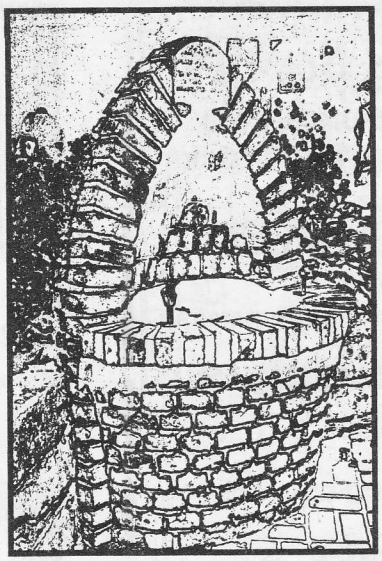
Portia's Gift

By Henry Swain



Closing out the 1940s saw the completion of the new Nashville House, the original having been destroyed by fire some years earlier. The new plans provided shop space as well as the restaurant, lobby and office space for the owner, A.J. Rogers. Mr. Rogers, known as Jack, was the father of Andy Rogers, present owner of the Nashville House.

The shop space was occupied by the Brown County Folks Shop operated by Portia and Ralph Sperry. The shop was probably the oldest shop in the village.

Portia opened the shop during the Great Depression and managed a living for her family by designing the Abigail doll which was sold in the shop and also marketed in large city department stores. Abigail was all Brown County. Portia designed the doll and clothing and had local seamstresses make them.

Ralph had retired from an Illinois piano factory where he had been the designer of the firm's new spinet model. Ralph spent most of the time in the stock room ordering and shipping. Ken Reeve and I were asked to renovate some of the display cases for the shop. Ken was working in the rear of the shop while my project was near the front.

I noticed Ralph kept coming from the stockroom to talk to Ken with considerable frequency. After a while I heard them both laughing loudly. Afterward I asked Ken what the joke was about. He said that Ralph had come and asked about some detail of his work.

Ralph asked him the same question each time he returned to view Ken's progress. Ken's baffled look finally brought Ralph's confession that he was testing new hearing aids and wanted to hear the same answer each time for comparison.

Portia had artistic talent and a desire to add beauty to the world when she saw the opportunity. She got permission from Mr. Rogers to add a small pool and fountain by the shop door. She had Karl Martz, a well-known local potter, create a ceramic shallow basin from which water overflowed into a larger pool below. This sound of flowing water lured customers to the shop as well as adding beauty to the entrance.

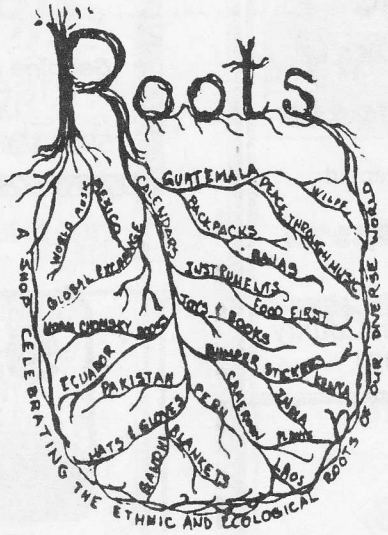
Ralph died a few years later and Portia asked Jack if he would approve the building of a drinking fountain in front of the shop nearer the street. She wanted it as a memorial to Ralph and as an opportunity to serve a public need.

Permission was granted and Portia again commissioned Karl Martz to design the fountain. After years as a teacher at Indiana University, Karl recently died, with a world reputation for having developed new ceramic glazes.

Portia showed me Karl's drawings and asked if I could build the fountain from his drawings. It was to be made of used bricks in a design that was mostly curved surface and somewhat reminiscent of a kiln, the natural tool of a potter. I assured her that it came within my skills to build it and she instructed me to complete the job.

For years it served the public as Portia had intended. I suspect worn plumbing too complicated for easy repair has left it in recent years deprived of its original function. The beauty of the design's simplicity still remains. The continuous flowing curves of Karl's design presented more of a challenge to my building skills than I had anticipated, but the final product was close to the original drawings.

I consider it one of my special memories to have worked with Portia and Karl on this small project. We were all made better by seeing Portia's memorial to Ralph become a reality. It was a dream of both beauty and service and is but a small example of what some of those who came before us left for us and future generations to enjoy. It was and is a part of what makes Brown County a special place.



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