

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 31 • PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1950 • NUMBER 2

The Lumberjacks' Sky Pilot

HAROLD T. HAGG

IN THE LUMBERJACK'S picturesque vocabulary, a "sky pilot" was an itinerant minister who conducted religious services in the logging camps. From 1895 to 1915 easily the best-known of these logging missionaries in Minnesota was the Reverend Frank E. Higgins. Indeed, for thousands of woodsmen, the term "sky pilot" was synonymous with Higgins' name, for he was *the* lumberjacks' sky pilot. After several years of preaching among woodsmen in his spare time, Higgins became a full-time logging missionary for the Evangelistic committee of the Presbyterian church. He organized missionary work among the woodsmen of Minnesota and then spent the remainder of his life supervising and promoting it. Not only did he become a familiar figure in the logging areas of Minnesota, but his influence and reputation extended far beyond the borders of the North Star State. He established in other states logging missions modeled on those in Minnesota; he described his experiences in the lumber camps in addresses before audiences throughout the United States and Canada; and he lived to see his career become the theme of popular books and magazine articles.

Yet, widely known as Higgins was a generation ago, he is today all but forgotten. Tributes to his devout leadership and service have appeared in church publications, but they have not brought him out of obscurity.¹ It is chiefly among older residents of northern Minnesota that he is remembered as a folk hero whose colorful exploits are the subject of numerous legends. To his contemporaries also, Higgins was a spectacular figure. The perspective afforded by the lapse of years, however, reveals not only that his was a striking personality, but that he had a record of solid achievement and wide influence which won him national recogni-

¹ Maurice D. Edwards, *History of the Synod of Minnesota Presbyterian Church*, 367 (St. Paul, 1927); Thomas D. Whittles, "The Lumberjack's Sky Pilot," in *Missionary Review of the World*, 38:197-200 (March, 1915).

tion in the field of home missions. His story forms a picturesque chapter in the epic of Minnesota lumbering, in the history of home missions on the frontier, and in the folklore of northern Minnesota.

Of Irish-Canadian parentage, Francis Edmund Higgins was born in Toronto on August 19, 1865. His given name was soon shortened to Frank, which served him throughout his life. His father, a hotelkeeper, died when the lad was seven. Two years later his mother remarried and the family moved to Shelburne, Ontario. There the boy grew up to vigorous young manhood in a rugged frontier environment, where he became accustomed to the toil and hardships of pioneer life. He was thus unwittingly preparing himself for his future labors on the Minnesota logging frontier.

Another formative influence of his early years was the example of Christian piety set by his mother and stepfather. To the latter Higgins always felt more indebted for his religious faith than to anyone else. During a revival which swept over the community when he was eighteen, Higgins was converted. He determined to become a minister, but his first efforts as a Methodist lay preacher met with little success. He had little or no schooling, and he soon found that zeal was no substitute for education in preparing for the ministry. Eager to make up the deficiencies in his educational background, the untutored youth went to Toronto, and at the age of twenty entered the sixth grade. After completing the elementary grades in three years, he spent two more attending high school.²

Higgins then decided to leave his homeland to seek opportunity in the United States. Upon learning that the Methodist denomination in Minnesota needed preachers, he made his way there in 1890. After serving for a time as a Methodist lay preacher at Annandale, he attended the academy of Hamline University in St. Paul for two years. But apparently he failed to convince the Methodist authorities that he was a fit candidate for their clergy, and the Methodist conference dropped him. Disheartened and discouraged, but clinging still to his hopes for a career in the ministry, he went to Duluth, where he worked while studying.³

He soon was able to resume work in his chosen field, however. The Methodist conference had no charge for him, but one Sunday in 1895 he

² Norman Duncan, *Higgins — A Man's Christian*, 54 (New York, 1909); Whittles, in *Missionary Review*, 38:198.

³ Thomas D. Whittles, *The Lumberjack Sky Pilot*, 29 (Chicago, 1908); manuscript copies of a sketch of Higgins in the Hansen Evesmith Papers owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, and in the collections of the St. Louis County Historical Society, Duluth; interview with A. P. Ritchie of Bemidji. Mr. Ritchie knew Higgins at Annandale and he also was a fellow student at Hamline University. The St. Louis County Historical Society has a file of newspaper clippings about Higgins.

filled the pulpit for a Presbyterian home mission station of the Duluth Presbytery at Barnum. The congregation called him, and the Presbytery placed him in charge with the understanding that he was to study for ordination under its auspices. It was at Barnum, a town of four hundred people, located about forty-five miles southwest of Duluth, that Higgins received his introduction to the lumberjack and began his career as a sky pilot. The logging operations in the vicinity attracted him, and he frequently saw the crews at work. Once while watching a log drive, a river pig said to him: "You're a preacher — give us a sermon." That evening, when the long day's work was over and the wannigan was tied up for the night, Higgins preached to the men and led them in stirring hymns. The woodsmen enjoyed the service and asked him to return. Frequently after that he walked out to the woods and preached in the camps. Higgins in turn invited his listeners to visit him at Barnum; one day a group of them did so and, incidentally, gave him a check for fifty-one dollars.⁴

These early experiences in the camps and on the drives gave Higgins an acquaintance with the lumberjack that was to ripen into a deep and sympathetic understanding of his psychology. From the first he acted on the conviction that a missionary must be one of his people. "I went out as a lumberjack," he wrote years later, "and did the things the men did." When they dared him to ride a log he attempted the feat, for it would never do not to accept the challenge. Before long Higgins, with his powerful physique and background of hard manual labor, was a competent woodsman himself. Sharing the strength and skill of the lumberjacks, he could approach them on their own level; he gained their confidence by becoming one of them.⁵

After years of struggle and disappointment, Higgins found in the ministry to the woodsmen the satisfaction of successful achievement. But while the logging field exerted an ever-increasing attraction for him, he continued to prepare for ordination and a city church. The Duluth Presbytery frowned upon his frequent visits to the lumber camps, and warned him that unless he gave more attention to his mission field his ordination might be postponed indefinitely. Handicapped by inadequate preparation and the necessity of working independently, Higgins was not finding the road to ordination easy.⁶ The success he enjoyed in his

⁴ Interview with the Reverend S. A. Blair of Superior, who was for many years the Sunday school missionary of the Duluth Presbytery and knew Higgins well; Frank E. Higgins, "Missionary Work in Logging-Camps," in *Missionary Review*, 34:292 (April, 1911).

⁵ Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:293.

⁶ Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:294; Peter Clark Macfarlane, "The Sky Pilot of the Lumberjacks," in *Collier's*, 50:22 (January 18, 1913).

contacts with the woodsmen contrasted with the difficulty he was having with his studies.

Then occurred an incident which crystallized what must have been a growing feeling that his real mission was among the lumberjacks. One bitterly cold winter day he was summoned to a log cabin deep in the woods, where a homesteader who had been working in the logging camps lay critically ill. He had asked that the sky pilot visit him. The attending physician told Higgins that there was a slight chance for the man's recovery if he could be taken to a hospital in Duluth. Higgins took the patient there only to learn there was no hope. When Higgins told the man that death was near and tried to comfort him, he smiled serenely and replied that he was prepared to die. "I heard you preach that night on the river," he told the sky pilot, and went on to say that it was the first time he had heard a sermon for twenty years, although he had been reared in a Christian home. Later, when the wannigan was dark and the crew was asleep, he could not banish from his mind the vision of his mother. Life had meant infinitely more to him since that night. The sky pilot's message had saved him. Then he urged Higgins to continue his work in the camps. The dying man's story made a profound impression on Higgins. Certain that this was the call, he gave up his hopes for a city church and made full-time work as a logging missionary his goal.⁷

Several years were to elapse, however, before his dream became a reality. In the meantime Higgins married Eva L. Lucas of Rockford, Minnesota. From Barnum the couple moved to New Duluth; after a brief period of service there, Higgins in May, 1899, became pastor of the Presbyterian church at Bemidji, a booming center of the Beltrami County logging frontier. The lumber camps, the river drives, and railroad construction employed a large force of migratory workers, as well as many local farmers. Any doubt that may have lingered in Higgins' mind about the woodsmen's need for missions was removed when he saw at first-hand the drunkenness and vice prevalent among them. Crowds of rough and boisterous lumberjacks arrived in town "thirsty for diversion"; they swarmed into the innumerable saloons where "whiskey, women, and the wheel" afforded psychological release from the hardships and dangers of life in the camps.⁸ For many the carouse ended in the foul "snake room" where, in freezing weather, the sodden and penniless men were

⁷ Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:294.

⁸ Duncan, *Higgins*, 56; Harold T. Hagg, "The Beltrami County Logging Frontier," in *Minnesota History*, 29:139 (June, 1948); Whittles, *The Lumberjack Sky Pilot*, 48; *Bemidji Pioneer*, May 18, 1899. The newspapers used in the preparation of this article are in the L. H. Bailey collection at the State Teachers College, Bemidji.

thrown in a heap to remain until they could safely go outside. Although many woodsmen were quiet and sober, the excesses of others gave the lumberjacks an unsavory reputation.

Higgins was a severe critic of the conspicuous debauchery in the logging towns and of those who profited by demoralizing the lumberjacks. He fought the saloon at every opportunity and threw himself into every movement for civic reform. But while combating the evils, he did not forget the victims. To many a woodsman in distress, Higgins was the good Samaritan. To sit up all night with a man crazed with drink, to pick an inebriate out of the gutter and take him to a warm room, to enter a barroom and urge a tipsy man to leave—these were not unusual activities for Higgins. It is said that when they arrived in town, scores of lumberjacks turned their money over to the sky pilot for safekeeping until they were ready to leave. Higgins was especially concerned about the younger men and anxious to prevent them from following the bad examples of their older companions. On many occasions he guided youths past the pitfalls of the towns and saw them safely on trains bound for home with their wages intact.⁹

Higgins felt that the woodsman was sinned against as well as sinning. In an article written for a church publication, the *Evangelist*, in 1902, he made a strong plea for organized missions to the lumberjacks. He argued that the evils among them were concomitants of the neglect of their spiritual and material welfare. Most of the men in the lumber camps, he pointed out, were homeless and migratory, finding summer work on the Dakota prairies or the railroads, and drifting back to the woods in winter. The saloon was the only home they had when they were in town. Where else were they welcome? What other facilities for recreation were available to them? Higgins also pointed to the indifference of the Christian clergy and laity toward the spiritual needs of the woodsmen, calling attention to the fact that "Years have gone by and very few ministers have ever gone out of their churches to reach these men. Even the Salvation Army and the Mission Halls have not gone to the camps, where they could find these men in their right mind. Months pass by every year and many of these men do not even get a letter or a paper to read. Is it any wonder when they come down in the spring that they feel that nobody cares for them, and at once go to the saloon where they are made welcome as long as their money lasts?" Having explained the need for mission work, Higgins went on to show that it was feasible. He described his own experiences with the lumberjacks, stressing the warm welcome he invariably received and the eagerness with which his mes-

⁹ Interview with Blair; Duncan, *Higgins*, 34-36, 41-45.

sage was heard. Higgins' article of 1902 was notable not only because it expressed the philosophy which guided his missionary labors, but also because it marked a transition from the local minister who spent his leisure hours preaching in the logging camps to the earnest advocate of logging missions making a nation-wide appeal for their establishment.¹⁰

Although Higgins visited the logging camps as often as he could, his church duties at Bemidji occupied much of his time. He preached twice every Sunday and gave many addresses at church and community gatherings. He busied himself with church affairs and the varied and arduous duties of the ministry. When, in 1902, his church building was enlarged and improved, Higgins displayed such competence in raising money that the cost was met without incurring debt. He was in charge also of a Presbyterian congregation in the new logging town of Farley, ten miles northeast of Bemidji, where a church was erected in 1902. Meanwhile, Higgins was still struggling for ordination by the Duluth Presbytery; the lumberjacks, he felt, were entitled to a full-fledged minister. But in neither his formal nor his independent studies did Higgins ever display much academic ability; his early lack of educational opportunity was a handicap he never fully overcame. After failing on several occasions to satisfy the examiners, he told the Presbytery that he would not again seek ordination. That body, however, soon reconsidered his case, realizing that if his knowledge of the formal theological fields was meager, his Christian faith, as well as his zeal, integrity, and practical success, were manifest. The outcome was his ordination by the Duluth Presbytery in 1902.¹¹

For several years Higgins persistently urged that logging missions with official backing be established. He wrote and spoke on the spiritual needs of the woodsmen and cited his work in the logging camps to show that something could be done. He appeared before the Minnesota synod and told his story. This led to an opportunity to present the case for the logging field to the Evangelistic committee of the Presbyterian church, meeting at Winona Lake, Indiana, in August, 1902. Without doubt, his most effective argument was his own experience. His years of service among the woodsmen had not only demonstrated that the project was feasible, but that they also qualified him to supervise it. The committee was convinced, and it commissioned Higgins to take charge of a program of missionary work in the Minnesota logging camps. His dream

¹⁰ Under the title "Preaching in the Camps," Higgins' article is reprinted from the *Evangelist* (New York) in the *Bemidji Pioneer* for April 10, 1902.

¹¹ *Bemidji Sentinel*, March 5, November 19, 1902; *Farley Telegram*, March 7, April 11, October 24, 1902; *Bemidji Pioneer*, January 24, 1901, November 13, 1902; interview with Manzer Blakely of Turtle River, a parishioner of Higgins at Farley; Whittles, in *Missionary Review*, 38:200; Edwards, *Synod of Minnesota*, 366.

came true after years of persistent effort. In November he resigned his pastorate at Bemidji in order to give his entire time to the logging missions.¹²

For the remainder of his life, Higgins' field was the "Parish of the Pines," in an area of Minnesota where lumbering was in its heyday. Ever on the march, the loggers pushed northward rapidly after the decline of the older centers on the St. Croix and Rum rivers. Over a vast area extending from Duluth to the western prairies and northward to the Rainy River, an army of perhaps twenty thousand woodsmen was attacking the vast stands of white and Norway pine. River drives and logging railroads carried logs to the great mills at Minneapolis, Cloquet, Virginia, and other centers. Scattered over the logging regions were about two hundred and fifty camps with an average of eighty men in each. In the harsh environment of the Minnesota woods, the lumberjack had to be tough and vigorous. Long hours of toil in bitter winter weather tested his strength and endurance. In the evenings the men relaxed for an hour or two in the bunkhouses, smoking, telling yarns, or playing cards before retiring. Life in the camps was rude and simple, without dissipation. There the sky pilot could reach the men while they were free from the distractions of the logging centers.¹³

During the years when Higgins was visiting the camps in his leisure time, he traveled on foot with a heavy pack strapped on his back. In his first winter as a full-time missionary, however, he began to use a dog team and sleigh to make his rounds. He found this means of transportation well adapted to his needs. With dogs he could reach places inaccessible to horses; furthermore dogs could be cared for more easily than horses. Higgins, moreover, never overlooked an opportunity to dramatize his role of sky pilot. Wherever he went, his dogs attracted attention and gave an added bit of color to his missionary enterprise.¹⁴

The arrival of the sky pilot in a camp provided a welcome break in the monotony of the isolated life in the woods. Sometimes lumberjacks from other camps walked several miles to hear him. Higgins eschewed the sensational; his service was simple and informal, yet not lacking in dignity; the attitude of the woodsmen was serious and reverent. Higgins always used a conversational mode in speaking. With his audience seated about him in the bunkhouse after the evening meal, using a cask covered with a blanket as his pulpit, Higgins read passages from the Scriptures,

¹² *Minneapolis Journal*, October 30, 1902; *Bemidji Pioneer*, August 21, 1902; Edwards, *Synod of Minnesota*, 367; interview with Blair.

¹³ E. G. Cheyney, "The Development of the Lumber Industry in Minnesota," in *Journal of Geography*, 14:193, 195 (February, 1916); Grace Lee Nute, *Lake Superior*, 208-210 (New York, 1944).

¹⁴ *Minneapolis Journal*, January 27, April 3, 1903.

led the men in hymns, and in a vigorous sermon called upon them to show repentance by leading better lives. His first and central purpose was to take the Gospel to the lumberjacks, but this implied an effort to reform their morals and conduct. How could his message take root if a man lapsed into his old habits when he returned to town?¹⁵

Higgins spoke the lumberjack's language. If the singing lacked spirit, the pilot would point his finger at those who did not join in wholeheartedly and admonish them to "get in the harness." One of his favorite topics, appropriately enough, was the Prodigal Son. A fragment from his sermon on this subject reveals that Higgins developed his theme in forceful, familiar language and in terms of the lumberjack's experience. "And what did the young man do?" Higgins would ask, concerning the Prodigal. "Why he packed his turkey and went off to blow his stake — *just like you!*" Later, when the poor Prodigal was penniless, "What about him *then*, boys? *You* know. *I* don't need to tell you. You learned all about it at Deer River. It was the husks and the hogs for him — *just like it is for you!* It's up the river for you — and it's back to the woods for you — when they've cleaned you out at Deer River!"¹⁶

Yet Higgins realized that the wild excesses of the lumberjacks reflected their barren lives. Reform could not come through exhortation alone; these rootless men needed worthwhile interests and normal emotional outlets. This was the philosophy underlying Higgins' missionary labors in the camps. He urged the men to re-establish broken ties with their homes, inquiring when they had last corresponded with their mothers or other kinsfolk and admonishing them to do so regularly. For the illiterates, he himself wrote letters. To provide inspirational and recreational reading and to develop new interests he took to the camps quantities of religious tracts and secular magazines. Since recent newspapers were seldom available in the camps, Higgins usually gave a news summary, and the men listened avidly. He visited the sick, and in his pack he carried a supply of bandages and medicine so he would be ready to administer first aid in an emergency, for accidents occurred rather frequently in the woods.¹⁷

The woodsmen liked and respected Higgins not only for what he did, but for what he was. Few could resist the spell of his fascinating personality — his warmth, his buoyant outlook, his jovial manner, and his virility. He mingled with the men in easy familiarity, without loss of dignity, becoming the friend and confidant of many in whom no one else

¹⁵ Interviews with Blair and J. O. Achenbach of Bemidji; Duncan, *Higgins*, 82.

¹⁶ Interview with Achenbach; Duncan, *Higgins*, 82, and in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 119:174 (July, 1909).

¹⁷ Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:299; interview with Achenbach.

was unselfishly interested. Fond of camp life, he frequently remained two or three days in one place; following camp routine, he arose, ate, and worked with the men. The traits he had in common with the woodsmen — skill, strength, endurance — commended his Christian teachings to them. He was a model as well as a critic.¹⁸

In the stories remembered and recorded about him, Higgins is usually portrayed as a minister of prodigious physical prowess, preaching a "Gospel of the Right Hook," exemplifying a muscular Christianity, and, not infrequently, maintaining discipline at his meetings by forcibly ejecting unruly lumberjacks. Higgins' vivid personality, his colorful career in the picturesque setting of the logging industry, and his flair for dramatizing his work have combined to give him the dimensions of a folk hero, and, as in much other American folklore, there is no little exaggeration in the stories of his legendary exploits. Seldom did he find it necessary to resort to force in his contacts with the woodsmen; they respected his strength not because they feared it, but because it was a trait they admired and shared with him. Like so many pioneer preachers, Higgins was indeed cast in a heroic mold, but the true significance of his robust physique lies in the fact that his strenuous career would have been impossible had he not possessed unquenchable vitality. Without it, he could not have made the rounds of the camps year after year, traveling long distances in sub-zero weather and sharing the toil and hardships of the woodsmen.¹⁹

Indefatigable as Higgins was, he could not himself directly reach all the thousands of woodsmen scattered over the vast stretches of northern Minnesota. Additional missionaries were essential, and indeed they were contemplated when the Evangelistic committee decided to undertake the lumber-camp program. Recruiting satisfactory assistants was not the least of Higgins' problems. He hit upon the plan, however, of using some of his own converts as workers — an idea suggested by the experience of the Salvation Army. He found that converted woodsmen were his most successful missionaries; they gained the confidence of the lumberjacks more readily than formally trained ministers could. By 1904 Higgins had five assistants in the field. The logging area of the state was divided into five districts with a missionary assigned to each. Higgins, as missionary at large, traveled from one district to another, supervising the work. During the winter of 1904-05, regular fortnightly services were held in each

¹⁸ Interview with Achenbach.

¹⁹ "The Lumber-jack's 'Sky-Pilot,'" in *Harper's Weekly*, 53:24 (November 27, 1909); Macfarlane, in *Collier's*, 50:22; interviews with Blair and the late Reverend L. P. Warford of Bemidji. The latter, who was pastor of the Bemidji Presbyterian Church from 1916 to 1949, had a fund of stories about Higgins which he shared with the writer.

of fifty logging camps, and there also were occasional services in other camps in more remote areas. Each year several tons of books, periodicals, and religious tracts were distributed. The missionaries also visited the woodsmen who were hospital patients.²⁰

Only once a year were the lumberjacks asked to contribute to the support of the missions. When Higgins began his missionary labors he had to overcome the woodsmen's prejudice toward demands for money, which were imposed upon them all too frequently. Generous almost to a fault, they often were victimized by solicitors for unworthy or fraudulent causes. Particularly did Higgins wish that he and his assistants should not be classed with those itinerant preachers who appeared in a camp, appealed for funds, and never returned. After Higgins or one of his missionaries had made several visits to a camp and convinced the men of a sincere devotion to their welfare, they would respond generously when a collection was taken at the last service before the logging season closed. Perhaps logging contractors also made occasional contributions.²¹

The growth of the logging missions soon attracted state-wide interest and publicity. In October, 1903, Higgins was invited to address the Presbyterian synod of Minnesota, meeting in St. Paul. His description of his missionary enterprise so impressed the synod that it adopted resolutions commending the program and directing the attention of the lumber companies to the moral and spiritual needs of the woodsmen. Churches were urged to aid by collecting religious pamphlets and discarded magazines for distribution in the camps. The synod also appointed a "Committee on Work in the Lumber Camps" to co-operate with Higgins. While attaining recognition among those interested in home missions, Higgins also was becoming widely known among Minnesotans in general through the notices his missionary activities began to receive in Twin City and other newspapers.²²

In 1908 the support and direction of the logging missions was transferred to the Home Mission board of the Presbyterian church. With the growth of settlement in northern Minnesota, an effort to found churches was linked with the program of evangelism in the logging camps. The Presbyterian church was looking to the future; as the forests vanished and gave way to farms, the logging missions should lay the foundations for permanent churches. The work in the camps was organized and car-

²⁰ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 21, 1904; *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, March 2, 1905; Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:299.

²¹ Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church of U.S.A., *109th Annual Report*, 20; Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:296; interview with Achenbach.

²² *Minneapolis Journal*, April 3, 1903, June 7, 1904, October 1, 1905; *Bemidji Pioneer*, February 26, November 26, 1903; Edwards, *Synod of Minnesota*, 276.

ried on as it had been previously, but the missionaries also served the settlers scattered throughout the logging areas. This was an extension of the program rather than a new departure, for many local farmers worked in the woods during the winter months and thus had been reached earlier by the logging missions. These men with their families as well as other settlers represented a potential membership for congregations. Wherever feasible, the missionaries organized churches with which the work among the lumberjacks was linked as closely as possible.²³

During the last few years of his ministry to the lumberjacks, Higgins had in the Minnesota field seven or eight assistants, serving approximately ten thousand woodsmen — about half the total number employed in camps. Each missionary had a circuit of from twelve to twenty camps, and conducted services nearly every evening. Nor were the river pigs neglected. In 1912 one missionary spent six months on a fifty-mile stretch of the Mississippi River; he was equipped with a canoe, a tent, and other things needed for trips up and down the river.²⁴

Almost without exception, the logging companies extended a cordial welcome to the missionaries. Only one firm, reported Higgins in 1911, had ever been unwilling to permit them to visit its camps. There was, moreover, a growing interest on the part of the employers in the work of the missions. This friendly attitude probably was prompted chiefly by intelligent self-interest. Any improvement in the morale of the workers would be reflected in a more contented and efficient labor force. Perhaps, also, the work of the missionaries was viewed as an antidote to the doctrines of labor organizers. The lumber companies themselves even took a leaf from Higgins' book and established reading rooms for the woodsmen. At Akeley, Thomas B. Walker, the lumber magnate, and the Methodist church co-operated in providing such a reading center; in Bemidji, Mrs. Thomas Shevlin established one for employees of the Crookston Lumber Company.²⁵

As time went on Higgins' leadership in the logging mission field was extended to other lumbering states. In 1907 he and two assistants spent the summer months in Washington, conducting services in logging camps, organizing a regular mission program, and training local workers for it. Four years later he made another journey to the Pacific coast, revisiting Washington and going on to Oregon and California. On other trips he established missions in several of the Southern states. In 1914, in

²³ Board of Home Missions, *108th Annual Report*, 14; *111th Annual Report*, 34.

²⁴ Board of Home Missions, *111th Annual Report*, 33; Higgins, in *Missionary Review*, 34:295.

²⁵ Board of Home Missions, *109th Annual Report*, 20; Whittles, *The Lumberjack Sky Pilot*, 175; interview with H. E. Rice of Bemidji, for many years an employee of the Crookston Lumber Company.

addition to his work in Minnesota missions, Higgins had twelve men working under his supervision in camps throughout the country.²⁶

After 1903, Higgins also devoted much time to extended speaking tours. He was a frequent guest minister in some of the largest churches of St. Paul and Minneapolis. His journeys took him to Chicago, Detroit, and other large cities in the Middle West, to Toronto, and to various Eastern cities. He also appeared before student audiences in several large universities, including Princeton and Michigan. Speaking in churches and Young Men's Christian Association buildings, Higgins described the effort to take the Gospel to the woodsmen with a view to obtaining increased financial support for the program. It is said that Higgins was a gifted and effective speaker, who, if his grammar was not always impeccable, knew how to arouse and hold the interest of his listeners by using anecdote and illustration, as well as vivid and concrete language. Shrewdly and skillfully, he enhanced the appeal of his addresses by describing life and work in the colorful logging camps, and by exhibiting the heavy clothing, snowshoes, and other equipment he used on his missionary journeys. As the interpreter of the lumberjack, he served a wide audience. The increasing frequency of his addresses as the years passed attests his success in promoting logging missions and his growing stature in the home mission field.²⁷

While Higgins' missionary and speaking trips were winning for him wide recognition among churchmen as a capable organizer and an effective speaker, several popular books and magazine articles, published between 1908 and 1913, made his name familiar to the reading public. They presented the story of a virile hero battling tough human nature for unselfish purposes, of adventurous action in the majestic setting of the north woods. Higgins' career appealed to the same primitive love for genuine adventure which Jack London exploited so successfully in his writings. The Reverend Thomas D. Whittles, a close personal friend of Higgins, published two books about the sky pilot; another was written by Norman Duncan, author of some popular volumes of travel and biography, as well as of novels and short stories. All are similar in content and spirit. Loosely organized, sympathetic rather than critical, descriptive rather than analytical, filled with anecdotes and incidents, they dramatize the intrepid sky pilot and stress the picturesque aspects of his achievements and personality. The folk hero emerges, but not the untir-

²⁶ *Minneapolis Journal*, May 7, 1907, March 19, 1914; Board of Home Missions, *110th Annual Report*, 40; Edwards, *Synod of Minnesota*, 367; Whittles, *The Lumberjack Sky Pilot*, 226.

²⁷ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 21, 1904; *Minneapolis Journal*, October 1, 1905, March 19, 1909, February 20, 1912, March 29, 1913, January 5, 1915; *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, October 8, 1903; interviews with Blair and Warford.

ing advocate and organizer of logging missions, the widely traveled speaker, the interpreter of the lumberjacks. Articles about Higgins that appeared in magazines of national circulation were written in the same vein.²⁸

As Higgins' sphere of activity widened, his influence and reputation grew steadily. The occasional preacher to the lumberjacks became the zealous advocate of regular logging missions; then, having obtained official backing, he organized a program of missionary work in the Minnesota lumber camps. His speaking tours brought his story to many parts of the nation; his organizing experience took him to other states to establish logging missions. In books, magazine articles, and newspapers, his achievements and personality took on heroic proportions. It is said, moreover, that he was the prototype of the hero of Ralph Connor's popular novel, *The Man from Glengarry*. Yet Higgins remained simple and unspoiled, completely unselfish, without ambition for personal advancement. His sincerity and integrity were unquestioned. He rubbed elbows with distinguished church leaders and prominent laymen in the great cities, but his heart remained always with the woodsmen he loved so well.²⁹

Then in the prime of life he was stricken with a dread disease. A malignant growth developed on his collarbone; apparently his long practice of carrying a heavy pack strapped to his shoulders was one cause of the malady. Two operations failed to cure him, and his health declined rapidly in the late months of 1914. Bearing his affliction with patient courage, he lingered until January 4, 1915, when he died at Shelburne, Ontario, his boyhood home. The following day, the news of his death was carried in the Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth press with long reviews of his colorful career. The *New York Times*, in reporting the event, stated that "The Reverend Francis E. Higgins, known all through the lumber regions of the north and northwest as the 'Lumberjack Clergyman'. . . had taken the Gospel to more than 30,000 of the roughest men in the world."

Mrs. Higgins and a daughter survived. For several years the family home had been near Delano, although the sky pilot had been able to spend very little time there. His funeral, however, was held there in the city hall on January 9. A group of Presbyterian ministers conducted the

²⁸ Those in *Harper's Weekly* and in *Collier's* were used in the preparation of this article. Duncan published a résumé of his book in *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 119:166-179 (July, 1909). Whittles' second book, *The Parish of the Pines*, appeared in 1912. A chapter on Higgins, in Harry Rimmer's *The Last of the Giants*, 47-69 (Berne, Indiana, 1948), contributes nothing new and fails to profit from the perspective given by the passing of a generation since the sky pilot's death.

²⁹ *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 1, 1926.

service, paying tribute to Higgins' character and accomplishments. Among them were representatives of the Duluth Presbytery, the Synod of Minnesota, and the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. Burial was in the cemetery at Rockford.³⁰

The loss of Higgins' leadership was a severe blow to the logging missions. The work was continued, however, by missionaries recruited and trained by Higgins, and in 1916 Whittles was appointed superintendent of the program. The best-known of the missionaries was John Sornberger, whose platform eloquence was often compared with that of Billy Sunday. Another member of the original band, the Reverend Elwyn Channer, still labors in the north woods in the tradition of Higgins.³¹

Higgins' limitations were those of the pioneer. His meager formal training for the ministry was typical of many frontier clergymen. The reckless waste of forest resources aroused no more misgivings in him than it did in the average Westerner. He labored for the welfare of the woodsmen in the spirit of pioneer individualism. His clear insight into the spiritual and moral needs of the lumberjacks was not matched by an awareness of the social and economic forces of which they were the victims. He was oblivious to their need for protection against the appalling insecurity and occupational hazards of their work, and he failed to grasp the economic factors which made for ruthless exploitation of labor by many employers.

Yet Higgins had the virtues as well as the faults of the pioneer. His courage, endurance, and militant zeal link him with the heroic missionaries who accompanied and sometimes preceded the settler on the advancing American frontier. The inception and organization of logging missions on a nation-wide scale was largely his individual achievement. Deep and sincere religious convictions, insight into the problems of the woodsmen, persevering energy, and a gift of effective speaking won him success and recognition despite his lack of formal training. Moreover, his ministry to a specific occupational group makes him a forerunner of contemporary industrial chaplains. Finally, his vivid personality and his picturesque career have given him the stature of a folk hero whose legendary feats enrich our folklore while reflecting something of the sweep and color of the epic of lumber.

³⁰ *Delano Eagle*, January 14, 1915.

³¹ Rimmer, *Last of the Giants*, 192, 210-215, 240, 262; Edwards, *Synod of Minnesota*, 321.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).