

# The VOICE

## Unraveling the truth

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**By Mary Lou Creamer** Editor

Jacki Sparling Howard had heard the stories all her life. How four men in her family who lived in The Thumb Area died mysteriously within three years in the early 20th Century.

As an adult, however, those stories became a curiosity for her that sparked a flame that evolved into a burning passion to uncover the truth. After years of research, the information she uncovered and the questions she raised were too good to keep to herself.

The result? The 63-year-old grandmother has gone from a kindergarten aid and working with soldiers to an author.

Her first novel - "The Thumb Pointed Fingers" - was published last month.

"I had heard the story all my life, and it was always a mystery," Howard said. "I really just wanted to see if I could find out what really happened."

Now Howard, a Michigan native who lives in Virginia, is returning to her home state to share her book and sign copies. She will sign copies from 3 to 5 p.m. Friday at Reading and Rhythm in Bad Axe and from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Literarium, the discount bookstore in the Port Huron Outlet Mall on Range Road in Kimball Township.

Howard said she never intended to write a book. In fact, all she planned to do was some family research.

"I started out by writing down the things I'd been told as a child - the stories that had been passed down to me," said Howard, who grew up in Ferndale and Owosso. "About 10 years ago, several articles came out, but there were always discrepancies.

"Then I did some digging to find facts. After several trips to libraries and newspapers, I ended up with a basement full of papers. With each new piece of information I uncovered, I became convinced that this story needed to be told."

"The Thumb Pointed Fingers" involves Howard's relatives who lived and farmed in the early 1900s in the Thumb's rural Sanilac County. John Wesley Sparling, a distant cousin to Howard, married Carrie Boddy and together they had five children.

Sparling died tragically - and unexpectedly - in 1908 while in a hospital in London, Ontario. His death was mourned by the small close-knit community of Tyre. But sadness quickly turned to suspicion as three of his grown children followed him to the grave in only three years.

"The incredible thing about the case is that the deaths just kept happening," Howard said. "This isn't a case where a family is murdered in their sleep overnight. These people died one by one in a very short time period - each one dying in a similar manner. Each one dying a painful and prolonged death."

Howard said the second death also occurred in a London hospital. A son, who moved to Ubley in Huron County, was the third to die at home, and the fourth died at home as well.

"And from everything I have read, there was no reason for any of them to die," she said.

Three men were arrested in the deaths, however, charges against two were dropped. One man went to trial and to prison. But just as sudden as the deaths were, so was the pardon the convicted received by then Governor Ferris.

So, armed with all this information, Howard decided to create a timeline and craft the story into a book.

"I call it historical fiction because I had to make up the dialogue," she said. "Those who were around then aren't here anymore to ask them about the case.

"I had oral history, exceptions for the defense (from the trial), depositions from the inquest, and a Michigan State Supreme Court ruling to go on."

And as mysterious as the deaths, Howard discovered much of the paperwork surrounding the case had disappeared over time.

"It happens," she said. "Cases get purged, fires happened, for whatever reason, things disappear. There is no transcript from the trial or the paperwork explaining the pardon, but I do know that Ferris did go to Bad Axe, for whatever reason."

While the dialogue may be fiction, the setting is actual. For example, if the book describes a blizzard or a county fair going on at the time, it's because it actually happened.

"I read it in the newspaper from the time," Howard said.

"The Thumb Pointed Fingers" was published in August, by Lot's Wife, a local publishing house in Virginia.

"I approached them first for advice and they did a read through, and then an edit," Howard said. "Then I got the nerve to ask if they would publish it and they said 'Yes.'

"I thought I would have to go through years of rejection before I saw it in print. I couldn't believe it happened so quickly.

In the end, Howard never really solved the mystery, but she ended up with a good tale.

"Because of the oral history that was passed down, everybody has a theory, for the most part," she said. "It could've been the doctor, the mother, or a conspiracy or an affair. I guess we'll never really know.

"But I do know that four people died who shouldn't have. There was no reason for them to die."

"The Thumb Pointed Fingers" publication comes in the year of the 100th anniversary of John Wesley Sparling's death. Howard hopes it will bring some closure for the family of four that died.

"I am convinced that somewhere out there, someone knows what really took place," she said.

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