

Vednesday Morning, December 31, 1980

Nashville, Brown County, Indiana

Abigail doll is a family tradition

Out of a round, fabric-covered Quaker Oats cereal box she came— a wool-stuffed, hand-made rag doll dressed in a cheery calico outfit with matching sunbonnet, dainty white apron, and leather shoes.

Out of her pretend portmanteau came Abigail.

The story of Brown County's well-known rag doll is actually several stories.

It is the legend of a doll and her avels in the 1830's by covered wagon

from Kentucky to Brown County.

In real life Abigail is the story of three generations of women named Portia.

That story began in the 1920's and 30's with the doll's creator, Portia Howe Sperry, her husband, Ralph, and their four children.

Ralph Waldo Emerson Sperry, so named for his father's English teacher, was the manager of the Packard Piano Company in Fort Wayne when the Depression hit the country.

With the demand of pianos gone, the Sperrys decided to return to Brown County, the scene of happier honeymoon days.

Home became two one-room cabins on Helmsburg Road.

Sperry found work picking apples at the Bessire Orchard, while Mrs. Sperry gave swimming lessons at the camp on Town Hill in exchange for her two daughters' admission and meals at the camp.

Soon after that, Jack Rogers asked Mrs. Sperry to run the gift shop in the Nashville House.

In the shop, located where the current Nashville House kitchen stands, Mrs. Sperry sold locally made jams and pottery and brooms from Berea, Kentucky.

During the winter Mrs. Sperry sought out new sources of local handcrafts to sell in the shop.

In 1931 she opened the Brown County Folks Shop and her sales of locally made items continued to expand.

One of those items was the forerunner of the Abigail doll—the Nancy Hanks doll.

Abigail was born in 1933 and just like Nancy Hanks, she was entirely hand-made.

Stuffed with wool scraps from a blanket factory, Abigail was designed to teach little girls how to dress themselves.

Although she is now stuffed with fiberfill, not much else has changed during the past 50 years.

For many years the rag doll's cloth facial features were printed by The Democrat.

Abigail's face is now silk screened by Barb and Dave Trusty of "Happiness Is" and her clothes are made by Dorothy Day of Columbus.

For the past two years both Abigail and her shoes have been made by employees of the shop.

Each doll body takes 10 hours to complete.

Today the greatest difference between the present and the past Abigail is her cost.

The doll was originally sold for \$3.50, a high price in 1933.

Abigail now costs \$27.50 but it is a tribute to her popularity that she is still being made and sold.

The Brown County Folks shop has always been a family enterprise.

After the Depression, Ralph Sperry returned to the piano manufacturing business, commuting by train to Detroit.

He was the inventor of the spinet piano and designed a method of crossing piano strings to allow for the creation of the lower profile version of the old highboy piano.

Meanwhile Portia Sperry continued to run the shop, aided by her two daughters who used to entertain customers by weaving rugs.

In 1938 Mrs. Sperry wrote the book "Abigail," taking great care to preserve the historical background of the time.

Her shop, celebrating its 50th years this week, holds the distinction of being the oldest continuously operating gift shop in Nashville.

Even the 1943 fire which destroyed the old Nashville House did not force the shop to close.

Until the new building was completed, Brown County Folks was housed in the old Kritzer Store near PegAnn's Wardrobe.

Mrs. Sperry continued to run the shop after the death of her husband in 1961 and constructed the water fountain in front of the shop in his memory because he had always complained, "You can't get a drink of water downtown."

In February, 1966, Portia Sperry's daughter Portia (Posey) and her husband Bob Martz became the owners of the shop.

Mrs. Sperry died in April of 1967 knowing, Mrs. Martz said, that "We love Brown County Folks just as much as she did."

The Martzes found it necessary to expand the business beyond the made-in-Brown-County idea.

About 10 years later they passed the family ownership of the shop to their



Portia Sperry displays one of the original Abigail dolls.

Photo by Frank Hohenberger

daughter, Portia Lee, and her husband, Jerry Miller.

Once retired, Mrs. Martz spent several years on the family sailboat "Abigail" before her death.

Mrs. Miller said the Brown County Folks shop has not changed much in 50 years.

"I'm carrying on the tradition just as it was, working under Grammie's philosophy. Work can be fun if you do things together, whether with family, clerks or customers. We still try to provide good old-fashioned service," Mrs. Miller said.

The buying habits of the customer have altered over the past 50 years, as has the quality of the merchandise available in the shop, Mrs. Miller said.

Gone are the days of the exclusive items, the right of one shop owner in an area to carry special items.

Mrs. Miller credits much of the success of the shop to May Roberts Monroe, who actively ran the shop for 42 years.

She calls Mrs. Monroe her life-sent because of her invaluable knowledge of merchandise buying.

Mrs. Monroe has gone on buying trips with all three Portias and knows just what will sell.

Mrs. Miller abides by the tradition of the Sperry crest "Sweet are the uses of adversity" and sees interesting times ahead for both Abigail and herself as the third Portia of the Brown County Folks shop.

— Barbara Sheehan



Photo by Barbara Sheehan

Portia Miller, granddaughter of Portia Sperry, holds the current version of an Abigail doll.