

# Writers & Landmarks

## A Beautiful Historic Building Is like a Lovely Older Woman

by Angela E. Soper



Illustration by Mark Payton



Angela's mother. Photo credit Mary-Ellen Bertram

My brother's car roared past my mother's kitchen windows. The gravel flew as the car's brakes growled to a stop. Mother and I were in the kitchen and I turned to her and said, "It didn't go well."

What didn't go well was the June 2005 county commissioners' decision to tear down Randolph County's 1877 Italianate-style courthouse. Debate had raged for weeks about the fate of the grand old Indiana structure that was sorely in need of repair. Or, as some vehemently proposed, destruction.

This set in motion the plan my brother, brother-in-law and I devised: to create a fundraising calendar inspired by the 2003 *Calendar Girls* movie. Our "girls" were my (then) 87-year-old mother and six other senior women in her bridge club. The oldest was 94, the youngest 78.

To us, it was a perfect match since we believed a beautiful historic building is like a lovely older woman. Sure, the courthouse had issues that come with

age, but she also had stately grace, the patina of beautifully crafted design, and knowledge that only comes from the centuries.

In addition to national attention, the calendar provoked white-hot ire among the community's conservative folks. They were appalled the women appeared to be naked behind the porcelain courthouse replicas used by local photographer Mary-Ellen Bertram. Called geriatric soft-core porn (oh, please), the project caused such a ruckus it fostered *Courthouse Girls Part Two*: a documentary about the courthouse, the calendar and the resulting firestorm.

With financial help from many, including WIPB-TV in Muncie, Indiana, we started filming. I live in Utah and flew back periodically to conduct interviews and witnessed the adoration, enthusiasm and respect these seven women generated as they attended event after event, gave interviews and, most of all, held true to their convictions.

Talk about grace under fire! These women had it—plus a good dollop of humor—in spades. Once I returned to Mother's house after a day of filming, close to tears over someone's nasty comment, and she merely shrugged. "Oh, Angela," she said, "you have to shake things up once in a while."

That we did. The calendar and documentary brought national as well as international attention to the plight of the courthouse, and the brouhaha also fostered new legislation to protect Indiana courthouses in the future. Best of all, the courthouse avoided the wrecking ball and was restored, complete with a matching addition. The roof and clock tower that had been removed in the 50s was also replicated and installed. Unfortunately, we've lost five of our darling girls; only my mother (99 in October) and the youngest woman remain—both still feisty and playing bridge regularly.

The experience gave me new appreciation for the importance of saving historic buildings. It also gave me new respect for the human spirit. If I can age with our *Courthouse Girls'* integrity and courage, I will be pleased. And yeah, determined to keep shaking things up.

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*Angela Soper is a writer and occasional filmmaker who lives in the Salt Lake City area. She returns to Farmland, Indiana, as often as possible to keep things stirred up.*