

CASS & BERRIEN COUNTY, MICHIGAN PROFILES
PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY
WITH PEOPLE, EVENTS & PLACES
By Jeannie Watson

LUCY ANN SPONBERG

Lucy Ann Sponberg was a Cass and Berrien County, Michigan resident of the late 1800s and early 1900s. She was the wife of John Weston Hawks, a local logging company executive. She was a gently bred lady, whose father migrated to Michigan, and worked in the saw mill industry. Like many ladies of her station in this era, she was trained as an artist. Her media were water colors and needle-point cloth canvases. Her subjects were primarily flowers and monarch butterflies; her "landmark signature motif." Some of her work still exists today in the antique markets of Southwestern Michigan, or are held by descendents. She had to deal with a number of tragedies in her life that would have defeated most mothers. Her ability to handle diversity, mobility, and change, made her an ideal life partner for her husband. She gracefully bridged six different social sub-strata of this era: (1) Niles' and Dowagiac's business/merchant society, (2) Cass and Berrien County's farming community, (3) the local saw mill industry culture, (4) Southwestern Michigan's logging camps, (5) New York's Tinsmen brotherhood, and (6) New York's elitist furniture industry society.

Lucy's ancestors and extended family members settled in Fairfield, Herkimer County, New York, then went to Avon, Hartford County, Connecticut. Through several generations, they moved in Johnstown, Montgomery County, New York, and Otsego County, New York. She and her parents came to Niles, Michigan, and eventually after she married, they returned to New York. A number of Sponberg relatives migrated to Austin, Texas, where that surname is common in certain cemeteries.

Lucy Ann Sponberg was born in Johnstown, Montgomery County, New York on April 24, 1823 to John Sponberg (1799-1868) and Agnes Bergheim (1802-1854, of German/Scottish descent). She was reared and educated in New York, where her father worked as a sawyer and lumber yard manager. When he was offered a job in Michigan, he moved the family there, and spent several years in the area. The "lake effect snows" of Michigan's weather were not to his liking (heavy snow falls upon the Niles, Michigan area every winter due to moisture that is picked up when air passes over Lake Michigan). Snow drifts were unusually high and blizzards were common, which he grew to dislike.

When Lucy was 18 years of age, she happened to be with her father one weekend in Dowagiac, Michigan, when he ran into a manager of the logging company that employed him. Widower John Weston Hawks took an instant liking to the young miss, courted her and married her 10 months later. The couple had two sons (George W. and John N.) and two daughters (Ann, and Sarah). Lucy followed her husband back and forth between Michigan and New York. She lived the life of a local timber executive wife, traveled extensively at his side, and kept the family together when his job forced him to leave her and the children at home. She graciously charted a course through her husband's varied business and social commitments. Charming her husband's business associates and their families, she adapted to a wide range of cultural expectations. She endeared herself to elegant wives, overworked employees, and non-pretentious lumberjacks.

When Lucy Ann married John, she was told of the realities of their life together. The nature of Michigan's logging and lumber business was one of mobility. Logging camps had to move from forest to forest, and logs had to be transported from woodlands to saw mills. Finished lumber was moved from lumberyards to local building sites, or shipped to New York manufacturers and builders. Timber company executives of the day, like John W., had to travel between New York's wholesale buyers and Michigan suppliers. When timber became available in other states that meant more travel. When her husband informed her that he had to return to New

York, and make that their home base, she followed him back east. Then she accompanied him, often, back to Michigan every six months on business trips; her only chance to see family and friends, the Bedfords and Conklins.

Other responsibilities existed that added more stress to their lives. Lucy's husband had invested much of his own inherited money into the logging company for whom he worked. Fear of the loss of the family's security was a constant irritant. Failure was simply not an option. Then there was the matter of John's New York Tin Shop, which he had inherited from a mentor who apprenticed him as a lad. When John W. was away on business, or busy with lumber commitments, there were only two people he trusted to handle the Tin Shop; a rather lax relative and Lucy. The responsibility of the Tin Shop fell on Lucy's shoulders more often than not.

Raising children in this environment had its advantages and disadvantages. As soon as sons, George W. Hawks and John N. Hawks, finished their education, they were apprenticed, as was the custom of these times, to their father's business. The high paced life turned George W. Hawks into a serious and responsible hard worker like his father. Son number two, John N. Hawks was more casual about the business. He did his job the way his father demanded it, fulfilled his family responsibilities, and maintained the social manners required by his mother. But he enjoyed his leisure time far too much for his mother's liking. Young John N. Hawks charmed the ladies, and had a charismatic personality that attracted people. "He was entirely too personable for his own good." Lucy was constantly worried about this son's possible temptations, and female attention. Her daughters, Ann and Sarah, were another matter. Sarah was a sickly child, and was often confined to her bed. When a respiratory epidemic swept Springfield, New York, she died at age 7. Ann was healthier and more resilient than her sister. When she reached her teenage years, she was sent to a finishing school for young ladies, where the daughters of the gentile classes were boarded, taught foreign languages, and music. Ann was every inch the perfect young lady, a product of her parents' adaptive life style, and easily handled family travel and sojourns in a variety of settings.

Throughout her life, Lucy Ann Sponberg enjoyed creating art work. It was her escape from the rigors of life and her means to relaxation. Her husband would have the canvases professionally mounted in frames and backed with paper in New York or Indiana. For her own reasons, she was fixated on Michigan's Monarch Butterflies. They became her subject of choice, her theme, and she painted them in vibrant colors, or created their image in embroidery needle-point designs (pictures made with colored yarn on a coarse cloth background canvas). When Lucy and John sold the Tin Shop in New York and moved permanently to Cass and Berrien County Michigan, Monarch Butterflies became her obsession.

Lucy Ann Sponberg was especially fond of her daughters-in-law Martha Bedford (George W.'s wife) and Jane E. Bedford (John N.'s wife). When her son John N. and Jane began having problems, she cried over the heartache. When son John N. left the state because of a scandal, Lucy was "at her wits end." John became estranged from his father because of the events, and Lucy wrote her child long letters, assuring him, that as her son, he always had a place in her heart. Lucy was a mother filled with unconditional love for her family.

In 1880, as recorded on the U.S. Federal Census, when Lucy Ann's and John W.'s health began to fail, the family met and decided that it was time for them to live with younger family members. Gilbert Conklin and wife Maria Bedford (sister to Lucy Ann's daughter-in-laws), had available bedrooms, so the aging couple boarded with them, a common family care-giver practice in this era.

In 1888, when Lucy Ann lost her husband, her son George W. and his wife Martha Bedford finally had unoccupied bedrooms, because their children had married and moved into their own homes. The 1900 U.S. Federal Census documents her sojourn at son George W.'s house in Section 31 of Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. She lived for only 7 more years.

On April 29, 1907, Lucy Ann Sponberg died at her son George W.'s home. She was buried in George's Indian Lake Cemetery Lot # 87, Silver Creek Township, Cass County, Michigan. Her tombstone is close to the family's large Hawks "marker stone," and simply says "Lucy A. 1823-1907."

In conclusion, Lucy Ann Sponberg was a resident of Cass and Berrien County, Michigan. She was a gentile lady of breeding, a devoted wife and a adoring mother. She bridged the gap between the social elite of Niles, and the logging camps of Southwestern Michigan. She was comfortable and gracious in all arenas. She endured much travel due to her husband's occupation. Though she lived a life of high stress and worry, she found solace in her art, capturing the beauty of Michigan's Monarch Butterfly and wild flowers. Lucy was part of Southwestern Michigan's early logging culture, and earned her place in local history.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Lucy Ann Sponberg's name was mis-spelled in several MI government documents, probably due to the unfamiliarity of this surname in that era, and the few who made it to MI. The spelling Sponenberg, Sparenberg, and an abbreviated variation have been found. In Texas and New York the name was more common, and not mistaken. The foremost authority on Lucy and her husband was their grandson, Guy Wesley Hawks.

RESEARCH

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