

Higgins Hollow, Little House Mountain  
With Ida Elizabeth Higgins Ferguson  
By Sarah Clayton

At the entrance to Higgins Hollow is a 4350-square foot McMansion built in 2009 with four bedrooms, four and a half bathrooms, a work-out room, built-in coolers for wine and beer, a wet bar, satellite dish, bathtub with water jets, and washer-dryer hook-ups. The exterior is manufactured “boards” and faux stone. It has 6.81 acres, and breath-taking views of House Mountain.

A mile away, at the other end of Higgins Hollow, is a 600-square foot log cabin, built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with a total of four small rooms, the only water source a hand pump at the kitchen sink, outside johnny house, no electricity until relatively recently. And no views; it’s tucked as far back into the leeward side of the mountain as is physically possible for protection from the weather. The land has been in the Higgins family for generations.

I’ve come to the cabin to visit Ida Elizabeth Higgins Ferguson, who’s lived there all but eight of her 83 years. She’s dressed as if going to church, her hair consciously and attractively coiffed and, in her hands, a paper she’s written about her life. We draw up chairs in the front yard at her quiet urging.

“Would you like to read it?” she says, holding the paper out to me.

“No, Ma’am,” I say. “I want to hear your voice.”

She straightens herself in the chair, and crosses her ankles. At her back is her log home, and behind it, the mountain rises, steeply. It’s early spring and, the red bud bursts out of the leafless winter forest like gunshots in a battle scene. I’m sure it must be one of the quietest places in Rockbridge County.

Ida begins to read: "I've been here for a long time" she says. "We had no electrical light. We used (oil) lamps. No bathroom. Carried water from the spring. We had a garden and picked blackberries, red raspberries. We had chickens. Took them to Dr. (Ned) Brush and Dr. (Fred) Feddeman. We canned tomatoes, beans, everything so winter come we have our food. We had hogs. Sold meat and beef. Cows for milk and butter. We have snow. We sled ride."

I love that Rockbridge County cadence. In came into my life early enough to be there forever. I'd like to close my eyes in the warmth of this spring day and let Ida's voice wash over me, but I keep them open so she doesn't think I'm falling asleep. The grassy swale of her yard is beginning to green, and the small creek, swollen with spring rain, burbles along its side. Birds chatter away, and the world is heavy and moist, as if ready to burst into growth.

"We also picked strawberries and sold them," she reads, her voice rising and falling like the breeze. "Made apple butter. In 1950 we had a flood. Couldn't get out. Basement full of water. All our fruit was in the water.

"Going to school, we walked two miles to the bus. I went to school on west 60. Monmouth School (across the road from where Jacktown Road intersects Rt. 60). Then at Highland Belle. Nice school. Bible teacher. We said the Pledge of Allegiance. Sang different songs."

Mrs. Ferguson hasn't moved, her grey-haired head bent over her words as if in prayer.

"We had an ice refrigerator (She still has their original 50-year-old freezer). On Saturdays I'd help Mama get ready for Sunday. We made cakes and pies, potato salad.

We took baths, wash our hair on Saturday. We washed the clothes outside. We'd take our two tubs out there and put up a table and wash the clothes. Inside in the winter. Had to heat the water on the woodstove.

“ Sometime, Daddy and Mama took us over town and get ice cream. Got up Sunday, cook for dinner, and walked to church and when we came home from church, our dinner was ready.

“Mama and Daddy always faithful in church. My brother, Gene Hunter Higgins, worked in the cemetery. Mowed. He was a deacon and an elder. Mama and Daddy was baptized at Ebenezer. Me and my brothers and sisters all baptized at Ebenezer. I joined the church on September 7, 1941. I was 11 years old. We attend a song singing at the other ARP Church (in Lexington). At Easter we go to sunrise service. We have covered dishes at different times and Christmas programs. We always played in the programs. And then in the old days, every Saturday we listened around the radio. Bluegrass music. Daddy (Tanzy Brown Higgins) passed away March 14, 1967. He was 56 years. Mama (Louise Vest Higgins) passed away January 17, 1991. She was 75 years.

“God always been good to me and all of my family.”

Ida was born just over a mile away, outside the hollow, in a log cabin under the trees where Tucker Kerr Road comes into Still House, the second of seven children and the oldest daughter. When she was four, the family moved to the cabin at the end of Higgins Hollow.

“I think my uncle built it,” she says. “Cause I think my grandma lived there with my uncle. And then Daddy and ‘em brought the place when my grandpa died.”

Ida was a sickly child, the only one of the seven so afflicted.

“I run a temperature all the time,” she says. “One thing they thought I had was rheumatic fever. Another doctor thought it was my nerves. I graduated from the fifth grade but I was about 15. I never went back to school. I just felt bad all the time. Then I got some big old pills and little red pills and I started to feel better.” And has been fine ever since.

She remembers the flood of 1950, when the little creek became a monster as those hollow creeks do if forced to take on more water than they can carry. “The (land) slip up here come off and come all the way down that hill. It made a big hole up there. You can put a house in it. All the mud was down in front of the old stable.

Her father’s mother lived in the next house down and more cousins lived farther along the hollow. “The cousins would come up and we’d play ball. Mama didn’t let us play on Sundays. Said it ‘just wasn’t right.’”

She met her future husband, Mitchell Ferguson, at church, the common meeting ground for young people around the mountain. “I was married to Mitchell on July 22, 1955, and he passed away on August 29, 1959. Had some kind of blood thing. They said first he had rheumatic fever but after come think about it, they said blood. Leukemia. We was renting from the Leeches (in Collierstown). I missed living here but he joined my church. I told him he didn’t have to, it was up to him, but he said, ‘yeah, that’s what I want to do.’ When he died, Daddy said, ‘you come back here,’ so I took my Mama and Daddy up on it.

“Daddy started me out playing the organ. We had an organ. I played since I was young. Daddy could pick out a couple of tunes and showed me a couple of chords to play then I tried to pick out the rest by myself. As long as I get the sound of it. If I know the sound, I can go on and play it. Daddy played banjo. He played for us when we were sittin’. My sister and ‘em come in on Sunday up here and her husband could play a guitar. We’d get around and sing.

“We’d go up on the mountain. Pick berries. Mama made jam and preserves. To make jam, you got to take your hands and mash ‘em (the berries) up before cookin’ ‘em. We had apple trees and we made jelly. We had a peach tree up on the hill in the holler. Crab apple. All gone now.

“We always kept our hog meat and salt it down. Daddy would hang it up in the hen house after he salted it. When you want some meat, you just went in there and cut a piece off. And Daddy would put straw down in the garden. Make a trench around it to keep the water out. You put your potatoes on one side and your turnips on another. We always had sweet potatoes. Cover it with dirt. So, in the wintertime, you think you want some potatoes, you know which end they’d be in. You come out and dig a little hole and get what you want. That kept them all winter.

“Daddy had a big old patch of strawberries out there behind the stable. He’d take ‘em to Clifton forge and peddle ‘em. Him and his brother. Mama made sausage. You stand there and you grind up your meat. Then you put in the sausage meal. She put salt and pepper in ‘em and then patted ‘em out. She always fried one on the stove to see how it taste. Daddy always had a taste. Me too.” She laughs. “He would take lima

beans to Clifton Forge too. We'd sit around and shell them beans. Most times on the porch."

Mrs. Ferguson has never been to the top of the mountain. "I always wanted to go, but I just thought I couldn't make it up there and get back down. Daddy always said, 'you don't have to go up there.'"

Her brothers went and brought back morel mushrooms, land cress and "polk stalk." "But you don't see much of those around anymore," she says.

For a time, the family had a cistern catching the rain water that came off the roof, but Ida said it got to tasting so bad, her brother told her to have water trucked in to fill the cistern, which she did, her one concession to modern living. She doesn't have a bathtub but "takes a slick bath," rather like the days of the water pitcher and wash bowl.

Later, and more at ease, she invited us into her home, and it was as if time had stopped in the 1930s. The woodstove, the hand pump at the large, white porcelain sink, worn linoleum on the floor, dark furniture. All so still as if waiting for something to happen. Or perhaps, just taking a breather in a long life.

Then she sat down at the piano and played a song. The notes wobbled and it was hard to tell if from fingers long unaccustomed to playing or the piano long overdue for a tuning. It seemed just right for the setting, though. Like the score from an old movie.

"Mrs. Ferguson," I say, when, flustered and flushed, she stopped playing, "If you had a choice of moving into town to a house with all the new bathrooms and things, would you move?"

“I haven’t yet,” she says. “This place means a lot, because Mama and Daddy were here. And the people that live round you, you know they will always call.”

*Ida Elizabeth Higgins Ferguson left the hollow around 2017 for a nursing home where she remains today, unaware of her surroundings. Her cabin is “padlocked and falling down,” according to a family member.*