

JOHN W. DUNSMORE: SULTANA SURVIVOR & CLARE COUNTY RESIDENT

THE E. & M.
VOL. 2, ISS. 2, PG. 3

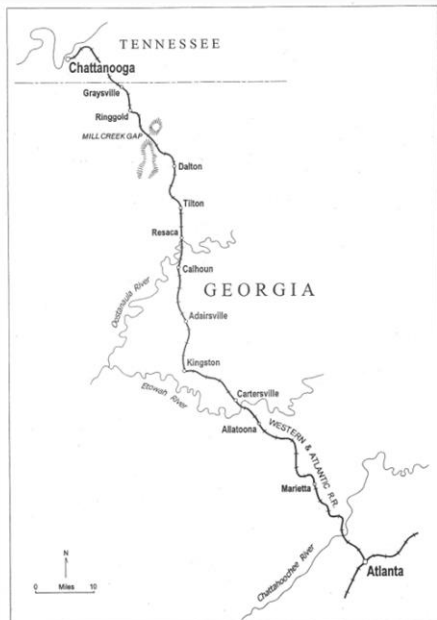
BY BROTHER MARK HOFFMAN, CAMP NO. 17

Michigan Engineer John W. Dunsmore only served in the Union Army for eighteen months, but during that time he survived wounding and capture at the hands of rebel cavalry, confinement for seven months in Confederate prison camp, and then the ill-fated journey of the steamer Sultana.

John Wilson Dunsmore was born into a maritime family on February 18, 1829, in Jefferson County, New York, the oldest child of Edmund and Belinda (Mallory) Dunsmore. His father was a sailor, and perhaps ship owner, on the St. Lawrence River. The 1840 census notes that all employed members of the household were engaged in 'navigation of canals, lakes [or] rivers.' John enlisted in the US Marines in 1846 for three years and served on a navy gunboat during the Mexican War. He returned to New York and married Cyrena Emmons on July 25, 1849.

The newlyweds took up farming in Jefferson County before moving to Michigan, probably Eaton County where most of his family had recently settled. By 1860, he and Cyrena were living in Berlin Township, Ionia County with four young children and John was working as a lumberman. In July 1863, provost officials included thirty-three-year-old lumberman John W. Dunsmore in the list of the township's military age men subject to any draft should volunteering not meet the state's quota. They also noted his Mexican War service as a US Marine.

Dunsmore enlisted in December 1863 as two major recruiting efforts came together. The Michigan Engineers needed to recruit additional men as part of the effort to fill up the regiment's strength to the newly-authorized 1800 men – twelve companies of 150 men – for a volunteer engineer regiment. At the same time, state and federal officials were aggressively recruiting in response to President Lincoln's October call for 300,000 more men to serve three years, either as volunteers or drafted if necessary. As enticement, a federal bounty of \$302 was offered, supplemented by local governments eager to meet their quota. More than 800 men enlisted in the Michigan Engineers in this late 1863 effort, almost 400 of them in Grand Rapids and nearby towns. Dunsmore travelled to Grand Rapids, enlisted for three years, and was eventually assigned to Company I.



ABOVE: Western & Atlantic RR. Dunsmore was captured near Acworth, just south of Allatoona, GA. (Map by Sherman Hollander)

The recruits were moved in groups by rail through Nashville to the regimental headquarters at Bridgeport in northeastern Alabama, where the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad crossed the Tennessee River. From Bridgeport, Dunsmore was sent to join his company building nearby blockhouses for railroad defense. Company I's work included several blockhouses defending bridges over Crow Creek north of Stevenson, Alabama and four more guarding a large bridge over Running Water Creek near Whiteside, Tennessee, east of Stevenson. In June 1864, most of the regiment's companies, including Dunsmore's, shifted to blockhouse construction along the Western and Atlantic railroad between Chattanooga and Sherman's army moving on to Atlanta. In July and August, most of Company I was stationed in the vicinity of Cartersville, Georgia working on nearby bridges in detachments.

In August 1864 Confederate cavalry under General Joseph Wheeler struck several points along the Western and Atlantic RR, Sherman's key supply route. Though little long-term damage was done, the detachments of Michigan Engineers working along the railroad were among those exposed to attacks, frequent alarms and several casualties, Dunsmore included. He was shot in both wrists and taken prisoner near Acworth, Georgia, a railroad station between Allatoona and Big Shanty (present-day Kennesaw), probably on August 18.

continued on p. 4

THE ENGINEER & MECHANIC is published by General Orlando M. Poe Camp 444 six times annually with occasional special editions. THE E & M is distributed to all Brothers of Camp 444, and various Department of Michigan Officers, National Officers, and friends of Camp 444. All Camp, Department, and General Orders and SUVCW communications are sent to all Camp 444 Brothers by other means without delay, and thus are not included herein.

ESSAYONS

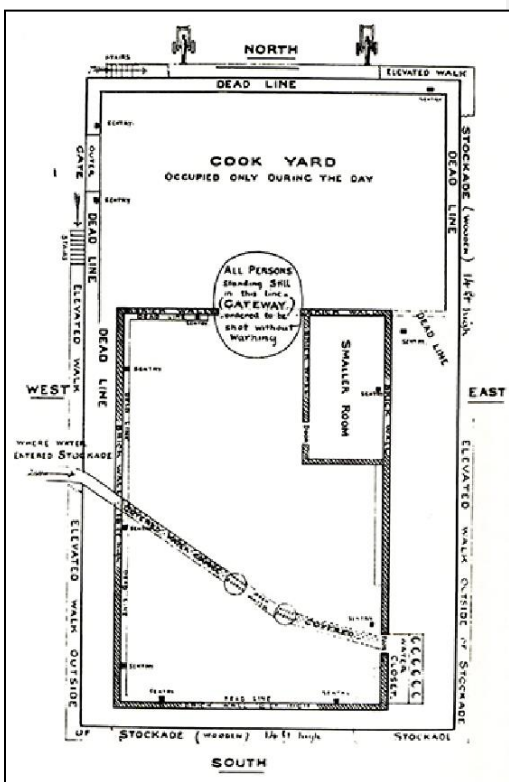
JOHN W. DUNSMORE CONTINUED

Following his capture, Dunsmore and many other Union soldiers were sent to the Confederate prison camp in Cahaba, Alabama. Also known as Castle Morgan, it was a major POW facility by 1864. At least one source suggests that Dunsmore was also confined in Andersonville prison, but based on his own accounts, it is more likely that he remained at Cahaba until March 1865.

Many of the Union prisoners at Andersonville and Cahaba were sent to Union-held Vicksburg to be formally exchanged beginning in March 1865. They were arranged into contingents by their home state and sent north on contracted steamers. More than 2000 former Union POWs were loaded onto the overcrowded Sultana and on April 24 the boat left Vicksburg. The Sultana's boiler burst, and the ship was destroyed by the explosion and fire north of Memphis early on April 27. Of the estimated 2300 individuals on board, at least 1700 died, including at least four from the Michigan Engineers. Three from the regiment are known to have survived the Sultana: Dunsmore, Absalom Hatch and Lt. John Earl.



ABOVE: Running Water Creek - Company I constructed 4 blockhouses at this important Nashville and Chattanooga bridge in the Spring of 1864. Dunsmore might have reached his company in time to be among those working on the site. (Miller, Photographic History)



ABOVE: Cahaba Prisoner of War Camp - Dunsmore was confined in this POW camp in Cahaba, Alabama. In March 1865, many of the prisoners were formally exchanged through Vicksburg and at least 800 of them perished in the Sultana disaster. This image is sourced from the Cahaba Federal Prison in Encyclopedia of Alabama.

Dunsmore was sleeping on an upper deck and survived the explosion. With the ship on fire, he and others jumped into the water. Struggling, he nearly drowned in an eddy while swimming for shore. Eventually he was pulled from the water by a Black Union soldier stationed at nearby Fort Pickering. Dunsmore was treated in the Memphis Gayoso Hotel for strain and injuries to his right foot and then sent north to Camp Chase near Columbus, Ohio. Camp Chase was a major processing center in the western theater for Union soldiers, including many of those who had been held in Confederate POW camps.

Eventually Dunsmore was sent to Detroit and discharged there in early June. The war was over, but its effects remained. Dunsmore was granted an invalid soldier's pension in 1875.

John and Cyrena remained in Ionia County for several years, but then moved north in about 1874 to the new sawmill settlement of Summerfield in Clare County. They are listed in the 1880 census as living with six of their children in Summerfield Township, John working as a carpenter and probably also farming with his older sons. Late that year, John purchased 166.04 acres from the US government in the township's Section 2, along the Clare and Missaukee County line. Descendant Cynthia Bartman still lives on this land that her great-great-grandparents homesteaded more than 140 years ago.

John was active in the local Democratic party, served as a grand jury member and continued to farm and log. He also was a member of the Grand Army of the Republic, likely Bradley Post 221 in Harrison.

continued on p. 6

Per SUCVW General Order No. 7 – Series 2021-2022: Individuals attending events hosted by the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, by virtue of their attendance, agree to the usage of their likeness in the Banner, any Camp or Department Newsletter, any SUCVW website and/or on any SUCVW Social Media outlet, promotional brochures, or any other SUCVW material.

JOHN W. DUNSMORE CONTINUED

Son Nayhem struggled with alcohol (apparently as a result of being drugged in a local saloon), was judged to be insane, and sent to the Northern Michigan Asylum. He recovered within months and came home in late 1883.

At some point John temporarily moved to the Upper Peninsula with Nayhem and the census for 1900 lists them as farming in Bates, southern Iron County. Family accounts also place the two working in the timber industry near Houghton County's Sidnaw. Cyrena remained in Clare County with two of their youngest adult children while John was temporarily in the UP.

John Dunsmore died on July 19, 1908, in Summerfield from cancer of the upper right jaw. He was followed by Cyrena on March 6, 1910. Family, members of Camp 444 and local historians are attempting to confirm their burial location and ensure that his grave is appropriately marked.

John's younger brother Albert (1845-1929) served in the 10th Michigan Cavalry during the last two years of the war. Brother Edmund (1830-1874) served in the US Navy in the mid-1850s and enlisted in April 1858 for another three years. Records aren't clear as to whether his service continued into the war.



ABOVE: This is photo of the ill-fated steamer Sultana was taken during a stop at Helena, Arkansas on April 26, 1865. Dunsmore was on board and might have been among those pictured here. (Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

SULTANA REMEMBERED

The Sultana disaster quickly faded from public attention amid the coverage of President Lincoln's death and surrender of Confederate armies. In recent decades, several historians have begun to give it the attention it deserves. They all rely heavily on the 1892 book by Chester Berry, Sultana survivor from the 18th Michigan Infantry. Berry made a herculean effort to identify the dead and survivors to the extent possible in the absence of complete boarding lists. He also assembled accounts from 134 others who survived the disaster, which collectively tell a very gripping story of their POW experience as well as the Sultana disaster. Accounts by both Dunsmore and Hatch are included among the more than thirty by Michigan soldiers. Berry's own 18th Michigan lost at least thirty-one men on the Sultana, the heaviest death toll among Michigan units.

Berry, Chester. *Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors*. Lansing, Mich: Darius D. Thorp, 1892. Also reprinted with an introduction by David Madden, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 2005.

J. W. DUNSMORE & A. N. HATCH'S SULTANA ACCOUNTS

The accounts of 1st Michigan Engineers John W. Dunsmore and Absalom N. Hatch were included in Rev. Chester Berry's "Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivor" published by Darius D. Thorp in 1892. Those accounts are written in the original transcript as follows:

JOHN W. DUNSMORE

I ENLISTED in the service of the United States at Ionia, Ionia county; Mich., December 25, 1863, in Company I, 1st Regiment Michigan Engineers and Mechanics, and joined the regiment at Bridgeport, Tenn. Was captured at a small place called Ackworth, August 8, 1864, and taken to the Cahaba prison. In March I was taken to Vicksburg and put on board the "Sultana." Her boiler exploded when about ten miles above Memphis. At the time H. C. Aldrich and myself were lying on one of the upper decks, near the starboard wheel-house. He said, "What shall I do, I cannot swim?" I replied, "Yon have got to." I got two blinds for him from a window and he went overboard. I followed him as quickly as

DID YOU KNOW?...

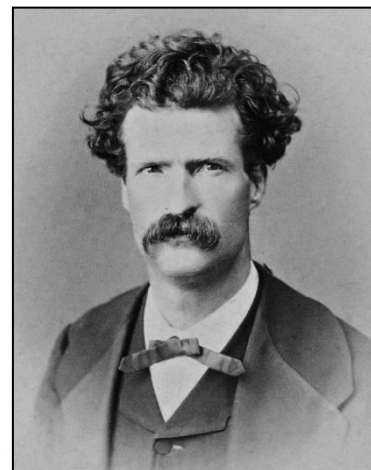
MARK TWAIN WAS A CONFEDERATE SOLDIER

Most readers are very well aware of the man named Samuel Clemens, more famously known as Mark Twain, the great American writer, humorist, publisher, lecturer, and entrepreneur. Before Mr. Twain was all of the aforementioned things, he was a soldier, albeit not for very long.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born on 30 November 1835, his birth coinciding with the return of Halley's Comet on its usual visit every 75 years. Young Samuel grew up in Hannibal, MO, working as a printer's apprentice and typesetter after dropping out of school in 5th Grade when his father passed away. At 18 years of age, he moved to work as a printer in newspapers in New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Eventually, Samuel came home to Missouri in 1857, taking up the vocation of a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi.

His occupation of a riverboat pilot came to a halt with the onset of the Civil War in

continued on p. 10



ABOVE: Mark Twain in 1867 (Photo source: Library of Congress)

DUNSMORE & HATCH SULTANA ACCOUNTS CONTINUED

possible. While I was swimming for dear life, a man called to me and asked for a chew of tobacco. I started to swim for the timber and was caught in an eddy and nearly drowned. When I got out of it I could see the lights of Memphis, but could not reach the dock, and finally was pulled out by a colored guard at Fort Pickens. Was sent from there to "Camp Chase," Ohio, and was given a furlough. I was discharged at Detroit, June, 1865.

Occupation, farming. Postoffice address, Harrison, Clare county, Mich.

ABSALOM N. HATCH

I WAS born in Steuben county, New York, March 8, 1839. Enlisted at Saginaw, Mich., November 11, 1861, Company F, 1st Regiment Michigan Engineers and Mechanics. Was captured near Huntsville, Ala., May 5, 1864, and confined in a prison at Cahaba, Ala., also at Marion, Miss.

I was put on board the "Sultana" too weak to care what became of me, but the air from the river, with the sweet crackers and other dainties provided by the ladies, seemed to put new life into me. I began to realize that I was on my way home after a prison life of ten and one-half months.

On the night of the disaster I did not lie down until the boat loosed from her moorings at the coal barge near midnight, and then found that some comrade had occupied my place or rather the one that I had selected on the boiler deck. There was no other way than to find another, a task easier thought of than accomplished, but which I proceeded to do. I first explored the boiler deck, then cabin and hurricane decks, but all were full. I then went below and out in front of the boilers, near the flagstaff on the bow, and rolled myself up in a blanket, between coils of rope. Had just gone to sleep when the explosion occurred. Several men ran over me and jumped into the river before I could get on my feet. I stayed on the boat until the wheel or covering on the left hand side began to topple into the boat, when I jumped in the river with an oak scantling (2x4) for company, floated within three miles of Memphis and was finally picked up by a boat just at peep of day.

The sight while on the boat, previous to leaving it, brings a shudder even to this late day.

P. S.—Yours found me just attacked with erysipelas, wrote off what you find on this sheet; the next morning both eyes were swollen shut, have just got around again. Would have written more if I had been well. Present occupation is that of farming. Post-office address, Ellington, Tuscola county, Mich.