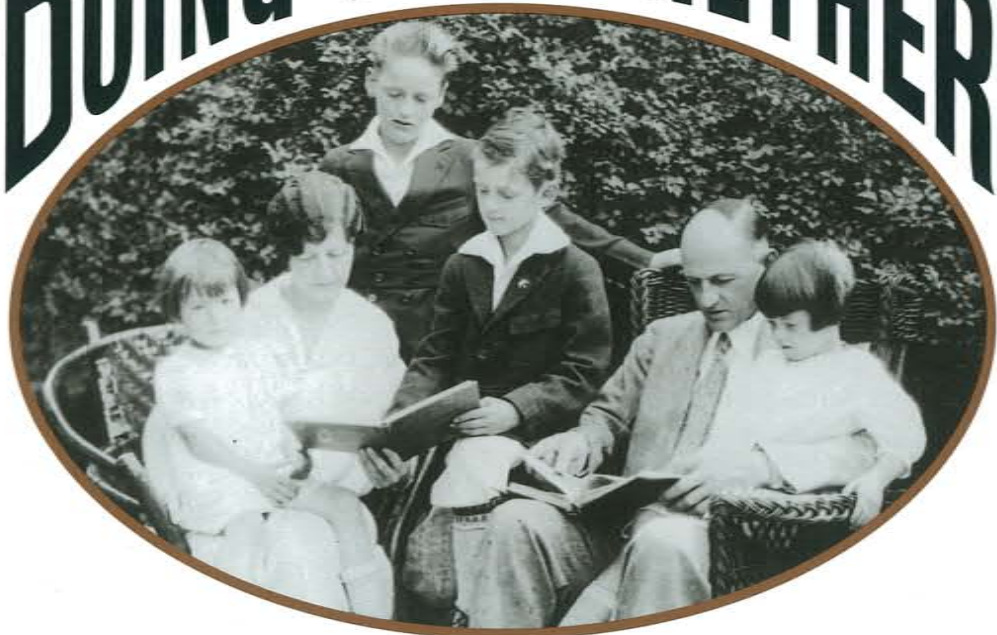


"DOING IT TOGETHER"



UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED, PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE SPERRY FAMILY
The Sperry family: Posey, Portia, Charles, Jim, Ralph, and Emily.

THE SPERRY FAMILY OF BROWN COUNTY, INDIANA

DURING THE DEPTHS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION, the gift shop manager at the Nashville House in Brown County, Indiana—a woman who had moved to the area with her family after her husband lost his well-paying job at RCA in Camden, New Jersey—had an idea for a new product. Seeing how much little girls enjoyed playing with rag dolls, the manager, Portia Howe Sperry, decided to design one herself. Working with Brown County natives and artists over the next several months, Sperry fashioned a doll dressed in a pioneer outfit to offer children both entertainment and education.

Named Abigail after a Brown County pioneer woman, the rag doll became a nationwide hit, selling at such respected stores as Marshall Field and Company in Chicago and L. S. Ayres and Company in Indianapolis. Eventually the dolls were in homes in nearly every state and other countries such as Canada, England, and France. The doll's popularity helped turn the Nashville House's gift store, the Brown County Folks Shop, into a tourist attraction and even

spawned a children's book based on the Abigail character. Sperry's refusal to buckle when faced with financial hardship reflected the motto she encouraged her family to live up to throughout her life: "When you're up against a brick wall and you can't go through it, climb over the top." She related her family's

OPPOSITE: A young girl, Barbara Belknap, dresses in a costume to match that of the Nancy Hanks doll she holds.

BARBARA J. DIRKS





The rag doll became a bridge between two cultures: the artists and Brown County natives. Though they had been living in the same small town, they had not had much in common in the past until the depression hit. Now they began to produce a doll named Abigail.



TOP LEFT: The Sperry family behind the counter of the Brown County Folk Shop. TOP RIGHT: Portia Howe Sperry holding a Nancy Hanks doll. BOTTOM: Ralph Sperry (left) at the Wurlitzer Piano Company. Before the depression, Sperry worked as an apprentice in piano shops in Boston and became one of the leading piano designers in the country.

An emergency fund held what little money they had as the Sperrys set about looking for work. Ralph found a job as foreman at a local apple orchard, earning twenty-five cents an hour. This money enabled the Sperrys to buy staple foods. Portia had also heard about a local summer camp. She approached the owners and offered to teach swimming an hour a day in return for letting her daughters attend the camp. Today her family suspects she knew only one stroke, but with her personality that was enough, and she was hired. When the daily walk in heat and humidity proved to be too much for her two daughters, Portia offered to have Ralph do some repair work for the camp in return for letting the girls stay all day and have lunch, an offer the camp's manager accepted.

These were difficult days for the family, and as Portia later related in her magazine article, "many a time in those months spent in the shacks the children pulled us through." One day while



Ralph Sperry working in the garden her second-oldest working on a child, Jim, who later became a farmer, piano design. said to his mother, "We are proving it isn't true, aren't we, Mother?"

"Proving what, Jim?"

"People say you have to have money to be happy; we haven't any money and we just couldn't be any happier, could we?"

Over time the Sperrys earned a reputation in the community as being good, honest people and reliable workers. One day the manager of the local hotel, the Nashville House, came to the Sperry home, told Portia that her cook had just quit, and asked her if she would come and work for a week. Though she had never cooked on or even seen a coal range, Portia

accepted the offer. Working from seven in the morning until eight at night, she successfully managed the kitchen. Her experience as a cook made her respect anyone working in such a difficult situation. "Even the hour off in the afternoon I was afraid to take for fear the fire would go out and the roast might not get done," Portia noted. "Never as long as I live shall I have the courage to go into a country inn and ask for a meal at an off-hour. I'd go hungry first any time." After Portia's harrowing time as a cook, the manager asked her to work another week, but this time to look after the hotel while she went on vacation. The second week was a different story, and Portia found she enjoyed working with the public.

With fall approaching, the manager of the hotel again thought of Portia and asked if she would like to manage the gift shop during the next few months. Even then the months of September, October, and November were busy times in Nashville. "I had always thought I'd rather scrub floors than sell anything," said Portia, "but following my general principle of accepting the thing at hand I didn't hesitate a second." She did make one condition: the store would sell only handmade pieces produced in Brown County. "Indianapolis people don't want to come to Brown County and buy merchandise they can buy back in Indianapolis," Portia noted.

As the Sperrys continued to eke out an existence, they realized that something had to be done about their living conditions. The shack's bare walls offered little protection from cold weather. They learned that a long-unoccupied cottage was available for rent, but upon closer inspection they discovered that the one-hundred-year-old house on Watten Hill had plaster peeling off the walls, a leaky roof, and chickens inhabiting the upstairs. Still, the house had a fine fireplace and modern plumbing, and the Sperrys decided to rent it. Ralph's carpentry skills came in handy as the family set about working on the home. With the help of his son Charles, Ralph finished the work, and the family moved into the home in December 1931.

The hotel manager asked Portia to continue overseeing the gift shop through the winter for a small salary. Although Portia had been offered a job in Chicago, she turned it down to remain in Brown County. Considering the well-established artists colony in the area, Portia decided to find native crafts to sell in the store. Knowing how much little girls enjoyed playing with rag dolls, Portia designed one for the shop. In addition to being a toy, the doll, she believed, could help children learn. She planned to dress the doll in a



Portia Howe Sperry designed the Abigail rag doll as a new product for the Brown County Folks Shop. Abigail was dressed in a pioneer

outfit with buttons, an apron, and shoestrings. Portia believed that children would have fun playing with the doll while learning to dress themselves.



Portia Howe Sperry.

Born in 1890, Portia Leonora Howe came from a Chicago-area family. After studying at Milwaukee-Dowder College to become a physical-education teacher, she worked in the Evanston, Illinois, school system. While working there she met Ralph Waldo Emerson Sperry. His background was very different from Portia's, and her decision to marry him disappointed her family. Ralph Sperry's large, somewhat poor family had moved from New England to live on a farm in Dodge Center, Minnesota. To help support his family, Ralph left school after the ninth grade to find work. His first love was music, however, and at the age of nineteen he left the farm and moved to Boston to become a piano technician.

During the next ten years Ralph worked as an apprentice in various piano shops in the Boston area, developing his skills and earning the respect of those already in the business. By the end of that time he had worked himself up to the position of factory manager for the Ivers and Pond Piano Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ralph and Portia married on 26 September 1914. Through continued self-study and work experience, Ralph became one of the leading designers of pianos in the country, earning national recognition in the field. He eventually accepted a position as vice president and factory manager with the Packard Piano Company in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the Sperrys moved there with their four children. The family enjoyed a comfortable life in Fort Wayne and spent summers at Lake Wawasee. The financial panic that gripped the country in 1929, however, turned the family's life around. Though times were very difficult, Portia later wrote that it was "the beginning of the happiest period of their whole lives."

By the late 1920s radios had become extremely popular, affecting the sales of pianos. To meet the competition, the Packard Company upgraded its equip-

ment, and Ralph began to design wooden radio cabinets for the firm. The company had a large stockpile of the cabinets when the depression hit. With customers not able to afford the company's new products, the firm closed and Ralph lost his job. Ralph's national reputation in the industry was such that he was offered a position with RCA in Camden, New Jersey. He went east to work for a few months and then wired Portia to move the family there. But only four months after arriving in New Jersey, Ralph again became unemployed and was left with only one month's salary to support his family. This second setback hit Ralph particularly hard; he was so distraught that "the very smell of food made him deathly sick."

With her husband ill and the family facing financial disaster, Portia acted. She decided that whatever happened, the family would remain together. She remembered a village in Brown County, Indiana, through which she and Ralph had traveled several times while on vacation. "The folk, hardly more than five hundred in all, seemed kindly," Portia noted of Nashville. "It was a beautifully hilly spot. Somehow my imagination

Sperry's refusal to buckle when faced with financial hardship reflected the motto she encouraged her family to live up to throughout her life: "When you're up against a brick wall and you can't go through it, climb over the top."

took me straight there, where we could live for far less than in any city." If they could go there, Portia thought, they could start a garden and preserve food for winter. By having the family work together, she was sure Ralph would get well again and be able to find a job.

Returning to Indiana, the Sperrys had some luck when they managed to find a buyer for their Fort Wayne house. While their children stayed with relatives and friends, Ralph and Portia went to Nashville to look the area over. The couple found a log cabin to rent for twenty dollars a month. But when the Sperrys finally moved to Nashville, they discovered the cabin's owner had received a better offer and rented the home to someone else. The only affordable housing they could locate were two one-room wooden shacks about twelve feet by fifteen feet in size. Each shack had a kerosene stove but no indoor plumbing or electricity. Water had to be carried in from a cistern a quarter of a mile up the road. With no other choice available to them, the Sperrys rented the shacks. They planned to cook and eat in one shack and sleep in the other. As she settled into her new home, Portia began to plan how to overcome the family's financial difficulties.



FRANK M. HOHENBERGER, PHOTOGRAPHER, LILLY LIBRARY, INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON

The Brown County Folks Shop. When Portia Sperry took over as manager of the gift shop at the Nashville House, she insisted that the store sell only pieces made by hand in Brown County.

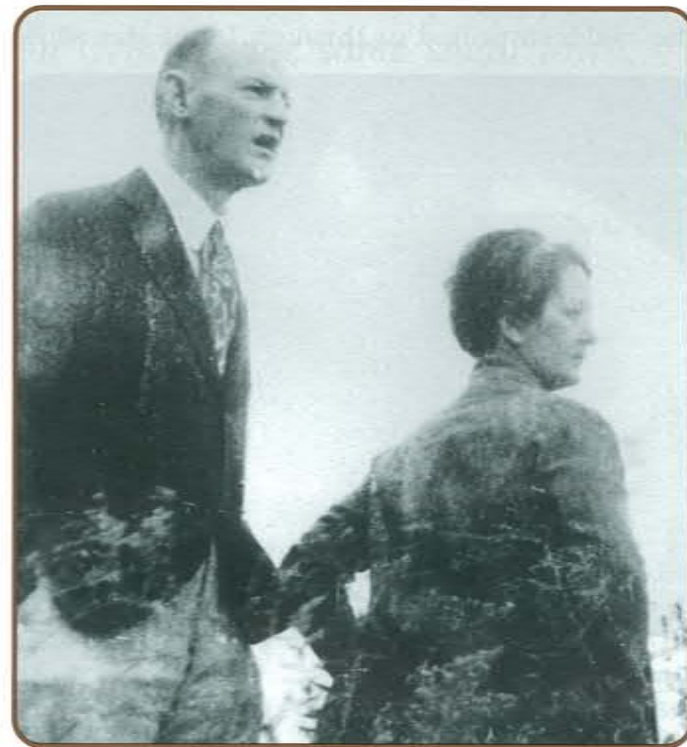
pioneer outfit with buttons to button, an apron and shoestrings to tie, and hair to braid. "Having four children," Portia said, "I well knew that some youngsters have a hard time learning to dress and undress themselves. So we knew it would be fun for them to learn how by playing with a doll."

Developing the doll took months. Portia worked in the shop and in the back of the Nashville House sewing the doll by hand, ripping out what was not right, and trying again. Working with fabric, leather scraps, and odds and ends, she perfected the pattern. Made of muslin, the twenty-inch-long doll was equipped with special joints to allow it to be dragged by the arm or leg. Sperry stuffed the doll with wool fleece so it could be washed. Creating the face proved difficult. Portia decided the face should be painted onto the fabric, but no matter what she did the face did not look right. By this time Portia had become good friends with Carolyn Griffith, wife of artist L. O. Griffith. Jim Sperry recalled that his mother took a prototype of the doll to the Griffiths to ask them what was wrong with the face. They told her to look where she was placing the eyes—they were in the doll's forehead. An artist herself, Carolyn Griffith redesigned the face and agreed to paint it on the manufactured dolls. The rag doll became a bridge between two cultures: the artists and Brown County natives. Though they had been living in the same small town, they had not had much in common in the past until the depression hit. Now they began to produce a doll named Abigail.

As she worked on the doll, Portia realized that production would have to be done by piecework. That way she would have quality control, and the dolls would all be the same. Not knowing how the local women would receive her, she decided to go out and try. With muslin

pattern pieces and a completed doll in hand, she started out to recruit help. The gamble paid off, and when word spread about the project, women in the community began asking to participate. Some made the doll's body while others made the clothing. Next, Portia came up with a carrying case or portmanteau for the doll. While sitting at the breakfast table she realized that two large, round oatmeal boxes put together could hold the doll. She experimented with different designs and eventually taped the boxes together, covered them with wallpaper, and attached a handle to the side.

On 27 February 1932 the Nashville House sponsored a christening party. The local newspaper printed an invitation introducing Abigail, the Log Cabin Doll, made by Brown County citizens. The article acknowledged Portia as the doll's creator and listed several local women as assisting her. The newspaper also announced that Sperry would be



Ralph and Portia Sperry. traveling to Chicago to see if Marshall Field and Company would like to sell the doll. L. S. Ayres and Company in Indianapolis had already agreed to begin carrying it later that month.

Marshall Field's proved eager to sell the doll, and Portia began to worry about having enough boxes to make the carrying cases. Her finances were still extremely limited so she decided to approach the head of the Quaker Oats Company to see if she could arrange a deal. In a meeting with the company's president, Portia so impressed him with her project that he asked the plant's manager to adjust the knives so that boxes

were cut the correct length for the doll. He said he would give her one hundred boxes and ship them free to support her community efforts. Another company agreed to supply Portia with leather scraps to create the handles for the portmanteaus.

By the end of the first Christmas season Portia had distributed \$2,000 in wages to local women for their work in producing the Abigail doll, which sold for \$3.50. With the doll a success and the store becoming a tourist attraction, Portia expanded the variety of local crafts she carried. Walter Griffiths and his wife Helen, an



This photograph, taken at Brown County State Park, was published in the *Brown County Democrat* on 7 July 1938. Portia Sperry and Carolyn Griffith appear in the top row. Griffith was the artist who designed and painted the faces on the Abigail dolls. Ralph Sperry and the Sperrys' two daughters, Posey and Emily, are in the bottom row of the photograph.

artist, had moved to Nashville from Milwaukee soon after he lost his engineering job. Portia suggested to the Griffiths that they try making pottery out of Salt Creek clay, which was beige to light brown with red streaks after firing. Working with Karl Martz, a local potter, the Griffiths developed what came to be known as Brown County Pottery. Portia next encouraged locals to begin weaving, and she set up looms in the shop. Rugs and dresser scarves were produced and sold there. The store also sold jam, honey, quilts, aprons, hand towels, straw toys, braided rugs, and woodcarvings. In

addition, Portia created another doll, this one based on Nancy Hanks, Abraham Lincoln's mother. Ralph designed a desk, chair, and bookcase for the doll and also developed other furniture for children.

The shop played host to an important visitor in the summer of 1934. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who had heard Nashville's beauty praised by University of Kentucky president Frank McVey, visited the area for a little over an hour on 8 July. Her first stop in Brown County was the Nashville House, where she became entranced by the weaving, woodwork, and pottery offered for sale by the Brown County Folks Shop. "This is just what we have been looking for," said Roosevelt, who on her trip had been trying to encourage poverty-stricken rural families to develop handmade products. She proceeded to purchase a Nancy Hanks doll and some walnut brittle. Before leaving the area to deliver a radio address in Chicago, Roosevelt also visited with Richard Lieber, former director of the Indiana Department of Conservation, and toured the Brown County Art Gallery.

The Sperrys received another surprise visit in 1934 when two men drove up to the family's house and asked if Ralph Sperry lived there. The men said they represented the Wurlitzer Piano Company and that they had been looking for Ralph all over the country. Ralph, they said, was one of a few people who knew every step in making an instrument their firm had been trying to develop—an upright spinet piano—and they wanted to hire him. Ralph had done some piano work for Indiana University, and the Wurlitzer job appealed to him. The shop was doing well, however, and the family did not want to separate or move. Still, the Sperrys' financial situation was such that they decided Ralph would accept the job and go to work in DeKalb, Illinois. This meant that he could come home only one weekend a month. Daughter Portia Martz later remembered these visits as "the gayest most festive time; we made up in one weekend for what we had lost in a month!" The store continued to prosper, and the Sperrys eventually hired a friend to manage it so that Portia and the children could go to Illinois a few months a year. In February 1937 another christening party was held at the store, this time for the new Wurlitzer 440 spinet piano designed by Ralph.

The Sperry family's good fortune continued when Portia wrote a children's book, which was published in 1938 and based on the Abigail doll. Just as the doll had been designed to be educational, so too the book had to be historically accurate, using as its basis the early



Eleanor Roosevelt visits Brown County on 8 July 1934. During her trip Roosevelt stopped in the Brown County Folks Shop and was impressed by the weaving, pottery, and woodwork she saw for sale there.

history of Indiana and Brown County. In an interview in 1970, Portia Martz remembered her mother conducting extensive research before she began to write. "I can't remember for sure how long it took mother to write the book, but I can remember hearing the typing, 'the hunt and peck' system for a long time," noted Martz. Portia's hard work paid off; the book *Abigail* was well received and sold readily with the doll. For years the book was used in fourth-grade classes in Indiana.

The Brown County Folks Shop remained in the Sperry family from 1931 to 1984. When World War II drew many craftsmen away from the area to work in war plants, Portia started selling commercially made gift items in the store. In 1964 Portia Martz took over her mother's shop and expanded the merchandise line to include items made outside Brown County. Martz's daughter, Portia Lee Miller, began to manage the shop in 1974 then sold the business to someone outside the family in 1984. In an article in the book *Brown County Remembers*, Miller recalled that her grandmother was "a woman of amazing fortitude. . . . She was always looking on the brighter side of things and absolutely refused to become defeated."

Ralph retired from Wurlitzer after working for the firm for approximately twenty-five years. He and Portia spent the rest of their lives in Nashville. Sperry grandchildren remember visiting them during summer vacations, sometimes helping in the shop. Every visit to their grandparents' home included walks, picnics, rides around the countryside in their grandfather's jeep, and sometimes one of his favorite Sunday suppers, popcorn and milk and homemade peach ice cream.

Following Ralph's death in August 1961, Portia created a memorial to her husband. He had often remarked that people visiting Nashville needed a place to get a drink of water. She had Karl Martz design a drinking fountain. Today the fountain still stands in front of the Nashville House at the corner of a raised perennial garden. Written on a plaque are words by Hugh Walpole, which young Jim Sperry had suggested the family adopt as its motto: "It is not life that matters but the courage you bring to it."

Portia died in 1967. In her obituary the family requested that in lieu of flowers donations be sent either to the American Printing House for the Blind or to a scholarship fund established in the name of her late brother Charles Howe. To the end of her life,

Portia thought of others she might somehow be able to help. Looking back on her life, Portia noted that she had "found that there is no problem that is put up to us, not anything for which there isn't a solution right close at hand."

The Sperry family's heartwarming story continues to resurface. In 1936 a revised version of Portia's 1934 *Woman's Home Companion* article was printed in *The Friendly Hour, Book Eight, Living and Serving*. Edited for children, the story was followed by "Guides to Thinking," which were used to generate discussion about the depression. *Holiday* magazine mentioned Portia and the Abigail doll in an article on Nashville in 1950. In 1970 the *Bloomington Herald-Times* ran a



Portia Sperry encouraged many local women to begin weaving and set up looms for them in the Brown County Folks Shop. She sold the rugs, dresser scarves, and other products they produced in the shop.

full-page story about the Sperrys and the Abigail doll. Last year the Indiana Historical Society reprinted the *Abigail* book, and the Sperry family's story is told in the Society exhibition *A Working Life*, which opened at the IHS's headquarters in May 2001. The Abigail doll has been trademarked by the Sperry family and continues to be made in Brown County.

Barbara J. Dirks is director of the Indiana Historical Society's Indiana History Project, which records books on tape for the blind and physically handicapped. She assisted the Society with the reprinting of the *Abigail* book, which the IHS sells in its History Market for \$8.95 (\$7.16 for Society members). The History Market also sells a handmade replica of the Abigail doll for \$125.00 (\$112.50 for Society members). To order either item, call the History Market at (800) 447-1830 or visit <http://shop.indianahistory.org>.

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