

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

William H. Kibble and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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In 1852, a novel that would have a momentous impact on American history was published, and some years later, the same story would play a part in the history of Mount Clemens, Michigan.

The novel was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the story of a slave family which touched the hearts of many and became a touchstone for the abolitionist movement in the United States. Soon after the book was published, a stage version of the story was produced and numerous road companies were introducing the tale to audiences in small town theaters and opera houses across the country. One such production had its home in Mount Clemens.

BIJOU THEATER
 MATINEE AND NIGHT
MONDAY, JULY 21.
 KIBBLE'S
UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
 The only Company with the
 Proper City Equipment.
 Solo Band and Orchestra.
 20 Colored Dancers and Singers. 20
 15 Donkeys, Ponies, Bloodhounds. 15
 Harriet Beecher Stowe's Great Heart
 Story.
 Prices, Matinee, 10c and 25c
 Night, 25c, 35c, 50c
 To see Uncle Tom's Cabin at the Bijou
 will be like seeing an entirely new show.
 Seats on sale beginning at 9 a. m.
 Thursday, July 17th.

An advertisement for the show which appeared in the *Mount Clemens Monitor* on July 18, 1913.

William H. Kibble was born in Pennsylvania in 1867 and began a career in the performing arts with the Leon Washburn circus, in which he was employed as a bareback rider. When Washburn forsook the bigtop in 1880 to organize a road company to perform *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, William Kibble became the manager of the play. He stuck with the show through successive owners until he bought it out and settled in Mount Clemens in the 1890s.

Using Mount Clemens as a home base, Kibble's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* toured throughout the midwest. Each winter, the troupe rehearsed here and kicked off its tour with performances at the **Nelson Opera House** or the **Bijou Theater**. Kibble was proud of the fact that his show used live ponies and dogs for the chase scenes; his newspaper advertisements proudly proclaimed "15 donkeys, ponies, [and] bloodhounds." Also noteworthy for the times was the fact that a black actor named **Gus Collins** played the title role.

A local legend revolves around Kibble's use of live dogs in the show. It was said that treats were used in training the animals, but the dogs would only eat them if they were broken into small pieces. Kibble is supposed to have

arranged with the manufacturer to purchase lots of broken dog biscuits, and the story says that the plant workers would call for the biscuits to be "kibbled" when they received a large order from the Mount Clemens showman. Local lore says that the term "kibble" as used for dog food in such brand names as

"Kibbles 'n' Bits" originates with William Kibble and his orders for broken dog biscuits.

In truth, the use of the term "kibbled" is probably only coincidentally similar to the name of the man who ordered the broken biscuits. The Oxford English Dictionary records the use of the verb "to kibble," meaning to grind coarsely or crush into small pieces, as early as 1826, long before William Kibble was born.

William Kibble sold his *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show in 1916 to his manager, C.E. Ackerman, and it continued under various ownership until the last performance at Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, on April 15, 1926. Kibble remained a resident of Mount Clemens until his death in 1920. He was survived by his wife, Mary, son William R. Kibble, and daughter Clara Rockensuess.

For more information about William Kibble and his Uncle Tom's Cabin show, we recommend:

- Cady, Smith H. "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Brought Fortune to Mt. Clemens Man," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, October 7, 1927 p.1.
- Stout, Wesley Winans. "Little Eva is Seventy-Five," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 8, 1927, pp.10ff.
- "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, July 29, 1921, p.5.
- "Our Neighbor" [obituary of William Kibble], *Mount Clemens Monitor*, March 26, 1920, p.1, col.5.