

Scott Russell Sanders
and wife Ruth in front of
the house on East Wyle
St. where they have lived
for 33 years.



by **Scott Russell Sanders** Photography by **Steve Raymer**

TO STAY OR *move on*

The Artist's *Dilemma*

FOR WRITER SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS THE ANSWER EVOLVED WITH THE BIRTH OF HIS CHILDREN AND HIS FEELINGS FOR BLOOMINGTON.

Until I was in my late 20s, I didn't know how to answer the question strangers often ask one another in this land of nomads: Where are you from? I could say that I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, but my family moved away from there before I started school. I could say that I spent my school years in the country outside of Ravenna, Ohio, but my family left there before I started college. I could say that I went to college in Providence, Rhode Island, and to graduate school in Cambridge, England, but every time I completed a degree I moved on. So I really wasn't from Memphis, despite the accident of birth, nor was I from Ravenna, Providence, or Cambridge, much as those places had influenced me.

When I finished the last of my degrees at the age of 25, I couldn't name a place or point to a spot on the map and say, "That's my home." Not having acquired a hometown in childhood, I imagined I never would.

From England, my wife and I moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where I took up my first real job, teaching at Indiana University. When Ruth and I arrived here in the summer of 1971, our furniture, books, bicycles, and clothes only half-filled a panel truck. Scattered about the second-floor apartment we rented in a house

near campus, our few possessions made the place look less like a home than a campsite. Ruth began foraging at yard sales to fill out our meager belongings. I was reluctant to buy anything more just yet. It would be only a matter of time, I figured, before we moved again, not merely to another house but to another town, another state, even another country.

Up to that point in my life, I thought it was normal to uproot every few years and go somewhere new, if only for more excitement or more pay. During the Great Depression, my father had left his parents' farm in Mississippi to seek work in Chicago, where he found not only a job but also a wife. The Second World War carried him back down south, newly married, to work in a munitions plant. After the war he landed a job with a tire company, which moved him and his family all over the country, from Tennessee to Ohio, then to Louisiana, Oklahoma and Ontario, then back again to Mississippi. My mother wept at every move, yet she threw herself into each new place, joining a church, running for the school board, planting perennials that would keep blooming long after she had moved on once more.

I took such moving about to be the American way. While growing up, I had read countless stories about pilgrims, voyagers, explorers, cowboys, and pioneers. These were the venturesome souls, the pathfinders. By contrast, the people who stayed put—whom I read about

in stories by Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, and others—were bigoted, listless, and dull. At our most lively, I came to believe, Americans were a footloose people, always striking out for new territory.

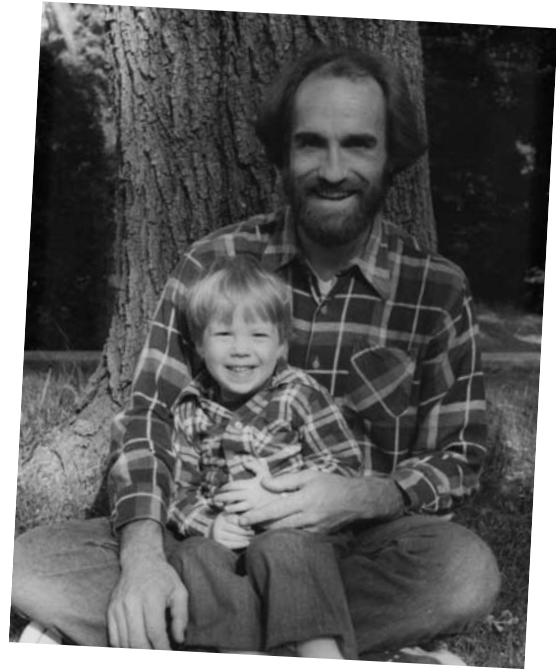
So instead of breaking down the crates we had used to ship our things from England to Indiana, I stored them in the attic where they would be handy for our next move. I worked hard at my job but didn't pay much attention to where I was actually living. I knew little about the city government, the schools, the parks and museums, the local economy, the sources of our food or water or electricity. I didn't know what social problems afflicted our city nor what efforts were being made to solve them. A few of the local trees, birds, and flowers were familiar to me from my childhood years in the Midwest, but otherwise I didn't know anything about the southern Indiana landscape.

Questions a father asks

After a year in Bloomington, however, Ruth became pregnant, and the following winter she gave birth to our first child. From the moment I heard baby Eva draw breath, the alchemy of fatherhood began to work a change in me. I began to look around our apartment, around



This page, left: Sanders with his daughter Eva, then 2, on the porch of the house on East Wyle in 1975. Right: Sanders and son Jesse Solomon in 1979.



Opposite page, left: Ruth cuddles with Jesse and Eva in the kitchen, June 1980. Right: Eva and Jesse with their dad, circa 1985.

the neighborhood, around the town and countryside with a fresh awareness. How clean was the air our daughter was breathing? How pure was the water she would drink? How safe were the streets? Was the library well-stocked with children's books? Were there parks where she could play, museums where she could explore? If we stayed in Bloomington even half a dozen years, Eva would attend one or another of the public schools. How good were they? How large were the classes? Were the teachers well-trained and well-paid? And who took responsibility, inside or outside of government, for making sure these needs were being met?

Suddenly I was beset by questions about this place where my daughter had entered the world. In seeking answers, I began to see Bloomington not merely as a way station on my career but as a working community, with its own history, its own strengths and weaknesses. I met people who volunteered at the hospital or the soup kitchen; I met people who were starting a food co-op, people who ran a shelter for abused women, people who fought to save and rehabilitate fine old buildings. I met teachers who stayed on after the school day ended to tutor children who were struggling. I met businesspeople who gave jobs to handicapped workers and donated money to local causes. I met politicians who bicycled to work and championed public land.

Of course I also met or learned of scallawags and charlatans and deadbeats, who were always on the take and never giving back to the community, but their like would have turned up in any town. I could also see that, because of the university, Bloomington suffered more than most places from transience, as students flowed in and out by the thousands every year, most of them taking little interest in the community during their temporary stays.

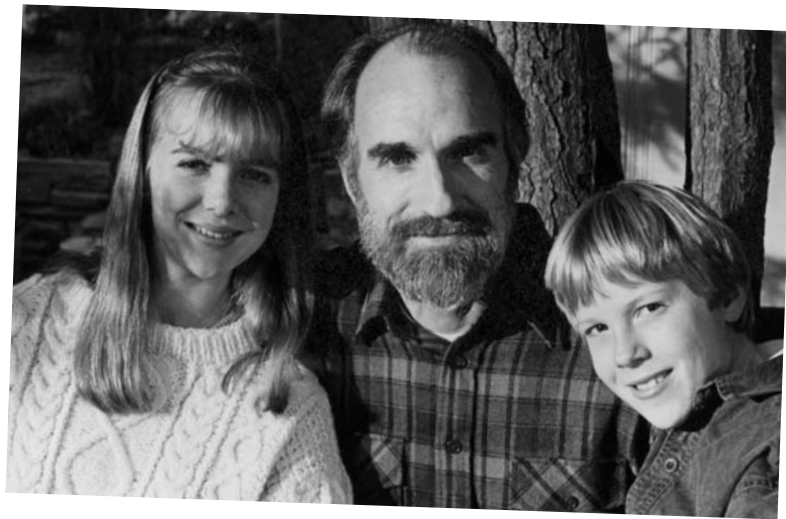
Indeed, the majority of residents, here as elsewhere, appeared to go about their lives without giving much thought to the well-being of the city, collecting their paychecks and their groceries and assuming that others would make sure things kept running. Still, in exploring this place with a father's eyes, I discovered there were many people devoted to caring for the community, enough people to steadily improve the quality of life in Bloomington.

About the time Eva learned to walk, my wife and I bought an old brick house within easy strolling distance of the courthouse square and only two blocks from a city park in one direction and a public school in the other. A mortgage hadn't kept my parents from moving every few years; still, it was a sobering step for me to sign an agreement promising payments for the next 30 years. I had been alive only 28 years, and already I had dwelt in 10 houses. Ruth and I could afford this house only because it was small and run-down. No sooner had we settled in than we began fixing it up, and the sweat and hours we put into the work strengthened our marriage to one another as well as to the place.

"What about those shipping crates?" Ruth asked me one day. They were just taking up room, and she didn't plan on moving again any time soon. After mulling it over, I took my hammer, dismantled the crates and used the wood to build storage shelves in the basement.

The neighborhood had been settled for most of a century, so the trees were big but the lots were small. We pruned our trees, trimmed the gangly bushes, dug up the flower beds and planted them anew. Neighbors stopped by with starts from their own gardens, with casseroles, with advice. The people living nearby whom we hadn't met on sidewalks or in front yards, we sought out by knocking on their doors and offering gifts of our own, usually cookies or bread.

Before long, Ruth and I formed a day-care cooperative with other parents of young children in the neighborhood. We found another circle of friends who liked to share food and folksongs. Ruth located shops where she could buy supplies for quilting and weaving. I discovered the best places to buy used books and new tools. We sought out the Quaker meeting, to continue a form of worship we had come to know during our years in England. We joined local groups devoted to peacemaking and conservation. We called or wrote or spoke in person with our elected officials (a



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mayor who served for eight years lived around the corner from us), and at election time we posted signs in our yard to support our favored candidates. When meetings were held to discuss the future of the schools, the library, the parks, or the neighborhood, we always tried to attend.

The importance of staying put

Within a few years our second child was born, a boy named Jesse. His arrival only deepened in me the change begun with Eva's birth. Here were two reasons for thinking hard about the importance of staying put. Children crave stability, a known world that is stimulating but safe. They also crave novelty, of course, but against a background of familiarity. For infants, the parents provide such a known world, but as children grow they need first the home, then the neighborhood, then a town or city for space to explore. Ruth understood from the beginning that Bloomington could be such a nourishing space for Eva and Jesse, and I came to agree with her.

Running errands about town, often in company with the children, Ruth and I recognized more and more of the faces we met. We knew by name the clerks in the credit union and the hardware store. We learned where our drinking water came from, what power plants generated our electricity. We discovered where to buy sound lumber, where to get our car fixed by an honest mechanic, where to buy produce grown locally by organic farmers. With enthusiastic help from Eva and Jesse, we planted a

vegetable garden of our own, watching sunlight, water, and soil transform into beans, lettuce, and tomatoes. After putting up bird feeders, we soon learned the feathers and songs of the birds that lived here year round, as well as many of those that migrated through. We camped in nearby state parks, we hiked in state and national forests, and before long we learned the trees, the wildflowers, and a few of the edible mushrooms. We began to read in the local terrain the effects of bedrock geology, the traces of glaciers, and the patterns of human settlement.

Gradually I ceased to think of the town as a temporary address and began to think of it as a permanent home for my young family. Ruth had never needed convincing. She had spent all but the first six weeks of her life in Indianapolis, just an hour away from our home in Bloomington, so she had grown up expecting to find a good place and to settle there. For me, however, the desire to put down roots came as a revelation. My own childhood experience, as well as the notions I had taken in from books and movies and television, had taught me that to stay in one place is to be stuck, to lack gumption or vision, especially if that place happens to be a small city in the Midwest.

To make a name for oneself?

During my years in graduate school and afterward, friends who knew I aspired to become a writer had advised me to seek out a big city on one of the coasts—New York, say, or San Francisco, Chicago or New Orleans, Seattle or Miami—some place that readers

had heard about, some place where influential critics might tout my books, where I was likely to meet filmmakers at cocktail parties, where a cab ride could deliver me to television studios. And they also urged me to pull up stakes and move whenever I saw a chance for more prestige or more publicity.

My friends were probably right, if my ruling ambition were to make a name for myself. But my chief ambition, I discovered during our early years in Bloomington, was not to make a good career but to make a good life. And such a life, as I came to understand it, meant being a husband and a father first, and an employee second; it meant belonging to a place rather than to a profession; it meant being a citizen as well as an artist.

Good citizenship begins with the right conduct of one's own life and one's household, then stretches out to embrace one's community and the surrounding watershed. Only by taking on responsibility for the well-being of your place can you become a good citizen of a state, a nation, or the planet. I know from the example of my own parents that people can invest themselves in a community in spite of frequent moves; but the more frequent the moves, the more difficult the investment. I also know that people can spend their whole lives in a place without knowing it well or caring for it, merely staying on out of inertia rather than commitment. In marrying a



The whole family today: (from left) daughter-in-law Carrie, Jesse, Ruth, Scott, son-in-law Matt Allen, Eva, and their daughter Elizabeth.

place as in marrying a person, commitment is the key. The longer you stay in a place out of wholehearted desire, the more likely you are to learn about its human and natural history, to help preserve what's worthy, restore what's damaged, and create what's lacking.

So as I came to recognize my children's need and my own need for a firm home place, I came to recognize my community's need for citizens who stay put. Most of what I valued in Bloomington was the result of efforts by people who loved this place, either because they grew up here and chose to stay, or because they landed here and chose to remain. I suspect the same is true of all flourishing communities.

I realize it's easier to stay put in a college town than in many other communities, especially if one has a job that isn't likely to be shipped across the border or replaced by a machine. While all places are in need of loving citizens, not all places are easy to love. I also realize that many people must pull up stakes in order to find work or seek an education or follow a mate. I'm not saying that staying put is invariably the right choice, nor that moving on is invariably the wrong one. I'm only saying that in our infatuation with the nomadic way of life we risk losing the deep pleasure that comes of commitment to a place, and our places risk losing the care that rises from such commitment.

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Although our children have traveled throughout the United States and in more than a dozen other countries, they tell us they are grateful to have grown up knowing the location of home. Jesse went to Indiana University, married his sweetheart, worked in Chicago and Brussels, then he and his wife moved to the Washington, D.C. area for graduate school. They swiftly came to know the parks and museums, the bike paths and subways of their new region. Given their professional interests, they're unlikely ever to move back to Bloomington, but they know they can always return for visits to this house where Ruth and I hope to live as long as we can climb the stairs, in this town where we hope to spend the rest of our days.

Eva wanted to sample another part of the country, so she went east to college—to my alma mater in Providence, in fact—then she returned for graduate school to Bloomington. She married a man who had also grown up here and whose parents live on the edge of town. Eva and her husband bought a bungalow a few blocks from our house, assuming one

of those long mortgages that had so daunted me. A few months after she finished her Ph.D., Eva gave birth to their first child, our first grandchild, Elizabeth.

Since Elizabeth was born, not quite four years ago, I have taken care of her many afternoons. In fair weather we often go to one of the parks, or we walk downtown to Wonder-Lab, the Historical Society Museum, or the county library, or we stop for a snack at the food co-op, or we check out the house renovation projects in the neighborhood, or we amble through gardens examining whatever happens to be in bloom, or we listen to birds, or we study bugs, or we go wading in a creek, or we rest on a bench in the shade of some great tree and watch the people stream by, visiting with the many we know, here in our hometown. ✨

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