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HER PLACE IN HISTORY

Brown County-made dolls being added to Smithsonian's museum of American history

When Portia Howe Sperry's husband, Ralph, lost his job during the Great Depression, the mother of four moved her family to Brown County.

Here, she created the Abigail Doll and, ultimately, financial stability.

STORY & PHOTO BY
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More about the dolls' creator

Sperry began working at the Nashville House as a cook in 1931. Jack Rogers, owner of the then-hotel, asked Sperry if she would manage a gift shop.

After the first year, the shop made a profit, which prompted Rogers to sell the shop to the Sperry family.

The Brown County Folks Shop is where Sperry created and sold both the Abigail and Nancy Hanks dolls.

In a few weeks, Sperry's creations will be featured at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington. They will be part of an "American

Enterprise" permanent exhibit that is set to debut in July.

Doll history

The Abigail Doll has hinged arms and legs that move. She is dressed in an old-fashioned print dress, sunbonnet and pantaloons.

Sperry employed local women to help create the Abigail Doll during an era when money was tight and living was tough. The women often worked at home.

Sperry called on local artist L.O. Griffith to draw the face on the doll. Griffith's wife helped to handpaint the faces.

The Abigail Doll also had a companion book, which Sperry wrote in 1938.

The story is set in the 1830s and is about the Calvin family moving from Kentucky to Brown County. The book focuses on the adventures of Susan Calvin and her doll, Abigail.

"Abigail" is currently published by the Indiana Historical Society.

The Nancy Hanks Doll, based on President Abraham Lincoln's mother, was the second doll Sperry created. It was not as big a seller as

Abigail, Sperry's granddaughter, Sarah Mitchell, said.

However, the Nancy Hanks Doll was what led to both dolls being displayed in the Smithsonian, Mitchell said.

A woman in Pennsylvania received the Nancy Hanks Doll from her mother when she was a girl. The woman, Mary Seubert, decided to donate the doll to the Smithsonian in honor of her mother, according to a story from Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

Seubert hand-delivered it to the museum.

In 2008, a curator with the Smithsonian contacted Mitchell and her sister, Abigail, to inform them that the museum had the Nancy Hanks Doll and was looking to include it in an exhibit. The sisters sent the museum information about their grandmother for the exhibit.

The curator noticed that Sperry had created the Abigail Doll and had helped women find work during the Depression.

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Doll owner Ellen Carter holds the Abigail doll. The locally created figure soon will be added to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington.

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"That's what really interested them," Mitchell said.

The Smithsonian National Museum of American History wanted both dolls for their "American Enterprise" exhibit and planned to rotate the dolls to preserve them.

Ironically, the recession hit between 2008 and 2009, causing the exhibit to be delayed due to lack of funding, Mitchell said.

"We continued to call them — not a lot, but every once in a while we would give them a phone call," Mitchell said. "We were anxious to see this happen."

Finally in January 2014, the museum contacted the granddaughters to tell them the exhibit would open in July 2015.

"We were thrilled, but they seemed to have forgotten about the Abigail Doll. They had planned the exhibit size for the Nancy Hanks Doll," Mitchell said.

The sisters had to go into "full marketing mode" to get the Abigail Doll included.

"We told the curator that the Abigail Doll and her accompanying book was more representative of her success story than the Nancy Hanks Doll," Mitchell said.

The museum agreed to display both. The Nancy Hanks Doll will lie in a bed built by Ralph, who made furniture.

Not wanting to give up their own dolls, the sisters found a doll collector on the East Coast who volunteered to donate hers to the exhibit.

Sperry's touch

Sperry had a say in everything regarding the Abigail Doll, down to the packaging.

About Portia Howe Sperry

Portia Howe Sperry was 40 when her husband Ralph, 50, lost his job, after his piano factory went bankrupt during the Depression.

She decided to come to Brown County to start a new life for her family.

Ralph became depressed, and doctors were unable to diagnose it at the time, said Sperry's granddaughter, Sarah Mitchell.

Portia had to pick up the extra load at times. She worked multiple jobs including teaching swimming.

Portia was college-educated, a one-time teacher and was a civic leader in Fort Wayne in the late 1920s, according to the Abigail Doll website.

She placed two Quaker oatmeal boxes end to end and covered them with period wallpaper to make a box for the doll. She added a handle and called the carrying case a "portmanteau."

After being asked by Sperry if she could buy oatmeal boxes, the president of Quaker Oats ordered special double boxes be sent to her for free. With the packaging complete, the Abigail Doll was officially launched.

Brown County resident Ellen Carter owns two Abigail Dolls, the Abigail book, a Nancy Hanks Doll and another doll that Carter believes might be one of the first Abigail Dolls created before the faces were hand painted.

She bought the doll at a local family auction in Brown County.

"She was made maybe as an example to start with," Carter said.

Carter also owns one of the Quaker oatmeal "portman-teaus" that was decorated with Christmas wrapping paper,

"She was the glue that held the family and extended family together," Mitchell said.

Describing her grandmother as always happy, positive and optimistic, Mitchell shared her one of favorite quotes by her grandmother, who was talking about the Depression and what happened to the Sperry family: "It has been the most thrilling adventure in living that I have ever known."

Ralph ran the Brown County Folks Shop with Portia, their family and the gift shop's longest employee, May Monroe, who worked for the family for 42 years, the Abigail Doll website states.

Creating the website, which

explains the history of the dolls and the gift shop, has been a rewarding experience for the sisters.

"It's very interesting. Because of that website, we had the privilege to hear from older people. People have contacted us who remember my grandmother. They remember making the doll, they remember their mother making the doll. They remember watching their mother make the boot and put the little grommets in the boot, and they might have helped do it," Mitchell said.

"The best part is getting to know all of these details about it and wondering how in the world my grandmother did it."

possibly for a child's Christmas present.

When Carter was growing up in Brown County, she knew Sperry and was friends with some of Sperry's grandchildren.

"I know as a kid growing up, it was a big deal for someone to come down from Indianapolis or Chicago to go to the folks shop. There weren't all of these shops (now). That was real popular to buy an Abigail Doll," she said.

Tradition lives

Mitchell and her sister are two of Sperry's 22 grandchildren. The girls took over creating the Abigail Doll in 2006.

"It is still in the family, and I did not want to let it go. This will keep us in touch with our heritage and our roots," Mitchell said. "I thought we had to carry it on."

The sisters originally planned to have the doll created in Brown County, but since the two live in Colorado, it was difficult to oversee the

process they way they would have liked.

Now, a doll maker in Colorado is working with the sisters to re-create the doll for anyone who wishes to purchase for \$250.

But it has not been easy following in their grandmother's footsteps.

"I told my sister, 'We're going to carry this on,'" Mitchell said. "Our goal was to make it as close as possible to the original, but we had no idea how hard this was going to be."

Difficulties include getting wool, finding the right bonnet material and getting the bonnet to fit just right, Mitchell said.

"All of that stuff has just been an amazing learning curve," she said.

The sisters measure down to millimeters when trying to re-create the doll's iconic face.

"We're picky," Mitchell said. "We make sure everything is

right, and we love to box them up and make sure everything is right on there before we send it out," she said. "We still feel such a connection that way."