

WHOSE FATHER WAS HE?

By Dani Crossley

Introduction. *In early April at the Society's annual dinner, Tom Jolin, musician, raconteur, and stand-up (sit-down) comedian, entertained us on the hammer dulcimer, harmonica and button accordion. In addition to beautiful music, he provided a glimpse into some of history's more intriguing moments with his renditions of 'Lorena,' and 'Children of the Battlefield.' The story of the three young children in the ambrotype clutched in the hands of Amos Humiston as he died on the field at Gettysburg tugged at our heartstrings. History comes alive for me when it becomes personal. I am awestruck in contemplation of the past when I consider the families and daily lives of these little-known players on the historical stage. What is the real story?*

Just like the riveting story of 18-month-old Jessica McClure who was trapped in an abandoned well in Texas for two and a half days captivated an entire country in 1987, the mystery of the unknown soldier clutching an ambrotype of his three children on the Gettysburg battlefield consumed our nation as well. Whose father was he?

Dr. John Francis Bourns took it upon himself to track down the identity of this heroic, loving man whose children were his last thought and sight on earth. Dr. Bourns



Frank, Freddie and Alice Humiston

had heard the story when he stopped at the tavern of Benjamin Schriver in Graeffenburg, a small town a few miles west of Gettysburg. He had been on his way with three other men to tend to the battle wounded when his wagon broke down. Schriver's daughter had come upon the unknown soldier at the secluded corner of Stratton and York streets in Gettysburg and rescued the ambrotype (glass-plate photograph) before the soldier was buried in an unknown soldiers grave. The photo became a curiosity and conversation piece at her father's small-town tavern. Dr. Bourns convinced

Schriver to give him the ambrotype to aid in his attempt to unearth the dead soldier's identity.

Bourns returned to Philadelphia and began his campaign. The first thing he did was have photographers produce several hundred copies of the picture to make *cartes de visite* (small cards used when making social calls) that he could hand out. Newspapers in that day couldn't reproduce photographs, so the best he could do was describe the photo in the story he hoped would run in many of the country's newspapers. The Philadelphia Inquirer featured the story on October 19, 1863. The article, after stirring the readers' emotions, requested that all papers in the country draw attention to the story so that the young man's family might be located and notified of Amos' last loving thoughts of them.

Imagine yourself that lonely young mother of three, hearing the beginning whispers of this heartbreaking mystery. You can just feel her anxiety as the details begin to sound all too familiar. The last time Mrs. Amos (Philinda) Humiston had heard from her husband was several weeks earlier, shortly after she had sent him an ambrotype of their children: 8-year-old Frank, 6-year-old Alice, and 4-year-old Freddie. He had responded enthusiastically, "...I got the likeness of the children and 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 I hope that we may all live to see each other again if this war dose not last to long."



Eventually a single copy of the story reprinted by *The American Presbyterian* (a small religious magazine) reached the little town of Portville, New York and the hands of Philinda. It was with a certain dread that she responded to Dr. Bourns through her local postmaster. Her worst fears were confirmed when she received one of the *cartes de visite* from Dr. Bournes and looked down into the very familiar faces of her dear children. Amos Humiston was that unknown soldier. Realizing she was now a widow and her children were fatherless, Philinda struggled to control her grief.

Dr. Bourns soon visited Philinda and brought with him the proceeds from the sale of the *cartes de visite* to help supplement her meager income as a seamstress. Thankfully, her neighbors' generosity also aided in the family's survival. The country's fascination with this sad tale didn't end once Amos had been identified. Dr. Bourns and a group called the National Orphans' Homestead Association embarked on a second fundraising campaign. Sunday school classes, wealthy businessmen, humble citizens all contributed. The American Presbyterian sponsored a poetry contest to immortalize Amos Humiston's last moments. Poet and balladeer James Gowdy Clark won that contest with his "Children of the Battlefield," which he also set to music.

The Children of the Battle Field by James Gowdy Clark

Upon the field of Gettysburg
The summer was high,
When freedom met her haughty foe,
Beneath a northern sky;
Among the heroes of the North,
Who swelled her grand array,
And rushed like mountain eagles forth
From happy homes away.
There stood a man of humble fame,
A sire of children three,
And gazed within a little frame,

Their picture for to see.
And blame him not, if in the strife,
He breathed a soldier's prayer:

Chorus:

O FATHER, shield the soldier's wife,
And for his children care,
And for his children care.

Upon the field of Gettysburg
When morning shone again,
The crimson cloud battle burst
In streams of fiery rain;
Our legions quelled the awfull flood
Of shot, and steel, and shell,
While banners, marked with ball and blood,
Around them arose and fell;
And none more nobly won the little frame
That held his children three;
And none were braver in the strife
Than he who breathed in the prayer:

Chorus

Upon the Field of Gettysburg
The full moon slowly rose,
She looked, and saw ten thousand brows
All pale in death's repose,
And down beside a silver stream,
From other forms away,
Calm as a warrior in a dream,
Our fallen comrade lay;
His limbs were cold, his sightless eyes
Were fixed upon the three
Sweet stars that rose in mem'ry's skies
To light him o'er death's sea.
Then honored be the soldier's life,
And hallowed be his prayer,

Chorus

This publicity campaign was equally successful and the Homestead Orphanage came into being in Gettysburg in October 1866. Philinda and her children moved there to live along with thirty other soldiers' children. Several hundred children passed through Homestead's doors before scandal struck in 1876. The matron, Rosa Carmichael, was convicted of aggravated assault and Dr. Bourns was sued for misappropriation of funds. By the end of 1877, homes were found for the remaining nine orphans and the Homestead closed its doors.

Philinda then married a minister from Massachusetts, Asa Barnes, and she and her children lived with him in his home state. All three children attended Lawrence University in Groton, Massachusetts. Frank went on to Dartmouth College and the

University of Pennsylvania Medical School. He raised a family and practiced as a physician in Jaffrey, New Hampshire until his death in 1912. Philinda, living in his home and heartbroken at his loss, died shortly after in 1913. Fred died in 1918 in West Somerville, Massachusetts where he had raised a family and was a successful grain merchant. Alice never married and died tragically in 1933 when her skirt caught fire from an open-flame stove and she was fatally burned.

My interest in Amos Humiston didn't stop with knowing his name and the fate of his children. Where had he come from? How did he arrive at that secluded Pennsylvania crossroads where his life ended so prematurely? His story could be my ancestor's story – all those soldiers were somebody's father, son or brother – each with his very own story.

Amos was born in Owego, Tioga County, New York in 1830. Not unlike his own children, Amos was fatherless at a young age. He joined his older brother Morris to apprentice as a harness maker. Amos completed that training at about age 20, but wasn't enthralled with the idea of spending his life as a harness maker. He went to New England and spent over three years on the whaling boat, the *Harrison*. He was cured of his disenchantment with harness making following that dangerous and tedious adventure and returned to New York. He met and married Philinda Smith at his brother's house in 1854. Amos, Philinda and children moved eventually to Portville, New York and there with a boyhood friend Amos set up his own business as a harness maker.

When President Lincoln issued another call for volunteers in July 1862, Amos was the first in Portville to enlist. He was mustered in as a corporal in Company C of the 154th regiment. After some time in Virginia and the Wilderness campaign, during which Amos had been promoted to Sergeant, his regiment moved northward and arrived outside Gettysburg on July 1, 1863. Disaster occurred when they were sent to help cover the retreat of the Eleventh Corps. Two large Confederate brigades, outnumbering them three to one, attacked their position. The few Federals who weren't captured made a dash for the safety of Cemetery Hill. Sergeant Humiston ran less than a quarter mile before the enemy's bullet found him. There he lay, beyond mortal aid and grasping what he held most dear, until Benjamin Schriver's daughter discovered him a couple days later.

This story was based on an article from America's Civil War magazine, "Key to a Mystery: The Death of Amos Humiston," written by Mark H. Dunkelman, and "Gettysburg: Profiles in Courage/Amos Humiston" from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, written by Mark Roth.