

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.

Harriet Hosmer

Former Terre Haute resident Harriet Goodhue Hosmer was the world's most famous 19th century sculptress.

Born in Watertown, Mass., on Oct. 9, 1830, Harriet was raised by her physician father after her mother and three siblings died of tuberculosis. Harriet was placed on a rigorous exercise program to assure good health and was educated by relatives. "Hattie," as she was called, eventually attended Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick's Liberal Private School in Lenox, Mass., where she met author Nathaniel Hawthorne and American actress Charlotte Cushman and developed interests in sculpting and anatomy. Dr. Hosmer tried to enroll his daughter at Harvard Medical School but she was denied admission because of her sex. For awhile, she studied in Boston under



Dr. Wayman Crow, father of a classmate at Sedgwick's, and took anatomy classes at St. Louis University Medical School. Her father built a home studio for Hosmer but after she produced her first major work in 1851, a neo-classical bust of Hesper, Cushman agreed to pay her living expenses to study in Rome under British sculptor John Gibson.

Hosmer's years in Rome were productive. Her controversial boyish independence attracted friends, including poets Robert Browning and wife Elizabeth Barrett, and commissions from European royalty. Her midnight horseback rides were the talk of the city and her sculptures were extraordinary. Fifty reproductions of her 1852 cast of "Puck," from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fetched \$1,000 each. After weeks of study in 1853, she sculpted a cast of the Brownings' clasped hands

in bronze, perhaps her most famous work. Hosmer's nine-foot bronze statue of U.S. Sen. Thomas Hart Benton was unveiled at Lafayette Park in St. Louis in 1868 before 40,000 spectators. Mount Hosmer near Lansing, Iowa, is named in her honor.

Harriet spent 20 years in England, living in castles creating commissioned work. Then she moved to Chicago to mold a statue of Queen Isabella for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. During her residency there, Hosmer often visited her cousin Sarah J. Fuller of Terre Haute, with whom she resided as a youth in Massachusetts. On Feb. 22, 1889, she was feted by the Decorative Arts Society of Terre Haute.

In 1896, after Charles Fuller, superintendent of bridges for the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad died, Harriet moved to Terre Haute to reside with her widowed cousin at 447 North Center St. While living here, she pursued research which resulted in patents for synthetic marble, a permanent magnet and a mechanical sheet music page-turning device for musicians. On March 10, 1898, Hosmer was made an honorary member of the Woman's Department Club of Terre Haute. At that time she presented the organization with one of only five casts of *Brownings' Hands*.

Harriet returned to Watertown in 1899 and died there Feb. 21, 1908. The Vigo County Public Library retains a valuable collection of Hosmer's letters.

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