

Captain Henry Dobson, Tug Boat Operator

I previously wrote an article about Dr. Jennie Dobson, one of Muskegon's first women doctors. While researching the article, I found out some information about her husband, Captain Henry Dobson that I thought I would share.

Henry Dobson was born in Canada to John and Annie Dobson ca. 1835. The 1850 census shows him at 15 years of age living with his parents and five siblings in Kent County, Michigan. He eventually settled in Muskegon in 1855 making him one of Muskegon's earliest settlers. While in Muskegon, he made his living as a vessel operator.

In September of 1862, he became part of the 26th Michigan Infantry, Company C as a 1st Lieutenant under Captain James A Lothian with Chauncey Gibbs as 2nd Lieutenant, all of Muskegon, MI. The Company was referred to as the "company of big men" because they were all lumbermen over 6 feet tall.

During the Civil War, the 26th had a reputation for being the best skirmish regiment in the Army and took part in many hazardous advances. Henry was promoted to the rank of Captain on April 26, 1864. On May 12, 1864, Henry was wounded at the famous battle at Spotsylvania Court House in Virginia where they fought alongside the famous Third Michigan Volunteers (which it is said he was once a member of). He was shot in the chest under his lung by a round-ball that was never removed and caused him problems until the day he died. He mustered out of the Army on September 3, 1864 and returned to Muskegon

Upon coming back to Muskegon, the Captain returned to his previous occupation as a vessel operator which was a tug boat, he named the "Third Michigan". Tug boat vessels were a crucial part of the logging industry. They were used to tow or push other vessels into harbors, over the Great Lakes, or through rivers and canals that were restricted in their ability to maneuver on their own, such as, large ships in a crowded harbor. They also towed disabled ships or barges into port for repairs. They were often used to tow "timber rafts". Timber rafts were made of felled logs that were loosely tied or chained together in the back with the front joined together with wooden bars. Some of these rafts contained thousands of logs. These rafts often carried men and supplied from one camp to another while traveling down the waterways to the lumber mills. This was the second least expensive way of transporting timber and it made this a very important and lucrative occupation, especially after the spring thaw. Tug boats had very powerful engines and pumps for their size and some were equipped with water cannons that could be used to put out fires on other ships or platforms. Sometimes, they would fire off the cannons as a show of respect when traveling in front of military vessels. Other times, they were used as a sort of "fireworks" display during a water parade.

In 1871, lumbermen John Torrent and Lewis L Arms purchased the old Farr Mill on the north side of Muskegon Lake for \$90,000 and spent several thousand for repairs. The mill was one of the largest and best on Muskegon Lake. The mill started up in the spring of 1872 expecting to cut twenty million feet of lumber by the end of the first season. Before they could reach their

goal, tragedy struck on Tuesday, August 20th when the mill was engulfed by flames. The alarm went out and the tugs the "Stevens" and the "Third Michigan" raced to the scene. The Stevens arrived first and did all she could to put out the flames. When the Third Michigan arrived, Captain Dobson ordered the hose be put on the Blake force-pump and began throwing a powerful stream, when the plunger burst making it unable to be of any real assistance. The mill was ruined. By Saturday, they assumed the fire was out even though there were still embers burning. Later that day, the winds came up and soon the fire was once again raging. In its path were wooden docks, runways, and large amounts of lumber that hadn't been destroyed by the earlier fire. A blacksmith and storage shop were engulfed in flames and the fire was spreading due to the wind. It looked like everything in its path would be destroyed. The smoke was so thick it was blinding at times. The schooner "Menominee" carrying 200,000 feet of lumber was aground and directly in the path of the flames. It signaled for assistance and was soon answered by a fleet of tugs. Only Captain Dobson with the Third Michigan (that had just been repaired only 30 minutes earlier) headed straight into the flames with all four far-reaching heavy streams of water spraying from the cannons. Captain Dobson and his crew kept the cannons running non-stop for 27 hours until the fire was completely extinguished. They managed to save the cut lumber on the Menominee and some adjacent property. The damage to the mill was well in excess of \$100,000 not including the losses of not being able to fulfill their contracts. Unfortunately, the insurance covered only \$40,000. It is not known what started the original fire but arson was suspected. By October of that year, they started to rebuild the mill about 150 yards from the original site and it became one of the finest new mills around.

Captain Dobson not only came to the aid of other mill fires, but came to the rescue again on November 27, 1893 when the vessel "Pile Driver #1" (owned by the Muskegon Booming Company) sank in 16 feet of frigid water. Captain Dobson and the Third Michigan managed to save the entire crew from a watery grave.

Captain Dobson was not only an early Muskegon pioneer and gallant Civil War veteran but an everyday hero as well. He was highly esteemed by all who knew him. On December 27, 1876 while staying at the Squires Mill (five miles from Bridgeton) Captain Henry Dobson died suddenly in his sleep. The cause of death was determined to be a heart attack brought on by an infection from the bullet wound he received during the Civil War twelve years earlier. He was 41 years old.

Sources: Newspapers.com, Genealogy Bank.com, Ancestry.com, The Centennial History of Muskegon by Henry H Holt



Tug boat water cannons. (Wikimedia free media)