

# **THE AMBROTYPE'S SECRET**

*by Mark H. Dunkelman*

## **AN OUTLINE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The significance of Amos Humiston's story is explained. How his fame rests on the circumstances of his death and subsequent identification. The author's determination to relate Humiston's life is delineated.

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **AMOS**

The Humiston forebears in America. The birth of Amos Humiston in Owego, Tioga County, New York, in 1830. His father dies in 1837, and an older sister drowns in a mill pond. His mother remarries, and Amos is raised as a stepson of Philander Boice. Owego is described. The ancient trade of harness making. Amos and his older brother Morris apprentice in a harness shop. They learn the intricacies of cutting, finishing and sewing leather to make harnesses. Morris finishes his apprenticeship and opens a shop in Candor, Tioga County, in 1848. On finishing his apprenticeship, Amos decides to forgo harness making, and embarks on an adventure.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **NEW BEDFORD**

Amos signs on as a crewman of the New Bedford whaleship *Harrison* in November 1850. The New Bedford whale fishery. Its importance to the city's economy. Amos in the clutches of the "landsharks." Brothers Gilbert and John Keen Hatheway; agent and captain, respectively, of the *Harrison*. The lay system explained. The ship's crew is assembled. Temptations in New Bedford. Final preparations for the voyage.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **GREEN HAND**

The *Harrison* sails on December 12, 1850. Duties of the crew. The wretchedness of the forecabin. Amos and the other green hands practice the whaleman's trade. The second cooper falls overboard and is drowned. Poor food. An addiction to tobacco. Captain Hatheway a benevolent master. The first whales sighted. Lowering boats. An unsuccessful chase. Rounding Cape Horn. A stop at Valparaiso (or "Wallop-my-ass-with-a-razor"). Captain Hatheway speaks ships, and gams. A poor summer season of 1851 on the Anadyr Sea grounds. The first kill. Cutting-in the whale. Trying-out the blubber into oil. Processing the baleen, or whalebone. The barren Anadyr Sea grounds are forsaken for the Kodiak waters. The disappointing season yields only three kills, and 280 barrels of oil.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ROVING THE PACIFIC**

Recruiting at Lahaina on Maui. Amos is enchanted by the Sandwich Islands. The importance of whaling to the islands, and vice versa. Vice in Lahaina. Again at sea. A stop at beautiful Raratonga. A desultory winter season in the South Pacific. Cruising the Juan Fernandez grounds. The ship's first sperm whale. Its case and junk yield spermaceti and fine oil. Anchorage at Hilo, Hawaii. A paradise. The Reverend Titus Coan, an American missionary. The *Harrison* sails, and a sick green hand is left at Honolulu. A moderately successful summer season of 1852 on the Gulf of Alaska and Kodiak grounds. The autumn layover at Lahaina, during which the first mate is sent ashore sick. Sailing equatorial grounds during the winter season. Coopering oil. Spring recruiting at the Sandwich Islands. The first mate, having rejoined the ship, dies a week later and is buried at sea. The *Harrison* passes through the Kuril Islands into the Sea of Okhotsk. A summer of snow, fog, ice, blood and oil. Eighteen whales are cut-in and tried-out. The ship is filled, and sails for home. Last liberty at Lahaina. A final stop at Raratonga, safely around Cape Horn, and four months in the Atlantic. The *Harrison* anchors at New Bedford on April 20, 1854. The ship's net profit approximates \$64,000. Amos's lay amounts to about \$200, or seventeen cents per day. He turns his back on the whaling industry, and heads for home.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PHILINDA**

A whirlwind courtship. Philinda Betsy Ensworth. She marries Justin Smith at age

nineteen, and he leaves her a widow. Philinda and Amos meet in Candor, where her cousin is married to Amos's brother Morris. The two are wed on Independence Day, 1854. Babies Franklin and Alice are born in 1855 and 1857, respectively. Candor. A trip to Michigan. The Humistons move west to Portville, Cattaraugus County, New York. A lumber, tanning and temperance town. Baby Frederick completes the family circle in 1859. Amos opens a harness shop with boyhood neighbor George Lillie. Favorable estimation of Amos by his new townsmen. His lack of religious orthodoxy. His physical features, as revealed in his only life portrait. The War of the Rebellion erupts. Portville's response. Amos resists the early calls for troops, feeling that his first duty is to his family. President Lincoln summons 300,000 volunteers on July 1, 1862. Amos enlists, one of the first from Portville to heed the call. The formation of the 154th New York Volunteer Infantry. On leaving home, Amos tells Philinda that he wishes he was a better man, and hopes he might be.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **TO THE FRONT**

Company C of the 154th New York. Its composition and officers. Amos is selected a corporal. Life at Camp James M. Brown in Jamestown, New York. Amos's first letter to Philinda. "Tel the babies that I want to see them very mutch." The regiment is mustered in. Amos send his bounty and advance money home. Departure for the front. To Washington, D.C., by rail. Camp Seward on Arlington Heights, Virginia. To Fairfax Court House, where the 154th joins the Army of the Potomac. Prejudice directed at the German elements of the Eleventh Corps. Movement to

Thoroughfare Gap. Amos is taken ill. The return to Fairfax. His comrades offer support. "The boys have stuck to me like brothers." Amos longs for his family, and worries about their financial welfare while the regiment remains unpaid. His illness lingers. "My fingers look like birds claws." Marching orders are received. "I am not very strong yet," Amos informs Philinda, "but I think that I can go it."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **CAMP MISERY**

A week's march to the banks of the Rappahannock River near Falmouth. Amos is stronger. "I am getting fat again as usual." Money matters rankle. Death of a friend. Amos welcomes visitors in camp. Hardtack and salt pork for Christmas dinner, salt pork and hardtack for New Year's Day dinner: "So you see that we had a change." Amos and his tent mates build a log hut, which "rivles all modern architecture." Life in winter camp. Amos is promoted to sergeant. The dismal Mud March. A new home: "Camp Misery." The paymaster finally arrives. Move to a new camp near Stafford Court House. Reviewed by the army's new commander, General Hooker. Amos suffers from chronic diarrhea. He is laid low, and does no duty. He sends a touching poem to Philinda.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **A CLOSE CALL AT**

### **CHANCELLORSVILLE**

Camp life. The 154th New York receives a nickname. Amos is hospitalized, recovers, and rejoins the regiment. The 154th marches upriver to Kelly's Ford. It leads the way across the river on the evening of April 28, 1863, initiating the army's movement into the Wilderness. The Battle of Chancellorsville. "Stonewall" Jackson's surprise attack on the evening of May 2 routs the Eleventh Corps. The forlorn and foolhardy stand of the 154th. The campaign ends in defeat and retreat. Company C sums up its first battle in diaries and letters home. Amos reports a close call to Philinda--he was hit by a spent ball, but is unhurt. Losses in the regiment total forty percent. Philinda sends Amos an ambrotype portrait of Frank, Alice and Fred. "It pleased me more than eney thing that you could have sent me How I want to se them and their mother is more than I can tell."

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **GETTYSBURG**

The dispirited aftermath of Chancellorsville. Amos's last letter home. A hurried, hot and dusty march carries the regiment northward. A welcome rest at Goose Creek. An uncertain strategic situation. Across the Potomac River into Maryland. More punishing marches. July 1, 1863. The 154th New York crosses into Pennsylvania and hurries to a hilltop cemetery overlooking Gettysburg. Amos and his comrades observe the distant battle. The 154th is ordered into the fight. The march through the town to its northeastern outskirts. The regiment is placed behind the fence of a brickyard. An overwhelming attack by two Confederate brigades. Brief resistance and rout of the 154th. The regiment is driven helter-skelter. Amos runs for his life. He is missing when

the regiment leaves Gettysburg after the battle.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **WHOSE FATHER WAS HE?**

The sickening aftermath of the battle. The dead, and their burial. Detritus of the dead occasionally used to identify individuals. Amos Humiston is found dead, holding the ambrotype of his three children. The Schriver family. The ambrotype is taken to Ben Schriver's tavern in Graeffenburg Springs, a dozen miles west of Gettysburg. A wagon breaks down at Graeffenburg. Enter Dr. J. Francis Bourns, a Philadelphia physician on his way to Gettysburg to tend the wounded. A learned, devout, cultivated and creative man. He realizes the ambrotype is the solitary clue to the soldier's identity, and takes it from Schriver. Bourns's work for the United States Christian Commission at Gettysburg. He returns to Philadelphia. His plan to publicize the incident. Prominent Philadelphia photographers produce carte-de-visite copies of the ambrotype. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* breaks the story under the headline, "Whose Father Was He?" The story's appeal to a death-conscious society. Spread of the *Inquirer's* story, and other publicity. The *American Presbyterian* carries an article. A single copy of that paper makes its way to Portville.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **A WIDOW**

### **AND HER ORPHANS**

Philinda's life in Portville. Humble circumstances. Family friends. No word from Amos since Gettysburg. The *American Presbyterian* is given to Philinda. At her request, Portville's postmaster writes to Dr. Bourns. In return, Bourns sends a carte de visite. The picture confirms Philinda's dread: it is of her children. The ambrotype's secret is revealed. The *American Presbyterian* announces Amos Humiston's identification. The news spreads quickly from newspaper to newspaper. The Reverend Isaac Ogden of Portville's Presbyterian church relates details about the Humistons. Word reaches the 154th New York that the sergeant is dead. Philinda receives a spurious sympathy letter from a soldier. Reinterment of the Gettysburg dead. Amos Humiston is reburied in Grave No. 14, Section B of the New York portion of the Soldiers' National Cemetery. The *American Presbyterian* calls for the establishment of a soldiers' orphans' home.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **CELEBRITY**

Stories in magazines and newspapers stir intense public reaction to the Humiston tale. A fanciful illustration in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The New York State Bureau of Military Statistics gathers information. The children's picture is displayed at the great Metropolitan Fair in New York City. Cartes de visite of the children are widely sold to benefit the family. A fine engraving is made. The story makes its first appearance in a book. Dr. Bourns visits Portville. He returns the ambrotype to Philinda. Proceedings at a great Union meeting at the Portville Presbyterian Church. Poetry inspired by the Humiston story. The *American Presbyterian* sponsors a poetry contest. Popular poet, composer and balladeer James G. Clark writes the winning



verses. Clark sets "The Children of the Battle Field" to a tune, and sheet music is sold to support the Humiston children. Philinda applies for a widow's pension. A false report that Amos has returned home circulates. The report debunked.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### **THE HOMESTEAD**

Formation of the National Orphans' Homestead Association. A successful fund-raising drive. A building on Cemetery Hill in Gettysburg is purchased and renovated. The National Orphans' Homestead is opened and dedicated in 1866. The Humiston children are among the first occupants. Philinda becomes wardrobe mistress on the institution's staff. A disagreeable time for the family. Philinda marries Asa Barnes in 1869, and the Humistons leave Gettysburg. Later history of the orphanage. It flourishes for a decade. Its sad end. The matron convicted of assault on one of the children. Other shocking allegations of cruelty. Financial mismanagement. Dr. Bourns and the matron investigated by the board of directors. The Homestead shuts down.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **THE FAMILY'S LATER YEARS**

The family shuns the spotlight of celebrity, which shined so brightly on them during the war years. Philinda's marriage of convenience to Barnes. The children attend Lawrence Academy. Frank attends Dartmouth College and the University of

Pennsylvania Medical School. He becomes a successful and respected physician in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where he raises a family. Frank is the first of the children to die, in 1913. Fred becomes a prosperous grain merchant in West Somerville, Massachusetts, where he raises a family and lives until 1918. Alice never marries and moves frequently. She is living with a niece in California in 1933 when she dies of burns after her dress catches fire from an open flame. Philinda dies in 1913, after spending her declining years dividing her time between Frank's and Fred's families.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

### **AMOS HUMISTON'S LEGACY**

The Humiston story is told and retold in the years since the war. Amos is remembered at a reunion of veterans of his regiment in 1910. Portville commemorates its hero with a special program at the Presbyterian Church in 1988 and Amos Humiston Day in 1989. In Gettysburg, the proprietors of the Homestead, a portion of the former orphanage converted into tourist lodgings, keep memories of the Humistons alive. The Gettysburg National Military Park mounts a special exhibit about the Humistons. A Gettysburg group, supported by citizens of Portville and descendants of members of the 154th New York, raises money to erect a monument to Amos at Gettysburg. The Amos Humiston Memorial, the only monument to an individual enlisted man on the Gettysburg battlefield, is dedicated in 1993.

## **APPENDIX ONE**

### **POETRY AND SONG**

Poems inspired by the Humiston incident: "The Dead Soldier's Children," by K.H.W.; "The Little Ones," by Walter; "The Three Watchers," by anonymous. Songs celebrating the story, with their music: "The Unknown Soldier! Who Is He?" lyrics by William H. Hayward, music by Wilson G. Horner; "The Children of the Battle Field," by James G. Clark.

## **APPENDIX TWO**

### **THE HUMISTON**

### **DESCENDANTS**

A brief accounting of the descendants of Franklin and Frederick Humiston, to the present day.

### **NOTES**

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