

A Much Needed Home

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This is the tenth article in a series of writings to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022.

The majority of Americans were embarrassed and saddened by the events of January 6, 2021, at our nation's Capitol. To their credit Congress reconvened that same day and counted our electoral votes. We have a multitude of problems, but now we are afforded a new approach to repair and rebuild the American psyche. Hopefully it will be built on honesty and trust.

Such was the case at the end of the Civil War in 1865. America had been broken into two factions, and the healing process was daunting indeed. Some soldiers returned from war suffering from amputation, drug addiction, or mental stress. In other cases the soldiers had died and orphans were left in need of care and understanding.

Rush County played a vital role in Indiana's need to help Indiana's servicemen and their families. In the summer of 1865, Governor Oliver Morton organized a meeting to make plans for a State Soldiers' Home. As a result of the meeting \$20,000 was raised through private donations, and at first the funds were used for veterans in Indianapolis. By 1866 the state purchased fifty-four acres of land in Rush County just south of Knightstown. The land was known as Knightstown Springs, and there was a hotel on the west side of the road (today state Road 140). The Aldrich Hotel served as the first dwelling for the Soldiers' and Seamen's Home. To have continued financial support for the Home, it became tax supported.



Who is who we know not, but we here list their names: Ben Buttriss, John Bugris, Alber Clark, Charles Clark, Emma Gray, Hattie Gray, Henry Gray, Will Gray, Kate Lewis, Jessie Phenis.

(picture courtesy of the Indiana Archives and Record Administration)

One of the original 50 some founders of the Home was a man named George Merritt. He saw the need for an orphans' home as well. At the time there was not enough funding to support both a soldiers' home and an orphans' home. So Merritt proceeded on his own and started an orphans' program at the Military Hospital in Indianapolis on November 24, 1865. Miss Susan Fussell was the teacher. By April of 1866 Miss Fussell's group had ten orphans, and they moved to Knightstown Springs. They lived in a cottage on the east side of the road.

By March 11, 1867, the Home officially became the Home for Disabled Soldiers. The Home's responsibilities were broadened to help the widows of Union Veterans, as well as

orphans. The first Board of Directors was appointed on June 15, 1867, and Dr. M. M. Wishard was the first Superintendent.

A new building for veterans was built across the road from the Home Hotel at a cost of \$56,000. Upon completion, the orphans then moved to the vacated Home Hotel.

Fire was the biggest enemy of the Home buildings. On Christmas Day of 1877 the Home Hotel burned. After this fire more space was needed for the orphans, so the veterans were moved to the National Military Home at Dayton, Ohio. The orphans were moved back across the road to the larger building (the Administration Building).

Fire again struck in 1877 and burned the Administration Building. All 230 children and 30 staff survived. The rebuilt building burned again in 1886. That time the building was completely redone and a south wing added to look much like it does today. During these difficult situations a two-story frame school building housed the children. Food, clothing, and other provisions came from good hearted neighbors in Rush, Henry, and Hancock Counties.

In 1895 one hundred and thirteen acres of additional land was purchased for \$6,000! Over the years multiple buildings were added to the campus. Some of those facilities included: Industrial Building (1887), School and Chapel (1887), Hospital (1889), Six New Cottages (1891), Manual Training Building (1903 and 1904), Gymnasium (1919), New School Building (1928), Dairy Barn (1931), New Hospital (1952), Outdoor Swimming Pool (1960). Athletic facilities that were later added including an Indoor Pool and All-Weather Running Track.

Over the years what came to be known as the Indiana Soldiers' and Sailors' Childrens' Home (ISSCH) became the residence for orphans from all military branches. In later history of the ISSCH, any child that had military representation in their family could attend. By 1923 the Home had a four-year high school with 58 students. During 1924-1925 the Home High School became a member of the Indiana High School Athletic Association. In 1929 the school was named after Indiana's Civil War Governor, and their nickname was the Morton Memorial Tigers.

The course of study at Morton Memorial was the same used by other schools throughout the state, but in 1915 the organization of an industrial course of study supplemented the practical work done in shops. Vocational education remained a hallmark of Morton Memorial's curriculum throughout its history.

Also important to the school's curriculum: music, drama, physical education, and religious study. The new Abraham Lincoln Hall was used for commencement in 1892. The hall's beautiful stained glass windows featured a Civil War Sailor on the east window, and a Civil War Soldier on the west window.

The enrollment of the school ebbed and flowed depending on the war situation and the economy. The highest enrollment was 1,010 in 1935 during the Depression.

Making a complete list of significant officers, educators, staff, and contributors would be impossible. From 1923 to 1962 Leslie A. Cortner and his wife Dorothy Cortner served as

Superintendent and Matron. William Brewer then became Superintendent. Later educators of note included Ralph Eder, Max Stanley, Jules Elzey, and Paul Wilkinson.

After WW II Morton Memorial had a higher student enrollment, and they renewed football as a sport. The Tigers were East Central Conference Champions four years running from 1951 through 1954. Their success came with one of the most outstanding football players ever to play in Rush County. He was an African American student named Tim Brown (Thomas Allen Brown). Tim Brown was a running back who went on to play at Ball state. He then played in the NFL: 1959 Green Bay Packers, 1960-1967 Philadelphia Eagles, and 1968 Baltimore Colts. Tim was selected to the Pro Bowl three times, and he won an NFL Championship Ring in 1960 and 1968. After football he worked as an actor and vocalist. He was in the movie MASH, as well as early episodes of MASH on TV. Later in his life he was a corrections officer in Los Angeles. He passed away on April 4, 2020, in California at the age of 82.

Tim and his brother John were a part of basketball history at Morton Memorial too. In 1952-1953 the Tigers had a 23-2 record under Coach Al Miller. They won the Rushville Sectional and were beaten in the Rushville Regional in a controversial double overtime. There was a timing error at the scorer's table that helped the Milan Indians win. In 1953-1954 Milan won the IHSAA State Championship.

Another Morton Memorial Alumnus of note was Gerard Montgomery "Monte" Blue. After Monte attended Purdue University he acted in silent films, then later in "talkies", and then on TV. He acted in Marriage Circle (1924), White Shadows (1928), Key Largo (1948), and appeared on TV in Sky King, Under Sea Kingdom, and the Lone Ranger among many.

The Indiana Department of Health closed ISSCH in 2009 evidently because they no longer wanted to include the Home in their budget. It was a sad day. Over the years several organizations financially supported ISSCH. In the beginning the GAR (Grand Army Of The Republic) and its auxiliary were generous. And in the modern era the American Legion was strong in their support.

Today the Home is under the leadership of the Indiana National Guard and is called the Hoosier Youth ChalleNGe Academy. The academy offers military based training for unemployed/underemployed, crime-free and drug-free, at risk youth who have not graduated from high school and are 16-18 years old. It's a free program with a 17.5 month commitment, including a five month residential phase. It's a program for boys and girls and there is no military obligation for those who participate.

Sources for this article were: The Home – Home For A Century 1865/1965, Rush County Sesquicentennial History, National Guard Hoosier Youth ChalleNGe Academy website, and interviews with Paul Wilkinson and Bruce Trump.