



Another 1863 view of Camp Morton. (Note the sheds.)

Acceptance

It is generally thought that the Civil War pre-muster physical examination was superficial at best. One medical science historian referred to the process as "abominable," "a sham" and cites an example of one doctor who bragged he could examine 100 men an hour.⁽³⁰⁾ Even a few women slipped through the "examinations." For those early Indiana volunteers, the routine was not so haphazard. The regimental historian of Billy's unit wrote, "At that time men were striving to get in, and Uncle Sam did not accept everyone who presented himself."⁽³¹⁾ Indeed, the ranks of the Johnson County Riflemen were reduced by about a third. And Billy Davis was one of those rejected because he was judged to be too short.

A man's height was important in the military culture of 1861. The 6th Indiana, a unit going through muster at the same time as Billy boasted of 83 men over six feet. "They were giants in those days," recorded the regimental historian with pride.⁽³²⁾ Daniel Howe from Billy's own company also felt the torment of being too short. He and

the other "smallest" man in the company were banished to the rear.⁽³³⁾

No doubt some of the enrollees in April of 1861 were chosen solely on the basis of their height. By war's end, however, loftiness was of little consequence. Of 118,254 Indiana enlistments sampled after the war, 28 percent were 5'6" tall (Billy's height) or less.⁽³⁴⁾

It is curious that the examiner did not detect Billy's false tooth. Teeth were an important consideration in the examining process, since soldiers used their teeth to tear open the small paper cartridge bags prior to loading a musket. Dentures were becoming common in 1861. In fact, there were two dentists doing business in Franklin in 1860. The most popular replacement tooth of the times would have been a manufactured porcelain crown on a wooden base. The wooden anchor was jammed into the root canal, then the moisture in the mouth would cause the wood to swell. It is likely an anesthesia was administered.⁽³⁵⁾ However miserable the process, an artificial tooth could go unnoticed.

Given a second chance, Billy passed muster. Relieved and proud, he had been accepted as a volunteer soldier.



The tallest man to serve in the Union Army, 6' 10½" David Van Buskirk, Company F, 27th Indiana Infantry.

END NOTES

(1) Merrill and Company, Editors. *The Soldier of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1866); pp. 11-12. Maybe one is never "too old to fight." A gray-haired Hoosier was reported to have shouted, "Ninety is not too old for such a cause; and the young people know nothing of war." For further, but brief, discussions of Indiana's response to the Fort Sumter news: David Stevenson, *Indiana's Roll of Honor* (2 Volumes, Indianapolis, 1864), v. I, pp. 13-32. Also, Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era* (Indianapolis, 1965) v. III, pp. 103-106. Also, W. H. H. Terrill, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Indiana* (8 Volumes, Indianapolis, 1866) v. I, p. 5.

(2) W. A. Swanberg, *First Blood: The Story of Fort Sumter* (New York, 1957), p. 320.

(3) Genealogical information concerning Billy's early life is found in L. Wallace Duncan and Charles F. Scott, editors and compilers, *History of Allen and Woodson Counties, Kansas* (Iola, Kansas, 1901; reproduced by the Allen County Historical Society, Dudley Henderson, President, 1976); pp. 528-530.

(4) George Curry, Editor, *History of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church* (Franklin, Indiana, 1981). This is primarily a church history preserved through newspaper articles written by Robert Allen Brown who lived 1858-1922. George Curry edited the articles for the church's sesquicentennial celebration in 1981. Various articles provide an early history of both the community and the church. The history of Hopewell and Johnson County can also be found in D. D. Banta, *A Historical Sketch of Johnson County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1881), reproduced by the Johnson County Historical Society in 1976. Also, Elba L. Branigan, *History of Johnson County, Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1888 and 1913).

(5) Duncan and Scott, *History of Allen and Woodson Counties, Kansas*; p. 528. Note that a genealogical curiosity (or nightmare) occurred when Billy's sister, Mary Ellen, married a man named John Davis. Mary Ellen's father was named John Davis, a brother was named John Davis, and her husband was named John Davis. "Vanarsdall" is spelled variously as Vannarsdoll and Vanarsdale. Even Billy is not consistent.

(6) *Ibid.*, P. 529. The phrase was used also in Billy Davis' obituary, the Iola, Kansas Register, November 24, 1922.

(7) Banta, *A Historical Sketch of Johnson County, Indiana*; p. 67.

(8) Livvy A. Young, *A Backward Glance at Old Union* (Reprinted Franklin, 1940); p. 57. Also printed as "Early Union Township Schools" in the *Nostalgia News*, a publication of the Johnson County Historical Society, Rachel Henry, Editor, (Spring 1984) Issue Number 17, p. 20.

(9) Curry, *History of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church*; Appendix section, "Chronological Roll of Communicants."

(10) "The Hopewell Academy, 1855-1888," written by Ruth Mathena Baughman, Historian, Hopewell Presbyterian Church; *Nostalgia News*, (Spring, 1984); Issue Number 17, p. 24.

(11) Billy refers to this living arrangement in the introductory remarks to his April 13, 1861 entry. *Census Records, 1860* provide information on the Jones family.

(12) The only clue as to the school Billy attended in Franklin is found in his journal. He simply states that before the war, he had started to the "Franklin school" which could mean either an Academy or the College. The Franklin College records, although not complete, do not list Billy as a student and the Franklin Academy records are not extant.

(13) Another journal reference. Lincoln carried Indiana with 139,033 or 51 percent of the total; Douglas, 115,509; Breckinridge, 12,294; Bell, 5,306. Historian Branigan, *History of Johnson County, Indiana*, recorded that Douglas carried Johnson County with 1,392 votes or 46 percent, Lincoln tallied 1,303 or 43 percent of the vote, 336 for Breckinridge and 60 votes for Bell. (Four years later McClellan, the so-called peace candidate, carried the county, 1,713 to Lincoln's 1,532.) For more background, see G. R. Tredway, *Democratic Opposition to the Lincoln Administration* (Indianapolis, 1973).

(14) Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era*; pp. 96, 98.

(15) *Johnson County Atlas* (Reprinted by the Johnson County Historical Society, 1983-1984); pp. 157 (map), 294-295.

(16) Curry, *History of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church*; p. 31.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 41.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 42.

(19) Franklin, *Indiana Democratic Herald*, April 18, 1861.

(20) This ambrotype has not been located. From the military records, it is known James T. Alexander was 20 years old, 5'9" tall, brown eyes and dark hair, of fair complexion.

(21) *Democratic Herald*, April 25, 1861. This issue reflected all the excitement. Of particular interest to the publishers was the fact that the editor of their rival paper, the *Jeffersonian*, had been elected Captain of the Johnson County Minutemen. The event was reported on the front page of the *Herald*: "We congratulate him [George Allison, editor of the *Jeffersonian*] upon his appointment, but trust if he crosses the tented field, that his onslaught upon the enemy may prove more disastrous than his attacks upon the *Herald*." Although Allison served for only about a year, the unit became a company in the 17th Indiana Infantry Regiment which was a part of the famed Lightning Brigade.

(22) Daniel Wait Howe, *Civil War Times* (Indianapolis, 1902); p. 9.

(23) *Democratic Herald*, April 25, 1861.

(24) Edward A. Leary, *The Nineteenth State: Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1966 and 1967); p. 31.