

AN UNTREED 'POSSUM: THE LIFE AND WANDERINGS OF THOMAS WILLIAM "POSSUM" MCCOMBS¹

Marvin L. Downing, Ph.D.

The lives of most Americans of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries are unknown now. Those persons often left little or no account of their personal and family activities. However, some scattered materials do relate biographical information regarding a few of those individuals. About 1947, Martin native James Holland McCombs, then a Texas journalist with Time, Inc., recorded for himself and posterity facts about his father Thomas William "Possum" McCombs. Additional information was also contained in correspondence which Holland conducted with his Aunt Jane Porter McCombs Phelan of Trenton, Tennessee, the sister of Thomas.

Those sources support the idea that Thomas McCombs certainly loved to wander. In fact, he was a rather carefree person who moved freely about West Tennessee and later at least Texas and Mexico. Around 1900, he tried to be a husband to an upper class Martin girl, but evidently within six years that approach proved unsatisfactory for "Possum" McCombs, a man who loved gambling, hunting, and travelling. Thereafter, he followed his own pursuits before finally settling down. His activities certainly illustrated a West Tennessean who moved as unrestrained as an untreed opossum.

The ancestors of Thomas McCombs demonstrated both respectability and mobility. Like many other Tennesseans, the McCombs migrated into West Tennessee. His grandfather William "Billy" McCombs, born December 4, 1807 in North Carolina, arrived in Nashville with "a game rooster under one arm and a hound dog under the other." In addition to being a blacksmith, he also fixed guns, reputedly even doing some weapon repairs for Governor Sam Houston. After marrying in January, 1835, Billy and Katherine McCombs settled in the Yorkville area of Gibson County where they became parents of twelve children and where he operated a small foundry and a gunsmith shop. Billy's oldest child Robert McCombs, born November 9, 1835, developed general mechanic skills before serving with Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest in Middle and West Tennessee clashes. After the Civil War he married Frances Holland, and they moved to the Weakley County site now known as Martin. In fact, Robert came to town with his father-in-law Thomas H. Holland who operated a grocery store and sold real estate and livestock there. In Martin, Robert reunited with his Civil War friend George W. Martin, whose relatives founded the settlement. Associated again, those two men built saw and grist mills, the first businesses in the settlement. Robert's solid reputation was enhanced by his heroic but fatal service to the sick and dying in the famous yellow fever epidemic of 1878. For his unselfish actions the city named McCombs Street, now the longest residential street in town, in his honor.²

The Robert McCombses began their family in Martin. Their first child Katherine L. or Kate McCombs, born June 4, 1872, was said to be the first female child born

in the new town. Three years later Thomas William McCombs, born in 1875, received the first names of his grandfathers Thomas Holland and William McCombs. The third child Porter McCombs was born on August 29, 1877, and schooled in Martin before her marriage in 1900 to Walter Bonaparte Phelan of Trenton. After the yellow fever tragedy, Widow McCombs reared her children and some orphaned nieces and nephews by herself. She earned her living by being one of the first school teachers locally. Most of her remaining years were spent in Martin where she was buried after her death in Trenton during 1908.³

Little is known about the early life of Tom McCombs. He was taught by his mother at The Martin Academy, "later Martin's first public school." There he became a close friend of classmate George M. Brooks who served as Martin's mayor for many years. When he was old enough to quit school, he dropped out to take a job. With that income he helped support his mother and assisted his sister Porter through McFerrin Methodist School in Martin. That contribution was contrary to the later image of Tom's being a reckless and irresponsible person. During the Spanish-American War Tom volunteered for duty along with nineteen other Martin residents. He grew into a tall man with an angular body topped by "a straight black forelock" of hair. A cheerful and carefree person most of the time, he spoke softly but "in the easy-flowing, gay vain (sic.) that was characteristics of him."⁴

Early he developed a lifestyle for which he became noted in Martin. At a young age his friends tabbed him "Possum" because he loved to hunt racoons and particularly opossum. He possessed trained dogs that were well above average for fox hunting. He even raced horses throughout the area. Adept at raising game chickens, Possum became "the champion trainer and fighter of gamecocks in all the Obion River Country." He excelled also in shooting dice. Not surprisingly, he was noted for spinning tall tales. In addition, he spent considerable time "roving restlessly about the country," an activity which he pursued even after his marriage. Youngsters liked him for all those traits and for "his amazing generosity" towards them at a local grocery store. Among blacks Possum was noted as "a sportin' man" who handled a pistol superbly.⁵

Perhaps because Possum loved to move around, he entered railroading which reportedly began a twenty-five year career. He may also have gotten the job because he had earlier worked as a freight clerk in Martin during the 1890s. He joined the Illinois Gulf Central Railroad as "the youngest conductor" to be employed. His runs were between Mounds, Illinois, and Jackson, Tennessee, but he lived in the latter because he considered it "a sportin' town."⁶

In the late 1890s, Tom McCombs became interested in teenager Annie Irene Freeman. He only knew her slightly through his sister Porter in part because he was about four years older than Annie. One day while out hunting, he encountered Annie who was lagging behind some other girls also walking in the woods. While he first realized then that she was especially attractive, he did not immediately begin to date her. As will be seen, those two young people were greatly different in their dispositions and lifestyles, but, nonetheless, the two opposites later began to date secretly.⁷

Miss Annie Irene Freeman belonged to the prominent James Evans Freeman

family of Martin. Her folks devoutly adhered to Methodist doctrine and regularly attended Methodist meetings. In fact, the Reverend James Vaughn Freeman, Annie's much older half-brother, became a Presiding Elder of the Memphis Methodist Conference. The Freemans operated a diversified farm in excess of one hundred acres just outside of town on land now comprising the University of Tennessee at Martin campus. "Squire Jim," as James Evans Freeman was called, engaged in agricultural, real estate, governmental, philanthropic, religious, and social matters in the community. Freeman and his second wife Elizabeth "Miss Lizzie," the former Elizabeth Rast of Gardner, raised six children. Annie, born in 1879, was their second child.⁸

Annie was not only "the gentlest and most tractable" of the Freeman children but also "pretty and demure (*sic*)."⁹ "Everybody loved Annie," and it was easy to see why. She exhibited a sweet spirit toward everyone and avoided idle gossip. At McFerrin School she earned good grades, and to the blacks at the Freeman farm "Annie was their pet."

She did not always succeed at being devout, reverent, and ladylike. During a long family devotional prayer, she discovered that a mouse was inside her dress. Although frightened, she grabbed a handful of clothing to contain the rodent. Her unusual restlessness and noise drew a look of strong disapproval from her praying father. Following Squire Jim's "Amen," she screamed loudly. Miss Lizzie then removed the mouse from Annie's stiff death grip.⁹

Tom was most definitely not the preferred choice of the Freemans for Annie. Certainly there were age and social differences between the two young people. Probably the Freemans were most concerned about Possum's general lifestyle and wild reputation. For example, when the local newspaper reported that he had been struck by a thrown or swung object one night in a street near a saloon, the Freemans perhaps thought the face injury more likely resulted from a street fight. While Annie may have admired him as "handsome, gay, reckless, and daring," her folks disagreed. They felt that the nature of his work, his nominal Methodism, and his recreational interests far outweighed his outstanding railroad performance. To the Freemans, he just was not an appropriate prospect for a proper Methodist girl.¹⁰

Predictably Tom and Annie's courtship resulted in a test of wills between the generations. The youths continued their romance against the Freemans' wishes, even becoming serious enough to try eloping. Somehow Squire Jim learned of their plan and stopped them with a rifle. Soon after Annie graduated from McFerrin School, her parents rushed her off to Soule College at Murfreesboro in the hope of ending the liaison.

Possum's action during her absence did not enhance his standing with the Freemans or his own companions. He was edgy and evidently even dangerous. At Mounds, Illinois, a disagreement during a poker game resulted in Possum shooting a man in the arm. Tom's reputation with a pistol was so well known that some folks figured that he only intended to wing his opponent; otherwise, in their opinion, Possum would have seriously wounded the disputant. The law cleared Tom by ruling that he had acted in self-defense. His general irritability must have been obvious because "his fellow railroaders were hoping that Annie would come home from

school."¹¹

Soon Tom and Annie resumed their relationship. She returned to Martin primarily because Squire Jim was seriously ill. Within a short time after his death, the youths resumed their forbidden courtship covertly and then overtly. Their persistence partly wore down the Freeman opposition. Even though no Freeman would sanction the wedding by giving Annie away, Tom and Annie realized it would be "acceptable" for the couple just to slip away. Accordingly, they travelled to Ralston, a little community just east of Martin, where a Methodist minister performed the ceremony.¹²

Under those difficult circumstances the marriage of Tom and Annie McCombs began. Having no time for a honeymoon, they moved into the residence of Mrs. Frances McCombs on Oxford Street in Martin. Moreover, Tom was obligated to the Illinois Central Railroad for his regular night run which kept him away for two days at a time.¹³

A partial and uneasy relationship was established between the Freemans and Tom over several months. It seemed that almost inevitably Freeman offspring and their spouses were drawn back to the Freeman farm. Apparently more adjustments were necessary in Possum's case, but perhaps Miss Lizzie decided to resign herself to his occasional presence. For a short while, Possum also accommodated by being less restless and less inclined to wander. In fact, "Possum at this time was on his best behavior, and he could be an engaging man when he wished to please a woman." However, he only occasionally visited the Freemans, for he felt out of place. Possibly he wondered if other Freeman sons-in-law were also somewhat uncomfortable with Miss Lizzie's strict standards.¹⁴

In about two years the Tom McCombs family reached its full size. Annie became pregnant and delivered their only child James Holland McCombs on August 5, 1901. They named him to honor his Freeman and Holland grandfathers. Possum, ecstatic about being the father of a twelve pound son, reportedly celebrated by putting three bullet holes into the ceiling of a Martin barber shop.

The Tom McCombs family set about making their own way. Tom maintained his preference for living in Jackson. Likely it was easier to work at one end of his run rather than fifty miles north of a terminus. Besides, he wanted to be with his poker-playing, rooster-fighting, and varmint-hunting buddies. Possibly his friends and hobbies were becoming more important to him than his family. However, about 1903, the McCombs family bought a house and lot on Gordon Street.

By 1906 and 1907, Possum's relationship to his family was becoming more tenuous. Differences in Tom's and Annie's disposition and values may have caused some estrangement. For whatever reasons, she may have even lived with her mother sometimes. In fact, Holland started to school in Martin. When he became a disciplinary problem, Miss Lizzie packed him back to his parents.¹⁵

In 1906, Possum decided to travel. Claiming that the Illinois Central Gulf had laid him off for a few weeks, he set out for the U.S. Southwest. Although he may have hunted wolves for a while in Oklahoma, within a short time he sent for his best fighting rooster "Old Rocket," a fourteen time winner. As his owner confidently expected, the

cock emerged victoriously from an international tournament in Juarez, Mexico.¹⁶

Possum's wanderlust continued into 1907, and beyond. That year he returned to Tennessee only long enough to quit his railroad job. He promised Annie and Holland that he would make enough money to send for them. Back in Texas, he moved frequently. In the Texas Panhandle, he worked, hunted wolves and coyotes, and visited his Uncle Johnny McCombs. Later, Possum travelled in Central and South Texas where he even considered buying land in the Rio Grande Valley to raise vegetables, particularly onions. He definitely liked San Antonio more than "all the other places he had seen."¹⁷

Then Possum broke contact with his family because of trouble with the law. The problem arose when he began playing poker with the Glover brothers at the Four Seasons Cafe in downtown San Antonio. One night Possum accused the Glovers of cheating, and a fight followed. Although badly cut up, he disabled one or more of his assailants and killed at least one. Unknowingly he severely pistol whipped a deputy who tried to stop the fracas. A local physician, believing Possum guilty only of defending himself against crooked gamblers with strong political connections, helped him escape. Thereafter, he was a fugitive for several months.¹⁸

In August, 1908, shortly after Holland's seventh birthday, Possum unexpectedly returned to Martin. Actually he may have come home to settle his mother's estate. Annie and Holland greeted him warmly because they had not heard from him for many months. The Freemans treated him coldly, for they considered that "Possum wasn't a steady husband or a responsible father." In the light of that response, Possum generally stayed away from the house, preferring instead to talk with the black tenants, the Freeman grandkids, or Annie. Apparently he told his family nothing of his fugitive status although he may have shared the news with a few close town friends.¹⁹

In a day or two Possum indicated that he could not stay. Not knowing her husband's secret, Annie pleaded that she and Holland depart with him. He denied her request and swore to reunite with them when he was settled, a vow never fulfilled. Gradually she understood "the reality was that her husband was going again, as he had gone so often in the past." She insisted, "Tom, you **must** send for us this time. You **must**." Possum assured Annie and Holland that he loved them and that they must take care of each other. Late in the evening "Possum's visit was over. He was gone."²⁰

Possum certainly acted mysteriously as far as his family was concerned. His fugitive life took home around the U.S. and into Latin America. He wrote Annie and Holland infrequently and seldom enclosed money for their livelihood. He did have Annie write him under aliases at General Delivery in major cities and small towns. During an eighteen month stretch, Mrs. McCombs received no mail from him. Yet he had been responsible enough at one point to contact his wife to assure her that a robber killed by a Texas lawman had been misidentified as himself.²¹

During the years 1908 to 1912, Possum was assessing his relationship to his family. Time, distance, and circumstances had pushed him farther from his wife and son. Before Possum returned to San Antonio for his trial, he reasoned that a

conviction would hurt Annie and Tom immeasurably. However, when the San Antonio political climate changed, he returned but was found not guilty. Although somewhat relieved by the verdict, Tom felt "that he would never be a respectable stay-at-home husband. And he knew that Annie could never live with any other kind." Consequently he may have hinted several times that they should seek a divorce, a step that she took reluctantly about 1912.²³

Around 1908, Annie and Holland were also arriving at decisions. Within a short time after Possum's last visit, Annie had spent any money that he had given her. By Christmas of 1908, she faced the dire and certain need of supporting herself and her son; otherwise, they would be totally dependent on the beneficence of Miss Lizzie, including continued room and board. For Annie it was a bold step to get a job with the **Martin Mail**, the local newspaper. Despite the Freemans questioning the propriety of a woman employed outside the home, she kept the position and became greatly respected among her colleagues. In fact, Annie spent most of her remaining years working there.²⁴

Holland McCombs, too, was adjusting to his father's absence. Somewhat accustomed to Tom's being gone, Holland "thought of Possum rather as if he had been a favorite uncle, in the same way that the other children at Woodley [the Freeman farm] thought of him." Actually Holland was part of an extended family because the Freemans were such a traditional Southern family and because everyone there seemingly "really belonged to Miss Lizzie." They saw that the young man did his farm chores while his mother worked downtown.²⁵

Holland eventually realized that "Possum was different from the rest of us at Woodley." The son was unhappy that his father was alienated from the Freemans. At school, he learned that the community also questioned Possum's lifestyle. Before then, among his schoolmates Holland proudly wore the nickname "Poss" or "Little Poss," a shortening of the name "Possum." Holland's attitude changed somewhat following a fight with another student around 1910. He accidentally heard a teacher's disparaging remark that Holland possessed Tom's violent temper. Then, "for the first time I [Holland] realized that—to some people, at least—my father was so far disgraced as to be an outcast. And I was like him." Though admiring many of Possum's ways, Holland did not care to have that bad disposition.²⁶

Throughout the second decade of the century Possum maintained minimal contact with the family. About 1912, his definite request for a divorce was otherwise contained in "the sweetest letter that she [Annie] had ever received [from him]. But it broke her heart." Seeing her emotionally distraught, Holland felt bitterness towards his father for "he had ruined her life." The son advised his mother to forget the man for her own good. Apparently the father and son were seldom in touch with one another for almost ten years. Certainly, Holland fondly remembered his graduation from McFerrin School in May, 1919, when Possum gave him a twenty-one jewel Elgin watch.²⁷

In that decade, Possum's fortunes fluctuated in Texas and Oklahoma. Sometimes he knocked around railroading, and other occasions he was involved in the oil business buying and selling leases or drilling. For a while he raised fighting chickens before he turned to gambling. During World War I, he pursued draft evaders

in Oklahoma for a constabulary service. Around 1919, after prospering in the Wichita Falls (Texas) oil boom, he went into a resort business at Lake Wichita. From the profits, he helped Holland to study journalism at the University of Missouri. Possum's personal progress was disrupted by an explosion in a Wichita Falls ice plant. He and his business partner M.A. Buffington received serious burns and other injuries but essentially recovered.²⁸

After recuperating, the untreed 'possum decided to limit himself to the West Tennessee area. About 1922, Possum returned to live at Jackson and to arrange a small family reunion at Porter's home in Trenton. Unfortunately, before that meeting, Annie died of diabetes in January, 1922, at the age of forty-two. Prior to her passing, she had counseled Holland to tell Possum that she had forgiven him. The Freemans, less charitable toward their former in-law, grudgingly approved of Holland rendezvousing with his Father.²⁹

The encounter began awkwardly for the father and son. Whether in spite of or because of Possum's limited attention and responsibility to Holland, the son would likely have hated his father. However, he remembered his mother's admonition to pardon and love Possum. Actually the reconciliation began after Possum, though feeling unworthy, asked for forgiveness. Following a long but cathartic silence, Holland remarked that Possum "was badly scarred." The elder then related the details of the Wichita Falls disaster. Thereafter, both men freely talked about many things.³⁰

Shortly after that family gathering, Possum invited his nephew Frank Phelan and Holland to visit Brookhill, a converted fox hunting club which he had perhaps acquired about 1921, outside of Jackson. Apparently the two hundred acres were poor farm land but suitable hunting habitat. In Holland's opinion, "nobody but Possum would have had the courage to tackle such a job—and it was probably the toughest he ever tackled." It was up to Possum and Seemore, his old black friend and possibly an occasional hired hand, to transform the acreage into a working farm.³¹

Possum spent many enjoyable hours at Brookhill developing the place, pursuing his hobbies, or receiving visitors. Holland visited there when he was not wandering through the American Southwest or Latin America. During one visit Tom counselled his wandering son, then in his mid-twenties to settle on a career in the cotton business. The son followed that advice briefly until restlessness overwhelmed him. Then, Possum-like, he went on another trip. In their free time, the father and son loved to swap stories about their hunting and travelling experiences. Their conversations were enlivened by the richly colorful tales of Seemore. Sometimes the three men, Seemore's wife Dovey, and other friends sat around singing old songs, including "De Bo' Weevil In My Fiel" and Possum's favorite "Down By the Riverside." Predictably Possum spent considerable time conditioning fighting roosters. In the summer of 1927, Holland helped his father with those responsibilities. One year, Possum experienced a serious chicken kill, probably heat related, but optimistically concluded that he had enough of each variety to start anew. Possum was often readying for a fox hunt or relating the outcome of his most recent hunting. He frequently busied himself readying for the next poker game. He also loved to give an

annual barbeque to which he likely invited relatives and close friends, at least.³²

During work sessions, Possum sometimes showed impatience or worse. Evidently when something went wrong or was not done properly, he would remark, "When you don't know what to do, dammit, don't do anything." He could get exasperated with circumstances or perhaps with people. Once when Holland and Seemore did not line up fence posts properly, Possum stopped and leaned on something for a few moments. Ritually wiping the sweat from his brow and emitting a deliberate sigh, Possum commented, "Man doesn't have any sense until he's thirty-five years old." After resuming his work, he continued, "And then [,] by God [,] he's only got sense thirty minutes."³³

Occasionally Possum's attention was diverted from his usual West Tennessee activities to a lawsuit in Texas. He made several trips to Wichita Falls because he did not know when his damage case would be heard. While Tom was optimistic that he would receive an award, his sister Porter expressed pessimism. She feared that any settlement would be insufficient for his livelihood and for surgical operations, "the ones he most needs." One fall she wondered what Possum would do without reparations, for he allegedly could not "do any kind of work." Even if Porter, perhaps, overstated the extent of her brother's injuries, likely Tom was at least partially disabled. For whatever reasons, Porter's correspondence does not indicate the outcome of the litigation.³⁴

In the 1920s, Possum experienced the loss of Seemore. Upon the old fellow's death, Tom arranged for a nice funeral for his special comrade. To Possum, "there was one great vacancy on Brookhill." Months after the interment, in relating the details of Seemore's passing, McCombs shed tears freely. Tom confided, "An' Mis' Possum will miss him [Seemore] most of all." In Holland's opinion, that situation marked one of the rare occasions anyone heard Possum express pity for himself.

Tom was also following the travels and activities of Holland. Such was not easy because the son moved so much and changed jobs so frequently, a similar complaint that Annie had voiced many times regarding her husband. Probably the lack of regular news bothered the father as it had his wife years before, for, in Porter's opinion, he was "as crazy about you [Holland] as he" could be. At times, Porter acted as liaison between the two men. In Possum's weekly letters to her, he asked whether she had received any news from Holland. Subsequently, she urged that Holland write Tom and strengthened her point by including the address: Tom McCombs, R-6, Box 59, Jackson. Possum definitely would write his son each week once the latter settled long enough to receive mail regularly. Otherwise, it was futile for anyone to send letters if the young man did not get them.³⁵

Probably Tom was in closer contact with his sister than any time since their childhood. She generally knew whether he was at home planting peas, tending chickens, or out hunting. She got him to visit her on occasion, and even spend some winters with her. Of course, he did not visit as often as she would have liked. In fact, one year he displayed such a definite independence that she was not sure if she could keep him in Trenton all winter. Nor could she always accurately evaluate his health, for even "if he was sick in bed [,] he would only say it was poor folks cold or make like [*sic* light] of it." Apparently he even claimed to be well when not fully

recovered from an illness.³⁶

Understandably, his health declined through the years. However, he still raised animals and a garden and engaged in his other usual pursuits at Brookhill as he was able. Certainly his health was bad by the summer of 1934. Early in 1935, he developed pneumonia which caused his death at Trenton on February 22, 1935. He was buried there in the Union Methodist Cemetery, but Holland later moved his remains to nearby Oakland Cemetery. The 'possum was finally at rest.³⁷

Possum McCombs exhibited a different style from most American men who married and settled down. Perhaps his approach could euphemistically be called colorful. Evidently he did not generally lack excitement, and it is difficult to imagine him bored for long, if at all. He certainly brought joy to many around him if his and their values coincided while he sometimes received disapproval from individuals, such as the Freeman family, who disliked the rascality they perceived in him. His ill-fated marriage produced troubles and a son much like the father in the love of outdoors and in the penchant for wandering and travelling. In those ways Possum's life became a part of Americana.³⁸

1. The research for this paper was partially done with a Faculty Research Grant from the University of Tennessee at Martin.
2. Holland McCombs, "Pioneers of Martin; McCombs and Hollands, **Weakley County Press**, Martin, Tennessee Centennial Edition, 28 June 1973, p. 45. Hereafter cited as McCombs, "Pioneers," **Press**. Some reference to the property associations of Thomas Holland and the Martin family is contained in Weakley County, Deed Book 24, pp. 163-64, Dresden, Tennessee. Thomas H. Holland's will is located in Weakley County, Will Record Book, 1860-1898, pp. 202-03. Martin, Tennessee Centennial Company, **Martin, Tennessee Centennial, 1873-1973** (Martin, TN.; Martin, Tennessee Centennial Company, Inc., 1973) pp. 19-20, 15, 17; hereafter cited as Martin, **Centennial**.
3. McCombs, "Pioneers," **Press**, 28 June 1973, **Trenton Herald-Register**, 12 June 1952, p. 1; Mrs. Carrie Phelan to Holland McCombs, February 4, 1954, Family Letters, in the Holland McCombs Papers, UTM Archives, University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, Tennessee; hereafter cited as McCombs Papers. The various McCombs dates recorded in the Yellow Fever Cemetery of Martin are: Bob McCombs, 1844-1878; Fannie Holland McCombs, 1884-1910; Kate McCombs, 1872-1891; and Tom McCombs, 1875-1934; in James Buckley Chapter, NSDAR, **Weakley County, Cemetery Listings**, (Sharon, Tennessee: James Buckley Chapter, NSDAR, 1980), p. 498. A blurry microfilmed obituary of Thomas McCombs gives his birthdates as August 26 (?), 1876. **Trenton Daily Bulletin**, 25 February 1935. For some reason the marriage application of W.B. Phelan shows the initials of B.W. Weakley County, Marriage Record Book D, 1898-1903, p. 140; and Martin, **Centennial**, p. 26.
4. Martin, **Centennial**, p. 22; and Holland McCombs, "McCombs History," Chapter III, pp. 27-28, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "McCombs History."
5. Holland McCombs, "Homecoming," Chapter I, pp. 1-2, 9-10, 12, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs "Homecoming."
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10 and **Trenton Daily Bulletin**, 25 February 1935.
7. Holland McCombs, "Incipitus—Early Life," pp. 16-17, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Incipitus."
8. Ann Phillips, Lambuth College, Jackson, Tennessee, to Marvin Downing, September 16, 1985, in Downing's possession; and Holland McCombs, "Freeman History," Chapter II, pp. 28-30, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Freemen;" Holland McCombs, "Freemans of Woodley; More Great Pioneers," in Holland McCombs, comp., **Life at Woodley Farm**, n.d., pp. 23-25, McCombs Papers; For additional information about the operations of Woodley Farm, the James Evans Freeman farm so named for the many tall trees, and the Freemans, see Marvin Downing, "Woodley Farm, Martin, Tennessee," **West Tennessee Historical Society Papers**, XXXVIII, 1984, 51-68; and Holland McCombs, "As It Was on a Martin Farm in the Early Century—The Place—The Economy—Work and

- Play," in Marvin Downing, ed., **The West Tennessee Farm** (Martin: The University of Tennessee at Martin, 1979), pp. 15-25.
9. McCombs, "Freemans," **Press**; and McCombs, "Incipitus," pp. 16-17.
 10. McCombs, "Incipitus," p. 18; and **Martin Mail**, 13 August 1897.
 11. McCombs, "Incipitus," p. 19; and **Martin Mail**, 10 September 1897, p. 4.
 12. McCombs, "Incipitus," pp. 19-20; McCombs, "Homecoming," pp. 8-9; McCombs, "McCombs History," pp. 8-9.
 13. McCombs, "McCombs History," pp. 31-32. Tom and Annie McCombs owned some property early in the marriage. On September 20, 1900, they purchased about one acre of land near Church Street in Martin. Weakley County, Deed Book, 24, p. 162. The McCombs may have relinquished that land a couple of weeks later in exchange for some other McCombs or Holland ancestral lands. *Ibid.* pp. 163-64 and pp. 177-78.
 14. Madison County, Deed Book 63, pp. 537-39; Madison County, Trust Book 65, p. 538.
 15. McCombs, "McCombs History," p. 30, 32; and; McCombs, "Homecoming," pp. 10-11, 6.
 16. For a graphic account; of Old Rocket's Mexico victory, see Holland McCombs, "H. Born—Poss," Chapter IV, pp. 33-37, unpublished manuscript, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "H. Born."
 17. *Ibid.* pp. 38-39; and McCombs, "Possum in Texas." Chapter XII, p. 9, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Texas." Possum referred to the hill country city as "San Antone," a fairly common Texas pronunciation earlier in the 20th century. Author's note.
 18. McCombs, "Texas," pp. 9-12.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 12; McCombs, "H. Born," p. 39; and McCombs, "Homecoming," pp. 1-4, 6-7, 11-12. To settle a joint Holland family land claim the Tom McCombs and the W.B. Phelans, Tom's sister and her husband, sold a Martin lot on September 14, 1908. Interestingly the McCombs appeared in Madison County (Jackson) of their deed of execution notarized. Weakley County, Deed Book 36, p. 407.
 20. McCombs, "Homecoming," pp. 13-18.
 21. Holland McCombs, "Possum's Secret Letters," Chapter VI, pp. 50-52, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Letters."
 22. McCombs, "Texas," p. 14; Holland McCombs, "Teenitus," Chapter IX, p. 7, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Teenitus;" and Holland McCombs to Marvin Downing, October 22, 1985, in Downing's possession.
 23. McCombs, "Texas," pp. 14-15. In June, 1910, Tom and Annie McCombs appeared separately in Jackson and sold the Gordon Street property. Madison County, Deed Book, 76, pp. 591-92. The separate appearance to sign the deed may not have been outstandingly significant during that era for other deeds executed around pages 591-92 contain similar statements. Evidently separate appearance of the husband and wife was not uncommon at that time in such land sales. Marvin Downing, Interview with lawyer Tommy Moore, Dresden, Tennessee, 5 September 1986.
 24. **Martin Mail**, 30 July 1915, p. 6 and 27 January 1922, p. 1; Holland McCombs, "Annie Goes to Work," Chapter V, pp. 43-45, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Annie;" and Holland McCombs, "Divorce, Work in Fields," Chapter VII, pp. 1-2, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Divorce."
 25. McCombs, "Homecoming," pp. 1—12; and; McCombs, "Annie," pp. 43-48.
 26. McCombs, "Letters," pp. 50-54; and McCombs, "Teenitus," p. 8.
 27. McCombs, "Divorce," pp. 1-3; McCombs, "Texas," pp. 1-3; Holland McCombs, "LSU-Baton Rouge," Chapter XIII, p. 13, McCombs Papers; Holland McCombs, "Campaign Beyond the Rockies (Calif. #1)," Chapter XVIII, p. 14, McCombs Papers; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Campaign." In October, 1914, an undivided one-half interest in a tract of Madison County land was deeded to J.H. (presumably James Holland) McCombs. Madison County, Deed Book 85, pp. 22-24. The following month, November, 1914, J.H. McCombs and W.H. Fortune purchased about twenty-nine acres outside of Jackson. *Ibid.*, pp. 326-27. Those deeds do not mention the name of Tom McCombs, but he may have made the purchases in Holland's name without mentioning that fact. Author's note.
 28. McCombs, "Texas," pp. 3-4; **Wichita Daily Times**, 12-13 May 1919. For some reason the newspapers reported Possum's name as "Bob" McCombs. *Ibid.* Perhaps it was indicative of Possum's financial fortunes that he purchased one-half interest in a tract of Madison County land in the name of J.H. McCombs in January, 1920. Then in September, 1921, Tom sold that property himself. Madison County, Deed Book 95, pp. 38-39, and *ibid.*, 98, pp. 72-73. For some reason Possum also bought a couple of lots in Chillicothe, Texas, west of Wichita Falls, Texas, in February, 1921. Hardeman County, Texas, Deed Book 65, p. 39. McCombs to Downing, February 13, 1986, in

Downing's possession.

29. McCombs, "Texas," pp. 1-2.
30. Ibid., pp. 4-5; and Pauline Freeman Ralston to Holland McCombs, February 23, 1935, Personal Correspondence at Possum's Death, 1934-35, Folder, McCombs Papers.
31. McCombs, "Texas," pp. 5-6. During Holland's visit he learned of Possum's trouble with the law in San Antonio in 1907, and his subsequent efforts to elude law enforcement officers before the murder trial was conducted. Ibid., pp. 7-14. No first name was given for Seemore. Author's note.
32. McCombs, "Campaign," pp. 4-5; Holland McCombs, "Mighty Monarch of the Air," Chapter XXIV, pp. 4-5, McCombs Papers; Holland McCombs, "Ozark Interlude," Chapter XXII, p. 1, McCombs Papers; and Holland McCombs, "New Traces and Old Trails," Chapter XX, p. 9, 12-14; hereafter cited as McCombs, "Traces."
33. Holland McCombs, "Cuba Penultima," Chapter XXIII, p. 6, McCombs Papers.
34. Jane Porter Phelan to Holland McCombs, April 19, 1922; Sunday afternoon, n.d., letter between April 19 and June 5, 1922; June 5 and 20, 1922; October 2, 18, 28, 1922; and March 2, 1923, Aunt Porter Phelan Folder, McCombs Papers.
35. Phelan to McCombs, June 20, July 26, August 3, October 28, 1922, March 2, 1923, February 24, 1925, April 25, 1924, December 12, 1925, April 5, 1925, September 2, 1926, December 11, 1924, and September 22, 1925, *ibid.*
36. McCombs, "Traces," p. 14. For a brief summary of Holland's travels and jobs, see McCombs to Green Peyton Wertenbaker, August 21, 1945, McCombs Papers. Phelan to McCombs, February 20, March 22, July 26, October 2, 1922; August 12, n.y.; February 12, September 22, 1925; September 2, 1926, and August 31, 1922, McCombs Papers.
37. Preston McCombs to Holland McCombs, March 18, 1935, John P. McCombs to Porter Phelan, March 12, 1935, Phelan to Holland McCombs, February 20, 22, 1935, Pauline Freeman House to Holland McCombs, February 23, 1935, Personal Correspondence at Possum's Death, 1934-35, Folder, McCombs Papers, Aunt Porter Phelan Folders, and McCombs to Patrick Hessian, April 7, 1949, Patrick Hessian Folder, McCombs Papers.
38. For a biographical sketch of Holland McCombs, see Steven R. Christensen, "The Ol' Squire," *Caduceus*, 89 (May, 1973); 5-11. Other details about Holland's early life can be found in Marvin Downing, "Holland McCombs of Woodley Farm and Martin, Tennessee," in Downing's possession or Marvin Downing, "Between Town and Country in Northwest Tennessee: The Early Life of Holland McCombs, 1901-1922," *Journal of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society*, 14 (June 1986); 31-38.