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Tampa is a BUM Place: The Letters of First Sergeant Henry A. Dobson in 1898

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When soldiers marched off to fight, they often communicated with their families by writing letters. On their way to the front, during lulls in the action, and even when sick at camp, soldiers described their experiences. They also tried to reassure loved ones that they were brave and could face danger, even though they preferred to be home. These letters serve as valuable documents offering insight into soldiers’ daily existence and struggles. Many families saved correspondence sent home by their sons. The Dobsons of Washington, D.C., were one such family. Their son, First Sergeant Henry A. Dobson, wrote many letters and postcards to his parents describing his experiences during the Spanish-American War. Between May 31 and July 28, 1898, Henry A. Dobson sent letters to his mother and father discussing his health, condition of the food and water, and diseases such as yellow fever and typhoid fever. Health-related subjects provide a theme running throughout most of his letters and postcards. Dobson wanted to share almost everything with his parents including his medical problems, but he also needed to reassure them that he was fit for duty and did not want to be discharged. He obviously took his job as first sergeant seriously. His letters contain gems of information about his daily work schedule and observations of the world around him during his stay in Tampa en route to Cuba.
Henry A. Dobson was born June 7, 1878, the youngest son of Dr. and Mrs. Hervie Dobson of Washington, D.C. He had two brothers, William and Alle, and a sister, Helen (“Dot”). He attended local public schools, and as a sixteen-year-old high school student he “was a member of the Ordway Rifles, Co. D, 4th Battalion, District National Guard, rising to the rank of Sergeant. He won a medal for competitive drill, also one in target practice, and earned a sharpshooter’s cross.”

As an adult, Dobson had a light complexion, brown eyes, light hair, and stood about five feet seven inches. He listed his family’s home address as 110 Eleventh Street Northeast, which was on Capitol Hill. After high school, he accepted a position with the Patent Office, joined the Sons of Veterans and became “an active member of the Eastern Presbyterian Church and Sunday-school.” As America geared up for war, Dobson mustered in as a First Sergeant, Company D, First District of Columbia (Infantry) Volunteers on May 13, 1898. He was one month shy of his twentieth birthday. While Dobson was in the military, his brother Will worked as a missionary in China.

Henry was miserable most of his tour of duty due to his health, which was generally poor throughout his service. Substandard food and water contributed to his sick stomach, along with other medical ailments. His lack of money to purchase good food was a constant problem. In his
first correspondence, dated May 31, 1898, he discussed the dreadful conditions en route to Tampa: “Not well, water too much like compound cathartic whether boiled or not. Broke, – stomach could not hold bacon, to[o] fat, had to buy bread and milk, that and the ride up drains me out. Can you help me at all? If so I don’t know where you would send it yet. Pretty tough here, no water, no food.”

His next letter, written two days later, mentioned food three separate times. In this four-paragraph, two-page letter to his mother, Dobson wrote: “Food still poor. Poor food is making men cross, doubles my work, triples it. I am always tired now. Would give my years pay though to get one square meal at the N.W. corner of our table.”

Occasionally, Dobson was able to obtain better food, relatively speaking. “We had excellent stew for supper,” he wrote on June 6. “The boys called it ‘clear-up’ as it contains 3 days scraps. Hardtack and black coffee completed supper! That sentence ought to copy-righted; it’s always true. I was va[c]cinated today the boys call it branding, it’s sore alright (i.e., my arm is sore). The boys are catching fish lately rather large and nice.” Additional comments about food and his health in this letter were positive. “I received Dot’s letter and Papa’s also the ‘dough’ which I believe saved me from a severe attack of sickness, because I ate, ate, ate plain food though steak, eggs, potatoes, etc. My stomach is getting much better now, and I think it will be O.K.”

Dobson’s next letter, six pages written June 12, was very optimistic and mentioned his health only once. “Well, my stomach is getting much better,” he claimed, “thanks to my being able to process something better than bacon.”

A postcard addressed to his mother three days later mentioned his stomach problems, along with something new: “I am in Room of Y.M.C.A., closing time. Will write sure tomorrow and explain. O.K. Stomach O.K. arm very sore and swollen to wrist – – its taking.” By June 18, he appeared to be in poor spirits. In a six-page letter, he poured out his heart to his mother:

I have just spent my last cent or rather dollar to have one of my front teeth quieted – Dr. Cowart on Franklin St – he took out a thimble full of matter, had to take out old filling, put in by Tommy Songster. It occurred 10 minutes ago...I have not slept for two nights on account of that tooth. I’ve got to go again Monday to have it finished – another “William” – where it will come from, I don’[t] know. Regardless of what the papers say, the food is miserable, for 6 days I have been living on one meal per-day, having to buy that one. Once in a while we get something good. Very seldom. Coffee rank; have not touched any for 10 days, except to taste it...I didn’t say anything about it before, but I took 1 cubic inch of my own right heel out the other day. It was terrible. I had to walk. But I treated it carefully and it has stopped hurting and the Surgeon says will not bother me anymore . . . My arm is getting very well thank you, swelling all gone except in immediate vicinity of wound. I’m glad it was done – also glad it is over.

I’m broke ‘ can you help me at all. Its a long ways to pay-day I’m afraid. I should not have sent money home this time while my stomach is weak. I’ll try and borrow some some where.

Another six-page letter to his mother followed, on June 23:

I am better. We changed cooks yesterday and the result is apparent, good food including bacon. He, Yratman, cooks bacon so that is it fine. My stomach seems well. Night before last I was carried to the Hospital with the strangest illness I have had a sick – headache and a weakness that was awful. But they got my stomach cleaned cleaned out, (I vomited scrapes of Bacon that I know I ate at Camp Alger, and lots of grease, etc.) Now I feel better, internally, than at any time since leaving home. I’ve got some cuts on my feet, of course. But they don[’]t count – nothing to speak of.
In the same letter, Dobson discussed sickness, yellow fever or typhoid fever, in the Tampa camps, but tried to reassure his mother everything was all right. “You people must not be worried at any reports of sickness from here,” he reassured her. “There has been no real sickness at all here, in our regiment, only cramps etc., nothing bad. Very healthful place it seems. If I get taken sick-bad—I’ll telegraph or if I’m not able Wooldridge or the ‘Captain’ will so never worry.”

The next day, in a postcard to his father, Dobson again mentioned his health. “Just got ‘registered’ at P.O. In Tampa and off to get tooth fixed – had to wait. “Apparently his family had been so concerned about his health that they may have asked him to obtain a discharge from the military. “Get discharged?” he wrote, “Not a bit of it. Stomach getting well will write more tonight.”

A postcard to his mother, dated June 29, put to rest any notion of getting discharged from the service: “If papa thinks I was a disch,” Dobson wrote, “He has forgotten what Dobsons are made of. I’ll come home with the boys.”

A two-page letter written the same day only briefly mentioned his health: “Don’[t] worry about me. I’m getting stronger now that my stomach has settled.”

In a postcard to his father on July 2, Dobson reported he had received a package of food from his parents: “I am feeling O.K. Box fine. Bread – Beef Butter – Cherries – Dates all O.K.”

In a postcard written July 4, while aboard the transport ship Catania, Dobson wrote he felt better. “Don’t worry about me,” Dobson reassured his mother again, on July 9, “Because I’m O.K. – never felt physically better.”

Henry Dobson cared deeply for his men, and mentioned them often in his letters and postcards. Even when he was ill, he did not want to let them down. As a first sergeant, he was responsible for their well-being. Writing reports, drilling his men and making sure everything ran smoothly left him little time to eat his meals, bathe, or wash his clothes. In a letter dated June 2, he discussed how the poor quality of food affected his soldiers, how they were coming along, and how he felt about the officers. “Poor food is making men cross, doubles my work, triples it,” Dobson complained. “I’m always tired now. But my non-coms. are learning and it will be easier after a while. I hope. Officers treat me as if I wore stripes as far as possible. Very nice.”

Dobson constantly tried to reassure his parents his stomach was better and insisted he would continue with his men. “My stomach is getting much better now, and I think it will be O.K.,” he wrote June 6. “Tell papa that I’ll go with the regiment, and won[’]t be left behind.”

In his letter of June 12, he described a typical Tampa work day to his mother:
Here is my program for the day. Get up at 5:00 A.M., wake up the boys at First Call 5:10, get them into line at 5:25, Reveille have them in uncover while the band plays “the Star Spangled Banner,” Call the roll at 5:30, take my report to the commanding officer, give the company “sitting-up exercises” for 10 minutes. Have the Sick Report made out and sent to the Hospital. March the company back to quarters, dismiss them. Fall them in again at 6:00 for Breakfast, march them to the kitchen have them fed, there try to eat my own breakfast and at the same time make out and deliver to headquarters my morning report and mess report for breakfast. This has to be done by 6:50 because at that time First Call for Drill sounds and I have to get the boys ready for assembly at 7:00 when I form the company and we drill before 10A.M. when the bathing is ordered stopped till 6 P.M. Then the streets and tents are cleaned under my direction, and presently it is 11:30 and I have to answer First Sergeants Call at headquarters. There at 12. Comes mess, and I mean the weather is so hot that you feel flattened to the ground. At 1:30 comes Noncommissioned officers school. At 3:30 P.M. drill with the same performance till 5:00. Mess at 5:30. Same work, including mess-report to head-qr’s. Then at 6:00 comes 1st Call for Retreat and Inspection, get the boys ready; at 6:10 form company. Inspection and Roll call; dismissal. Nothing more until 9:00 when the company is formed once more for roll-call, then at 9:30 Taps, and I must see that all lights go out.

Mixed in with all that I am supposed to wash myself, clothes, dishes, make details, and passes, and answer the thousand-and-one worrying questions of 75 men...Well I suppose that I ought to be satisfied, since Uncle Sam pays me $8.40 extra for the extra work per mo[nth].

In the same letter, Dobson claimed conditions were much better, which had improved morale. “This is a nice campground, good bathing 10 rods from our tents ‘Tampa Bay’ Drinking water at the company street, and a breeze. The boys are a great deal happier than they were and everything seems much brighter that it did.” In a letter to his mother June 18, he claimed to be popular with his men, but had a problem with one of them. This particular soldier irritated him enough to write: “Our good boys like me better than ever. But there is one man who if I see turn around in battle I’ll battle I’ll shoot right away – he thinks I’m down on him and is revengeful. Wait till he threatens once more. I’ll have him court-martialed. All the boys dislike him for his actions toward me but I’m O.K. never fear.” In the same letter, he mentioned a Mr. Ritchey, who might have been an officer or a soldier in his regiment. Mr. Ritchey also received mail from home and the two must have shared their correspondence.

On June 29, Dobson was busy and worried about his regiment which was going to lose some of its men. “Lost one sergeant and seven privates by transfer to the U.S.V. Signal Corps we’re getting short,” he observed.

In a long letter written on June 18, Dobson went into great detail about a horse stampede. This frightening encounter provided an example of the courage his men exhibited. Dobson was very proud of his men and how they handled themselves during the stampede. According to his description, the stampede was likely the most hazardous event the D.C. volunteers had experienced up to that point in the Tampa camp:

Perhaps you read of [the] stampede the other night. That, showed what the companies were. The boys were all asleep. I was writing when I heard the peculiar roar of the horses hoofs. I know what it was and proceeded – in my blue shirt – to the captains tent and awakened him. A moment later came the crash of the fence and the cry of the sentinel “guard no. 6” followed by the “bang” of his rifle sounding the alarm. In an instant all was confusion, the trumpets sounded – the call “To Arms” and men came springing from their tents to answer their first call at night. In 30 seconds I
had on pants, shoes-(unlaced), hat and belt, another 30 seconds and my men were in line and I was calling the [muster] roll – that quieted the boys. Meanwhile my cooks with excellent presence of mind started large fires to keep off the rushing animals. Others followed their example and camp was safe on the coral side. But the horses circled the camp and entered the officers street, and came plunging down it [and] they passed within 2 yards of me and the right of our company. But my boys never moved not a man. The Co. in front broke and ran back into our street. But my men are men. We expect another stampede any time as some one is keeping the mules excited at night. If they get loose-well I hope not.  

Dobson enclosed a small map he drew, showing where the stampede took place, the location of the streets, and where the tents were located. This visual added to the high drama of the moment. He and his men, he claimed, exhibited discipline during a life-threatening and chaotic situation. It took courage not to panic like the others.

Henry had good and bad days in Tampa. On bad days, when he was homesick, lonely or ill, everything bothered him. On June 18, he described a visit to the dentist, the bad food, and the poor quality of available fruit. He talked of home and eating at the family dinner table. In the same letter, Dobson provided his parents with a vivid description of Tampa and the immediate vicinity of his camp, including a map:
Tampa is, collectively speaking, a BUM place. Its map is like this. [He drew a map showing the Tampa Bay Hotel with the comment “Nice” below it, and indicating the location of the New York and District of Columbia camps and where his was situated.] Our camp [is] on the right. Coral behind, water filled with glass before sun [shines] on top. Sand beneath 2nd N.Y. on our site 5th Md on [the] other, total – rather bum, dotted line – the way I go to swim, old sunken tug (x) water very salty[24], 20 ft deep at tug, bottom good – informal assemblies morning and night. The water in front of [the] camp is shallow and filled with shells, . . . iron, glass and other hardware.

When he had time, Dobson was able to get away from the camp to go swimming. He probably envied high ranking officers and war correspondents, most of whom were quartered at the nearby opulent and luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel. In the sea of camps, the hotel appeared almost as an island of wealth and status. While the more fortunate stayed at the hotel, the soldiers had to “rough it.”

In letters to his parents, Dobson recorded other interesting experiences he had while at the Tampa camp. Since he was from Washington, D.C., Spanish moss was an unfamiliar sight. On June 12, he wrote, “I am lying under a live-oak, from whose massive branches hang the famous ‘Hanging Moss.’” In the same letter, he described conditions in his tent once the summer rains began. “The rainy season started in yesterday evening, came down by bathtubs full. Our ‘Pup Tents’ make excellent shower baths, sprayed the water all over you.” On June 23, he mentioned the rain again. “The rainy season is on us sure. It rained 8 times today. It Clears, Rains, Clears, Rains, Clears, etc. all the time.” One of his most memorable experiences in Tampa was seeing a beautiful rainbow:

I saw a strange and beautiful sight this evening. It was while we were standing at inspection (which takes the place of dress parade); we face the east and it is just before the sun leaves us in the strange dark twilight of the south. A few clouds had come into view, and presently, right before us there appeared a beautiful clear, full arched, rainbow, this above it another and above that still another – a triple bow. But then the strange part came. The lower and brighter bow became four or rather a quadruple repetition of the colors. The bow itself remained unchanged but beneath it were narrow lines of color added to it in regular order, four times repeated the violet at the bottom a. third bow, b. second, c. original. [He drew the rainbow] d., e., f. three perfect little bows blended with the c. Although it was the most beautiful “sky piece” I have ever seen.

Dobson celebrated his twentieth birthday on June 7, 1898, while in Tampa. He was far away from family and friends and was not pleased with his surroundings. “Well this is the strangest birthday I’ve ever had, sand, heat, flies, gnats, hunger, dirt, and an intense desire to walk up our front steps at 100-11 N.E.”

Little information survives about Henry Dobson’s experiences after he left Tampa. His last letter was dated July 28, 1898, when he was at the battle San Juan Heights, Santiago de Cuba. An eleven-page, typed, single-spaced letter written by Dr. Dobson September 20, to Henry’s brother Will, a missionary in China, discussed several letters received after July 28, but they are missing from the family collection. Newspaper clippings saved by Dobson’s family, along with his military service record, provide the only information on his activities after that date. An undated article reported the locations where he had served: “Camp Alger, Va., Chickamauga, Tampa, Port Tampa, Key West, Siboney, Juragua, Santiago and San Juan. He fought in the trenches and under fire before Santiago, and was present at the surrender.”
According to Dr. Dobson’s letter to Will, Henry Dobson and his men returned from Cuba to Camp Wikoff, located in Montauk Point, Long Island, New York, via the transport ship Hudson. This was the same location where Colonel Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders were sent after the Cuban campaign. According to his father, Dobson had injured his back while boarding the transport.

On the transport, he volunteered to care for the sick and was with the surgeons and others on the upper deck. He was taken with a chill when two days out and could not eat the stinking meat and musty hard tack, and he wrote me, “lived on four ounces of hand me outs from the pantry – starved[,]” as he said, so when reached Montauk he was very weak. On going ashore on . . . [August] 27th, he was so weak that he was relieved from duty and a doctor was called.\(^30\)

Dobson’s health grew worse. Camp Wikoff had been erected almost overnight and was not up to the task of handling so many sick soldiers. At the camp, there was much confusion and lack of a coordinated effort. Henry finally saw a doctor, who diagnosed his condition as malaria. Sadly that diagnosis was incorrect. Dobson had typhoid fever. His mother traveled to Montauk to care for him.

Mrs. Dobson found her son in poor condition. She reported that “since leaving Santiago he had not had a change of clothing nor a bath,” and she proceeded to bathe him.\(^31\) Dobson was moved to the Shinnecock, bound for New York City, the next day. His mother was so persistent that she was allowed to go along with him.\(^32\) Mrs. Dobson realized her son was getting worse during the trip. “He was delirious during the night and would call ‘attention company,’ and call the roll from memory, the only sergeant that could do so in the regiment.”\(^33\) On September 7, 1898, he was taken to St. Peter’s Hospital, a civilian facility in Brooklyn, New York.\(^34\) His condition grew worse immediately upon arrival. “Here mama sat by his side for two hours and no one came near him,” Dr. Dobson wrote Will. “Finally they undressed him and put on underclothes. At five o’clock they ordered her out of the building.”\(^35\) Mrs. Dobson was incensed and requested to be with her son, but hospital personnel balked. She tried again, but to no avail. Mrs. Dobson had him moved from St. Peter’s to the Long Island College Hospital on September 9, 1898.\(^36\)

By the time Dobson arrived on Long Island, he was gravely ill. According to a handwritten medical report in his military service record, he arrived “in a weak delirious state, with a temperature of 103 2/5 degrees.”\(^37\) Mrs. Dobson notified her husband of his condition, and he immediately proceeded to New York to be with his wife and son. Henry Dobson was near death...
when his father arrived. Delirious and incoherent, he had a temperature that fluctuated between 102 and 105 degrees. He died on Sunday, September 11, 1898, at 9:30 in the morning. Dr. Dobson notified the family in Washington, D.C., of his son’s death.

Dobson’s body was brought to the family home, where friends paid their respects. The church service was attended by many people from “The Y.P.S.C.E., Ladies’ Aid, Easton Literary Association, Patent Office, Pay Division, and while others sent flowers, and his company gave a broken wheel.” He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, with military honors provided by men from his company. Dr. Dobson described the burial site in his letter to Will:

His grave is number 5835 A. Go into the grounds until you come to the Hawkins monument on the left hand, almost opposite the mansion. It is the tallest, finest monument in the grounds...Close by him rest five other boys. Maupin, Griffiths, Maddux, Gaskill, and first sergeant Jost, only a year older than Henry. Others will soon be there, for death is after them. It is awful.

Throughout his letter to Will, Dr. Dobson wrote of how his son was truly loved by his men and everyone else. Also, he mentioned that even though Henry was ill at Montauk, he still wrote home. “Henry wrote me when he first came to Montauk, but his ambition to march up the Avenue with his regiment, and at the head of his company, made him conceal his real condition. He deceived all and even himself. No one thought him so ill.”

After Dobson’s death, his sister Dot received a letter from a woman he had met in Tampa. She was impressed by Dobson's intestinal fortitude and deep-rooted faith. While in Tampa, he had struggled to live by his Christian beliefs in the face of temptation. His father wanted to share this information with Will:

Dot has a letter from a Miss Scott at Tampa, who had written her to know if the name she saw in the paper was really Henry. She tells us of his struggles against the temptation to let things go as they might in Tampa, as so many of his men had given themselves up to temptation. She is [a] librarian of the C.E.[Christian Education] at the Y.M.C.A. rooms. He came there, came again, and each time received help and strength and spoke well in the meetings, telling of his trials. She saw him just before he sailed away and said he was happy, having conquered and had organized a society of C. E. This was kept up all the time. It was pretty hard place for a boy like him, but thank God he withstood all and is safe now.

Miss Scott’s letter was a relief and a blessing, confirming he had raised his son to be a man of conviction and integrity. He was proud of Henry and missed him dearly.

First Sergeant Henry A. Dobson, along with many soldiers during the Spanish-American War, lost his life to infectious disease, rather than to combat wounds. According to one historian, “The total number of deaths in the Army from disease and other noncombat causes between the end of April and the end of September [1898] was 2,565; only 365 men had died in action. The total strength of the Army during this period reached 274,717.” Many of these deaths resulted from inadequate preparation to organize and supply the troops with fresh drinking water or food. It was a logistical nightmare. Food was transported by train, where it spoiled when manifests posted outside each car did not accurately reflect the contents. There was not even a master list of what was on each train. The location of latrines near fresh water sources also contributed to the spread of infectious diseases, such as typhoid fever. Government advisors had been very
concerned about the soldiers health even before the war began. They warned the military against sending troops to Cuba during the rainy season, knowing that they would be subjected to the risk of malaria and yellow fever.

A portrait of the last days of Henry Dobson’s life emerges from his letters to his parents, newspaper clippings, his military record, and the lengthy letter from Dr. Dobson to his missionary son in China. All these surviving records make it clear that Henry A. Dobson proudly served his country under difficult and trying conditions and died in service to his country.

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1 Newspaper clipping, n.p., n.d. [1898], Archives, Henry B. Plant Museum, University of Tampa, Tampa, Florida.

2 Henry A. Dobson, Military Service Record, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
3 Newspaper clipping labelled #2, n.p., n.d. [1898], Archives, Henry B. Plant Museum.

4 Henry A. Dobson to Dr. Dobson, May 31, 1897[1898]. All of Henry A. Dobson’s correspondence cited here is deposited in the Archives, Henry B. Plant Museum, University of Tampa, Tampa, Florida.

5 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 2, 1898.

6 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 6, 1898.

7 Henry A. Dobson, to Mrs. Dobson, June 12, 1898.

8 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 15, 1898.

9 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 18 1898.

10 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 23 1898.

11 Henry A. Dobson to Dr. Dobson, June 24, 1898.

12 Henry A. Dobson (postcard) to Mrs. Dobson, June 29, 1898.

13 Henry A. Dobson (letter) to Mrs. Dobson, June 29, 1898

14 Henry A. Dobson to Dr. Dobson, July 2, 1898.

15 Henry A. Dobson to Dr. Dobson, July 4, 1898.

16 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, July 9, 1898.

17 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 2, 1898.

18 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 6, 1898.

19 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 12, 1898.

20 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 18, 1898.

21 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 23, 1898.

22 Henry A. Dobson (letter) to Mrs. Dobson, June 29, 1898.

23 Henry Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 18, 1898.

24 Ibid.

25 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 12, 1898.

26 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 23, 1898.

27 Henry A. Dobson to Mrs. Dobson, June 6, 1898.

28 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson, September 20, 1898.

30 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson.

31 Ibid.


33 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson.

34 Military Service Record.

35 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson.

36 Ibid., and Military Service Record.

37 Military Service Record.

38 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson.

39 Dr. Dobson to Dobson family, September 11, 1898.

40 Dr. Dobson to Will Dobson.

41 Ibid.