

# WILLYS AND VIRGINIA HIGGINS PAPERS, 1918-1920

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Collection #  
M 0455

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Processed by  
Kim Rivers  
July 1986

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## COLLECTION INFORMATION

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|-----------------------|---|
| VOLUME OF COLLECTION: | 1 manuscript box and 1 photograph   |
| COLLECTION DATES:     | 1918-1920   |
| PROVENANCE:           | Gift of Mary B. Higgins, Versailles, Indiana, 24 June 1986  |
| RESTRICTIONS:         | none  |
| REPRODUCTION RIGHTS:  | Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained in writing from the Indiana Historical Society. |
| ALTERNATE FORMATS:    | none  |
| OTHER FINDING AIDS:   | none  |
| RELATED HOLDINGS:     |   |
| ACCESSION NUMBER:     | 1986.0471   |
| NOTES:                |   |

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

When World War I caught up to Willys (1889-c.1975) and Virginia (?-1954) Higgins, they were a young couple

recently moved from Chicago to Toledo, Ohio. Originally from Sharon, Pennsylvania, Willys was christened Wyllys Albert Manley Higgins (he later changed the "y" to an "i" and dropped "Manley") and was the eldest of four children. Virginia Wagner Higgins, often referred to as "Dollie" in the letters, was born in Frederick, Maryland, but raised in Chevy Chase. She was several years Willys' elder and rather frail throughout her married life.

Willys was working for Simmons Hardware Company in Toledo in June 1918 when he was drafted and sent to Camp Sherman at Chillicothe, Ohio. He remained there for two months before proceeding on to Camp Mills on Long Island to await overseas duty. He spent the time before the Armistice in Razac, France, and in parts of Belgium, Luxemburg, and Germany. Originally a member of the First Division of the American Expeditionary Forces, he later transferred to the 84th. According to his own account, he took a "modest part" as member of the 84th in the battles of Argonne Forest (6 November 1918) and Sedan (7 November) and visited the scene of the 1918 Battle of Verdun. After the Armistice, he remained in Germany as part of the occupation forces, serving as company clerk until late July 1919. He returned home after a short stint at an American base sometime in mid-August 1919. Virginia passed the year in her home on Wayne Street in Toledo, except for an occasional visit to her mother and sister. Evidently, she had little or no income outside of her husband's army allotment and had a difficult time economically.

After the war, Willys and a friend operated another hardware store until 1929, when the depression forced Willys out of business. During the following years, he held several different jobs in Chicago and in Indiana. Virginia died in 1954, and Willys remained single until he married Mary B. Higgins of Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1957. He resided in Fort Wayne with her until his death at the age of 86.

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## SCOPE AND CONTENT

The collection consists of nearly 250 letters, the bulk of which are dated between June 1918 and July 1919 and divided fairly evenly between wife and husband, and one black and white portrait of Virginia (Dollie) Higgins. Willys evidently kept most of Virginia's letters, using the backs of some as letter paper and sending installments of others home when new ones arrived. Beyond their certain designation as "love letters," the correspondence provides much information about the lives and duties of those on either side of the Atlantic. Willys, a budding writer, takes pains to relate camp life in the States and abroad. His first impressions of Camp Sherman are especially detailed, as he reveals his fellow soldiers' attitudes about the war, the draft, and army food. His later overseas letters dwell particularly on the landscape, the local cuisine, and the natives' reactions to American soldiers as well as furnishing fine accounts of Parisienne fashions and Christmas festivities at Derbach, Germany. Virginia's correspondence illustrates the tedium of those who had to stay at home and wait for others to return. She relates the difficulties of women left to fend for themselves as both she and Willys agonize over whether she should take a job, how to pay the rent, and whether she should move in with her sister for the winter of 1918-1919. Beyond these topical points, both were interested in literature and in writing and devote much space to books read, viable authors, and discussions of friends' works about to be published. There are also several letters of Willys' Australian friend, Gerry Austen, dated from early 1919 to late 1920 and a few from Willys' former employer, Simmons Hardware Company.

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## BOX AND FOLDER INVENTORY

### Box 1

| FOLDER | CONTENTS   |
|--------|--|
| 1      | Correspondence, 28 June--17 Aug 1918. 33 items.    |
| 2      | Correspondence, 18 Aug--25 Nov 1918. 33 items.     |
| 3      | Correspondence, 1 Dec 1918--31 Jan 1919. 27 items. |
| 4      | Correspondence, 1 Feb--10 March 1919. 29 items.    |

- 5 Correspondence, 10 March--9 April 1919. 24 items.
- 6 Correspondence, 9 April--16 May 1919. 35 items.
- 7 Correspondence, 17 May--27 June 1919. 27 items.
- 8 Correspondence, 28 June--11 October 1920. 28 items.
- 9 Miscellaneous and no date items. 8 items.
- 10 (VC) Portrait of Virginia (Dollie) Higgins (Black and white photograph storage)
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## CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's [online catalog](#)
2. Click on the "Local Catalog" icon.
3. Search for the collection by its call number, using the letter or letters designation and **four** digits (e.g., M 0715, SC 2234).
4. When you find the collection, go to the "Holdings" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.

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