

6 The Newcomer

Jackson Township

Harris Family Civil War Letters

By Beth Bassett

When I first received scanned copies of the Civil War correspondence of the John T. Harris family of Mt. Ayr, I was positive that this would be an excellent article for the Newcomer, and I was right. My only problem being, what to include and what to leave out. Deciphering the handwriting of John and Louisa Harris, friends and family is a daunting task, but very rewarding. The letters capture life as a soldier, his wife and family during the Civil War.

I have broken some of the Harris letters into particular groups, explaining along the way the information known about the named individuals, as well as tracking the days of the Civil War during this same period of time, in particular the movement of Company B., 51st Volunteer Infantry. Transcription of some of the letters appear on pages eight and nine of this edition.

The first set of letters contain general social and family correspondence. Farm news, crop prices, illness in the family, religious comments and the news of the death of the son of Elizabeth and Henry Kessler, James W., and the passing of a Landis girl. This first group helped establish the relationship of those writing the letters to the Coshaw and Harris families.

The Civil War correspondence begins with a letter dated October 6, 1861. It is from Thomas Jefferson (T.J.) Coshaw, brother to Louisa (Coshaw) Harris, to his Uncle. Unfortunately, we do not know which one. T.J. Coshaw enlisted in Company G of the 9th Indiana Volunteer Infantry. The regiment was reorganized at LaPorte in Aug. 1861, and was mustered in Sept. 5, for three years. It left the state soon afterward for western Virginia, went into quarters at Cheat Mountain, and was engaged at Green River and Camp Alleghany. His letter discusses the battle at Cheat Mountain. (See letter A407-1.8., page 8)

September 12-15, 1861

The Battle of Cheat Mountain

General Robert E. Lee directed his first offensive of the war against Brigadier General Joseph Reynolds's entrenchments on the summit of Cheat Mountain and in the Tygart Valley. The Confederate attacks were uncoordinated, however, and the Federal defense was so stubborn that Col. Albert Rust (leading the attacks) was convinced that he confronted an overwhelming force. He actually faced only about 300 determined Federals. Lee called off the attack and, after maneuvering in the vicinity, withdrew to Valley Head on September 17. It was considered a Union victory. Estimated

ed Casualties: 170 total (US 80; CS 90).

John T. Harris Letters, December 24, 1861-March, 1862; A407-1.9, 1.12, 1.14

John enlisted in Company B, 51st Indiana Volunteer Infantry. This regiment was organized at Indianapolis in the fall of 1861 and was mustered in Dec. 14. Company B consisted entirely of Newton County recruits. It moved at once to Bardstown, Ky., and with Buell's army in Feb., 1862, towards Nashville, reaching the Tennessee River too late to participate in the battle of Shiloh.

April 1862, The Battle of Shiloh

On April 6, Confederate forces attacked Union forces under General Ulysses S. Grant at Shiloh, Tennessee. By the end of the day, the federal troops were almost defeated. Yet, during the night, reinforcements arrived, and by the next morning the Union commanded the field. When Confederate forces retreated, the exhausted federal forces did not follow. Casualties were heavy, 13,000 out of 63,000 Union soldiers died, and 11,000 of 40,000 Confederate troops were killed.

We learn about the death of Henry Howey, who died of measles and Wm. Board, who died of quick consumption; he gives descriptions of camp food, the land and trees in the area as he passes through Kentucky into Tennessee. He describes his first weeks in the regiment, and the Negro quarters he passes, "I saw the Negro dance, and Old Popcorn (the Lieutenant Colonel's groom/stableman), played the accordion for them. He is one smart Negro and thinks a great deal of the 51st boys."

Movement of the 51st

It took an active part in the siege of Corinth and moved from there with Wood's division of the Army of the Ohio through Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky. It moved for Murfreesboro in December and participated in the three days' battle at Stone's River, losing 5 killed, 36 wounded, and 8 missing. It remained near Murfreesboro until April, 1863, when it joined a force under Col. Streight for a raid in the rear of Bragg's army at Tullahoma.

Stone River

December 31, 1862-January 2, 1863

After General Braxton Bragg's defeat at Perryville, Kentucky, October 8, 1862, he and his Confederate Army of the Mississippi retreated, reorganized, and were re-designated as the Army of Tennessee. They then advanced to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and prepared to go into winter quarters. Major General William S. Rosecrans's Union Army

of the Cumberland followed Bragg from Kentucky to Nashville. Rosecrans left Nashville on December 26, with about 44,000 men, to defeat Bragg's army of more than 37,000. He found Bragg's army on December 29 and went into camp that night, within hearing distance of the Rebels.

At dawn on the 31st, Bragg's men attacked the Union right flank. The Confederates had driven the Union line back to the Nashville Pike by 10:00 am but there it held. Union reinforcements arrived from Rosecrans's left in the late forenoon to bolster the stand, and before fighting stopped that day the Federals had established a new, strong line.

On New Year's Day, both armies marked time. Bragg surmised that Rosecrans would now withdraw, but the next morning he was still in position. In late afternoon, Bragg hurled a division at a Union division that, on January 1, had crossed Stones River and had taken up a strong position on the bluff east of the river. The Confederates drove most of the Federals back across McFadden's Ford, but with the assistance of artillery, the Federals repulsed the attack, compelling the Rebels to retire to their original position.

Bragg left the field on January 4-5, retreating to Shelbyville and Tullahoma, Tennessee. Rosecrans did not pursue, but as the Confederates retired, he claimed the victory. Stones River boosted Union morale.

The Confederates had been thrown back in the east, west, and in the Trans-Mississippi. Union victory Estimated Casualties: 23,515 total (US 13,249; CS 10,266)

John T. Harris Letters, May, 1862 to March, 1863: A407-1.19, 1.23, 1.32, 1.34

With a letter dated July 8, 1862, from John to Louisa, John writes, "I hope you really do not want a divorce, but you can have one unless she wants to marry a Democrat." At this time, Louisa is staying with family in Carroll County. John writes of guard duty, and mentions in the August 3, 1862 letter that Company B is separated from the Regiment, as they are guarding the Memphis and Charleston Railroad; wishes he could see Oscar, their firstborn son on his 2nd birthday, and sends \$80.00 home to Louisa; there were no letters from November, 1862 until January, 1863, John mentioned that there was difficulty in mailing a letter, and predicts that there would be fighting at Murfreesboro.

There is a gap again between letters, and the consequences of the war may have caused the lack of correspondence, or perhaps letters were not written, or saved. He receives news of the death of John Coshaw, great nephew to Louisa, son of Joshua, and

the death of Ephriam Ham, a friend and neighbor, who died at the Battle at Day's Gap in Alabama. John had sent money to Louisa through Coshaw and Ham, posted in a letter March 17, 1863, via Indianapolis and Kent Station. It is not known if the money was delivered.

The Battle of Day's Gap April 30, 1863

This was the first in a series of skirmishes in Cullman County, Alabama, that lasted until May 2, known as Streight's Raid. Commanding the Union forces was Col. Abel Streight; Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest led the Confederate forces. The goal of Streight's raid was to cut off the Western and Atlantic Railroad, which supplied General Braxton Bragg's Confederate army in Middle Tennessee. Starting in Nashville, Tennessee, Streight and his men first traveled to Eastport, Mississippi, and then eastward to Tusculumbia, Alabama.

On April 26, 1863, Streight left Tusculumbia and marched southeastward. Streight's initial movements were screened by Union Brig. Gen. Grenville Dodge's troops. On April 30 at Day's Gap on Sand Mountain, Forrest caught up with Streight's expedition and attacked his rear guard. Streight's men managed to repulse this attack and as a result they continued their march to avoid any further delays and envelopments caused by the Confederate troops. This battle set off a chain of skirmishes and engagements at Crooked Creek (April 30), Hog Mountain (April 30), Blountsville (May 1), Black Creek/Gadsden (May 2), and Blount's Plantation (May 2). Finally, on May 3, Forrest surrounded Streight's exhausted men three miles east of Cedar Bluff, Alabama, and forced their surrender. They all were sent to Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. Only the officers were kept as prisoners. Streight and some of his men escaped on February 9, 1864.

John T. Harris was one of the soliders taken at Cedar Bluff. It is thought he took several furloughs after his release.

John T. Harris Letters, June, 1863 to July, 1864: A407-1.40, 1.42, 1.49, 1.52

Movement of the 51st

The regiment joined the army at Nashville in November and was assigned to the duty of guarding the communications between Nashville and Chattanooga. It was sent into eastern Tennessee and in the winter of 1863 a portion of the regiment reenlisted and was sent home on furlough in March. The regiment was on duty at Chattanooga during the summer of 1864 going to Atlanta after its occupation, and with the 1st brigade, 3rd division 4th corps, took part in the campaign against Hood in Tennessee.



John T. Harris is buried at Weston Cemetery, Rensselaer. The inscriptions upon tombstone reflect his dedication to his country and faith. Along with the inscription below is "He That Is Faithful In That Which Is Least Is Faithful Also In Much."

John talks of the furlough that some men of the 99th, (paroled from Libby Prison). He states in a July 21st, 1863 letter written from Camp Morton, (Indianapolis), that he hasn't been sick since he's been home. He is assigned to guard boats, railroad trains and forage wagons in Nashville; his group is on 2/3rds rations, but do pretty well.

In February, 1864, he is now with the 15th Indiana Regiment, Veteran Services; he describes his attempts to re-enlist men, and wishes his son Oscar was there to play with him; March 10, 1864, his address is now the 100th Illinois Regiment, Co. B, and he states that writing paper is expensive, i.e. six sheets cost 20 cents.

A letter from Pilot Grove, April 2, 1864, from his uncle William Buchanan, says his new baby weighs 9 pounds and that Oscar thinks the baby is ok, who himself is full of mischief; William longs for the time when John and Jefferson (T.J. Coshaw), come home; he says there are not enough workers at home to get all the land

planted this spring; Louisa writes in May, 1864, and thinks she will name the baby Harrison Grant.

John's letters reflect the movement of the 51st, as his letters are posted from Chattanooga, Knoxville and Athens TN; a letter from William Buchanan dated April 30, 1864, states that Jefferson (T.J.) was at Blue Springs, TN on April 12; later, John writes Louisa on May 29th, from Chattanooga, that Jefferson is at a convalescent camp nearby, and that he may have liver problems, rumors of 15,000 prisoners nearby. June 20, 1864, he writes to Louisa that they are retreating and describes conditions on retreat; Louisa writes of news at home and that her aunt and uncle Joshua Coshaw want to move to Battle Ground or buy a sorghum mill and make molasses.

John T. Harris Letters: August, 1864 to January 26, 1865: A407-1.57, 1.59, 1.62, 1.69

Movement of the 51st

The regiment was on duty at Chattanooga during the summer of 1864 going to Atlanta after its occupation, and with the 1st brigade, 3rd division 4th corps, they took part in the campaign against Hood in Tennessee. The regiment participated in the battle of Nashville, Dec. 15, and then joined in the pursuit of Hood to Huntsville, Ala., remaining there until March 1865, when it moved into east Tennessee. It returned to Nashville about May 1, where a number of recruits, remaining in service after the muster-out of the 78th regiment, were transferred to the 51st. The regiment was sent to Texas in June, and was mustered out Dec. 13, 1865, the non-veterans having been mustered out Dec. 14, 1864.

John writes that he has seen Jefferson, and thinks he will be home by early September; then had more rain and were in a slight skirmish, some men were wounded. Louisa writes on September 5, 1864, that John's brother William has sold his farm to a Mr. Applegate: \$170 for the prairie, \$300 for the woodland; October 22, 1864, John writes that he is still in Tennessee, but the regiment has moved to Huntsville, AL; John writes that the Rebs are between where he is and Nashville, so the roads were closed for 10 days, he doesn't know where they will live when he returns, but suggests he can bring home his pup tent. T.J. writes to John and sends news from home, and hopes that Sherman will burn everything in Georgia and South Carolina; William Buchanan has moved north of Logansport; John is home and receives a letter from a friend describing news of the war.

Information presented here regarding the movement of the 51st Regiment can be found at www.civilwardata.com.

Civil War Correspondence Between John T. Harris and His Wife Louisa J. Harris, Their Family and Friends

By Beth Bassett

“we was the first in the fight and the last to leave”

From T.J. Coshaw to his Uncle Henry Coshaw, Gandalf County Virginia, October 6, 1861

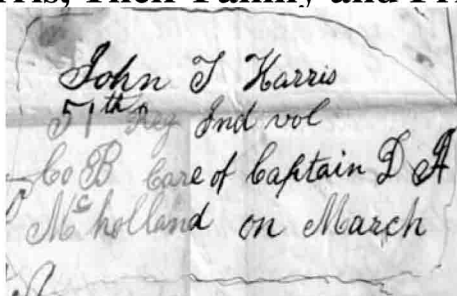
“Dear Uncle, I take my pen in hand to inform you that I am well. I wrote to you about five days ago when I was at Cheat Mountain Summit. We have got back to the old camp Waggoner. We had a fight the other day, the third of this month. We started about midnight and traveled about 10 miles against daylight when we struck the heights. Then shooting commenced, then skirmishing continued. For four miles we drove them inside of their breast works and then commenced on them with a cannons which lasted about five hours. The balls whistle pretty. There was a large force there and they was well fortified their loss was great and our loss was but few. We lost about 30 men there was about 30 killed and wounded. There was but one man in our company hurt and he had two of his fingers shot off. We was the first in the fight and the last to leave the field. The next time we attack them we will take possession of the place and that won’t be long. You could not tell the feelings that it puts on a person that do not think of getting shot. We just went to see how them was situated. We really only about 500 men and they had about 20,000 men. The second Virginia Regiment just started out to meet the Rebels there is a rumor in camp that the rebels is advancing on ours but do not think it; but if they are let them come, we are ready for them. When you write direct your letters to T. J. Coshaw Company G. Ninth Regiment Indiana Volunteer.” (A407-1.8)

“John Coshaw has just burned Abe Lyons’ whiskey”

From John T. Harris to Louisa J. Harris, December 29, 1861

“... I am well at present and E. G. Ham is complaining of the back, but he is up and about. John Coshaw has just burned Abe Lyons whiskey. I like camp life very well, Samuel Yeoman is our cook, there is plenty of good tame pasture here and some turnips in the patch yet.

“... there was one of our soldiers died this morning at 9 a.m. at Beardstown Hospital. He came from Newton County,



Washington Township, Henry Howey, he took cold after the measles. The most of our company is from Newton County we are camped on a Cedar Hill and have plenty of dry cedar wood to burn. We have beef, bacon, hominy or rice sometimes potatoes or crackers, plenty of coffee and sugar molasses once a week.

“... I am writing on my knapsack by the side of J. D. Morgan. There is not a deck of cards in our bunk that I know anything about, there is some of the boys swear in our bunk, Bully for Bunk, we have the best mess in the B.

“... thoughtfully direct letter to John T. Harris 51st Regiment Indiana Volunteer Company B. care of Capt. McHolland and on March. E. G. Ham, J. H. Thomas and Jasper, J. Yeoman, Sam Yeoman, George Smith, W. S Wilcox, G. W. Hartman, Ab Lyons, Sam Lyons, J. D. Morgan, J. Coshaw, John Lowe, John T. Harris.” (A407-1.9)

From John T. Harris, Nelson County,

“the civilians talk of burning it”

Beardstown, Kentucky, to his brother, January 5, 1862

“... I left home 12 December. I told you that I expected to go to the battlefield before you left, and I am as good as my words so far. Our company was made up in Newton County, Capt. McHolland from Kent Station. There is 83 in Company B and 800 in the Regiment of 51st Indiana volunteer. There was one of our company was buried the 25th. Ephriam and I help to do it. His name was Henry Howey.

“... We marched from Louisville to Beardstown in three days its 49 miles. We marched 22 miles one day, we was tired boys. Next day 14 miles. We drewed our tents yesterday. There is 15 regiments within one half mile camped. We have the enfield rifle in four companys. The rest is a smooth bore muskets. We don’t drill on Sunday. Inspection at 1 o’clock and dress parade at four o’clock. Roll Call at 8:00.

I was on guard yesterday. We have some pickets to guard, a bridge. The civilians talk of burning it.

“... our friend as ever, J. T. Harris direct to John T Harris. Signed S. B. Yeoman S. Lyons A. Lyons J. B. Lyons, G. W. Smith, G. W. Hartman, Ira Yeoman, W. S. Wilcox, J. T. Harris, E. G. Ham, Leroy Kelley, Jery Hurst, William McHolland, J. Thomas, John Lowe, John Coshaw, John P. Morgan.” (A407-1.12)

From John T. Harris, Camp Near Bowl-

“stock has been drove in the pond and shot down to spoil the water”

ing Green, Kentucky, March 2, 1862, to his wife Louisa.

“... I take the present Sabbath morning to write you a few lines to let you know that I am still in Kentucky, but can’t tell how long I shall be. We have marching orders for Nashville, Tennessee. Before we get this far we left Munfordsville last Sunday after sundown and traveled 1 1/2 miles. The Regiment got there at 10 o’clock, the teams at 12. Monday we came 6 miles, Tuesday 4 miles, then we got on the pike, we came 14 miles. We are closest to the 15th Regiment. Aaron Reed has been to see us twice and several of the boys has been over to see us. I haven’t been over there yet. We will leave as soon as we can cross the river. There is so many troops ahead of us they are crossing day and night with two ferry boats. It’s raining today as usual. The people think it is hard times in Indiana they ought to come to the Kentucky where their stock has been drove in the pond and shot down to spoil the water so our troops could not use it. They tore up the pike and the railroad and burnt up several thousand bushel of corn as they went from Green River to Bowling Green.

“... You need not send the Gazette to me there is one come about every week to the bunk. Capt. gets the current Chronotype once and a while. Well there has been six of us of our company died, Walter Hawkins, Eli Jackson, there is about 18 that is left behind.” (A407-1.14)

From John T. Harris to his Uncle,

“3 bullet holes in his clothes and one just grazed his cheekbone”

July 16, 1862

“Dear Uncle, I take the opportunity

to write you a few lines to let you know that we are all well except sore feet from scouting our position 30 miles from here. I wrote Louisa a bit before I left camp while I was on picket and the Colonel sent for us to come in on double-quick. The Regiment was going to Decatur to fight the guerrillas. We stayed there three days and then some of the union man came from the mountains. And if we would go out there we could get a good many more to volunteer so Col. telegraphed to General Buell and got the privilege to go. So we started with four days rations of crackers, we went along night until noon. We halted for two hours rest. We charged upon a blackberry patch of about 2 acres and took the most of them prisoners. Then we marched until about six o'clock and the rearguard was fired on. We wheeled in and waited for an attack, they fired three shots but they all overshot. This was Company A. Company B. was in advance we started on and went 1/2 mile and the word came that our Calvary was fired upon and they was coming on to us. Half our company was ordered to deploy out into skirmishing but we was too late the Calvary was too far ahead of us and stopped and was eating supper when the guerrillas came on them. There was 16 of the Calvary and there was 44 guerrillas and there is two of our men gone. One was wounded the other they caught and murdered. One was shot at several times but not hurt much. Three bullets holes in his clothes and one just grazed his cheekbone. And he swears vengeance on them if he ever gets to see them again. They shot his horse from under him, then he took to the timbers and got in a swamp. He buried his carbine and they got bloodhounds after him. Then he clum a tree and the next day our men found him. The guerrillas report 4 killed of them. We stayed at Col. Davises'. He was a Col. in the Mexican war. We got there at eight o'clock and he was hid up in the mountains. He came in next morning you never saw a gladder set and then they, they are all union man and we was the first set ever was in the neighborhood." (A407-1.19)

From John to Louisa, Bowling Green

"he is well, but looks like the rest of us, that is pretty hard"

Kentucky, September 12, 1862

"Wife, once more I will try and send a few lines to let you know I am well and hope you and Oscar is the same. We have marched from Stevenson in 21 days and we have rested three. We got here yesterday evening. I got four letters last Sunday,

one from you, mailed August 30, one from William and Ben, and from Uncle William, Ben and Dock. Have gone to the 48th Regiment. I got that paper you sent me last night I saw Jefferson yesterday for the first time since I left home. He is well but looks like the rest of us, that is pretty hard. John Coshaw is well but his feet is very sore from the hard march. My feet is not much sore. I can't write with ink this time for it is in my knapsack and it is in their wagon and it is two miles from here on the other side of the river. We are expecting marching orders any minute, don't know where but suppose supposedly to Louisville or Lexington. We are camped on Buckner's campground almost two miles from one of his forts."(A407-1.23)

From John to Louisa, Loudon, East

"much obliged for the thread you just sent and needle"

Tennessee, February 23, 1864

"Dear companion, Once again I sit myself in the parlor to pen you a few lines. I received a letter from you a few days ago with some thread and needle. When I wrote for it I was where I could not get any such thanks, but we can get them here now. There is a government store here in town now.

". . . Well I must tell you something about our parlor it is well furnished swept clean and everything is in good order clean and tidy with a good brick fireplace in the cupboard or on the shelf rather is our grub and dishes such as fresh beef, bacon, light bread, sugar, coffee, tea, salt, pepper, other things to tedious to mention. We have eat at the beans and taters. I am well pleased with our home it is. Four logs high and covered with our dog tents it is 11 feet long and 6 1/2 wide. We have a good bed three good blankets and four woolen blankets and two overlets. We have a fine time and plenty to eat and well satisfied but I often think if I had Oscar here to play with to pass the lonesome hours it would be fine fun. Well it is getting almost dinnertime and I will have to cook it. John Bridgeman is in picket and Daniel Doty has gone to town to get a some gingerbread.

". . . J.T. Harris detachment of the 51st Regiment Indiana Loudon, East Tennessee P. S. I am very much obliged to you for that thread you just sent me and needle."(A407 - 1.40)

From Lousia to John, Newton County,

"oats is ripe enough to cut and is tolerably good"

Indiana, July 18, 1864

"Kind Husband, I have not received a letter from you for over two weeks but I thought I would write you a letter this evening anyhow. We are all well and I hope this will find you the same. Uncle William has got all his wheat cut and is helping Mr. Putman cut his this afternoon. It rained so last night and this morning that they couldn't cut until after dinner most in the neighborhood is cut. Those that have machinery got a dollar in cash for cutting wheat and then got one and a half dollar a day for working in the harvest field. I heard today that good wheat was selling at \$.90 a bushel. Oats is ripe enough to cut and is tolerably good. The corn looks nice. I never saw corn grow faster in my life than it has in the last two weeks, we have lots of corn that is in still.

". . . I wrote you a letter about two months ago and put a silver three cent piece in it for you to get John Bridgeman to make me a black finger ring with silver sets in it. You never wrote whether you got it or not Mary Brown has one that he made so I thought if you had to write his letters that he might make one make me a ring." (A407-1.52)

From Benjamin Harris to John T. Harris,

"on the porch herding sheep"

September 11, 1864

"Brother John, I will pen you a few lines in answer to you and yours of 1 August. This may inform you that I am writing on the porch herding sheep and thought I would have time to write you a few lines. It is quite warm and the sheep are lying in the shade of the apple trees. We have sold our cattle and bought 1300 sheep, eight or 900 of them on land. They are worth about four dollars per head. When you come home I want you to bring two or three curly heads to attend to them. (A407 - 1.60)

From John to Louisa, Sanitary Gardens, October 16, 1864

"Louisa, I want to know where you are. Uncles and Doc and if they are going to leave Newton. You must try to put together a home for yourself and the boys and I the best you ever can until I get home. If Jim Wiseman has rented that house I don't know what we will do for a house unless I bring home my pup tent." (A407-1.62)

Editor's note: Most of these letters were written without punctuation or capitalization, these were added from time to time to clarify the meanings of the letters. They are typed as they were written to convey the true character of the individuals. Many thanks to Sue Hurlbut, San Bernardino County Museum of Redlands, California for emailing digital scans of the letters that I used in this article.