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**Patsi B. Trollinger** was born and raised near Kingsport, Tennessee, and launched her writing career in third grade by scrawling verses on homemade greeting cards. Two years later, she began writing and delivering speeches after her mother required her to enter a local contest. “That marked a turning point,” says Trollinger. “I had been so shy that I once locked myself inside a church pulpit rather than stand in front of the congregation. The speaking contests got me interested in the way that words connect people to each other.”

By the time she reached high school, Trollinger was writing short stories and play scripts. She tried journalism, too, as the teen correspondent for a local newspaper.

The news stories turned into a career after Trollinger graduated from Emory & Henry College. She was hired by the college to produce a steady stream of stories about students, faculty, and alumni. The topics included everything from football to space travel.

“Writing news stories was my ticket to meet interesting people,” says Trollinger. “I spent time with a deaf quarterback who led his hearing teammates to a winning season. An outspoken, rancher who tried to buy an island to found his own nation. And a professor who traveled on horseback as a boy and, as an adult, trained rocket scientists for NASA.”

After moving to Kentucky, Trollinger held a similar job at Centre College until she decided to write fulltime for young readers. “The birth of my daughters put me in touch with children’s books, and I loved the high-energy style of writing.”

Trollinger continues to live in Kentucky with her husband, Richard, and daughters, Mary and Elizabeth. *Perfect Timing*, her first book, grew out of a small six-line story she noticed in the newspaper. “The story mentioned that Isaac Murphy was the first person to win three Kentucky Derbies, and I wanted to know more about him. By the time I saw his photo, I was hooked. He looked intelligent, intense, and determined. I felt an obligation to tell his story.”

*Perfect Timing: How Isaac Murphy Became One of the World’s Greatest Jockeys*  
by Patsi Trollinger. Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue Published by Viking (Penguin Putnam).  
September 21, 2006. Biography. Hardcover. 32 pages. \$15.99. ISBN 0-670-06083-6

## **The Life and Times of Isaac Murphy 1861-96**

Isaac Murphy was born on New Year's Day, 1861 – a time when black Americans felt a mixture of fear and exhilaration. Fear because there was talk of war. Exhilaration because there was talk of putting an end to slavery.

The war did begin, just months after Isaac's birth. The violence of the Civil War killed thousands of people, including Isaac's father, who died either as a soldier or a civilian worker for the Union Army. By the time the war ended (when Isaac was four years old), the United States had abolished slavery. For the first time in the nation's history, all black men, women, and children in the U.S.A. were free. They were eager to have decent jobs, schools, and homes.

Other changes were happening, too. It was a time of invention, with new machines appearing almost weekly. People began to leave their farms to become factory workers or merchants, and they had more free time to watch sports competitions. Businessmen figured out that they could make money by selling tickets to baseball games, horse races, and boxing matches, so they hired athletes and organized big sporting events.

In the midst of all the change, Isaac Murphy became one of the nation's first sports celebrities. His name frequently appeared in newspaper headlines, and he earned so much money that he and his wife, Lucy, bought a big house in Lexington and gave elegant parties. He traveled to distant states to race, including California, Michigan, New York, and Missouri.

Those were the golden years, when Isaac was respected as the best rider in Thoroughbred racing and a leader among African-American citizens. It was a different life from that of his grandparents, yet the racial prejudice from slavery times had not disappeared. In many towns, Isaac had to stay in colored-only hotels and eat in colored-only restaurants. And any time he or another jockey made a mistake in judgment during a horse race, they could expect stiff criticism in newspaper articles, which often included a racial epithet that now is considered profane.

For almost twenty years after the Civil War, the most extreme expressions of racial prejudice were held in check by Federal laws and the presence of Federal military troops in many southern states. But by the late 1880s, the nation faced a series of important questions: Did the nation intend to do more than simply end slavery? Was the United States prepared to treat black Americans as full citizens and pass laws to make clear that they were equal to white citizens?

At that pivotal moment, the nation turned its back on black Americans. A Supreme Court loaded with judges from the North refused to state that segregation should be unconstitutional, and the national government withdrew Federal troops from the South. That launched one of the ugliest eras in U.S. history, marked by the harassment and murder of many black Americans.

On the race track, Isaac experienced the shift with threats on his life. Some white jockeys were jealous of black riders and began to cause accidents on the track. Racing officials and horse owners could have pushed hard to punish the white jockeys, but they chose not to do so.

Isaac managed to escape serious injury on the track, but the growing ugliness around him probably contributed to the health problems that ultimately took his life. His funeral revealed the strength of his many friendships that cut across racial boundaries. The largest flower arrangements came from jockeys of both races – men who had competed against him but held him in high regard.

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