

A town that leans

By MICHAEL McBRIDE
The Star Press

BRYANT, Ind. — Back in 1975, Gladys M. Ketchum showed up at Bryant High School just as the wrecking ball took off the southwest corner of the two story brick building where she taught music, art, home economics and girls physical education from 1931 until she retired in 1972.

Needles and bricks were among many things on her mind as she watched and took pictures for the rest of the day.

"I was concerned the workers might injure themselves on worn-out sewing needles students dropped down an air shaft in my home-economics room," Ketchum said last week.

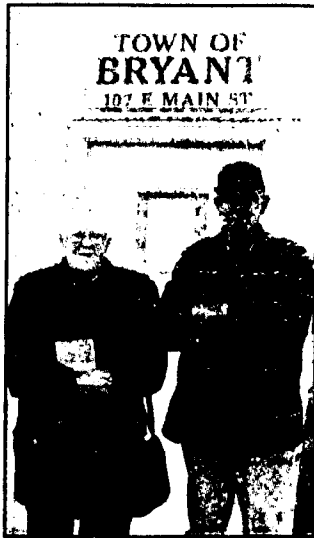
She also wanted a brick.

"I have one someplace, but I have collected bricks from so many places now that I am not sure which one it is," said the spry 87-year-old Bryant woman, her doctor's favorite because she "gets out and goes."

Although Ketchum was raised one township north of Bearcreek Township in Adams County, she taught only 3 years at Jefferson Township High School — her alma mater — before moving to Bryant.

At a pace of about 16 students a year — including two in 1901 and 36 the year before Jay County High School graduated the first all-Jay County class in 1976 — 1,221 students graduated from Bryant High School.

The 2-story building took shape in 1900, smack in the middle of the town's 24-year-long, gas-and-oil-boom days. At the same time, the town swelled to 465 souls and 32 businesses: a sawmill, feed mill, bank, hotel, bakery, general merchandise store, drug store, veterinary, grocery, meat market, hardware, combination furniture store and undertaker, two livery stables and more, including physicians, barbers and other professionals.



Michael McBride / The Star Press
REMEMBERING BRYANT: Longtime resident Gladys M. Ketchum and town board president Jim Spade in front of the town hall.

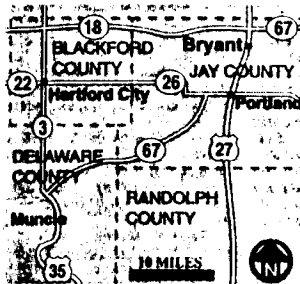
The boom brought a lot of people to town, but 7 years before the boom banged something happened to ensure the settlement's survival after the gas was gone. The Huckriede Tile Co. marked the beginning of the end of the Loblolly and Limbertost Marshes, one of the last wild areas in a state more than 60 years old.

The swamps were made famous in early novels and biological tomes by Gene Stratton Porter — a turn-of-the-century Geneva woman, who moved on to Rome City and then to Hollywood to write screenplays. At home in the treacherous swamps, Porter met her end in a California automobile accident.

By 1975, when Bryant celebrated a century of existence, there were 18 businesses.

Bryant

The town of Bryant is northeast of Muncie in Jay County.



Population: 330 (estimated)

Local government:

Three-member town council;
clerk-treasurer

Largest local employer:

Bearcreek Crossing, a truck stop, deli and convenience store with 14 employees — if you don't count Bearcreek Farms 5 miles away. The restaurant, entertainment complex and headquarters for Richard's Restaurants issues 1,100 corporatewide paychecks a week.

Star Press graphic/ SHELBY SAPUSEK

Now, there is Indiana Millworks, a 7-employee operation in the town's new industrial park; and Bearcreek Crossing, Jinny's Restaurant, Bryant Combine Parts, Davis Machine Shop, Maries Antiques, Bryant Antiques, Hirschy's Seed and Dog Food, P&C Variety, Farm Bureau Co-op and the Hardly-Able Ranch where passersby can haggle over the price for antique tools, painted neon yellow and hung on the outside walls of a red barn along U.S. 27.

The Redeemer Lutheran and Wesleyan Churches also survive.

A little less than 5 miles away, Bearcreek Farms — corporate headquarters for 18 Richard's Restaurants, a Florida orange grove and the complex itself — has become a mecca for bus loads of seniors and anyone else looking for

wholesome food, gifts and entertainment.

A few 100-year-old store fronts stand empty along Main Street near Town Hall, the Conservation Club and the Lions Club. Once a year, the downtown springs back to life with food, games, crafts and fun when the 4-block-long park along the abandoned railroad line fills up with folks for Bryant Loblolly Days.

Down the alley from Town Hall is a 120-year-old, 2-celled, log jail house.

Ten months into his first term on the town board, board president Jim Spade has made a sign for the tiny structure. He called it a pet project. The 77-year-old contractor has lived in Bryant 23 years after marrying a Bryant woman.

"Fredia won't let me live anywhere else," said the former Randolph County resident.

On Palm Sunday, 1920, Ketchum said the worst tornado in Jay County history demolished West Liberty 2 miles west of Bryant, killing 13 people.

She should know. She and her husband Leo, now deceased, had stopped at what is now Jinny's Cafe for desert after visiting her parents on Palm Sunday, 1965.

"When I walked to the door to leave, I could see the tornados: one from high heaven to the earth, the next one half that big and the last one half as big as the second one," she said in an animated voice. "By the time Leo walked from the cash register to the door, all three had come together in a storm a ½-mile wide headed for Berne."

Her neighbors were waiting to share some space in the Ketchum basement when the couple got home. The storm killed people nearby in Keystone and Geneva.

"That storm pushed all the houses to the east," Spade said. "There is not a house in this town that does not lean that way."