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HOOOSIER BANKER

INSIDE

Andy Briggs,
fifth-generation
banker, keeps
Bank of Geneva
safe and sound.

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Andy Briggs: Legacy Banker



Andy and Rhonda Briggs have been enjoying the artful task of remodeling their Geneva home, originally built by Andy's great grandfather.

LAURA WILSON
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A conversation with Andrew J. Briggs, president and chief executive officer of Bank of Geneva, is akin to a private audience with a banking museum curator. A fifth-generation banker, Briggs' personal story is intertwined with his community, bank and family, a patchwork of a rich history of success.

Geneva, Ind.—home to about 1,350 inhabitants—is located 35 miles northeast of Muncie, near the Ohio border. It is 10 minutes by car to its Swiss-namesake cousin, Berne, known for chalet-lined streets. Like Berne, Geneva is embedded in Adams County, home to a large Amish population. The Bank of Geneva accommodates its Amish clientele with parking lot hitching posts.

Geneva also was the former home and inspiration of Gene Stratton-Porter, author of *Girl of the Limberlost* and other best-selling novels of the early 1900s. Enchanted with area marshes prevalent at the time, she had her home situated so that “the swamp used to come up to her back door,” notes Briggs. A naturalist, Stratton-Porter spent hours exploring the swamp, undeterred by fables of men

nicknamed Limber becoming hopelessly lost. Eventually she was killed in a streetcar accident in Los Angeles while working on a movie deal, but her story lives on at the Limberlost State Historic Site in Geneva.

Stratton-Porter's fascination with the marshlands also lives on. Most of the swamps were drained long ago for development, but in recent years a group called Friends of the Limberlost has started to restore the wetlands. “Over 1,500 acres has been restored by this Friends group,” reports Briggs. “They're putting together one of the largest wetlands restoration projects in the country.”

Stratton-Porter's history intermingles with Bank of Geneva. Her husband, Charles Porter, helped found the bank with several investors, including A.G. Briggs, the great grandfather of current president Andrew J. Briggs. A.G. Briggs became the bank's first president; all succeeding presidents have been his descendants: James D. Briggs Sr., James D. Briggs Jr. and current president Andrew J. “Andy” Briggs. Before the Briggs family moved to Indiana, Andy Briggs' great great grandfather—James Day—helped found the First National Bank of Celina, Ohio, where he also served as a judge.

Andy Briggs was named to his current position with Bank of Geneva in 1994 and



The home of Andy and Rhonda Briggs houses four generations of memories.

has 33 years of banking experience. A graduate of Ball State University, he is past president of the Geneva Town Council and is active on the boards of: Bank of Geneva, chairman; Limberlost Bancshares Inc., chairman; Limberlost State Historic Site, corporate secretary; Swiss Village Retirement Center; Adams County Economic Development, treasurer; Adams County Public Library, treasurer; Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership; and Arts Place Inc. He also is active with the Indiana Bankers Association as a member of the IBA board of directors.

Briggs and his wife Rhonda live in Geneva, across the street from the main office of Bank of Geneva, in a stunning Victorian house that was built by Briggs' great grandfather. Andy and Rhonda relocated to the house three years ago after selling their prior home in Pendleton, which had served as a midway point between Andy's bank duties and Rhonda's former position with Kittle's Furniture in Indianapolis. Rhonda retired from Kittle's at the time of the move and now is proprietor of a convenience store.

Hoosier Banker recently interviewed Andy Briggs about his banking legacy background.

How is Bank of Geneva faring in today's challenging economic environment?

"We're going to weather this storm really well. We have 18 percent capital, far above the norm. Our industry is caught in this subprime mess, but Bank of Geneva did not participate in it, and neither did our banking neighbors.

"At Bank of Geneva, we believe in strong capital. We believe in safety nets. We're going to have challenging days, but

we've stayed close to the ground, close to our customers, and we meet the needs of our customers. We're here to lend, and we're here to keep people's deposits safe.

"Community banks are the backbone of the banking system. We're well-capitalized and running well. We're going to do well."

During another difficult time period,

the Great Depression, Bank of Geneva was one of the few banks permitted to reopen after a national three-day hiatus.

What happened?

"During the Depression, my grandfather was running the bank. He was a traditional banker and a very conservative person. He also was one of those people who exuded confidence, so he was a touchstone for calming people's fears.

"Everybody knew my grandfather, because he started working here in 1912.

Because he was well-known and respected, everybody knew that Bank of Geneva was in great shape, and that there was no question we would be opened up as a Class A bank after the three-day closure.

"Later, when my dad came to work here in 1946, he said we had more in U.S. government bonds than we had in deposits. That was how conservative we were, because my grandfather had gone through the Great Depression. It was a totally different realm of banking. We were more focused on keeping the deposits safe and making sure that people had cash when they needed it."

Being part of a banking legacy family, were you always committed to banking as a career?

"I was not supposed to be here. My eldest brother was to be successor, and I planned to become a teacher, but circumstances changed.

"When we were kids, my three brothers and I would go down to the bank every Saturday and count pennies. That was our job—we'd count pennies and nickels and dimes. That was our job for years.

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“We’d also clean the vault door and polish it. Then we’d earn additional responsibilities as we got older. I’ve done every job from proof machine operator to teller to whatever position I needed to fill at the time. I can’t think of a job I haven’t had inside the bank.

“I went to Ball State and studied biology to become a biology teacher, but I continued to work here in the summers, because they needed me. I started working summers, then vacations, and then—about halfway through college—I decided that this is what I wanted to do. It felt natural.

“Finally, the opportunity came in 1994 for me to become president. They put me in the seat, and I’ve been here ever since.

“My dad still works here. He’s 87. He comes in every morning around 8:30 and stays until 6 in the evening. I don’t think he’d feel right *not* coming to the bank every day.”

He must be in excellent health.

“Yes, and this bank has been his life. He left the Army in 1946, after serving in World War II. The story is that my grandfather roused him out of bed and said, ‘I’m not going to have a son of mine

lounging around. Get to work.’ That was my dad’s first day on the job.

“When I was a kid growing up, the house I lived in had a safe in the living room. People would come after hours and do their banking at the house. People would come at any hour and knock on the door if they needed something.

“The house was set up like a little branch. In a rural community like this, farmers work from sunup to sundown, so we basically were open from sunup to sundown. I still have the original safe.

“People came routinely to conduct business before hours and after hours. It wasn’t unusual; that was the way it was done. I never heard my family complain. I think they thought of it as, ‘That’s the service we provide.’”

You could open a museum of banking.

“People keep telling me that. We need to have a museum, because we have so many documents from this area. We have a philosophy: We don’t throw anything away.

“When we cleaned out my great grandfather’s house, I found call reports all the way back to when they started doing call reports. They ended up in my garage.

“We found letters in the basement from other banks protesting FDIC insurance. They didn’t believe in it,



Jim Briggs, age 87, continues to work every day at Bank of Geneva since passing on the presidency to son Andy in 1994.

and didn’t think that banks should participate in it. They wanted to have other bankers send letters to say they didn’t want to participate, either.

“FDIC was a radical change. All of sudden, banks went from having no FDIC, with nobody looking over their shoulders, to having FDIC with big premiums on the insurance. And we were just coming out of a time when many banks had failed.”

How did your work ethic develop?

“I’ve always been a worker. I’ve never been without a paying job, whether it was here at the bank or at a chicken farm where I also used to work growing up.

“I always knew the value of money. If I wanted a pop or something like that, my parents never gave us an allowance, so I had to have a job.

“My parents both worked. My mother was a schoolteacher, my dad worked here at the bank with my grandfather, so as kids growing up we spent a lot of time with my grandmother. She operated a dairy farm, managed her home and watched us as needed. But whenever the bank needed help, she’d come and work as a teller.

“My mother was an English teacher and sixth grade teacher. It was interesting.



Among memorabilia at Bank of Geneva is a photo of James D. Briggs Sr., the grandfather of Andy Briggs, shown with teammates from the Ohio Wesleyan University baseball team. Mr. Briggs’ coach was Branch Rickey, who later signed Jackie Robinson as a baseball player.

The teachers would come over to the house, and my brothers and I would see them in a social arena. Today I still have coffee quite often with my high school principal and my guidance counselor, because they're customers, and they're friends. There are some nice benefits to living in a small town.

"I was fortunate that my grandparents on both sides were businesspeople. They ran their own companies, and I was brought up in that environment. Now I listen to conversations of others and realize that the conversations we used to have as kids were much different. We didn't talk about people at the dinner table, because people's information is confidential in a banking family.

"With my grandparents and parents, we would talk about places, not people. Gossip was unheard of; you didn't talk about those things. We grew up in an environment where you said nice things about people. With so many generations of bankers, we knew what we could and could not talk about.

"Information to a bank is sacred. In a bank, you know more than you really want to know. You know if people are getting divorced, or having financial problems, because personal problems are brought into the bank. We left their troubles at the business.

"I was lucky to have such solid grandparents and parents. You were expected to toe the line in my family, because you were held up in the town as the banker. For my grandmother, the big thing was reputation. You always wanted to have integrity, you wanted to have honesty—those were principle ideas to her generation.

"Growing up like she did, in the early 1900s, many people only had their word. It meant so much to them once you gave your word to somebody. You'd better live up to it."

What kind of leader would you say that you are?

"I try to be extremely observant and see everything. I try to pick up on things, so that I can sit in a meeting and direct what I see is happening.

"Running a bank, you are a community leader, too. People look toward you for leadership. My wife tells me I'm on every board there is, but that's part of leading in a small town. You wear a lot of hats.

"One of my little sayings is that you only get out of things what you put into them. If you expect your community to grow, you have to reinvest in it; you have to reinvest in the people. I've been fortunate to meet a lot of people. I appreciate the people I meet, because I think everybody influences you."

How does your IBA involvement benefit you and your bank?

"It's positive. I've really enjoyed the CEO roundtables at the IBA. That's one of my favorite things; I try never to miss

'YOU WERE EXPECTED TO TOE THE LINE IN MY FAMILY, BECAUSE YOU WERE HELD UP IN THE TOWN AS THE BANKER.'

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them. I've gotten some tremendous ideas out of the roundtables and networking with the different people at the IBA.

"The IBA does a wonderful job on many levels. I like the fact that, at the board meetings, we first get together and have lunch, so that we have a chance for everybody to discuss what's going on. And the board meetings themselves are very informative.

"Every bank in the state of Indiana ought to have someone sit on the board, so that they see what the inner workings are. They need to know what the IBA does for us in education and training and the political arena.

"Our membership has more than paid for itself. It's like they say: 'This is *your* IBA.' It's true."

What are some of your interests?

"I love news. I spend a lot of time on the Internet reading and talking to people. I catch what's going on during the day, and keep abreast of current events. One of my favorite interests is current events.

"I also enjoy travel. I used to travel a lot. That's how I amused myself before I was married about eight years ago. I've been to



Memories of a decades-long friendship between the Briggs family and a family in France are captured in a photo album stored in Andy Briggs' office. The friendship developed when Briggs' father was stationed overseas during World War II.

almost all of Europe and Scandinavia, and also Mexico. I can't believe all the places I've been.

"I would go places and meet people—strike up conversations. I've had people say, 'You should write a book, you meet so many people.' It's partly just being nice to people, but also I listen to them and pick up on things. I would put two and two together, and then we could talk on many different levels. One of the greatest gifts in my life is the people I've met.

"I have several friends overseas, and they send e-mails, wanting to know how the banking system is doing in the United States, and how Bank of Geneva is doing. They want to make sure that we are doing well, because they're friends. At the same time, I get input from them as to what they perceive of United States banking, and what's going on overseas with their investments.

"One set of friends is a family in France. My family has been friends with that family from 1944 to the present day—four generations of correspondence. The friendship started when my dad was stationed in France during World War II. He met two girls in Nîmes, France, and about two weeks later got an invitation to come to their family's house for dinner.

"Through the years, they've come over here to visit for a month or two, and we'd go visit them. When Bertrand, one of the Frenchmen, got married, I was in the wedding party.

"I also get e-mails from Scottish friends of mine, Jack and Jill. I met them on a trip to Russia. Jack is retired as chairman of the board of Scottish & New Castle Breweries. They're in their 90s now and are concerned about retirement and the English economy.

"Another overseas connection is my dad's best friend, who lives in England—a farmer from Yorkshire. They're about the same age, and they phone each other every Friday. They've gone back and forth to visit each other several times. I've gone over, too, and stayed at the house in Yorkshire.

"I have friends in Holland. My friend Alex—she's actually a friend of my mother's—speaks five languages. She's come over here with her husband and stayed at my house for a month at a time.

"Our visitors from Europe all love Geneva. Maybe it's the people, but they

have a great time here and feel safe.

We'll also take them—depending on where they want to go—to Chicago or New York City or Disney World.

"We've taken our overseas friends to meet the Amish community. My friend who speaks five languages will speak German with them. They get along fabulously, because the Amish respect that she's from the old country.

"My dad knows all the Amish in the area, including the two generations before us. He's very well respected in the Amish community because of his longevity. We had a dinner last year for the Amish bishops to thank them for being our customers. When my father walked in, you could hear them whisper: 'Jim Briggs is here.' Then all of them came up and shook his hand."

You are known for personal style, always wearing a bow tie. How did your signature style develop?

"I started wearing bow ties when I got invited to a Congressional White House party in the mid-1990s. It was a black tie event, so I had to learn to tie a bow tie. My dad showed me. Once I started with bow ties, I decided to keep wearing them. It gives a distinctive appearance.

"A few years later, I got invited to the White House again, during the Clinton administration. It was a big press conference, and the topic was health care. Bill Clinton and Hillary were both there.

"I had my bow tie on and was standing about four rows back in the crowd. When Bill Clinton walked by, he leaned over all these people in front of me to shake my hand. I thought to myself, 'It's got to be the bow tie.'"

Andy Briggs radiates a deep-rooted interest in everything around him—ideas and people and places. Above all, he conveys a positive spirit. "I think you have to be positive," he concurs. "Life is a great adventure. You need to do as much as you can.

"I was talking to a guy the other day," he continues, "and I said, 'In my life, I have never, ever been bored.' I don't see how you could be."

Briggs sums up his view of life: "There's so much to do, so much to see, so much to think about. Life is a cornucopia." ♦