portia designed one around 1940 or 1941. A sketch of each member of the family at their place of work or study; she and Posey were by the fireplace keeping the home fires burning. Ralph, the father was designing pianos in DeKalb, Illinois. Most of the second generation of Sperrys had flown the nest; Charles was building refrigerators in Evansville, young Ralph and Emily were pictured at their desks as students of Indiana University.

Another fire - 1943

For a decade the Brown County Folks Shop was the center of craft

making and sales in Brown County. The shop located in the east end of the Nashville House. The inn still faced the post office and courthouse looking north. Those buildings, the constant flow of home folks, shop keepers and tourists on Main Street could be seen from the window. Portia had moved temporarily to be with Ralph in DeKalb, Illinois. Carolyn Griffith, wife of artist L.O. Griffith managed the shop. "Griff" had designed the face of Abigail, taught young Ralph to etch in copper the family coat of arms.

September 24, 1943 a fire started in the third floor of Nashville House. Soon after an appeal for help to those passing by, Carolyn Griffith began to take art, crafts, dolls and supplies across the street to the courthouse lawn. So many came to help, so quickly, most of the items in the store were saved and used to reopen the store in a few days at the Kritzer building. The scent of smoke filled the town for several days as charred timbers smoldered.

It took a long time to rebuild the Nashville House, since it was in the middle of the WWII and such a large project. In fact the inadequate water supply and not having a large enough pumper to douse the fire started a drive to get a better water supply and how inadequate the town pump now was for the small yet growing

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village. Because by the time a large pumper arrived from Bloomington the fire was out of control.

Three Generations of Sperrys

Margaret Dingley came to Nashville regularly in 1930s because her family had a horse farm on Clay Lick road several miles east of town. She caught young Ralph's eye and heart at the Playhouse. She came from the same stock as the Sperrys; family centered community minded and generous. In 1946 Bert and Julia Dingley donated their horse farm, 280 acres on Clay Lick Road to the Archdiocese of Indianapolis for a Catholic youth camp (CYO). They named it Framasa, created from the first syllables of the names of their three daughters, Frances, Margaret and Samuella. By this time Margaret and Ralph were married and living in Hendericks County as farmers with the beginnings of a family of 13 children.

They began farming in 1945 with a dairy; it became a major hog farm in 1966. They retired from raising hogs in 1980. The hundreds and maybe thousands of times they with their children traveled to Brown County to visit Grammy (Portia) and Grandfather over the years made an indelible impression on the third generation.

Two granddaughters now mature women in their own right, gladly told this author of some memories. Anne exclaimed, "Where do I start, she encouraged us kids, gave me my first painting book. We always received a book at Christmas for making notes. We were always making stuff." Susan remembered family picnics, working as a camp counselor, a picture that hung over the fireplace and how Grammy would sit them down and go over the plans and duties for the day.

Summer stays included days planned in early morning around Grammy's table. Beth Sperry Mills reported we played at Aunt Emily's place next door; we did things and participated in Grammy's plans while at her home. It was never carefree play. Sometimes the trips from Brownstown were to work as a counselor at CYO camp. Then often the inevitable time to work at Brown County Folks Shop to know the stories and work habits of their family.

Portia Lee Miller follows Posey Eades as Posey followed Portia Sperry

Three Portias owned and managed the Brown County Folks Shop from 1931 until it was sold almost 50 years later. Granddaughter Portia Lee took over the shop in 1974, yet she had been reared in it as had been Posey. Her mother, Posey was there from the beginning. But the Brown County Democrat's social and community news often tell of their trips to Chicago and others places looking for art, crafts and gifts for tourists to buy. Portia Lee Miller now lives in retirement in Florida. Soon after she sold the shop, the non-family owner moved the shop to a house on North Van Buren Street.

Another Shop with a Sperry tradition

In 1992, Beth Sperry, one of Ralph and Margaret's daughters married John Mills. He made clay pots. At the Brown County Pottery Shop he has thrown tens of thousands of pots to perfect his art. You can recognize his work, yet each is created individually and contains the spirit of the potter. His work subtly and boldly speaks of the beauty and wonder of function and form joined. He was and is active in the community and occasionally speaks his mind about public issues. His shop stands less than a block from where the early Brown County Pottery began.

John's mentor in clay was Karl Martz, then a professor at Indiana University. Karl's brother married the second Portia.

The Mills live in an historic house; one of the dwellers in the house built by Adolph & Ada Schultz was her grandparents Ralph, Portia and her father. They moved there after the fire on Helmsburg road in 1930s. Therein is one of the threads that introduced and tied Beth Sperry & John Mills to Brown County and each other.

A return to her family roots

Now Beth Mills throws pots for their pottery shop. After quietly getting the feel of the clay and joining with it in her own style, she begins her craft. The emerging style will likely be faithful to her influences yet carry her distinctive graceful manner. Their daughters, Ann and Ellen (fourth generation of Sperrys) make and sell small clay items and crafts in their parents shop. Signs on the door and wall make one feel welcomed with a smile; a water bowl by the door is for welcoming four legged creatures.

A third fire, 62 years after Nashville House burned

John Mills, in August 2005, saw a car race up his driveway. Lila Johnson had been called by co-workers at Moonshine Leather to get hold of John Mills. She jumped in her car and drove up hill to tell him, they did not have his telephone number. The shop was on fire, just prior to the height of tourist season fall of 2005. He rushed to the scene on Franklin Street beside the Ferguson House wondering how it started. He knew the kiln was turned off. The fire inspectors determined it started in the wall socket. The Volunteer Fire Department was called first and was able to protect the exterior and knock the fire down primarily in the work room of the shop.

The interior of the shop was gutted in the entire work area, three-fourths of the interior of the whole shop had to be replaced from the smoke and blistering effect of the fire. Smoke and heat damaged many pots and closed the shop temporarily. Mills' response to how many people came running then or stopped by the next day to help clean up and offer encouragement contains echoes from other scenes in Brown County where we do it together and we are with each other come....

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The Brown County Democrat recorded his comments when asked about his loss in the fire. "The response of the community to our need made it more than worth it." His sentiments also shared the respect and love of Brown County shared by Beth's grandfather, Ralph Sperry.

It was not only the immediate response that prompted the Mills' gratitude, but the prompt and caring assistance the shopkeepers, the county employees, contractors and especially the owner of the building Andy Rogers offered as they rebuilt Brown County Pottery. All cooperated to put him back in time to open for the busiest season. Andy Rogers is son of Jack Rogers. Jack offered the first craft shop in Brown County to Portia Sperry in 1931. Also, Andy Rogers is the present owner of Nashville House.

The Fountain in front of Nashville House

Ralph Sperry in the summer of 1961 several months before his death gratefully said to Portia, "Nashville has been so good for us we need to do something for Nashville. What would be the nicest thing we could do?" Together they sat remembering the good times and hard times. What was the question we were asked the most? They must have laughed when they realized it was, "Where could I get a drink of water?"

After his death in fall of 1961, the family asked friends and co-workers to help build a water fountain. Karl Martz, potter designed it. Hank Swain, contractor built it and Andy Rogers gladly gave permission for the water fountain to be erected in front of the gift shop close to the street. The bronze plaque first only contained Ralph's name and a Hugh Walpole saying. When Portia died in 1967 her name was added to another plaque. It replaced the first. It now reads "In Memory of Ralph W.E. Sperry 1880 - 1961, Portia Howe Sperry 1890 - 1967 —It is not life that matters but the courage you bring to it."

Sources: interviews with young Ralph Sperry, his daughters Susan, Anne and conversations with John and Beth Mills.

Articles from the Brown County Democrat in years 1930's, early 40's and 1960's, The article, "Doing it Together" and a family story book Portia H. Sperry wrote for her grandchildren in 1960.

