

## Bily Brothers: Wood Carvers and Clock Makers

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American frontier and western history, this and the preceding volumes in the set offer exciting and interesting reading. One can only look forward to the volumes yet to come.

*Bily Brothers: Wood Carvers and Clock Makers*, by Duane Hutchinson. Lincoln, NE: Foundation Books, 1993. xxiv, 127 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$9.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY STEVEN OHRN, STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Joseph and Frank Bily were born and raised outside Spillville, Iowa. Their parents were recent immigrants from Czechoslovakia drawn to Iowa to make their livings farming. Joseph and Frank turned to carving and clock making rather than follow their father in farming family lands. It was as carvers that the Bily brothers made their mark in their own times and beyond. By donating their wonderful clocks, carvings, and miscellaneous personal collections of books and artifacts to the City of Spillville, they created a legacy for themselves and a popular tourist attraction for this small Czech town.

This book purports to be the story of Joseph and Frank as told by their mother, Mary Bily, who kept a diary beginning in 1865 and continuing through July 1945, when Frank took over as family chronicler until shortly before his death in 1965. The diary begins with Mary's youthful entries, continues through the years of bearing and raising four children, and then increasingly focuses on the remarkable work of her sons. The diary is full of all the interesting details of daily life that a social historian could ever dream of finding. Daily events, family tragedies and celebrations, seasonal changes, and commentary on events near and far are all topics for Mary's pen. And all of this is extremely well written.

It was the style of the writing that sent me back to the preface to discover that the diary form used by Hutchinson is merely a literary device; there is no diary of Mary Bily! The book records "those private conversations which we will never recover." Using words that Mary might have expressed had she kept a diary is a way of "revealing and not revealing." So as someone with a longtime curiosity about the Bily brothers, this book is not the one I have been waiting for. It is interesting and well written, but ultimately no more satisfying than fiction based partially on the historical record.

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