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To many, Siberia is a place to go to church, attend an auction or drop off a donation at a food bank.

But for Ralph Hobbs, it's a rope swing tied to a tree, a connection to memories and a place where he can find peace.

To Robert Kron, Siberia is as big as the world.

Siberia, a small town in northern Perry County, just a short walk from the Dubois County line, has two distinct personalities. There is the sleepy community where an outsider is as hard to miss as the clattering of a hail storm on a tin roof and there is the town that can become swollen with visitors on a Sunday morning.

Just eight houses rest between the signs that display identical markings:

Siberia

Cold in Name

Warm in Heart

The town is dissected by a Perry Street, a paved local road, with the town park and five houses on one side and the church, community hall and three houses on the other.

It is a place that few people call home, but it is where many find a sense of community.

Siberia's roots can be traced back to the mid-1800s when settlers began to inhabit the area in the northwest corner of Perry County. Its history, similar to its present, can be tied to the church. The Benedictine priests of Saint Meinrad played a huge role in the development of the town, including helping start a church. The town's church was founded in 1869, though the current building is the third physical structure. The church was later named St. Martin of Tours after the patron saint of soldiers.

The town was also platted in 1869 with three streets running north and south and six streets running east and west. Siberia had a post office, a blacksmith shop, a feed mill and two taverns. Originally, the town was named Sabaria, in honor of the birthplace of St. Martin, but the name was changed rather unceremoniously. The name was simply crossed out on the application for a post office and replaced by "Siberia," though the church continued to recognize the original name for several years afterward. Some of the first tombstones to be placed in the church's cemetery bore the name Sabaria instead of the town's official name.

The town still has a connection to the original name. The town's park, which features some playground equipment, a basketball court and open grassy areas, is named Sabaria Park. Not much from the early days is left, other than memories. Hobbs, who grew up in Siberia, remembers the post office and store — they were in the same building — and the blacksmith shop. He recalls Werner Bender shoeing horses.

Then there was school.

The town's schoolhouse had classes for eight grades in two rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs.

Hobbs remembered going to school in the two-room building.

"The school was heated with two coal stoves, one upstairs and one downstairs," Hobbs said. "If you were a lucky guy, you got to carry the coal upstairs, which got you out of class."

It was replaced by a more modern building in 1959, but that school burned down in December 1968 — a cause for the fire was never determined.

Hobbs, 72, is one of the few residents within the town limits these days. He lives in a comfortable house with a massive pine tree in front and small kennel for his squirrel-hunting dogs in the back.

The tree used to have a rope swing attached to one branch and Hobbs used to play on it when

he was a child. That branch came crashing down last summer during a bad storm.

“Maybe that tree was here before the town was,” Hobbs joked. “That storm was the most exciting thing that’s happened here in a while.”

Siberia is like a family reunion for Hobbs because he has two sisters — Sylvia Cox and Terri Utley — who live in houses across the street from him. In fact, the Hobbs family comprises nearly half of the town’s households.

Mildred Denu, the wife of former postmaster Louis Denu, lives in what used to be the post office and store. Across the street from Denu’s house, next to Hobbs’ place, is the community hall, Lark House and the church.

Lark House is a group home for people with mental disabilities that falls under the umbrella of Anderson Woods Inc., a not-for-profit organization that has hosted a summer camp since 1978. Lark House, which is connected to sister houses Owl House and Dove House in Jasper, was started in 1992. Sister Beata Mehling, from Monastery Immaculate Conception, named it Lark House because of the phrase “happy as a lark.”

Three residents now live at Lark House after one transferred out to be closer to his job in Jasper. The residents clean the church, take care of the chickens and grow a garden. Lark House’s chickens provide eggs for the other two group homes. Kron, one of the residents, also mows grass.

One of Kron’s pastimes is writing. Though he doesn’t read, he diligently copies text from books onto sheets of paper on which he draws his own lines. Each page is filled with sentences written in Kron’s neat style, giving the words a unique look.

Kron gives the pages away as gifts to visitors. Brother Andrew Nguyen, who is studying at Saint Meinrad School of Theology and visits the group home weekly, showed off Kron’s gift while he helped the residents clean the church Wednesday.

The residents of Lark House have developed their own family atmosphere and have integrated into the larger community, as well.

Kron and Hobbs have become friends. Hobbs said while some people have a difficult time understanding Robert, he has no problem. Robert is certainly fond of his neighbor.

“Robert really admires Ralph to no end,” Sr. Beata said. “He thinks Ralph can do anything. If something’s broken, Robert will say, ‘Ralph will fix it. Ralph will fix it.’”

Hobbs and many of the residents of Siberia attend services at St. Martin of Tours Church, a small parish that includes about 90 families from around the area.

The church is one of three — along with St. Boniface and St. Meinrad — that share a priest. Father Adrian Burke travels to the three churches giving services on Sundays. Saturday night services also rotate among the churches.

The parking lot of the church was jammed with cars Sunday and the pews of the tidy church were speckled with people, including Hobbs and his wife, Susie, Sr. Beata and the residents of Lark House.

Despite the slight population of the town, the church draws people from the surrounding areas. Some people who grew up in the area and then move to another community still attend church at St. Martin’s.

Seth and Ashli Clark live in Jasper, but they are building a house in Perry County because that’s where Seth is from. They attended church and an auction that followed the services Sunday.

Fr. Burke said that’s not an unusual situation for parishioners of the community church.

“People from here have a profound connection to this church,” Fr. Burke said as he bid parishioners farewell Sunday. “Young people who move away come back. Some still go to church here and others who move farther away come back for visits or to (community events).”

The auction was held in the community hall, the same building that houses a food bank affiliated with the church.

One of the community events is a ham shoot fund raiser which Sr. Beata said is a popular attraction. Sunday's auction drew a big crowd, too.

Numerous household items of a woman who had recently died were being auctioned to raise money for the family. People were there for the auction, but they were also in attendance to support a family from their community.

"That's what a community is about," Fr. Burke said.

The sense of community is strong in Siberia and important to the people who live and go to church there.

Sr. Beata said people are quick to help each other. On occasion, Ralph and Susie have kept an eye on Lark House when Sr. Beata has had to attend meetings away from Siberia.

"It's just the neighborly thing to do," Hobbs said.

The same attitude was apparent during the snowstorms that blasted southern Indiana this winter. The town was buried under almost 2 feet of snow, but Sr. Beata said people were quick to help. Farmers with blades attached to their tractors helped clear roads and neighbors helped her dig out.

"Everyone is really so helpful to each other," Sr. Beata said. "When you need something done, people are there to do it."

People really use the opportunity to get to know each other.

When Sr. Beata and the residents of Lark House went to their barn to take care of the chickens one day recently, they stopped by Hobbs' house to say hello. He was outside feeding his dogs and Sr. Beata wanted to show a visitor the training device Hobbs created to teach his dogs to tree squirrels. Hobbs built a system with wire chutes for squirrels to travel through so his dogs could become accustomed to treeing them.

Sr. Beata knew how to explain how the device worked.

Hobbs and Sr. Beata also share an interest in gardening.

Another neighbor who has apple trees made Sr. Beata a kind offer. After the neighbor was done picking apples, she left the stepladder outside and told Sr. Beata that she and the Lark House residents could pick whatever apples were left whenever they wanted.

There's also a sense of safety in such a small community.

One day Sr. Beata saw a white truck that she hadn't seen before parked in town. When it reappeared another day, she received a call from a neighbor asking about the truck. Sr. Beata chose to approach the man in the truck to see why he was lurking around town.

While she was talking, another neighbor showed up to find out what the man was doing. It turns out, the man worked for a telephone company.

"In a big town, you don't even know who lives nextdoor," Sr. Beata said.

Hobbs moved back to Siberia five years ago from Mariah Hill because he enjoyed the experience of living in Siberia off and on for a significant portion of his life.

"I wanted a little peace and quiet," Hobbs said. "I sure got it."