



# Brown County Journal

August 15, 2021

## Events:

Brown County  
Historical Society  
Dinner meeting  
Sept. 6, 2021

The Fall Gathering  
Sept. 18, 2021

Brown County Rock &  
Mineral Show  
Sept. 25 & 26, 2021

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Rhonda A. Dunn

## The Sturgeons of Schooner Valley

Family Reunions still occur, many are to bring close family members together, and some are arranged for the benefit of getting distant families back together. This series of stories was written as a way to introduce you to the latter type of reunion. The Sturgeon Reunion has gone on for many years in order to bring together distant Sturgeon families every August. The following stories are about Sturgeons that have lived here in Brown County.

More than any other area in Brown County, Schooner Valley has more folklore and legends that have survived in our history. State Road 46 West traverses the full length of it and its scenic beauty is greatly admired by all. A number of older families in the county are still living here for the reason that it is claimed that the valley soil is quite productive when compared to the clay hillsides bordering it. I'm sure, though, the first visitors here could not have seen the beauty that we do today. The forests covered everything then, it was a great expanse of huge trees that had to be cleared for the first settlers that came here.

This valley has some interesting history surrounding it. The first story of how Brown County was settled always starts with Johann Schoonover, a German immigrant, for whom Schooner Valley was named. He was known to be here in 1820. He owned a small stock of items that he used to trade with the Indians. The name Schoonover was shortened to Schooner and the valley and creek both acquired his name.

Several Indian tribes called Brown County their home, the Woodland Indians being the first known group. By 1650 the Miami, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Piankashaw and Wyandotte were

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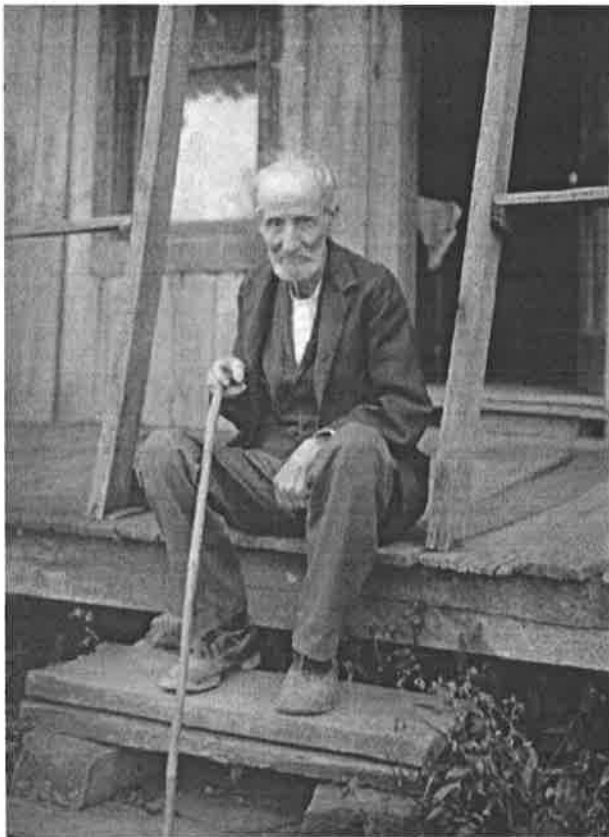
here, with the Shawnee and Delaware coming about 1788 moving from eastern lands. Treaties were formed with the Native Americans in 1818 and 1821, the area that was to be become Brown County was opened up to white settlers. The area that is Schooner Valley was first attached to Monroe County. Brown County was created in 1836 from parts of Monroe and Bartholomew Counties.

My purpose here is not to study the migration of the Sturgeon family into Indiana, but to relate some stories that have been told over the years about some of the more notable Sturgeon family members. Rolla Sturgeon appears to be one of the first of the family to settle here.

### **Ransom Sturgeon & the Indians**

Information is scant, but there are tales concerning the Indians that the pioneers had told their children that have been handed down. For the most part the Indians that remained were peaceable. More than a few families became accustomed to seeing smoke from Indian campfires 'down the holler.' Pioneers found and used Indian traces and trails that crisscrossed the county. One trace crossed the western part of the county north and south from Hendricks County to Lawrence County.

Another trace crossed east and west from Ohio to Illinois. (History and Families, Brown County, Indiana 1836-1990)



**Ransom Sturgeon**

This is from a story told by one old settler, Ransom Sturgeon. He lived in Schooner Valley half a mile from the Duncan Cemetery. During an 'oldest resident contest' conducted by the local newspaper Ransom wrote his story on April 15, 1915. "I was born on Schooner, Brown County, Indiana, August 26, 1838. My father entered land from the Indians, the land now owned by William Hoy. I learned to plow with an Indian. In my recollection this country was cleared only in small patches and the houses were built in small groups as a protection against Indians. This country contained fierce game such as panthers, wildcat and catamount, with plenty of wild deer, turkey and hogs. I have seen as many as 36 wild deer in one drove. I have spent my entire life here with the exception of about seven years. I now live about one and a half miles of where I was born. (Brown County Democrat, Apr. 15, 1915) Mr.

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Sturgeon died in July of 1920 and was buried in the old cemetery a half mile from his birthplace at Duncan Cemetery in Schooner Valley.

### **Gillman Sturgeon & Sorghum Making**

Gil Sturgeon died at age 86 at the home of his son, Harley Sturgeon at Schooner on Monday, November 8, 1948. He had been ill six weeks. Mr. Sturgeon was born in this county February 12, 1862 the son of Ransom and Elizabeth Lane Sturgeon. He spent most of his life here, moving to Monroe County only about 10 years ago. He had lived on Moores Creek about six miles south of Bloomington. His first wife preceded him in death, the former Minerva Henthorne who died on April 10, 1932. They were married in 1885. His second wife, the former Sarah Breedlove, survives. Three sons, Lora of Shelby County, Ralph and Harley of Schooner, and three daughters, Mrs. Zona Ault and Mrs. Ella Watson both of Nashville, and Mrs. Letha Robertson of Phoenix, Arizona also survive. One son, Charles died in 1918 in World War I. Other survivors include a brother, Marion Sturgeon of Bloomington,



**Gil Sturgeon Making Sorghum on Schooner Hill**

28 grandchildren and 23 great-grandchildren. Mr. Sturgeon was a member of the Christian Church. Funeral services were held at the Nashville Christian Church in charge of Dr. J. E. deGafferly. Burial was in the Duncan Cemetery south of Nashville. (Brown County Democrat, Nov. 11, 1948)

### **Marion Sturgeon & the Bean Dinners**

The Duncan School grounds 6 miles west of the county seat, Nashville, is the scene of many happy gatherings every year when the last Saturday of August rolls around. About 35 to 40 years ago Elihu Wheeler, Rafe Lane, Wash Parks, Ambrose Bartlett, a Mr. Huber, an old gentleman named Miles, James Yoder and Ben Siebert, old Civil War veterans, started what has since been known as the Bean Dinner. It was started primarily as a sort of get-together day for the old soldiers and as the



### **Marion Sturgeon**

much as 1100 gallons of coffee for one of the big days. Dinner is served at 12 and then the deck is cleared for public speaking.

As in any small town there is always a cast of local characters, Marion Sturgeon was one of those. One day when a local man was hired to do some work on the public square in Nashville it didn't take long for them to filter down to check out the action. Joe Shrock was hired to put a new top on the curb outside a local studio. George Bond thought to help out, and he being curious too, brought over a 2 x 4 for the construction. Marion Sturgeon, known as the official cook at the Bean Dinner came over, not exactly to do any bossing, but he deduced the public square would give him plenty of room for his tobacco spittin', especially since the wind wasn't blowing. Another and then another showed up giving advice to the crew about the best way to tackle the construction job. In spite of all the non-constructive criticisms the job was finished in about an hour. When the assembly of helpers broke up Marion Sturgeon said, "Make out our pay in one check - no use writing a half dozen." (Down in the Hills, Indpls. Star, Feb. 9, 1941)

years rolled on and ranks began to thin out their ancestors kept the affair alive. Today as high as 500 people are in attendance, arriving at sun-up and remaining until dark. They come from all over. Marion Sturgeon, who has seen 72 birthdays, has been the official bean cooker for about 30 years, missing only three years of service in that length of time. He told me that when he was a lad of seven he used to get the horse hitched up to take his mother to the old cemetery, but little did he think that he would ever have such a prominent place in a big event on the ground adjoining the burial place. Mr. Wheeler asked him to assume the duties of cook and to stick to the job as long as he could. Mr. Sturgeon says it takes from one and one-half to three bushels of beans and 30 to 40 pounds of bacon to fill the eight large kettles, and of course the supply is regulated by the anticipated attendance. It takes about 3 1/2 hours to cook the beans but, as Marion relates, "they disappear sooner than that." He says he has "boiled" as

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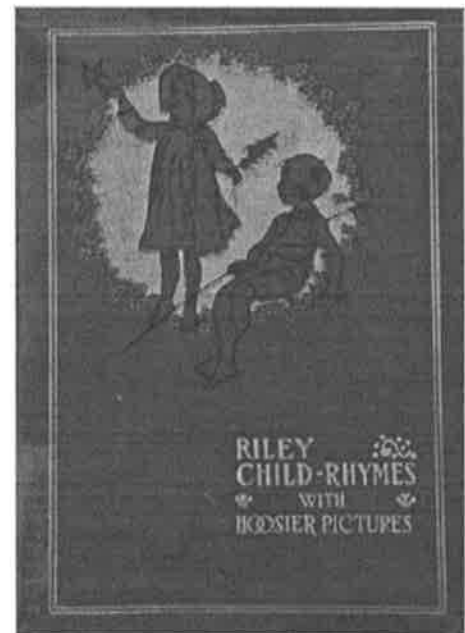
## Sergeant Charles G. Sturgeon

Gilman Sturgeon's son, Charles, was born May 7, 1890 in the same valley as all his family. At the age of 21 he joined the Army in 1911. He served four years and then re-enlisted in 1915. He was sent overseas in 1917 during World War I. Charles served in Company G of the 7th Infantry. He then was assigned to Company M in the 18th Infantry, First Division. He took part in the battles of Cantigny, Montdeder, Neyon, Aiane, Marne, and St. Miheil. Charles was killed in action in France on Oct. 11, 1918. He was buried in Langres, France. His body was brought home in 1922 and he is now buried at Duncan Cemetery with his parents.

## Sarah Spicer ~ Little Orphant Annie

Sarah Louisa Spicer-Harden achieved something that most never even dream of doing in their lifetime when she was eight years old. Although, she was a Brown County resident all her life, many people have seen her face outside the county and never knew her. Mrs. Harden posed for sketches for the artist Will Vawter, and several other artists. Those sketches later became the illustrations for James Whitcomb Riley's books as 'Little Orphant Annie' back in 1916. Little Sarah Spicer was born up on Greasy Creek on July 22, 1910 at the old Kelp place. Her parents, William Virgil Spicer and Mary Voland had built that house. When her dad had become too disabled to work they moved into Nashville and ran a store which was across the street from the Taggart Service Station. Sarah's mother took on cleaning jobs to supplement the family income. Little Sary went with her to clean Will Vawter's place. One day Mr. Vawter asked her to pose for him while he did some sketches. He was known to have used Brown County citizens in the various sketches he made, as well as in calendars and brochures. Other children also posed for Mr. Vawter. One was her brother, Walter.

Will Vawter's sketches were chosen to go in James Whitcomb Riley's book for the 1920 edition of Child-Rhymes. Sarah appears in the first illustration in the book. A child of about eight or nine she is depicted as Riley's 'Little Orphant Annie.' In the sketch she is standing with an apron on with a dish in hand at



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a kitchen table that goes with the rhyme, "Little Orphant Annie's come to our house to stay, An' wash the cups an' saucers up, an' brush the crumbs away. . . " Her sketch also appears in the illustration for "The Happy Little Cripple." It is that sketch that her brother, Walter, also appears. Another one of her sketches appears with the rhyme, "A Sudden Shower."

Sarah recalled that Mr. Vawter treated her like a queen during those sessions and he gave her 50 cents for her trouble. That was a lot of money for a little girl. Mrs. Harden's face has also graced the canvases of other well-known Brown County artists. Painters such as Carl Graf, Ada Walter Shulz, Mr. Sargent of Chicago, and Mrs. Will (Mary) Vawter have done her image. The artists would sometimes give her some of their works. The idea that she would be seen by a generation of readers and art lovers never bothered her, she never even thought about it.



### **Sarah Spicer Harden**

Then Thurston decided to trade it in on the old Mobley place on South Johnson Street. She lived there in that old trailer on lot 179 ever since. Sarah was always satisfied to just live in Nashville. She tried living in other towns for a short while, but didn't like it. She never wanted to live anywhere else. "Around here you've got friends and if you need something, they're here to help you. (from "Sarah Harden," Brown County Folks, 1974). Sarah Louisa Spicer was a descendant of Simpson Sturgeon. She died on Aug. 14, 1995 and is buried in Green Valley Cemetery next to her husband.

To help out Sarah took on small jobs. Her first job was baby-sitting for Alberta Shulz. Sarah cleaned houses for the Bessires, L.O. Griffith, and Glen Cooper Henshaw. She also worked for Kate Andrews, who ran Hilltop Summer Camp for girls up on Town Hill. She got a quarter an hour there, she was about 14 at that time.

In 1927 Sarah Spicer was married to Thurston Harden. The wages of her carpenter husband were never quite enough, though. When Sarah was in need of more money she took one of her treasures from the artists to town and sold it, her copy of the book in which the three fleeting moments of her childhood were enshrined. A worn copy of the book is in the Brown County Public Library which is kept under lock and key. This illustrated copy of the edition is protected because of its historical value to the community.

Sarah and Thurston lived in a lot of places in and around Nashville. The house they bought burned. Then they bought the old Winchester place on West Main Street.

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## Asst. Dean Robert Ray Sturgeon

Robert Ray Sturgeon and wife Miriam, moved to Brown County and built a home in 1949 on acreage they bought from the estate of Indiana author Lew Wallace. Just south of Beanblossom it was a beautiful place, they both lived there until their deaths. Both had illustrious and long careers. Robert was the son of Peter R. and Daisy Sturgeon and was actually born in Canada June 28, 1917 during a short time the family moved there from Indiana. He attended Indiana University in the 1930s getting his B.A. in 1940. He attended Harvard University and got his M.B.A. in 1942 and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa for 17 years.

Robert was a veteran of World War II and served in the Army and Army Reserve for 27 years, retiring with the rank of Colonel. He served in the War Department General Staff during the war. After the War he went home to help run the family businesses in Indianapolis. His family owned Ball Park Lumber Company and Burdsal Paint Company. In 1943 he met and married his wife, Miriam Meloy of Shelbyville, Indiana. "Lieutenant Robert R. Sturgeon of Camp Lee, Virginia, an instructor in the quartermaster school, was wed in Petersburg, Virginia to Miriam Joy Meloy" where the couple lived during his service. His teaching career consisted of being assistant professor of Economics at Earlham College. He was also an assistant to the Chairman of Economics Dept. at Indiana University. In 1963 when Professor Robert R. Sturgeon of Brown County was asked by I. U. President Frank T. Gucker to lend a hand in the College's Administration office. It just so happened to be the very room where he had studied German as an undergraduate in the 1930s. He retired in 1983, but kept working at Indiana University, he just didn't get paid. He was member of the Rotary Club, the Indianapolis Athletic Club, and the Columbia Club.

Robert died April 12, 1999 at the age of 81. He was the widower of Miriam Meloy-Sturgeon and Kate Berns Robinson-Sturgeon. His surviving children were William H. and Sally Ann Sturgeon. Daughters, Margaret Jane and Barbara J., preceded him in death. Robert and Miriam are both buried at Greenlawn Cemetery in Nashville, Indiana.

Robert often spoke fondly of his wife, Miriam. She was born in 1916 in Waldron, Indiana. She also attended Indiana University receiving a Journalism degree in 1938 and a Masters in 1940. She worked at I. U. holding several positions as Librarian, college newspaper editor, and at the I.U. Foundation. In Brown County she was a member of Business and Professional Women and a member of the local Library board. Miriam co-authored the little book, *Tales & Trails of Brown County*. She died Jan. 14, 1979. (from the Indianapolis Star newspapers)

(Photographs are from the Brown County Historical Society Archives and Frank M. Hohenberger Collection, IU Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana)