
A Letter from the Front: Vicksburg, 1863

*Edited by Erich L. Ewald**

The American Civil War consisted of a vast accumulation of small tragedies that forever left a mark upon Hoosier families. Scarcely an Indiana city, town, or village remained unaffected by the endless casualty reports that came flooding in from every quarter of the conflict. The young men who marched off from those towns in the early days of the war to the accompaniment of waving flags and brass bands could not realize fully the sacrifice that would be demanded of them. During the course of the rebellion Hoosiers marched and fought literally from the Potomac to the Rio Grande. The countryside separating the two great rivers is marked by graves bearing quiet testimony to the extent of their sacrifice.

Joseph B. Gossett was one of those soldiers. The Honey Creek (Henry County) native was twenty-two years old when he enlisted in Company F of the Eighth Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment.¹ After a raucous, bell-ringing departure from New Castle, Gossett and seventy-four additional Henry County volunteers mustered in with the rest of the regiment in Indianapolis. The Eighth trained briefly and left for the front in time to distinguish itself at Rich Mountain in western Virginia.²

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¹ Joseph B. Gossett was born February 12, 1839, to Jeremiah and Temperance Deavers Gossett. Joseph's brother William also served in the Eighth Indiana. From a genealogical sheet provided the author by Virginia (Fadely) Ruh, April 23, 1993. Honey Creek, originally known as Warnock Station, is located in Henry County's Fall Creek Township. An undated, typewritten history of Honey Creek by an unnamed author is to be found in the archives of the Middletown Public Library, Middletown, Indiana.

² The Eighth represented one of six Indiana regiments raised in response to President Abraham Lincoln's call for ninety-day volunteers immediately following the attack on Fort Sumter. The contingent's departure from New Castle was reported in the *New Castle Courier*, April 22, 1861. The account was reprinted in Herbert Heller, *Historic Henry County* (3 vols., New Castle, Ind., 1982), II, 178-79. All gener-

The Eighth's original enlistment period expired immediately after the disaster at Bull Run made it clear that the war would be much bigger than the authorities in both Washington and Richmond had originally envisioned. In the wake of Bull Run and a similar catastrophe at Wilson's Creek, Missouri, the Eighth was reconstituted under many of its original officers and sent back to war with a three-year enlistment period. Over the next eighteen months the regiment campaigned across the rugged terrain of Missouri and northern Arkansas. Gossett had not immediately reenlisted when his original service period expired, but he did rejoin the regiment a few weeks after the battle of Pea Ridge in northwestern Arkansas.³ From Missouri the Eighth eventually gravitated to Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, in March, 1863, in time to participate in Ulysses S. Grant's justifiably famous Vicksburg campaign.⁴

From Milliken's Bend Grant's army marched down the west bank of the Mississippi to a point some thirty meandering river miles below the Confederate citadel. As the main body of the army moved south, Union cavalry raided into the interior of Mississippi, effectively wreaking havoc and spreading confusion among the rebel defenders. While the horsemen distracted the Confederate command, Grant's transports under the command of Admiral David D. Porter, ran past Vicksburg in two cannon-thundering nights. The army linked up with the transports and crossed to the east bank of the river at Bruinsburg, Mississippi, while William T. Sherman's corps demonstrated noisily against enemy installations at Grand Gulf.⁵ As Sherman masked the crossing, the main army moved on to the important road junction of Port Gibson. There, on May 1, the Federals defeated a considerable rebel force in a hard, day-long fight. The Eighth was engaged heavily in the battle and received commendations for its part in the action.⁶

al information concerning the Eighth's three-month combat record, unless otherwise cited, is from [William H. H. Terrell], *Report of the Adjutant General of Indiana* (8 vols., Indianapolis, 1866-1869), II, 16. The regiment's three-year service record can be found in *ibid.*, 55-56. See also Ann Turner, *Guide to Indiana Civil War Manuscripts* (Indianapolis, 1965), 9-10.

³ Gossett's original service period ran from April 25 to August 6, 1861. He reenlisted, this time in Company E, on March 18, 1862. George Hazzard, *Hazzard's History of Henry County, Indiana, 1822-1906* (Military ed., 2 vols., New Castle, Ind., 1906), I, 248, 264.

⁴ The Eighth Regiment was a part of William P. Benton's First Brigade, Eugene A. Carr's Fourteenth Division, John A. McClernand's XIII Corps. McClernand's report of the corps' operations from March 30 to June 17, 1863, can be found in U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols., Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. XXIV, pp. 137-57. This work is hereafter cited as *Official Records*. See also Terrell, *Report of the Indiana Adjutant General*, II, 55-56.

⁵ All dates and general information concerning the Vicksburg campaign are derived from a synopsis in Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (Rev. ed., New York, 1988), 871-77.

⁶ Brigadier General George F. McGinnis said of the Eighth at Port Gibson, "although they were short of ammunition, they went in with a will and rendered the

Grant then moved boldly into the interior of the state, his soldiers living off the land as they went.⁷ Grant's only supply train on this rapid penetration consisted of a ludicrous and eclectic collection of buggies, carts, and farmer's wagons impressed for the occasion to carry ammunition. The army moved quickly, and the town of Raymond fell after a heavy skirmish on May 12. Grant occupied the state capital, Jackson, two days later, driving the Confederate forces under General Joseph E. Johnston out of the city and the entire campaign while Sherman's men gleefully put the torch to the extensive munitions facilities located there.

The Confederates were thoroughly confused by Grant's unorthodox movements, and the fog of war descended upon the Vicksburg garrison and its commander, General John C. Pemberton. With the vague intention of severing Grant's nonexistent supply lines that, the Confederates presumed, led back to the Mississippi, Pemberton marched out from the city's fortifications to confront the Federals. As Pemberton moved out, Grant held Johnston at bay with Sherman's corps and turned west with the remainder of the army in Vicksburg's direction.

On May 16 the opponents collided almost exactly midway between Vicksburg and Jackson on the canebrake-infested slopes of Champion's Hill. The ensuing battle, in which the Eighth Indiana played mostly a supporting role, was one of the most decisive Union victories of the war. Grant virtually destroyed Pemberton. Broken and separated, the rebel units retreated in headlong flight back toward the Vicksburg entrenchments. Grant caught up with them the next day and beat them soundly at the Big Black River bridge. The Eighth Indiana was in the forefront of this fight, a victory that resulted in the capture of about two thousand rebels and many artillery pieces.

Grant crossed the Big Black the next morning and on May 19 assaulted rebel fortifications that honeycombed Vicksburg's imposing bluffs. The Federal attack was easily blunted, and Grant's losses were considerable. In a second try, on May 22, the Federals hurled themselves against the rebel works in a loosely coordinated end-to-end assault. The Eighth's assignment was particularly tough as the Hoosiers moved down the Vicksburg-Jackson railroad against a lunette occupied by the Second Texas Infantry. The Eighth and the brigade to which it belonged achieved some small, initial success

necessary relief, and fought gloriously and victoriously during the remainder of the engagement." *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. XXIV, part I, p. 607.

⁷ "I must tell you something about our march through the Suney South it's some of the prettiest countrys that I ever saw and I tell you that we lived prety well while on the march we had plenty of molases sugar corn meal smoked meat fresh Beef pork and mutting and also plenty of fowls We [im]pressed evry thing that would not take the oath of allegiance," wrote Jasper Huffman of the 34th Indiana to his brother on May 31, 1863. Huffman's letter was made available through the courtesy of Harold Anderson of Anderson, Indiana. See also Erich Ewald, "Private Huffman, Visions of the Mud Creek Girls, and War in the Southern Confederacy," *Madison County Monthly*, III (March, 1993), 39.

but were quickly pinned down by a withering fire from the rebel works. The regiment managed to extricate itself under the cover of darkness, leaving behind 117 killed and wounded.⁸

Reeling from 3,200 casualties, Grant concluded reluctantly to conduct a formal siege. During the investment that followed, Federal entrenchments and parallels arose around the city with ever-increasing complexity and sophistication. The Eighth held the line directly across the way from the Second Texas lunette, and the next few weeks were marked by sniping and bombardment by day and illicit barter with the enemy at night.⁹

Joseph B. Gossett had survived all this and, two weeks after the tragic assault of May 22, wrote home:

Camp Near Vicksburg Miss June 6th 1863¹⁰

Dear uncle, I seat myself this fine evening to drop you a few lines to let you know that I am still alive and in Reasonable Health at this time hoping that this letter may Find you and your family well. we have ben seeing some pretty hard times here for some time past and expect to see more then we have seen Before we are through fighting Here. I Have already wrote to you concerning the Battles off Port Gibson. since that time I have ben in or under the fire of three other Battles, one at Edwards Depot [Champion's Hill], Black River, and in the rear of Vicksburg and I will just say that I am getting a little tired of the sport. we have lost a great many men since we crossed the River, Both in Battle and by sickness. we are fortifying around the rebels and if we can't Whip them we will starve them. our cannon are playing on their forts day and night and our sharp shooters picks one of them from off their forts once in a while.

⁸ An excellent eyewitness account by Charles Wilcox of the 33rd Illinois (another regiment in Benton's Brigade) is reprinted in Henry Steele Commager, *The Blue and the Gray* (One vol. ed., Indianapolis, 1950), 655-56. The Eighth's movements and casualties in the May 22 attack are reported in Henry C. Adams, Jr., comp., *Indiana at Vicksburg* (Indianapolis, 1910), 203. A "lunette" is an entrenchment with two projecting faces and two parallel flanks.

⁹ "During the siege, and especially the latter part of it, there was a kind of mutual understanding between the pickets of the two forces that there should be no firing at each other after dark, and a general conversation was kept up by the men on picket duty and a good deal of trading done. The rebels were short of coffee and had tobacco, and this suited the men of our army." Adams, *Indiana at Vicksburg*, 204.

¹⁰ Joseph B. Gossett's letter is addressed to Henry and Elizabeth (Gossett) Fadely of Honey Creek. For biographical information on the Fadely family, see Virginia (Fadely) Ruh, comp., *A Fadely Family History and Genealogy* (n.p., 1982), 157-58. Alice and Joseph, mentioned in the letter, were two of Henry and Elizabeth's thirteen children. For a biographical sketch of Henry Fadely, see also *History of Henry County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1884), 590-91. In order to produce the most authentic reproduction, Gossett's letter is presented here essentially as written, with grammar and spelling uncorrected by the editor. Capitalization, too, remains as in Gossett's original, although editorial decisions as to capital or lower case "s" and "c" were sometimes arbitrary. Punctuation was supplied to facilitate reading as most of Gossett's original punctuation marks have faded from the manuscript.

I think they will hoist the white flag Before long or else come out and fight us fair and square and if they do that they will get one of the worst whippings That they have ever had since Jeff Davis has ben president of the Confederate States +++ But I must stop gassing for maybe they might whip us and then I would feel bad +++ I have seen Chris Fiffer several times since I have ben down here. he is well and appears to be satisfied.¹¹ I would like to Be at home this summer and if I live till Vicksburg is taken I am coming home. I am willing to serve my country But I am not willing to stay away from friends and home allways therefore you may look for me this fall if I live. So fix a good dinner for a good dinner is something I aint had for fourteen months now. I have wrote a great many letters in the last day or two to your neighborhood and as it would be useless for me to write the same things over again I will have to close soon. Tell Alice and Joseph that I have not forgot them yet. give my respects to all the friends. tell Uncle Asa Gossett that I have sent word to Charley Cummins to get my Horse on pasture some place and get him in order so that he will sell. I have heard that he is worked verry hard and gets But little feed and I dont like that a bit. if I have a Horse I want him to be a horse. now I will Bid you goodby hoping that you will not forget me and you must excuse me for not writing oftner for I have ten letters to write to where those at home have narry one. Beside, I have a poor chance to write. goodby Remember me and write soon. Tell me all the news. from Joseph B. Gossett To Henry and Elizabeth Fadely
Just excuse me for not filling this sheet for I have not time. But when you write to me just write the same amount and I will be satisfied.

JBG

Joseph Gossett would not live to see home again. He was killed ten days after writing this letter and is interred in Section G of the Vicksburg National Cemetery, Grave Number 4809.¹² His death contributed to the vast accumulation of small tragedies that was the American Civil War.

¹¹ Gossett was undoubtedly referring to Christopher S. Fifer, a resident of Middletown serving in Company H, 69th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Terrell, *Report of the Indiana Adjutant General*, VI, 113.

¹² The Indiana adjutant general's report incorrectly lists Gossett's death as June 6, 1863, the same date on which the above letter was written. *Ibid.*, IV, 119. The date of death on record at the Vicksburg National Cemetery is June 16, as verified by park historian Terrence J. Winschel in a letter to the editor dated April 15, 1993. Details concerning the manner in which Gossett was killed are unavailable. Nearly three weeks after Gossett's death, the Confederate garrison at Vicksburg capitulated.