



THIS PHOTOGRAPH was the only identification found on Portville soldier Amos Humiston when he died in 1863 during the Civil War at the battle of Gettysburg. The Humiston children (from

left) Frank, Frederick and Alice, were eventually traced to Portville. Some 125 years later, the story continues to be told in Civil War history books. (Portville Historical Society Photo)

Amos Humiston: 'Portville Hero,' Who Touched Nation's Heart

By LISA NIANIATUS

Times Herald Staff Writer

PORTVILLE — In grave 14, row B in the New York section of the National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pa., is buried a story that lives on in Portville history.

"It's a very sad story. But it really is a Portville story of a Portville hero," said Rhonda Pollock, president of the Portville Historical and Preservation Society.

The story took place 125 years ago after the battle of Gettysburg when a dead soldier was found on the field with no other identification except the photograph of his three little children clasped in his hand. The soldier's name and his home were a mystery.

It was some six months later that the soldier was identified as Portville resident Amos Humiston.

No other incident of the Civil War is known to have so touched the heart of the nation, Mrs. Pollack said.

AS THE STORY goes, Mr. Humiston didn't enlist immediately because of his family. But after President Abraham Lincoln called for more help, Mr. Humiston joined the 154th New York State Volunteers in 1862.

Mrs. Pollack said history books were kind to the man, calling him "a quiet citizen, good neighbor and devoted family man."

A harness-maker by trade, Mr. Humiston was at one time a sailor and made several whaling voyages to the South Pacific.

A story telling of Mr. Humiston's character was told by the Rev. Ogdon, then minister of the Portville Presbyterian Church where the soldier was a member.

While enlisting, one young man was considering joining but doubted his endurance. Mr. Humiston convinced him to go in, saying "Come on, I'll carry your rifle."

On July 1, 1863, the Confederates outnumbered the Yankees on Cemetery Hill. When the battlefield finally cleared later that evening, only 18 men of the 154th Regiment answered roll call.

"We lost over 250 men," Mrs. Pollack said of

the regiment comprised of nine companies from Cattaraugus County.

Amos Humiston was among the missing, but the burial detail who found him could not identify him.

DR. FRANCIS BOURNS of Philadelphia, Pa., heard about the unknown soldier when he arrived in Gettysburg to aid the wounded. He made copies of the photograph in hopes its circulation might lead to the discovery of the family, Mrs. Pollock said.

At the same time, sales from the copies were put into a fund to support and educate the children left fatherless by the Civil War.

The story, printed in many papers throughout the North, eventually appeared without a photograph in the magazine "American Presbyterian."

"There was one Portville subscriber who took the article to Amos' wife, Phylinda, because she thought it sounded like her husband," Mrs. Pollock said.

"Phylinda wrote to Dr. Bourns asking him to send a copy of the picture. Sure enough, it was her children," she continued.

DR. BOURNS MADE a personal visit to Portville in 1864 to present Mrs. Humiston with the original photograph and hold a benefit for the children's orphanage.

Mrs. Pollack said the doctor also held a song-writing contest for musicians to tell the story of Portville's fallen hero. It was James G. Clark of Dansville, Pa., who won the contest by setting his original poem to music. Net proceeds from sales of his song, "The Children of the Battlefield," were also reserved for the orphanage.

According to research conducted by Mrs. Pollack, Mrs. Humiston later traveled to Gettysburg to become the first matron of the orphanage. The last account of Mrs. Humiston reported she married minister Asa Barnes and moved to Massachusetts.

Left behind, on Cemetery Hill, was Amos Humiston, a hero to the North, typical of the common soldiers of the Union.