

Land, Sea, Air / Ships & Boats

Capt. Michael Healy and the Revenue Cutter *Bear*

By Jennifer Houdek

Among the great sea captains to sail the waters of Alaska, Captain Michael Healy bore the nickname “Hell Roaring Mike,” an appropriate moniker for a man with a vicious temperament who disciplined his crew with brutal force, especially when he was drinking. During his command of the famed U.S. Revenue Cutter *Bear*, Healy was at once respected and hated, and his behavior eventually led to a formal court martial. Yet, he also served the Territory with valor, dispensing justice fairly, and handling his duties ably. Also, in a time when only white men were permitted to serve as captain in the Revenue Cutter Service, Healy distinguished himself by reaching such a rank even though he was the grandson of a slave woman, and he himself was born into slavery on a Georgia plantation. By necessity, he climbed the ranks by keeping his heritage cloaked.

The captain’s father, Michael Morris Healy, was an Irish immigrant who entered America through Canada. He became prosperous through Georgia land lotteries after the War of 1812, and became a plantation owner, growing cotton near Macon. Healy’s mother, Mary Eliza (Clark) Healy, of biracial heritage, had been a domestic slave who belonged to plantation owner Sam Griswold. The emigrant Healy purchased her in 1829. The couple fell in love and married with full knowledge that their union was taboo. Any of their children would be born into slavery, according to Georgia codes.

Born Sept. 22, 1839, Michael was the fifth of ten children born to the couple. Although the siblings were one-quarter African-American, they also were subject to Georgia’s “one drop” law, which held that any person with even one drop of black blood was considered black and therefore a slave. Since the Healy children were viewed as “property,” they were not allowed to attend school in the South. Their parents, determined to obtain a quality education for the children, searched for schools in the North. Their attempts were thwarted until they found a Quaker school in New York that was willing to accept the

three eldest sons. After graduation, the young men continued their schooling at Holy Cross College in Massachusetts.

In 1850, with the death of both of his parents, Healy joined his brothers in Massachusetts, however, four years later, his brothers, worried about Healy's wild behavior, sent him to France. Going overseas only worsened the situation for the strong-headed teen, and in July 1855, Healy left France and joined a British ship en route to Calcutta. He was 15 years old.

Onboard the ship, Healy's talents were recognized and he was quickly elevated through the ranks. He worked on merchant vessels for ten years before applying to the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. Then under the U.S. Department of the Treasury, that branch of service would be folded into the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915.

After two years of service, and with help from his family contacts, Healy applied for and received a commission as third lieutenant from President Abraham Lincoln in January 1864. A week later, he married Mary Jane Roach.

While Michael chose a life of adventure as a seaman, his siblings were distinguishing themselves in other ways. Among the Healy children were James, who became the first black bishop in the Catholic Church; Patrick, a founder and first president of Georgetown University; Alexander, a priest, seminary director and, eventually rector of the Boston Cathedral; and three sisters, all of whom became nuns. One of them, Eliza, was elevated to Mother Superior. As light-skinned biracial people, the Healys chose to live within a white society so they could more easily achieve their goals. Their family heritage was not well known until well after their deaths, and they are today recognized as leaders in America's black history.

After marriage, Michael Healy's first post took the couple to the East Coast. However, by the mid-1870s, they were transferred to San Francisco, homeport for Revenue Cutters that sailed northward to patrol the Alaska coast and Bering Sea. Operating under the authority of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the armed ships enforced maritime law

regarding sealing and fishing, transported school officials and law officers, investigated complaints, and carried passengers, among other varied duties.

In March 1883, Healy was promoted to captain, and three years later, took command of the largest Revenue Cutter in the Arctic service, the *Bear*, a 190.4-foot bark that routinely sailed from Sitka to Kodiak and Unalaska, then spent summers and early falls in the Arctic. According to Robert Browning, Chief Historian for the Coast Guard, during Healy's tenure as captain of the *Bear*, the ship became "a symbol for all the service represents—for steadfastness, for courage, and for constant readiness to help men and vessels in distress."

Aside from its regular patrols, the *Bear* was involved in helping to create a reindeer industry in Alaska, transporting animals and herders from Siberia to Alaska. The ship also was instrumental in saving the lives of many commercial whalers who had become trapped in the ice. Healy's post as the *Bear*'s captain was prestigious—he represented the law in the North—yet Healy's treatment of his crew and his frequent inebriation led to formal investigations twice, in 1890 and 1896.

The *Coast Seamen's Journal* (San Francisco) of February 21, 1894, reported two separate incidents in 1889, both charging Healy with "cruelty perpetrated upon American seamen . . ." The first read, "*BEAR, United States revenue steamer, Captain Healy. Three seamen, Holben, Daweritz and Frandsen, of the American bark Estella charged that while discharging coal into the Bear in the harbor of Oonalaska in June, 1889, Captain Healy, without provocation, ordered them placed in irons and confined in the forepeak of the Bear. Then they were triced up with their hands behind them and their toes barely touching the deck. The punishment lasted fifteen minutes and the pain was most excruciating. They were then tied with their backs to the stanchions and their arms around them for forty-two hours. They were then put ashore and made to shift for themselves. The seamen accused both Captain Healy and Captain Avery of the Estella of drunkenness and gross incapacity; united press condemnation. Healy exonerated by Navy Department.*"

The second report stated: *BEAR 2, United States revenue steamer, Captain Healy. Crew of whaling bark Northern Light refused duty in Port Clarence, June 8, 1889, on account of cruelty from the officers. Captain Healy ordered them all in irons. First-Lieutenant of the Bear was sent aboard the Northern Light to execute the order. Crew triced-up to the skids with arms behind their backs and toes just touching the deck. One man's hands were lashed with hambroline (small cord), as the irons were too small for his wrists; line cut into the flesh three-eighths of an inch. One man fainted from pain and the Bear's doctor had to bring him to. Men were triced up fifteen minutes, suffering untold pain.*

Under the right conditions, tricing was still legal in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, but the charges of Healy's drunkenness while administering discipline worried the naval authorities and members of the Christian Women's Temperance Union. Captain Healy already had earned the name "Hell Roaring Mike" during fights in the saloons of San Francisco. In one attempt to control Healy's drinking, superiors even allowed Mrs. Healy to join her husband on his voyages. Mary and the Healys' adopted son, Fred, accompanied Michael on several trips, and each kept a diary, copies of which may be found in the Alaska State Library and the University of Alaska Anchorage's Consortium Library and Archives.

In the 1890 investigation, Healy was cleared of the charges, however, on June 8, 1896, he was court-martialed and found guilty of seven charges. Asked to speak, Healy delivered these words on his own behalf: "When I am in charge of a vessel, I always command; nobody commands but me. I take all the responsibility, all the risks, all the hardships that my office would call upon me to take. I do not steer by any man's compass but my own."

The guilty verdict landed Healy on shore for four years without pay. He lost command of the *Bear* and fell to the bottom of the captain's list. In 1900, the influx of gold miners to Alaska created a demand for more cutters in service, and that year Healy resumed temporary command, taking the helm of the *McCulloch* for her Alaskan patrols. And once more, Healy returned to his drinking and hell-roaring, even requiring hospitalization in July of 1900. Afterward, he made yet one more attempt to go back to sea, however he had not fully recovered from his last breakdown. At age 64, on Sept. 22, 1903, he

submitted to the mandatory retirement rules. Less than a year later, on Aug. 30, 1904, he died in California.

As for the famous *Bear*, the great flagship made her final voyage into the Bering Sea in 1926, and in 1928 her duties were commissioned to a new cutter, the *Northland*. In 1930, the decommissioned ship played a role in the adventure movie *The Sea Wolf*, then lay in the San Francisco port for a spell as a museum. After refitting in 1934, as the *Bear of Oakland*, the ship sailed under the command of Admiral Byrd in the Antarctic. After WWII, the ship, now the *Arctic Bear*, was back in Canada and in private ownership, then sold again in 1962, when the *Bear* was renovated for service a restaurant and museum in Philadelphia. Finally, in 1963, the great ship met her end. While under tow to Philadelphia, the *Bear* encountered a fierce gale, and she went down on March 19, about 250 miles east of Boston.

And as for Healy, despite a career that was marred by violence and drink, he was respected as an expert seaman and courageous commander of the Revenue Cutters *Chandler*, *Corwin*, *Bear*, *McCulloch* and *Thetis*. Nearly a century after his death, Healy was honored by the military branch in which he served. On June 12, 2001, the U.S. Coast Guard launched a new 420-foot, 16,300-ton icebreaker to join three other research ships in its Polar Class fleet. The ship was christened the *Healy*.

In 2000, the Alaska Humanities Forum awarded a grant to the Alaska Historical Society for the production of a film on Healy's life. Produced by noted West Coast filmmaker Maria Brooks, *The Odyssey of Captain Healy* informs a broad new audience about this important part of Alaska history, and the role of Michael Healy and the Revenue Cutter Service.

LINKS:

More on Captain Michael Healy of the Revenue Cutter *Bear*:

<http://explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/bl-healy.htm>

Revenue Cutter *Bear* History:

http://www.uscg.mil/history/WEBCUTTERS/Bear_1885.html

U.S. Coast Guard Historians Office; Revenue Cutter *Bear*:

<http://www.uscg.mil/history/>

Haze Gray Photo Feature: *The Cutter Bear: Sealer, Rescue Ship, Revenue Cutter, Exploration Vessel, Patrol Ship*

<http://www.hazegray.org/features/bear/>

USS Coast Guard and Mill Valley Masonic Lodge history of Revenue Cutter *Bear*:

<http://mill-valley.freemasonry.biz/bear/>

History of the Revenue Cutter Service:

<http://www.spanamwar.com/USRCS.htm>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about Michael Healy and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **MICHAEL HEALY** or **CUTTER BEAR**

MORE READING:

Bixby, William. *Track of the Bear*. New York: D. McKay Co., 1965.

Report of the Cruise of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Bear and the Overland Expedition for the Relief of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean, from November 27, 1897, to September 13, 1898. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1899.

Unalaska Pride. *The Cutter BEAR, Unalaska, and the Bering Sea Patrol*. Unalaska, Alaska: Unalaska Pride, 1990.

For Juvenile Readers:

Rankin, Robert H. and H. R. Kaplan. *Immortal Bear, the Stoutest Polar Ship*. New York: Putnam, 1970. A biography of the polar ship Bear covering her birth in a Scottish shipyard, her long years as a Coast Guard cutter, and her part in Admiral Byrd's second expedition to the Antarctic.

AUDIO/VIDEO:

The Odyssey of Captain Healy. Maria Brooks, Russ Holcomb, Jason Martineau, Robert W. Cherny, Joe Johnson, Dennis L. Noble, Gerald O. Williams, Douglas Henry Daniels, Johnetta Richards, James O'Toole, Clay Healy Young, Knud Andersen, Nick Wongittilin, and Larry McGee. DVD video, 57 minutes. Waterfront Soundings Productions, 1999. Mike Healy, born a slave on a Georgia plantation, ran away to sea winding up on San

Francisco's Barbary Coast. With the purchase of the Alaska Territory Healy's career took off. Passing as a white man on board the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service's *Bear*, he represented the U.S. government and its justice in the Arctic. He charted and patrolled the treacherous waters of the Bering Sea, confronted the rum-runners and poachers, and foresaw the extermination of marine animals caused by unrestrained harvesting. He contended with the devastation wreaked upon the Eskimos and was instrumental in bringing reindeer to the Arctic. Film includes extensive rare archival footage of arctic conditions and history.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Papers, Michael A. Healy, 1865-1895. Alaska State Library and University of Alaska Anchorage, Library and Archives. This collection on microfilm consists of papers, diaries, scrapbooks, and photographs relative to Healy's activities in Alaska. The first part contains Healy's oath of office, letters and reports to the secretary of the treasury, letters and documents he received, and other records. The second part contains the diary and notes of Healy's adopted son, Fred, on a voyage in the Aleutians (1883), Michael Healy's letterbook (1885-1887), letters of testimony and commendation, scrapbooks, and photographs.

Diaries of Mary Jane and Fred Healy during their travels in Alaska, 1884-1891.

Alaska State Library. Includes diaries of Mary Jane and Fred Healy while accompanying husband and father Michael A. (sometimes Michael J.) Healy of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service during their travels in Alaska.

Diaries, Mary Healy, 1883-1891. University of Alaska Anchorage. This collection on microfilm consists of Mary Healy's diaries which were written on her voyages to Alaska with her husband on the Revenue Steamer *Bear*, and other ships (1883-1884, 1890, 1891). In her diaries, she records events of her trips, the names of other travelers, and her impressions of the various places she visited.

Frank C. Nichols Photograph Collection, 1898-1902. Alaska State Library. Collection includes 91 black-and-white photographs collected and/or taken by Nichols during his trip to and time in Alaska. Included are images of the Cutter *Bear*, Alaskan Natives, camps and boats, sailing ships, steamers, the Yukon and Kobuk Rivers, placer mining activities, individuals, a hand-drawn map of the Koowak [Kobuk] River showing the winter trail of the natives and the prospecting area.

U.S. Revenue Cutter Service Photograph Collection, 1905-1923. Alaska State Library. Collection includes 130 black-and-white photoprints. *Bio/History:* The 190.4' barkentine *Bear*, built in Scotland in 1873, was purchased by the U.S. Government in 1884 for the Greely Relief Expedition. Transferred in 1885 to the United States Revenue Cutter Service, the *Bear* was active in Alaska waters from 1886-1924. From her homeport in San Francisco, the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Bear* usually made annual trips to Alaska with

many ports of call and served on the Bering Sea Patrol for protection of the seal fisheries. In 1905 the *Bear*, under Captain Oscar C. Hamlet, visited Dutch Harbor, Unalaska, Nome, Teller, Diomed Island, Siberia, Kivalina, Kodiak, Sitka and other locations. A letter by Captain Hamlet on this trip describes the diversity of duty including transport of law officers to handle legal matters, school officials to inspect buildings and reindeer herds, carrying passengers, investigating complaints, landing mail, etc. One of the passengers was an Eskimo man looking for a wife. In 1944 the *Bear* was decommissioned, sold in 1948, and sank in 1963 while under tow. [From: Bixby, William. *Track of the Bear*, p. 194-199, N.Y., David McKay Co., 1965.].

Logbooks of Rev. Cutter *Bear*, 1976. Archives, University of Alaska. Logbooks of the *Bear* and the *Corwin*, two ships in the employ of the U.S. Revenue-Cutter Service and early U.S. Coast Guard in the Alaska area.

Samuel J. Call Photograph Collection, 1892-1908. Alaska State Library. Collection of 76 black-and-white photoprints depicts early Aleutian scenics, Eskimos and Eskimo art, tools, villages, graves, a game of blanket toss, lip ornaments, whaling vessels, Chernofski, Oomnak, and Sanak Stations, fur seals, Plover Bay, Siberia, “Tar-Tar’-ock” (guide and interpreter), sled dogs, “Rufe’s Place” (*barabara*, Unalaska). **Bio/History:** Dr. Samuel Johnson Call was born in Missouri in 1858 and lived most of his early years in California. He went to work for the Alaska Commercial Company (headquartered in San Francisco) in 1880 and was sent to Unalaska where he worked for about 5 years. In 1890 he left the Alaska Commercial Company went to work as a company surgeon aboard the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Bear*. He played an active role in the 1892 reindeer acquisition program in Siberia. The *Bear* was based in San Francisco but traveled to Sitka, Kodiak, and spent summers and early falls in the Arctic. In August of 1899, Dr. Call resigned from the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and sometime later went to Nome. There he practiced medicine and served as Quarantine Officer for the Marine Hospital Service and later as City Health Officer of Nome. In 1902 he became Collector and Inspector at the subport of Nome. He left Nome in August 1903 to go back to sea as surgeon on the U.S. Revenue Service Cutter *Thetis* and, later, in 1905, on the *McCulloch*. That year he received a gold medal for his “heroic service” in the whalers’ relief expedition to the Arctic. He was forced to retire for health reasons during 1908 and died in Hollister, California, February 6, 1909, five days before his 51st birthday. [From: “Dr Samuel J. Call,” by Albert Cocke. *Alaska Journal*, v. 4, no. 3, 1974, pp. 181-188.].