

## ON THE TRAIL OF A POSSUM

If I may quote a frequent guest of the Chestnut City jail, one Hack Tobias, “Them possums. Theys a strange lot.”

While Mr. Tobias’s summation could be considered rather broad, it was essentially accurate. Possums are rather long in the face with a mouth full of sharp teeth. Folks often said the Good Lord gave them those extra sharp teeth so they could eat most anything they came across. And they did. Usually kind of scraggly looking, they seldom rose above lazy. They roamed the hills alone, except when family arrived. Rarely building a home of their own, the vagabonds would use an abandoned place for a while and then continue their solitary meandering through life. When the possums chose to venture into town, it was always at night so their deeds would go unseen, at least until morning.

At one time, Dawson County had a thriving population of possums, but in the last few years their number had diminished rather quickly. The main reason for the decrease could be attributed to

an efficient bounty hunter by the name of Jeremiah Duke. His name was on the verge of becoming legendary in the region.

Whenever Jeremiah reaped his reward money for ridding the county of possums, he immediately went to the local branch of the Five Card Stud Bank. Sometimes he came out of the bank with considerable interest on his investments. Other times he left sizable deposits with the trusted fiduciaries at the table.

After a heavy night of investing, the bounty hunter decided to take a walk outside the confines of the financial institution and stretch his legs. He noticed a flyer on the post outside the bank. A drawing of Harvey Possum's face preceded the details of the wanted poster.

“Good,” he said to himself. “I could use some fresh capital to shore up my finances. I reckon I should get some shuteye before starting out.”

He looked down the street towards the hotel and shielded his eyes from the bright morning sun.

Riding in from the east, a lone rider sitting tall in the saddle, wearing a white hat, and reining

in a magnificent white stallion, came to a stop near the boardwalk. Getting down from his steed, the rider walked over to the boardwalk, picked up Eliza Macomb by her waist, and effortlessly put her on the back of his horse. He then walked his horse with her on it across the muddy street and stopped at the boardwalk on the opposite side. He once again effortlessly took her off his horse and put her on the dry boardwalk. He tipped his hat to the beautiful young maiden and got back on his horse. Miss Macomb stood awestruck and nearly fainted. She was not alone, though, as four other women on the boardwalk had the same response. It was then that the bounty hunter noticed the shiny badge on the stranger's shirt.

“Huh. A new marshal in town. I wonder why he's here.”

Jeremiah would later come to find out that the new marshal had come to Chestnut City because of the Citizens' Committee to Get Rid of Possums. As it turned out, the Committee discovered that the balance in their rewards account sat dangerously low. They had made urgent appeals to higher ups for additional help in the apprehension of Harvey

Possum. Not that they doubted the efficiency of Jeremiah Duke, but rather they thought him too good. They figured if a lawman in his official position were to capture Mr. Possum that they might not have to pay out any reward money.

Jeremiah rose early, packed up, and headed for the hills. Harvey Possum stood as the last Possum of significance in Dawson County. As such, he had a lot of experience out in the wild. He wouldn't be an easy catch.

After an hour of riding, he came to Freeman's Fork. Out of habit, he turned around and looked at the trail behind him to see if anybody was following him. He could see a lone rider kicking up a cloud of dust, which meant he had to be in a hurry. Jeremiah moved behind a rock near the fork to watch the rider. The new marshal came flying by without hesitating at the fork. He took the right side as if he knew exactly where he was going.

“Does he know something I don't?”

The bounty hunter stuck with his hunch and took the left fork. Affirmation of his choice came when he ran into old Hack Tobias.

“Howdy, Mr. Duke,” said Hack.

“Hack. Seen any possums on the trail?”

“Uh ... Yes, sir,” answered Hack. “Earlier this morning I seen Harvey Possum a little piece up. He was sacked out in the crotch of an old Oak tree. Yeah, he was asleepin and agrinnin just like ... Well, just like an old possum.”

Jeremiah flipped a gold piece to Hack and continued down the trail.

“Uh ... Thanks, Mr. Duke. Thanks.”

About a hundred yards up the trail, Jeremiah found the old oak tree where Harvey had been, but he had left. Harvey’s mule had a distinctive shoe pattern, so he didn’t have any trouble tracking him. He lost the trail, though, when he came upon a rocky section. With boulders on either side of the path, he could only go straight ahead. He picked up the trail again when the rocks turned back to dirt. Rounding a couple of bends, Jeremiah came to a stop. He saw Harvey straight ahead sitting on a ledge and he looked like he was thinking. Then Jeremiah saw why. A rockslide had blocked the path and Harvey had no place to go. The bounty hunter

moved in slowly. When Harvey saw Jeremiah, he stood up and pulled his gun.

“Before you raise that gun any higher, Possum, you need to ask yourself one question, ‘Are you prepared to meet your Maker?’ ”

Well, we don’t know if Harvey was prepared to meet his Maker or not, but he did raise his gun and fired a shot that knocked Jeremiah off his horse. As soon as he hit the ground, the bounty hunter returned fire and put a forty-five right through Harvey’s heart.

Jeremiah tried to get up, but he couldn’t feel his legs. The pool of blood along the side of his leg kept getting bigger rapidly. He felt so weak. Something was wrong.

The trail for both the Possum and the pursuer ended on that lazy summer afternoon. We don’t know if the bounty hunter was prepared to meet his Maker either. He certainly knew of the question. With the way he had lived his life, he hadn’t shown much evidence to suggest that he had given serious thought to the answer.

Sometimes that's just how the story ends. None of us know when our trail is gonna run out, so I reckon we best always be prepared to meet our Maker, whether that's in ten minutes, next week, or ten years down the trail. Yep ... I reckon that's the best plan.