

## The Story of the Brown County Art Colony

By ADOLPH ROBERT SHULZ

If we pause a moment to recall the long list of poets, writers, musicians, sculptors and painters that Indiana has produced, it is easy to realize that there has been for many years something friendly to the creative arts in the Hoosier land.

It is interesting to know that all of the original Hoosier group of painters, composed of Theodore C. Steele, J. Otis Adams, William Forsyth, Otto Stark, Richard Gruelle, as well as John Bundy of Richmond, were still living in 1908, at the time Brown County became a noted painting ground. This group, which added so much to the culture of Indiana, had for years won the admiration and respect of those of the art world who knew their work. While all great art springs from the soil, it cannot blossom fully without the sunshine coming from a sympathetic and understanding public. Most of these pioneers were well trained artists and it was an honest, heroic and unusual experiment at that time for these men to come from schools of art to paint the country and people they knew, rather than allow themselves to drift to the few large cities which then furnished nearly all the art appreciation which existed.

These artists composed in all probability the first real group of distinctive character in the entire central portion of our country and paralleled the contemporary literary movement in Indiana. The members received, especially at first, but little appreciation, and there were many trials for them to surmount in order to make a living and continue their work at all. Fortunately for succeeding generations they did a great deal of teaching, which was their legacy to their state as were also their paintings—all honor to these men! One by one these pioneers of art have passed away until not one remains alive today.

It has been felt by many that the full blossoming of this group occurred when Mr. Steele came into the hills of Brown County to live and to put on canvass his interpretations of the country he loved so well. He once made the statement that he considered the opalescent atmosphere among the hills of southern Indiana of sufficient distinctive character and beauty

to nurture a great school of art. Although he was the only one of the original Hoosier Group to paint in Brown County, yet a very large portion of the finest painting of this group was done in the southern part of the State. Working in this section it is but natural that the present Brown County Colony should carry on the best traditions of the older group.

The beautiful hill region of southern Indiana covers a vast area. There are other portions of this part of the state which are no doubt quite as lovely and paintable as Brown County but none situated so close to the largest city of the state and the great metropolis to the north, which, with other populous centers, now sends so many pilgrims to the unique and widely known Art Colony of Brown County.

The first connection of art with Brown County is a little far-fetched, but interesting. William Merritt Chase, one of the most famous painters and teachers of his day, was born south of Williamsburg (now Nineveh) in Johnson County. His birthplace is near the Brown County line in Nineveh Township. The first artist to sketch in Brown County was undoubtedly William McKendree Snyder, born at Liberty, Indiana. Mr. Snyder for many years lived and painted in the vicinity of Madison, where he died. He was a pupil of Eaton, Inness, and Bierstadt. Though one of the older type of painters, he had the true art spirit. From 1870 to 1872 he was associated with his brother, a photographer in Columbus, and during those years made several excursions into Brown County and was much inspired by its scenery. One of these trips he took with him Peter Fiske Reed, the poet-painter and art critic whom he had met in Columbus.

In October, 1891, Fred Hetherington and Charles Nicoli, art students from Indianapolis, spent several days sketching, photographing, and exploring in the County, coming in by the way of Morgantown. There are rumors that other students penetrated the County on "hikes" from Indianapolis. These rumors are no doubt true, but none has been verified, nor has the writer been able to learn that anyone ever did any real work in the County, other than possibly a little sketching, prior to 1907.

I was one of a small group of artists working in Delavan, Wisconsin. This city was in a lovely and picturesque country. The dairy interests in that state, however, grew to such

dimensions that the cows literally ate up the landscape, practically ruining the region as a permanent location for art work. It became necessary for this group of artists to search for a new environment. They wished to locate in the most ideal sketching ground to be found in the Central States, as near to Chicago as possible.

Soon after this search began a short article appeared in a Chicago paper, telling of the hills of Brown County, Indiana—of the people, the cabin life and the beauties of the landscape. Taking a hint from this article, in August of 1900, I undertook a horse and buggy trip through Brown County, starting from Columbus, and spending several days on a tour of investigation. Never before had I been so thrilled by a region; it seemed like a fairyland with its narrow winding roads leading the traveler down into the creek beds, through the water pools and up over the hills. Everywhere there were rail fences almost hidden by Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod and other interesting weeds and bushes. Picturesque cabins here and there seemed to belong to the landscape as did the people who lived in them. I was much impressed by the beautiful and dignified growth of the timber. All this country was enveloped in a soft, opalescent haze. A sense of peace and loveliness never before experienced came over me and I felt that at last that I had found the ideal sketching ground. Brown County at this time was quite inaccessible. On this trip I heard much talk of a proposed rail road, which was constructed several years later. What most concerned me was that I found no hotel to which I could bring my family.

After learning that the railroad had been built through a corner of the county, I told a number of my Chicago artist friends about this region, and, in March, 1907, Louis O. Griffith, Wilson Irvine and Harry L. Engle came to Nashville for two weeks sketching. They were delighted with the scenery and the people.

In June, 1907, I started from Martinsville with a friend on a two weeks' "hiking" trip of exploration through southern Indiana. One of the principal objects of this journey was to find a desirable place somewhere among the Hoosier hills to which I could bring my family and our Delevan group of artists. On the way through Brown County a stop was made at Nashville. Bill Pittman and Mandy, his good wife, had

recently taken over the Sanatorium Hotel and they made their two visitors feel very much at home, with their glad hand, good cheer, wholesome food and clean beds. Continuing the zigzag route nearly to the Ohio River the return was made over other roads to Nashville, to see the hotel once more. While in Nashville, Mr. Pittman reported that "Artist Steele" was building a home on the top of a large hill near the Monroe County line. Going to the hill, Mr. Steele, whom I had previously met, was found sitting on a pile of lumber directing the construction of the first unit of what was to be "The House of the Singing Winds" so well known.

In May, 1908, I brought my family to Nashville. In the meantime others had been told about Brown County and they spread the news of the picturesque region and the hotel. The year 1908 marked the first of Brown County as a famous sketching ground. That season there were about twenty-five artists painting in the County, probably at the time as strong a group of its kind as had ever gathered in a like place in the states of Middle West. Perhaps, the same may be said of the group each year since then. The numbers have increased until there have been in some seasons from fifty to sixty artists working there. The work conceived and done in Brown County has undoubtedly been the dominant note in the exhibitions in the central states for all these years and a great force in the maintenance of sanity in art in this part of our country during the confusion of late years.

Mr. Theodore C. Steele, A.N.A., as stated above, was the first one of the group to settle in Brown County. He purchased a large tract of land ten miles west of Nashville in 1907. He wished to have a home and studio amid the beautiful hills where he could best pursue his work in the peace and quiet he desired. For a number of years his place was quite inaccessible on account of the distance from Nashville and the condition of the roads and we saw but little of him. He expressed regret that he was not living nearer Nashville so that he could associate more closely with his fellow painters. There was probably no artist in the entire central area who was more loved and respected by all the artists both for his work and as a man and friend. Mr. Steele always took an interest in the activity of the group as long as he lived. He was our most distinguished member, the dean of Indiana artists, and

the only connecting link with the older Hoosier group of painters and the colony in Brown County.

The Brown County group, as now, has always centered in Nashville. I believe that Bill and Mandy Pittman had more to do with the beginning and continuance of art in Brown County than any other single influence. For years they kept the picturesque, cheerful hotel at a price within the reach of the average artist, till the Colony was established, widely known, and the members had begun to build their homes. Had it not been for such a hotel in the community, it is quite likely that the Colony might have located in some other part of the great hill district of southern Indiana.

The Pittmans were natives of Brown County. The early visitors to the Colony will always carry with them tender memories of these good people who cared for them so well during the years when the hotel was the meeting place for them all. They were continually doing or suggesting interesting things for the artists, even to the extent of having the village brass band on the balcony of the hotel to welcome the arrival of one of the early members of the group. For years, a sign done in 1908 portraying rotund Bill (front and rear) painted by John Hafen, Adam Emory Albright and myself, swung in front of the hotel.

I happened to be one of the first at the inception of the colony. Brown County and Nashville were in the nature of discoveries to me as I had never known anyone who had been there before. I located there because I believed it furnished the most beautiful and paintable scenes I had ever known. I wished to continue my life work in such a congenial atmosphere and harmonious surroundings. There, too, Mrs. Ada Walter Shulz could paint her mothers and children at their best. One could hardly have dreamed of a large colony and I was somewhat surprised at the number who came the first year (1908).

For several years nearly all the artists who came were from Chicago and mostly my friends and acquaintances. Among the first were Frank K. Phoenix, Mrs. Ada Walter Shulz, and myself of the Delavan (Wisconsin) group. Louis O. Griffith, Wilson Irvine, Harry L. Engle, Adam Emory Albright, the painter of children, Rudolph Ingerlo, and Karl Krafft were among those who joined the Colony, and there

were a number of others all of Chicago. John Hafen, of Utah, a fellow student in Paris, came East in 1908 to exhibit in Chicago and to renew our old friendship and paint in company with me that season. He remained a loved and enthusiastic Brown County painter till he passed away in 1910. J. W. Vawter and Mary Murray Vawter came in August, 1908.

Some of the first to arrive are still with us and others coming later have since established themselves and have secured homes. Still others have been coming year after year to the hotels and boarding houses. Those who live at Nashville at this time are: Louis O. Griffith, Carl Graf, Marie Goth, J. W. Vawter, V. J. Caraini, C. Curry Bohm, Georges La Chance, Mary Murray Vawter, Robert E. Burke, Dale P. Bessire, Musette O. Stoddard, Edward K. Williams, Alton Coffey, Frank Humpel, Alberta R. Shulz, Adolph R. Shulz (the writer), and Anthony Buchta.

Among others who have been closely associated with the colony are: Lucie Hartrath, Homer Davisson, Rudolph Ingerle, Leota Loop, Oscar Erickson, Alexis J. Fourmier, Charles Dahlgreen, Thomas Lockie, Gustave Baumann, George Mock, Frederick W. Polley, Simon Baus, Robert M. Root, Paul Sargent, James Topping, Othmar Hoefler, Angus Peter MacDonall, Harry L. Engle, Joseph Chenoworth, Wilson Irvine, Mr. and Mrs. William Riddell, Doel Reed, Adam Emory Albright, Jack Spelman, Karl Krafft, Roy Trobaugh, Joseph Birren.

The following members of the group have gone over the sunset hill to the West: John Hafen, 1910; Theodore C. Steele, 1926; Frederick Nelson Vance, 1926; Ada Walter Shulz, 1928; Paul Randall, 1933.

It would be impossible to enumerate all the different artists who have painted in Brown County from time to time. This Colony of workers has grown in a natural manner without exploitation or the presence in its midst of an art school. As the fame of the colony increased, visitors in great numbers began to come to the studios and it became apparent that the artists would soon have to establish art galleries for the mutual benefit of the artists and the public, showing the work of the entire group. This need was mentioned one evening in the presence of Mr. J. A. Linke and B. W. Stoddard and they volunteered to raise the necessary money required

to build the galleries. In a few days, with the aid of Frederick W. Polley and Mrs. Musette O. Stoddard, a substantial amount was secured and deposited in the Nashville Bank, and more promised. The time was not ripe, however, and the idea of the galleries was postponed and the money refunded.

In September, 1926, largely through the plans of Carl Graf, the Brown County Art Galleries Association was founded and Mr. Graf was made the President. Public exhibitions were made possible by Mr. William M. Wilkes, a good friend of the artists, who remodelled some store buildings in Nashville for their use. For several years Mr. Wilkes operated an art store in an adjoining room and was the manager of the galleries. These galleries have been opened each year since, from about April tenth to November twentieth. Exhibitions are changed three times each season. At first the experiment was tried of maintaining the galleries entirely by dues of artist members and the voluntary help of friends, keeping the exhibitions free to the public. This could not continue and in July, 1932, it was found necessary to charge a small admission fee of ten cents on certain days each week, which plan has enabled the Association to carry on.

The attendance and interest on the part of the public have steadily increased. During 1934 over nine thousand people visited the galleries, a fact which encouraged the Association to take over the entire building. In April, 1935, the season started with the gallery capacity nearly doubled. The Association cherishes a plan to build, eventually, its own galleries, with proper lighting and an adequate parking place. In that event, without the necessity of the payment of rents, a permanent collection of outstanding Hoosier art can gradually be acquired. It is planned to have this collection include a memorial gallery of work by departed members. This collection has already been started and several additional important works have been promised. Numerous exhibitions of Brown County paintings, both by individuals and groups, have been sent over Indiana and other states. The demand for exhibitions is always greater than can be supplied. The Frederick Nelson Vance memorial prize of \$50.00, a bequest of Mrs. Josephine Vance, the artist's mother, is awarded each year on August ninth, the birthday of Mr. Vance.

The members of this group of talented and well known artists have all been attracted to Brown County by the same things—the Hoosier hills, the Hoosier people, the Hoosier spirit, the beautiful opalescent atmosphere and the quiet picturesque surroundings where the artists can live their normal lives and pursue their life work, each in his own individual way. They have been living together for a long time as neighbors in a small community and while there has always been a fine spirit of helpfulness and coöperation among them, no two artists paint alike nor do they see much of each other's work till it is exhibited. They love their neighbors, the sturdy, picturesque and kindly folk of the hills, and have entered with interest into their lives.

Nearly all the great art of the past has been racial, regional or national in character. As a liberty loving people we are growing weary of an art degraded by foreign influence. If we are to expect an art indigenous to our soil, telling the story, depicting the scene, or expressing the beauty, spirit and aspiration of America, there can be no doubt that it must come from just such groups of workers located here and there in those parts of the country farthest removed from foreign influence as is the Brown County Colony of artists. This Colony has for many years taken its place as one of the most significant and widely known in America.