

# John H. Higgins, Jefferson Township's Civil War Drummer Boy, 1849-1931

By Beth Bassett

When the conversations of local history buffs center around the Civil War, how it affected Newton County and its population, most certainly one name is always mentioned, that of John Higgins. After serving in the 51st Infantry, Company B as their drummer boy at the age of 12, he returned to Newton County in 1863, and took an active part in community and civic matters. He learned the tinner's trade from George W. Smith, and followed it for a number of years. In 1888, he was elected to the office of county recorder and in 1892, was reelected for a second term. It was after he completed his tenure of office, He embarked in the law and insurance business with Frank Comparet as a partner. In 1907 when Mr. Comparet passed away, and until the day he passed away, he continued the business alone.

His biography appears in the *1916 History of Jasper and Newton Counties*, and upon the celebration of his 82nd birthday in 1931, a *Newton County Enterprise* reporter sat down with him in his office surrounded by pictures that the writer felt revealed the soldier career of the man. On one wall was the picture of "Old Ironsides" and her British adversary which she has just shot to splinters and on her decks are a shamble of dead and dying men. Another picture was of the famous charge of George Pickett's Confederate division at Gettysburg. Only 3 months later, his death would prompt another article that included a more personal look at his life, and additional memoirs of the Civil War.

"John Higgins was born April 24th, 1849, in Brooklyn, N.Y., a son of Michael and Julia Higgins, of Irish descent. At the age of seven he was left an orphan, and for three years lived in the institution of the Children's Aid Society at New York City on Randall's Island, New York. In the autumn of 1860, with two carloads of other orphans, he was brought to Lafayette, Indiana, where they were distributed among the people. Samuel Bramble, a merchant in Kentland, took Mr. Higgins into his home. He arrived in Kentland in November 1860, a few weeks after the election of Abraham Lincoln, an event that was destined to precipitate the great Civil War.

"During the winter and spring of 1861, he heard the papers read and discussed around the stove in Mr. Bramble's store, and it was here proposed that a company be organized.

"David McHolland, a Mexican war soldier, and a local blacksmith, was made a Captain; Albert Light, First Lieutenant, and Adolphus H. Wonder, who had seen service in the German Army as a Second Lieutenant. He was Mr. A.J. Kent's herdsman. William Collins, a local physician, became regimental surgeon. The company was to become a part of a regiment that was being organized by A.J. Streight, a wealthy lumber dealer of Indianapolis.

"On the 14th of December, at Indianapolis, John Higgins was mustered into the service. Mr. Higgins told an amusing incident when they were being mustered. A Lt. Wood of the Regular Army, was the mustering officer. The Company fell in, and Mr. Higgins with them. He, being a boy of twelve, and quite small, was



*John Higgins, age 12, drummer boy for Newton County's 51st Infantry, Company B, returned to Newton County in 1863.*

easily spotted by Lt. Wood and ordered out of the line, stating that he was entirely too young and small for service. The mustering was not completed that evening, so in the morning the company fell in again. This time Mr. Higgins has learned his lesson and did not fall in with the Company, but stood by the side of Lt. Wonder, who was a small man, hoping there would not be such a contrast. But it did not succeed. He was ordered out again. But this time, the Company officers interceded, and finally the mustering officer sent Mr. Higgins to the

regimental surgeon, who was William Collins of Kentland (the old army game of passing the buck). He ran to Dr. Collins' tent. The doctor wrote something on a piece of paper which Mr. Higgins did not take the time to read, but ran back to the Company and handed it to Lt. Wood. It must have contained the proper information, for he was immediately mustered.

"The regiment left immediately for the front, passing through Louisville, Bardstown and Lebanon, Kentucky, and in the latter part of January took part in the battle of Hall's Gap. In February, the regiment suffered greatly from sickness, measles and pneumonia, many men dying. It was at Lebanon that Lt. Albert Light died. At this point in his narrative, Mr. Higgins spoke of the great service rendered the soldiers and their families by Mr. and Mrs. John Ade. All the churches, stores and public buildings in Lebanon were filled with sick and dying Union soldiers lying on the floors with very few blankets and little of anything else. John Ade went to Lebanon to get the body of Lt. Albert Light. He was the first Union soldier to be buried in Fairlawn Cemetery, Kentland. While in Lebanon, Mr. Ade busied himself hunting out and getting the sick of Newton County evacuated North.

"The Shilo battle started Sunday morning by the Confederates making a surprise attack on the Union Army under Grant and Sherman. All day long they drove back the Union, and as night fell, the Union Army stood with its back to the wide and deep Tennessee River. Gen. Albert Sidney Johnson, Confederate commander, essayed to sweep the Union Army into the river, and either capture or destroy it. He led his troops in person and fell mortally wounded, but the Union Army was saved for the night. As soon as the battle started, Grant sent out couriers to his scattered troops to hasten to Shilo. Mr. Higgin's regiment was with Buell's army at Nashville. Sunday forenoon they received word of the battle and started a forced march to the rescue. All afternoon and all night they hiked with the sound of battle growing louder. Sunday morning they were crossing the river and were in battle. Grant had not waited for the Confederates to attack, but had struck first, and had driven them steadily back, recovering all ground lost the previous day. It was during Monday night that Mr. Higgins had the experience

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## John H. Higgins, County Civic Leader

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that he tells with great amusement. He, with five other drummer boys, and an ambulance, were covering the recovered ground, picking up the wounded of both armies. They thought they heard a wounded man moaning, and left the ambulance and were searching in the woods, when Mr. Higgins fell over the prostrate form of a man. The man was wrapped in a poncho, asleep. He arose, and it proved to be Gen. Grant, asleep under a tree in the rain. The spot was near his headquarters. He had the battle well in hand and was trying to get some sleep.

"Mr. Higgins had three experiences at the battle of Stone River, the bloodiest battle fought in the west. A Confederate cavalry charge swept the rear of the Union Army. Mr. Higgins saw them coming, yelling and shooting. He made a dive for the ambulance, and as he raised his leg to get in, a rifle bullet struck his right thigh, tearing through his trousers and bruising the skin, but aside from the inflicting great pain, it did no damage. He lay in the ambulance while Confederate Cavalry rode by, looking in and mistaking him for a wounded man. In a few minutes the scene was changed. The Union Cavalry made a counter charge, drove back the Confederate cavalry, recaptured all the prisoners and trains, and restored the lines. Can anyone imagine a more awe-inspiring sight than thousands of men fighting on horseback and to be 12-15 years of age?"

"His regiment and brigade was captured at Rome, Georgia, May 3, 1863, by Gen. Forrest. The enlisted men were paroled and the officers confined in Libby Prison, Richmond, Virginia. Here, Col. A.J. Streight and one hundred and eight other prisoners escaped by digging a tunnel sixty feet long. Fifty-five of the men were recaptured but fifty-four finally reached the Union lines.

"We kids, said Mr. Higgins, were not allowed to do any actual fighting when in contact with the enemy, largely because we could not carry the army musket then in use. We were to make ourselves useful in helping around the ambulances in the care of the wounded. On a particular day of a capture of our men, I was helping two drivers and watching a pair of mules which they had hitched to the ambulance in our charge. Presently, they came running towards me shouting that the regiment was being captured. One of them jumped on a

mule, and I jumped into the ambulance and crawled under a tarpaulin. I thought they would drive away. Instead of that, they cut the mules loose and left me to my fate. Several rebels took a look in the ambulance, but thinking there was nothing in it, did not look under the tarpaulin. That night, I crawled out and ran away".

The reporter for the *Newton County Enterprise* had to have thoroughly enjoyed his visit with Mr. Higgins, then at the age of 82. The recount of the events in his life were described as though they had only happened a few months prior to the interview, not 68 years before at the age of 12. Reading them now, 71 years after its publication, the thrill of his military life still resounds in the article.

"John Higgins is one of the few men whose recollections cover almost the entire period of Kentland's history", the *1916 History of Newton and Jasper Counties* states.

"When he first came here there was one business block, a hotel and five or six stores, with very few residences on the town site proper", it continues.

On September 4, 1878, he married Anna Wittenberg of Reynolds, Indiana, a daughter of Charles and Caroline Wittenberg. They had three children, Frederick B., Harry L., and Ruth B.

Mr. Higgins served as a member of the Board of Trustees of the town and was clerk for several terms. In his middle life he took an active part in politics. He was a Republican and served on the county central committee.

Mr. Higgins confined his own work largely to probate practice. He had a good clientele, and it is stated that the wards of the court were always well taken care of when John Higgins represented them. He always looked after the interests of his comrades of the Civil War and many a veteran, and veteran's widow and children have cause to thank Mr. Higgins for his painstaking efforts in the procurement of pensions. He was a member of the Grand Army of the Republic and of the Masonic Lodge. He had served through all the chairs of the Newton Lodge, No. 361 F and A.M., and was secretary of the Masonic Lodge Association.

"Taps" sounded from John H. Higgins on October 11, 1931. At the time of his death, he was the last surviving Civil War Veteran of Jefferson township. He passed away at his home on West Carroll Street,



*"Comrade Higgins", as his G.A.R. friends addressed him, served his country and his county.*

due to a weakened heart condition brought on by advanced age. His entire life had been one of action and remained as such up to three weeks prior to his death.

"Comrade Higgins", as his G.A.R. friends addressed him, courageously took up arms on behalf of his country at the tender age of twelve. The keen sense of duty and honor which prompted his early patriotic move, remained with him throughout a long and useful career. He was known as a courteous and congenial friend and neighbor, able and honorable.

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