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The Power of the Written Word and the Spoken
Word in the Rise and Fall of William Lee Popham

by WILLIAM WARREN ROGERS

WILLIAM Lee Popham first came to the small fishing and lumbering town of Apalachicola in 1916. Seat of government for Franklin County in northwest Florida and located at the mouth of the Apalachicola River, the town had an aesthetic appeal. Equally important, it enjoyed strategic economic advantages. As a port opening to the Gulf of Mexico, antebellum Apalachicola imported manufactured goods and luxuries and shipped them by steamboats up the Apalachicola River and beyond. They went to individuals and businesses in north Florida, southwest Georgia, and southeast Alabama. In turn, Apalachicola received timber and agricultural products, especially cotton, from the interior and transhipped them to American and international markets. It became Florida's premier port of shipment and third on the Gulf of Mexico after New Orleans and Mobile. With little agricultural income from Franklin County's poor soil or from limited urban manufacturing, Apalachicola became a conduit of trade. It prospered from the 1830s through the mid-1850s. Yet, over sixty years before the exuberant Popham came to town, Apalachicola had begun to decline.

Founded in the early 1820s and incorporated in 1828, it was known variously as Cottonton and West Point. In 1831 the legislative council officially named the town Apalachicola, a euphonious Indian word meaning "those people living on the other side." There was an early prosperity that was deceiving. Surrounded by swamps and marshes, its unhealthy location was made more dangerous by the primitive medical knowledge of the nineteenth century. Natural disasters, most pointedly hurricanes, took a destructive toll. The port was further handicapped by a shallow harbor and inadequate state and federal funding to provide the necessary dredging. The lack of railroad connections helped keep Apalachicola from overtaking its rivals and permitted Galveston, Texas, to become third in Gulf commerce shortly before the Civil

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War. No rail lines joined Apalachicola to the outside world until 1907. Cities to the north, particularly Columbus, Georgia, became railroad centers, and siphoned off much of Apalachicola's trade. The local economy had little to fall back on.

Apalachicola suffered with the rest of the South because of the Civil War, and although it, like other Gulf ports, was blockaded, there was no permanent occupation by federal troops. Isolated throughout the conflict, even from the rest of Florida (no bridge spanned Apalachicola Bay until 1935), the town's citizens concentrated on survival. Fortunately, the surrounding waters were teaming with aquatic life, especially oysters, and starvation was never a threat. Despite the hard years of Reconstruction, the 1880s saw significant financial stirrings. Federal and state monies helped fund the dredging of both the harbor and the Apalachicola River. The seafood industry assumed more than a local nature as the process of pasteurization was mastered.

The seemingly inexhaustible supply of cypress and pines attracted local and outside lumber entrepreneurs, and pressure for a railroad mounted. The area's recreational development— particularly the offshore barrier islands of St. George, Dog, and St. Vincent that protected Apalachicola and the bay— for visitors and permanent residents was just beginning. Progress and prosperity were highly uneven, as the depression of the 1890s crippled a fragile economy, and a devastating fire in May 1900 destroyed six blocks of the town's business section. Undaunted by adversity and buoyed by the twentieth century, Apalachicola pulled itself together. The city installed its first electric lights by 1900 and opened a picture show in 1913. Commercial fishing and oystering expanded as profitable endeavors, and the lumber industry flourished.

By 1920 the Apalachicola that William Lee Popham came upon had a population of 3,066, while all of Franklin County, whose other towns were Carrabelle and Eastpoint, had 5,318 citizens. The county's people were unprepared for a man of Popham's energy and dreams. Within their midst was a man whose influence was immediate and would still resonate at the end of the twentieth century.¹

1. For a detailed history of the area, see William Warren Rogers, *Outpost on the Gulf: St. George Island and Apalachicola from Early Exploration to World War II* (Pensacola, 1986). For population figures see *Fourteenth Census of the United States, I, Population, 1920*, 97, 189.

Maude Miller Estes wrote a biography of William Lee Popham in 1910, and although she would marry him in 1912, at the time she considered herself merely one of his many admirers. The book was brief and lacked objectivity (in the place of a table of contents, it advised readers to “turn the pages and pick the kernels out”). The dedication, one that the voluble Popham would have approved, was “To Every Optimist Who Believes In Giving Flowers Of Praise To The Living Instead Of Placing A Wreath Upon The Grave Of The Dead.”² Unstinting in praise of its subject, the book revealed that Popham was born April 14, 1885, in Hardin County, Kentucky. The Pophams were a prominent English family that had participated in the Virginia Company’s seventeenth-century explorations along the Atlantic seaboard. The first permanent Popham in America settled in Virginia in 1708. After the American Revolution, various family members scattered north and south, and one branch went into Kentucky.³ Virgil Popham, William Lee’s father, was a farmer-nurseryman specializing in fruit and fruit tree production. Close to the rustic village of Big Clifty, Virgil owned a hundred acres and grew plums, peaches, pears, and apples. Produce was shipped all over the country from the farm’s own post office, New Fruit. The versatile Virgil was also a schoolteacher and country merchant, but, according to Maude Estes, was without “poetic talent or unusual intellectual gift.”⁴ Redheaded and creative, Clara Popham had no formal education, but she was an intelligent, “gentle kind and dutiful wife and mother.” William Lee was devoted to his mother, as were his brother and two sisters. Albert, a fifth child, died at birth. William Lee, the future evangelist, lecturer, poet, author, and promoter, inherited his flamboyance and speaking ability from Clara’s people. If Popham’s genes accounted for his “voice of melody— which at will becomes eloquent and commanding,” there

2. Maude Miller Estes, *Love Poems and the Boyhood of Kentucky’s Poet, Being the Life-Story of William Lee Popham* (Louisville, 1910).

3. Claire Tillman Stanton, interview with author, October 3, 1977. She was the daughter of Popham’s sister, Flora Popham Tillman; Popham’s nephew, Arthur C. Popham Jr. of Kansas City, Missouri, provided useful family information in a letter to the author, October 26, 1979. R. R. Popham of Darien, Connecticut, another nephew of William Lee, added valuable information in a letter to the author, December 20, 1979. See also Estes, *Love Poems and the Boyhood of Kentucky’s Poet*, 6.

4. Estes, *Love Poems and the Boyhood of Kentucky’s Poet*, 6.

was no explaining his literary talents. That gift, wrote the uncritical Estes, was "born of heaven in his own soul."⁵

Popham, future creator of an oyster empire and developer of St. George Island, received his common school education in a log schoolhouse. He later enrolled in Lynn College, a small Kentucky institution, but never graduated. In 1917 he persuaded his parents to move to Louisville, sixty miles away. There, Popham continued his education with private teachers, although he was largely self-taught. He earned money as a messenger boy for a private company, and then worked for the post office as a special delivery messenger. For two years he attended night classes at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the city. According to William Lee, "I did not take the courses, or the examination[s], for the simple reason I had to work during the day a great deal, and I could only attend those lectures between the hours I worked."⁶

Always a dreamer, Popham remained an incurable romantic all of his life. Touched with genius, he had difficulty restraining his soaring imagination. By any standard, the books he wrote are sentimental and pietistic potboilers, and his poetry is simplistic and embarrassingly bad. Yet, Popham had a flair for composition and a penetrating, inquiring mind. He was inventive, and his prose and poetry, even his later grandiloquent real estate and oyster advertisements, are a part of the man's "art." So was his speaking ability, and so were what would have been mundane legal contracts for anyone else. In various ways Popham's writing and speaking and his real life complemented each other. Each was an extension of the other.

Much of his knowledge was based on observation and quick deduction. His insight was startling. In his future real estate schemes, Popham's restless mind would never be satisfied, regardless of how detailed and structured his plans. He endlessly shifted, embroidered, rearranged. Never doubting that an initial concept was flawless, he still amended it. Others saw him as enigmatic, but, in some undefined way, he understood his own logic. Maude Miller Estes viewed him as a person who pored over books, as a man whose curiosity was insatiable. Later, she would personally experience his

5. *Ibid.*

6. See testimony by Popham in U.S. Post Office Department Hearing, October 1923. The testimony is included in U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit, No. 4698, *William Lee Popham, Appellant vs. U.S., Appellee* Transcript and Brief. See 1099 (1) to 1088 (130). Hereafter cited as *Popham Testimony*. Testimony of others in the case is hereafter cited as *Record*.

singular ability to turn adversity to his advantage. Traumatic, bleak experiences for others were to Popham challenging new vistas. He had a "reservoir of wit and humor" that his only son and namesake recalled vividly in 1982. He was "a dynamic . . . outspoken personality," his son remembered with pride. Claire Tillman Stanton (daughter of his sister Flora) added that he was given to "grandiose gestures" and had a "flair for the dramatic."⁷

William Lee never lost the influence of his rural origins. That dominant force was plainly evident in his writing and thinking. His first poems were composed in the cornfield while he let his plow-horse rest and his imagination wander. He had more admirers than friends while growing up (a trait common to some people who later in life communicate well with large audiences). Popham was close to his family, particularly his mother. Clara Popham's place in his affections was co-equal with that of his wife. He idealized both women and paid them lifelong devotion and deference. The talented youth was also close to his brother Arthur, who graduated from the University of Louisville law school and later became a famous trial lawyer in Kansas City, Missouri.

Early on, William Lee discovered that his oratorical talents enabled him to mesmerize audiences. He soon combined that gift with his drive and ambition. Popham's writing talents emerged about the same time. He published his first poem at the age of eleven, a fourteen-verse effort entitled "The Babbling Brook" that was accepted by a London newspaper. Undoubtedly bad, it is probably no worse than those he wrote in maturity. Once he mastered the art of composing verses that rhymed, Popham made no further effort to refine his skills. But what he lacked in quality was compensated for in quantity. Popham was forever writing maudlin poems, some composed idly, just to pass the time, the way other young men whittled sticks with pocket knives. He could write at reckless speed, seemingly without thinking. Among his efforts are "Kiss the Cook," "Memory Gallery," "My First Sweetheart," and "Because the Violin Had a Bow." Years of apprenticeship made it easy later for him to write verses about St. George Island and Apalachicola and even poems about the improbable and unromantic subject of oyster culture. Still in the future were such vintage poems as "I May Live in Flor-

7. A resident of California, Popham's son, who later changed his name, provided much information on family matters. William Lee Parker to author, January 31, 1982, and January 8, 1996; Stanton, interview.

ida” and “The Golden Sunset Sinking o’er the Florida Sea.” Few others could have imagined, much less have written, a poem such as “Consider the Oyster,” or have ruminated, as he did in “The Oyster Harvest Moon” that

Beneath the oyster harvest moon
 Serene from all alarm
 Where harvest time is coming soon
 Is our Florida oyster farm;
 And here, a hundred thousand barrels
 Where, Winter rivals June—
 Our planted oysters thrive and grow
 Beneath the harvest moon.⁸

Becoming a combination evangelist and lecturer on the Chautauqua circuit at the age of seventeen, William Lee was a sensation. The slim orator who faced overflow audiences was of medium height and had small, piercing eyes. His broad face rose to a high forehead topped by straight black hair. Always well dressed but never dapper, he favored sharply pressed, conservative suits (made distinctive by a gold watchchain that stretched across his vest). Good looking without being handsome, Popham had an additional characteristic: a gaze of utter sincerity. By his late twenties Popham’s face had become thinner, which made his nose look longer, and his hair had begun to retreat. In his maturity, his hair loss became almost total, and, as he gained weight, the added pounds made him what southerners called “stout.” But he always retained a physical dignity.

Traveling many places on the Chautauqua circuit, William Lee was especially popular in the South. There, love of oratory almost matched love of food. According to Popham, from 1906 to 1912 he lectured in Kentucky and “scores of other places.”⁹ Audiences welcomed the material he so convincingly presented. Among the lectures that earned the orator standing ovations were “Kings Who Wear No Crowns,” “Can God Kill the Devil?” “Lovers in the Garden of Eden,” “Men and Swine, Women and Wine,” and “Fools, Follies, Fibs, and Fancies.” If, for some reason, an audience seemed predisposed to hostility, Popham easily won it over with his sentimental

8. *Record*, 670-71.

9. *Popham Testimony*, 1088 (2-3)

oration, "Mother, Home, and Heaven." His niece remembered that Popham always "talked reams around you."¹⁰

Editing a magazine in Louisville called *Happy Home and Fireside*, Popham gained in reputation and popularity. He decided to promote himself more profitably by publishing books containing his sermons, speeches, homilies, fiction, and poems. The future Oyster King's first books were self-published. Later works were brought out by the World Supply Company of Louisville and the Broadway Publishing Company of New York. Considering Popham's propensity for spinning several projects off one main endeavor, he probably had a financial interest in the World Supply Company. All of Popham's books were copyrighted in his own name.

His first effort, *The Road to Success/The Best Book in the World*, came out in 1905. The title's accuracy is debatable, but it was one of the best bargains in the world: the introductory price was twenty-five cents. The regular price was fifty cents, and as the publisher's introduction notes, "The moral lessons taught herein are plain to comprehend, expressing golden thoughts and sentiments in language of the greatest simplicity. . . . Every sentence is not only decorated with entertaining language, but clothed with thoughts that breathe and words that burn." Actually, the book is an unorganized collection of pious admonitions, philosophical thoughts, and pep talks. One section, the "Alphabet of Success," meanders from "A—Attend carefully to details and mind your own business" to "Z—Zealously labor for the right. Push forward, and never backward, in ascending the mountain of life, and the road to success is yours."¹¹

The work features brief discussions on a variety of topics: "Mother and Child," "Will Obeying the Ten Commandments Alone Gain a Home in Heaven," "Greatness," and "How to Prevent a Boy from Leaving Home." Even in 1905 Popham's talent as a promoter was evident. What became an art form in his later career burgeoned much earlier. To further sales of *The Road to Success*, he devised the idea of a "Premium Badge Offer." One had only to sell a dozen copies of *The Road to Success* and send the three dollars to Popham in Louisville ("No street or number is needed to reach him"). The badge had three circular parts: a rose with the word "Honor" written on it, a photograph of Popham, and an open book containing the words "The Road to Success." William Lee told po-

10. Stanton, interview.

11. William Lee Popham, *The Road to Success* (Murray, Ky., 1905), 13-16.

tential aspirants that the badge “is worn and appreciated by self-respecting people from ocean to ocean and is indeed! an honor to those whom honor deserves.” What that meant exactly was not clear, but it was certain that anyone who earned a badge was an estimable person.¹²

It was difficult to separate Popham “The Speaker” from Popham “The Writer.” He was more effective as a speaker because his southern audiences preferred the spoken word to the written word. Besides, more people heard him than read him. The orator’s voice rang with conviction, and although he usually said the obvious, he did so with earnestness and absolute certitude. Still, his prose undoubtedly reached many people who nodded approving heads as they read, “profaneness is a brutal vice. He who indulges in it is no gentleman. I care not what his stamp may be in society; I care not what clothes he wears, or of what education he boasts.”¹³

Popham believed what he said and what he wrote. All those who knew him in triumph or defeat, enemies no less than friends, remarked about the gentleness of his language. He never cursed, rarely using even harmless expressions of anger. Popham’s limitations as a creative writer were no handicap when he indulged later in writing promotional tracts. He had a self-renewing supply of imagination. Abundant capitalization of key words in advertisements, common in contemporary real estate inducements, was pioneered by Popham. He effectively got the potential customer’s attention by ending an explanation of a project with an exclamation mark and, increasingly, with multiple exclamation marks.

From his experience as an evangelist-lecturer (never ordained as a minister with any Protestant group, he was nominally a Baptist), William Lee increased his literary output. He never really abandoned writing, and instead of having to push himself to write, had to cut back to allow time for other projects. Hitting upon a successful writing formula, he rarely deviated from it.

In 1910 Popham produced *Love’s Rainbow Dream*. In the hard-bound sixty-two-page book William Lee created a story line that he used in all his fiction. The ultimate triumph of true love is his theme. Like all the fiction that followed, *Love’s Rainbow Dream* is badly plotted. The book, as well as others, has only a few characters; most feature fewer than ten. His works are filled with stilted, moral-

12. *Ibid.*, 89. See also 5.

13. *Ibid.*

istic conversations that bear little resemblance to reality. The words that his characters exchange sound like memorized speeches. The basic plot never varies: a young man and a young woman meet by chance, fall in love, face some threatening conflict, triumph over it, and happily live out their days. A modern reader does not get the impression that Popham expected his cardboard creations to be taken seriously. Popham gave his characters vivid names that a pop art writer of the 1960s would envy. The mock-serious LaVerne Sunbeam is the heroine of *Love's Rainbow Dream*. *She Dared to Win* is another Popham book of 1910, and, like *Love's Rainbow Dream*, it has no acknowledged publisher. The seventy-six-page book sold for fifty cents and contains a plot device that William Lee frequently used: the protagonist is a lecturer-poet. By the last chapter Lincoln Burton, the hero, finally wins over Millicent Mordeaux, "the only daughter of a French cologne manufacturer."¹⁴

Two books in a single year would have satisfied most authors, but Popham's standards were more demanding. His productivity continued in 1910. Admittedly, the books are brief. *The Valley of Love* (sixty pages, fifty cents a copy, no publisher) and *The Village by the Sea* (fifty-six pages, fifty cents a copy, no publisher) came out that year. Both fit the pattern of what would become known as "tear jerkers." *The Valley of Love* has two heroines, and one of them, Una Nelson, dies bravely at the end. In *The Village by the Sea*, the more fortunate Princess le Roy has a traumatic start, but presumably lives a long and happy life. Even briefer, *A Tramp's Love* is bound in cloth. Popham eliminated all extraneous frills, and the book's entire plot—how a nonproductive citizen becomes infatuated—is revealed in its title.¹⁵

Turning to essays, Popham produced two other works in 1910. *Silver Gems in Seas of Gold*, a 250-page tome, was published simultaneously by New York's Broadway Publishing Company and Louisville's World Supply Company and sold for \$2.50. The publisher's blurb notes his accomplishments and adds, "Born in 1885 on a farm in Kentucky, William Lee Popham has risen from a plow-boy to public life— and to-day, by the strokes of his pen and the delivery of his lectures, commands the attentions of anxious thousands. He

14. William Lee Popham, *Love's Rainbow Dream* (Louisville, 1910), and William Lee Popham, *She Dared to Win* (Louisville, 1910), table of contents.

15. See William Lee Popham, *The Valley of Love* (Louisville, 1910), *The Village by the Sea* (Louisville, 1910), and *A Tramp's Love* (Louisville, 1910), passim.

spends his time in giving expression to beautiful sentiments and helpful thoughts to calm the waves in life's great sea."¹⁶

The first of the book's three parts is devoted to essays, character sketches, and miscellaneous prose. Part two contains lectures, addresses, and sermons, while the last section features short love and character stories. Because "Every subject has a noble lesson," the publishers declared, *Silver Gems in Seas of Gold* should "inspire millions of human lives to high aspirations and bless millions yet unborn."¹⁷ The book reveals Popham's thoughts on "Fast Young Men," "Good Literature in the Home," "A Mother's Love," and "Low Wages." He reminds tobacco users, "If every cigarette is a coffin nail, some of our boys are getting pretty well boxed up."¹⁸

Nutshells of Truth is another product of the vintage year 1910. "You just ought to own a copy," the publishers declared. Selling for one dollar, the work contains sentence sermons, short sayings, and toasts of common sense, beauty, and wisdom. There is a singular resemblance between the book and both *The Road to Success* and *Silver Gems in Seas of Gold*. In some instances identical passages have been taken from the previous works.¹⁹

Poems of Truth, Love and Power, published in 1910, contains a sweeping and all-inclusive dedication. In the words of the poet, the book is dedicated "To all persons who appreciate the baby's smile, the mother's lullaby, the wind's whisper, the wavelet's music, the bird's song, the lover's love, childhood's laugh, humanity's affection, nature's beauty, home's enchantment, our country's flag, God's care and the Savior's grace. . . ." The poems range in quality from bad to mediocre, but even that gives them a certain fascination.²⁰ Clearly, the man who would bill himself as "Florida's Pioneer Oyster Developer" did not limit his time to writing a single volume. Even so, the sheer number (eight books in one year) is evidence of extended time spent writing.

While Popham's lectures and travels took him to ordinary places, he also visited sites of historic and geographical impor-

16. William Lee Popham, *Silver Gems in Seas of Gold* (New York, 1910), preface.

17. *Ibid.*, 19.

18. *Ibid.*, 115.

19. William Lee Popham, *Nutshells of Truth*, (New York, 1910), preface.

20. William Lee Popham, *Poems of Truth, Love and Power* (New York, 1910). This is the only Popham book published exclusively by the Broadway Publishing Company. For the poems "Selfishness," "Love's Thoughts," "August," and "It Will Do No Good to Whine," see 84, 152, 166.

tance. Knowing that fiction had a vast market and that many readers were fascinated by exotic natural wonders, William Lee decided to combine these common interests. Making the attractive more attractive never failed to stir Popham's inventive urges. Just as he later melded the pleasure of owning property and living on St. George Island with the profits of oyster production— all for the price of one— he devised a literary package with multiple appeal. Between 1911 and 1913 he wrote a set of books called the "Seven Wonders of the World Series (American)." With his usual brevity, William Lee authored *Yosemite Valley Romance*, *Mammoth Cave Romance*, *Yellowstone Park Romance*, *Garden of the Gods Romance*, *Grand Canyon of Arizona Romance*, *Natural Bridge Romance*, and *Niagara Falls Romance*. Visiting the District of Columbia persuaded Popham that man-made edifices could rival nature's handiwork, and he wrote *The Washington Monument Romance*.

The books are identical in format. None is over 120 pages, and all begin with a fulsome, adjective-laced tribute to the site. Familiar with all of the locales, Popham then succinctly described what, for instance, the Grand Canyon looked like. Next comes the accidental meeting of the book's central characters. Inevitably, the man and the woman experience romance, conflict, and loving reunion.

Yosemite Valley Romance also features Long Beach, Santa Catalina Island, and descriptions of California's giant sequoias. Readers are introduced to Miss Dixie Darlington, "A Winsome Tourist of the West"; Chester Oakland, "The Handsome Flirt"; and Thelma, Anetta, Edna, Estelle, and Hazel, all "Former Sweethearts of Chester Oakland." At the end Chester rescues Dixie's little brother Robert from drowning. Her grateful father, previously suspicious of the flirt's intentions, says to Chester, "Mr. Oakland, we'll shake hands! You have saved my child's life. You are both gallant and heroic." Turning to Dixie, Darlington places her hand in Chester's, and concludes, "I have no objections to a son-in-law like you. Dixie is yours— she is a queen— treat her as such— and may the union alway be a happy one— may God bless you— my son— my daughter."²¹

Each book in the Seven Wonders series has characters with pseudo-comic names. *The Garden of the Gods Romance* (dedicated to an inanimate object, the state of Colorado, but containing, somewhat strangely, descriptions of Utah and Salt Lake City) is the best

21. William Lee Popham, *The Yosemite Valley Romance* (Louisville, 1911), 119.

of the series. Masie Mayflower, "A Young Widow"; Garland Water-son, "Ex-Sailor-Capitalist"; Miss Ola, "The balance of her name to be made known in the story"; and Miss Blossom Illbeen, "Appearing only in the latter part of the story," are the principals.²²

The Washington Monument Romance relates the adventures of Bildad, a farmer from the mountains; Daisy Sunflower, a restaurant cashier; and a pawnbroker, otherwise known as "The Man with a Voice like a File." The book offers an updated, but brief and unin-formational, biographical sketch. The "graduate of the plow-handles" is "now a roamer— occasionally attempting to write a poem, create a book, preach a sermon and deliver a lecture." Such was the man destined to negotiate an avalanche of contracts and agreements relating principally to St. George Island. He did so with a facile writing style that converted routine documents from pedestrian prose into lively and unique reading matter. By 1912 Popham was ready for his invasion and occupation of Florida.²³

William Lee and Maude married on May 11, 1912, at the Henry County Courthouse in McDonough, Georgia. He was conducting a series of lecture-revivals at Baptist churches in towns located near Atlanta. At William Lee's request, Maude left Louisville by train, arrived in McDonough, and the ceremony was enacted without fanfare.²⁴

Going south from Georgia, they honeymooned in Florida (Popham had been there before on the Chautauqua circuit) and were so impressed that they bought a hundred-acre farm near Tampa on the Alafia River. He financed the purchase and made improvements from money accumulated by lectures and book sales. Naming the sylvan spot Poet Eden, Popham was soon buying and selling property in the Tampa area. He had business dealings with James J. Abbott who became his agent. Later Abbott served as a trusted associate in the Byzantine activities related to St. George Island.²⁵ An acquaintance in Tampa first told Popham about St. George Island in 1916 and urged him to visit it. Popham, having campaigned lackadaisically and unsuccessfully for a position on the Hillsborough County Commission, took him up on his invitation, and he and Maude paid a visit to Franklin County. George M.

22. William Lee Popham, *The Garden of the Gods Romance* (Louisville, 1911).

23. William Lee Popham, *The Washington Monument Romance* (Louisville, 1911), preface.

24. Marriage Record, 1903-1927, 241, Henry County Courthouse. See also *Popham Testimony*, 1088 (3-4).

25. *Popham Testimony*, 1099 (4-6, 7-8).

Counts Sr., who was “turpentineing” on St. George, noted that the Pophams were stylishly dressed in outfits of matching khaki. The Pophams took an instant liking to the island and Apalachicola. William Lee learned that George W. Saxon, president of the Capital City Bank in Tallahassee, who had owned the island since 1910, had it for sale. Saxon’s attempts to sell lots on St. George had been unsuccessful, and when the Pophams returned to Tampa via Tallahassee, a meeting was arranged.²⁶

Later communications resulted in a deal. Popham accepted Saxon’s price of \$30,000, and Saxon agreed to take the copyrights to all of Popham’s books as security. Assurances from Popham’s publishers that the books had merit persuaded Saxon to accept them as a substantial down payment. That Saxon had read *Nutshells of Truth*, or any of the books, seems improbable. Popham was permitted to sell island lots; he would receive a warranty deed once he paid the \$30,000. Until then, the first twenty-five percent of the purchase price would go directly to Popham, and he would use the money to stake off lots, send out literature, and engage in promotion. By September 1916, Popham had activated his purchase.²⁷ He employed William H. Roat, an architect and contractor, to live on St. George and aid in the development. The eccentric but gifted Roat became known as “the Island Man.”²⁸

Popham’s first public appearance in Apalachicola came in January 1917 when he preached by invitation at the local Methodist church. As a “very attentive audience” listened, Popham was in good form, and left the congregation “highly pleased.”²⁹ The town soon buzzed with rumors about Popham’s big plans for St. George Island. In the winter of 1917 he negotiated unsuccessfully with a company to sell a thousand acres on the island. Reorganizing in Lakeland as the Saint George Company, the members resumed the talks. The company, headed by Helen Brooks Smith and John Malcolmson, authorized “Island Man Roat” to build a small hotel called The Breakers, and expected to construct cabins in the spring. Popham organized his own company, the St. George Island Company, and began selling island lots, especially in Tallahassee.

26. *Tampa Tribune*, June 9, 1916; *Popham Testimony*, 1088 (8-9); George M. Counts Sr., interview with author, July 28, 1978.

27. *Popham Testimony*, 1088 (9-12).

28. See Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 153.

29. *Apalachicola Times*, January 20, 1917.

Unfortunately, World War I intervened, and interest in summer cabins plummeted as the uncertainties of conflict prevailed. To his credit Popham later returned the original subscribers' investments.³⁰ In Lakeland the Saint George Company faced similar disinterest and abandoned its island adventures.

Temporarily stalled, Popham and Maude, now pregnant, moved to Jacksonville. During the holiday season in 1917, the Pophams visited Tallahassee, and there their only child, William Lee Jr., was born. During 1917-1918, Popham worked at the St. Johns Shipyard in South Jacksonville. Wartime wages were high, and Popham's talents were quickly discovered. He became a publicity man and edited a weekly journal known as *Hun Hammer*. Popham wrote patriotic editorials, all the while urging the workers to achieve greater production and to buy Liberty bonds. He kept in contact with Saxon who authorized him to sell lots. By 1918, Popham hit upon a new plan to develop the island.

He founded the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Unincorporated, a utopian industrial colony based on the idea of a classless society. Borrowing from various historical schemes for communal Christian colonies, Popham added a few capitalistic touches. Briefly put, five hundred members would pay \$200 each in installments and begin working for the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Unincorporated. In return the stockholder would receive four lots in a city to be established on the island and an interest in the company's holdings and operations. The workers would be paid \$5 a day for their labors. Popham recruited members mainly in Jacksonville, and worked with a thirteen-man board of directors that included Charles N. Hampton, who served as secretary. Like James J. Abbott, Hampton would become a close associate of the poet-novelist-evangelist-promoter.³¹

The Colony began in July 1918, upped its activities when World War I ended that fall, and lasted until December 1920. The inventive Popham persuaded Colony members to pay him \$65,000 to buy St. George Island from Saxon. Since the banker was only asking \$35,000 for the property, Saxon stood to make a large profit. The board of directors found out, reduced Popham to the position

30. Franklin County Deed Book U, 96-97; Book B, 219-22; Book T, 463-67, Franklin County Courthouse, Apalachicola. See also *Apalachicola Times*, January 1, February 24, March 10, 1917.

31. *Record*, 176-79; *Florida Times-Union*, January 16, 20, 25, 1919; February 1-2, 1919.

St. George's Island

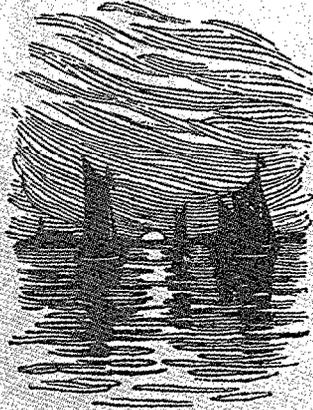
On The Gulf of Mexico
Franklin County, Florida

DESCRIPTION IN POETRY AND PROSE

By

WILLIAM LEE POPHAM

Author, Lecturer, Poet and Traveler



Replete With Actual Photographs
of
ST. GEORGE'S ISLAND

THE YEAR ROUND RESORT
HAPPY HOME FOR HOME-SEEKERS
Hunting, Fishing, Boating, Surf Bathing.
Finest Oysters in the World.
The Most Healthful Place on Earth.
Nature's Paradise and the Land of Always
Summer.
For the Hunter and Sportsman.

William Lee Popham employed creative marketing techniques to promote his land schemes. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

of a \$30-a-week salaried employee, and decided to buy directly from Saxon. Temporarily defeated, Popham continued soliciting memberships in Tampa, Jacksonville, and Apalachicola. When the membership goal of five hundred was reached, Popham helped arrange a \$5,000 down payment to Saxon. The banker was protected by a clause declaring that if the payments lapsed, the island would revert to him. During the next few months, Popham regained power over the board of directors and recruited a third lieutenant: William H. Collier, a young navy veteran.³² People in the Southeast and nationwide learned about the remarkable Popham from a July 1919 interview in the *Atlanta Journal*. Ward Green, the writer, was amazed to learn about the proposed self-supporting, self-governing utopian colony. Liberally mixing untruths, half-truths, and truths, Popham spoke about a co-operative colony of shipbuilders, ministers, lawyers, cooks, fisherman, hunters, chauffeurs, and more. They would raise their own food and livestock, saw lumber from their own sawmills, refine sugar, build a fleet of oyster boats and schooners, and run cooperative laundries, theaters, and utilities. To avoid boredom the colonists would be regularly rotated in their jobs. Popham explained a non-existent contract to furnish the United States government with food to relieve a world food shortage. Besides owning a factory that would can oysters, shrimp, fish, and other seafood, members of the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Unincorporated, would engage in the porpoise industry. A specially designed company ship would capture the porpoises, transport them to a slaughtering pen, and make them available to consumers. At the time (and now) the intelligent mammals were not considered edible. The Colony would also have a tannery that would process the porpoise hides and convert them into the world's finest shoestrings.

Speaking of St. George Island, Popham noted six fresh-water lakes (there were none) and described a \$220,000 steel bridge that connected it to Apalachicola (there has never been a bridge connecting the two, and not until 1965 was there a bridge joining Eastpoint and St. George Island). Popham went on to discuss plans for hardsurfaced roads, race tracks, and recreation in the form of hunting, boating, and fishing. Other leisure time would be spent at theaters and picture shows (no vampire movies or sex plays would

32. *Popham Testimony* 1088 (21-24); Franklin County Deed Book U, 202-26.

be presented). With colonists on their own to obey the law, there would be no jail, no police force, no bill collectors, and no rules, other than the Golden Rule. Members agreed in advance to accept expulsion from the island if they broke the contract. "Our main crop," William Lee declared, "will be children." Children could not be employed or forced to labor. "We shall give them a happy childhood that will be followed by a useful manhood," he promised. Education would be furnished from grammar school through university training.

The Atlanta journalist was non-plused. "It is not so much Mr. Popham's eloquence," he wrote, "though few young men can out-elucute him when it comes to subjects of love, romance, and the light that never was on land or sea." Rather, the writer could not comprehend a man who, on the one hand, offered an outrageous plan to market porpoise shoestrings, and, on the other, so staunchly opposed child labor. Hampton and others, including the local *Times* and the Apalachicola Chamber of Commerce, apologized for the inaccuracies, but Popham was not fazed by the brief controversy.³³

In the meantime, Helen Smith and her Lakeland associates bought a boat, *The Governor* to transport guests to The Breakers, and declared themselves back in business. Saxon backed Popham and the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Unincorporated, and after some litigation, Mrs. Smith relinquished the hotel. Under Popham's leadership, the hostelry was improved and renamed the Reeves House (after its manager Mrs. J. W. Reeves, who called it the Club House, and once served a fifteen-pound raccoon for dinner). A bathhouse was built nearby, and a cypress boardwalk was constructed across the island. The group purchased several commercial and excursion ships, rented an office, and built a new dock, as well as a fish and oyster house, at Nick's Hole, on the island's bay side. To the pleasure of locals, a few colonists began arriving. Afternoons of swimming and evenings of dining and dancing at the Club House to the tunes of an all-black orchestra became common. Apalachicolans lost any former envy they had about Miami and its widely publicized boom. Marveling at the local activity, they praised William Lee Popham for giving them a boom of their own.³⁴

33. Ward Green, "Where Everybody Gets \$5.00 a Day," *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine*, July 19, 1919.

34. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 182-83.

When internal difficulties forced the Colony into a receivership, Hampton, Collier, and Abbott obtained a new charter as the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Incorporated. The old Colony had paid Saxon \$8,000 of its \$30,000 indebtedness. The new colony, chartered in Delaware, made a purchase arrangement with Saxon and recruited new members. Wisely, Popham stayed out of the new enterprise, suppressing his desire to control St. George Island. He remained, popular in Apalachicola, and in November 1919, wrote the first of many future poems for the local *Times*. As the paper's editor remarked, "poetry is as natural with Mr. Popham, as song is to a mockingbird."³⁵

When the St. George Co-Operative Colony, Incorporated, defaulted on its payments to Saxon, Popham stepped in. He loaned the company money, but its managers still failed to meet their obligations, or even to repay Popham. At that, William Lee assumed control of the company, began paying Saxon, and in the fall of 1920 took possession of St. George Island. Popham was free to proceed with his plan to develop the bay's natural resources. Dazzled by the reproductive capacity of oysters, Popham formed in October the Oyster Grower's Co-Operative Association (unincorporated and operating under a declaration of trust). The Association would plant, harvest, handle, and process oysters for investors. A thousand shares or certificates of beneficial interest were offered for sale.³⁶ Popham inserted large advertisements in Florida newspapers and flooded the Apalachicola *Times* with a new literary genre: commercial poems. One was entitled "The Game of Chance" and cleverly antedated the popular Burma-Shave signs that appeared a few years later along the nation's highways:

A fair young girl of sweet sixteen
Wanted to ride in a new machine;
The young couple sat beneath the trees—
He proposed to the girl on bended knees;
He lost his heart and lost his head;
Bought a Ford and they were wed;
He wrecked his Ford and broke her arm,
And lost everything but his oyster farm.³⁷

35. *Apalachicola Times*, November 2, 15, and 21, 1919.

36. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 186.

37. *Apalachicola Times*, August 20, 1921.

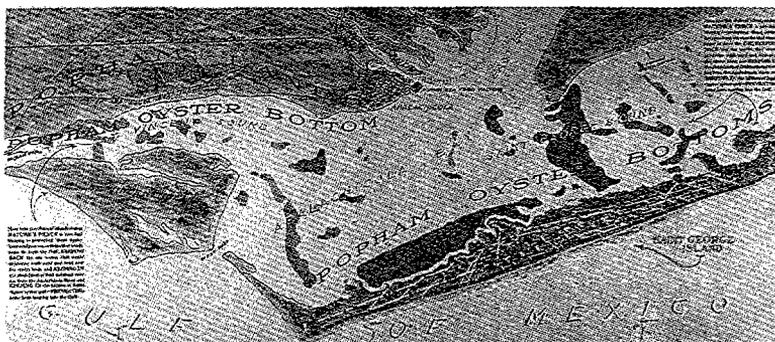
By late summer 1921, Popham boasted a capitalization of \$425,000 and seven hundred members in forty-eight states. He had a score of boats and crews planting five hundred acres of bay bottoms in oyster shells to provide "cultch" (adhesive surface) for young oysters. His company owned river lots where future factories would be built. With a new car and a new boat, Popham was the essence of prosperity. He gave the families of Apalachicola's black and white preachers turkeys and cranberries for their Christmas dinners, and donated copies of his books to the local library.³⁸

Popham began tying the future of his Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association to that of St. George Island. All the while he pursued other interests such as developing a marshy island close to the waterfront of Apalachicola into a habitable spot. At high tide what he named Venice Island was covered with a foot or more of water, but that did not deter the visionary Popham. He reemployed his former associates and formed the Florida Co-Operative Colony to engage in oystering projects. Those who joined received lots on his less than firm island. He advertised the Florida Co-Operative Colony with newspaper advertisements and brochures filled with prose and poetry as smooth as the Tupelo honey that abounded in Franklin County. Oysters were a "liquid gold mine" to William Lee, and he offered the added bonus of vacation property on his island which was a "liquid homestead." A person could move to Apalachicola and enjoy sighing pines, blooming magnolias, waving palms, mockingbirds, sea breezes in the summer, sunbeams in the winter, and, by a stretch of Popham's imagination, evergreen orange trees groaning with their burdens of yellow gold.³⁹

Realizing that Venice Island had limitations, Popham still offered lots on it, but he upped the Colony's membership fee and added a residential lot on St. George Island. Abbott, Collier, and Hampton broke with Popham and formed their own rival company. Lacking William Lee's charisma, they failed, and once more returned as his lieutenants. Meanwhile, Popham abandoned the Florida Co-Operative Colony and concentrated on his Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association, which, true to his nature, he reorganized. By now Popham was commonly called the "Oyster King" and went to Tallahassee where he obtained from Commissioner of Agri-

38. *Ibid.*, August 20, November 5, December 10, 24, 1921; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, December 7, 1921; *Popham Testimony*, 1088 (29), in *Record*.

39. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 193-94.



Among the ventures undertaken by William Lee Popham was the St. George Co-Operative Colony and the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

culture William A. McRae leases permitting him to oyster five hundred acres in the bay. Popham quickly sold all one thousand shares of his new Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association.⁴⁰

A time of triumph followed for Popham. He owned and edited the *Oyster Farm News*, a newspaper that was mailed monthly to what became four thousand investors. By some adroit rearranging he changed the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association into the Million Dollar Bond Plan. The new company's goals differed only slightly from those of the Association, and the investors gladly made the switch. Popham bought wharf lots and land in Franklin County contiguous to oyster bars, made contracts with companies to can oysters and shrimp, and continued to advertise. The *Atlanta Georgian* called him "the young Narcissus, poet-laureate and love singer of the ages."⁴¹ When a Georgia official questioned the accuracy of his claims, he replied, "I stand on . . . common law, equity and freedom as given and assured by the constitution of the world's greatest nation whose flag of blood-red, lily-white and sky blue has never been dragged into the mud by either the Huns of Germany or any American peanut politician."⁴² His innovations included putting wire mesh on the bottoms to hold the oyster shells and binding scrub oaks with wire and sinking the bundles. He bought property on the mainland, hired workers, made speeches, and, in-

40. *Ibid.*, 198.

41. Quoted in *Apalachicola Times*, November 5, 1921

42. *Ibid.*

evitably, made enemies. His chief antagonist was John G. Ruge, a civic leader and oysterman. The two became deep personal enemies.⁴³

In 1923 Popham bought and renovated the Alvan W. Chapman house in Apalachicola (Chapman had been a famed nineteenth-century botanist). Maude furnished the home with expensive and tasteful furniture, and oversaw the landscaping of the grounds. When Popham's father died in 1922, Clara joined Popham, Maude, and William Lee Jr. James "Silent Jim" Estes, Maude's mentally handicapped but harmless brother, also became part of the household.⁴⁴

When William Jennings Bryan, who had moved to Florida, came to town raising funds for a building on the University of Florida campus, the Pophams were his hosts. After a fulsome introduction by William Lee at the Dixie Theatre, the Great Commoner, who knew oratorical talent when he heard it, was briefly speechless. He then told his audience it would be difficult "to come down to earth after such a flowery introduction."⁴⁵

There seemed no limit to Popham's activities. He sold land for other people, as well as for the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association, set up the Florida Wholesale Land Company, Inc., joined the Satsuma and Fruit Grower's Association, and spoke of planting ten thousand acres of satumas (he never did). A young man in his twenties, Homer Marks of Apalachicola, remembered over a half century later that Popham once talked about gaining economic control of South America or at least Brazil.⁴⁶

The Apalachicola post office had to install a special container to handle the correspondence of the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association and its successor in 1924, the Million Dollar Bond Plan. Theoretically, an investor would have a homesite on St. George Island and a lifetime cash income from oyster and seafood culture. Popham enlarged his staff and rented an entire building which he equipped with the town's only dictaphone and a machine called an "Addressograph." A branch office was opened in Tallahassee. The island developer and Oyster Ring greatly simplified his

43. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 201.

44. *Ibid.*, 203.

45. William Lee Parker to author, January 31, 1982. See also *Apalachicola Times*, May 12, 19, 1923.

46. Homer Marks, interview with author, July 7, 1978.

contracts because "All promises, like pie crusts, are easily broken." As for his ideas of organizational structure and chains of command, Popham endorsed corporate anarchy when he declared, "[W]e will have no organization, and by having no organization, will save red-tape reports to state departments, corporation taxes, corporation income taxes, revenue stamps on certificates, fat fees to politicians in 48 states for admittance to do business in their states, tiresome board meetings, personal liabilities, or any possibilities of such liabilities, and a 100 other bothers incidental to any ORGANIZATION."⁴⁷

St. George Island was beautiful but primitive. It had a boardwalk, a small hotel, and cattle, hogs, and goats that roamed it. Turpentine men came and went. But as Popham saw the island and advertised it, a million-dollar hotel with a thousand rooms and exterior walls of multicolored seashells would soon rise. There would be a game preserve of ten thousand acres with birds and animals, broad streets, and lakes of salt or fresh water. Could he do it? The *Apalachicola Times* declared, "To pin a flower to Mr. Popham's coat-lapel, instead of waiting to place it on his grave, we must say that if any man on earth can build on Saint George Island the city-by-the-sea, it is this promoter."⁴⁸

Florida Shell Fish Commissioner T. R. Hodges soon joined John Ruge as one of Popham's bitter enemies. Highly zealous in enforcing the state's shellfish laws, the nautically clad Hodges sailed around Florida in the *Seaform* asserting his authority. He and Popham were at odds on many matters. Hodges also clashed with Governor Sidney J. Catts, who removed the commissioner from office in 1917. But when Cary Augustus Hardee succeeded Catts as chief executive, he reappointed Hodges. Despite his adversaries, Popham claimed to have planted 200,000,000 live oysters and shells in 1921 and 1922, and the state itself engaged in planting activities, utilizing Popham's methods. No one had ever promoted and publicized oyster culture like its new monarch.⁴⁹

Utilizing his "seemingly never ending vocabulary," Popham gave guest sermons, usually at the Calvary Baptist Church, but declined an invitation to serve as its permanent pastor. He became

47. Franklin County Deed Book Y, 442. See 441-44 for Popham's entire proposal.

The plan was an early version of the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association. 48. *Apalachicola Times*, March 11, 1922.

49. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 213.

president of the Apalachicola Chamber of Commerce and headed the Franklin County branch of the Automobile Association of America. His boats participated in Fourth of July races, and other craft were used for excursions to St. George Island.⁵⁰ After touring New England in 1923 and studying packing methods, Popham constructed a two-story, 61,000-square-foot building on the Apalachicola waterfront. Its opening was celebrated with speeches, seaplanes from the Naval Air Station at Pensacola flew overhead, and a large dance ended the festivities. Across the front of the enameled warehouse was the statement POPHAM OYSTER FACTORY NO. 1 spelled out in oyster shells.⁵¹

Campaigning listlessly in 1922 for the Florida House of Representatives, Popham lost a race that was decided on political deals and countywide jealousy of Apalachicola's prominence. Popham paid scant attention to the campaign, but demonstrated originality with his announcement for office. His special affection for Apalachicola and Franklin County was manifest:

I love every acre of her sunny soil; I love every drop of sparkling water in the great gulf that kisses her border; I love every drop of red water in her great river and its redness, resembling the gulf of her crimson sunsets; I love every grain of sand that helps to keep the waves within their own home; I love every shell from her liquid depths; I love every business man here, and want him to prosper in his business; I love every flower that nods its head o'er sparkling sands— sun-crowned, moon-lit and dream-kissed; I love every vine that hugs the wall of home, fence or tree; and I love every man, woman and child in Franklin County, for whom there is not one that I would not rise from my bed at midnight and walk miles in the darkness to favor, or aid in time of need.⁵²

Difficulties with Ruge (and a few other seafood dealers) and Hodges continued. Yet the major problem came from the postal

50. *Apalachicola Times*, May 17, 19, June 24, 1923; Francis Lovett, interview with author, August 25, 1977; Frederick Sawyer Jr., interview with author, November 24, 1976.

51. *Apalachicola Times*, October 7, 1922; February 24, March 3, 1923; Harry Cummings, interview with author, August 25, 1977; Sawyer Jr., interview.

52. *Apalachicola Times*, May 6, 1922.

department. Acting on allegations from unrevealed sources (Popham claimed Hodges and Ruge were the accusers), the U.S. Post Office began an investigation. After a long and complicated inquiry, William Lee and Maude, as well as Collier and Abbott, were charged with violating Section 215 of the U.S. Penal Code: improper use of the mails in furtherance of fraud. By leasing oyster bottoms to nonresidents of Florida, Popham was also accused of violating a state law. William Lee made public declarations of his innocence, and there was widespread support— churches, newspapers, private individuals— for him in Tallahassee, Apalachicola, and Franklin County. The trial was supposed to be held in January 1923, but in May Popham still had not gone to court. The Bureau of Internal Revenue of the Treasury Department charged him and Maude additionally with \$200,000 in unpaid income taxes for the years 1920 and 1923. Similar tax liens were filed against them in 1924 and 1925. All properties of the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association were placed under temporary attachment.⁵³

In May 1923, a federal grand jury indicted Popham again, broadening the charges against him. The Apalachicola Chamber of Commerce reacted by petitioning the governor to remove Hodges from office. A similar petition signed by 1,000 people in the seafood industry was passed, and Popham was made a committee of one to deliver it to the legislature then in session. In September Popham was nominated to run for mayor. Then he and Hodges were summoned to Washington to testify in a hearing before the Post Office Department. No public report was made, but news leaked that the hearings were stormy. A bright spot came in November when Popham was elected mayor of Apalachicola. His opponent received two votes. More trouble came in December when the postmaster general issued an order to hold all of Popham's incoming mail (he could still send mail). Because most of Popham's business was dependent on the U.S. postal service, his situation was critical. Confronting grand jury indictments, attached bank accounts, mail stoppage, and possible state action, Popham still held his ground. "He is very optimistic," an admiring Tallahassee newspaper declared, "and he is planning for bigger developments than ever."⁵⁴

Popham's lawyers secured a change of venue from Pensacola. In January 1924, the Oyster King and his entourage came to Talla-

53. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 220-22.

54. *Tallahassee Dispatch*, December 15, 1923.

hassee for the trial and took over an entire floor of the Cherokee Hotel. All the while, he was spoken of as the leading candidate in the next governor's race.⁵⁵ The state did not pursue its case, and before a crowded courtroom the defense was able to get most of the federal charges dismissed. Still, the government obtained a continuance until February when Judge William B. Sheppard agreed to rule on the fraudulent mail charges. In the event, there would be additional delays and even a new judge. Meanwhile, the poet-promoter's company was placed in receivership as the Popham Trust Estate, but the government lost its effort to have the Bureau of Internal Revenue take over the company's properties.⁵⁶

Back home a distracted Popham campaigned without enthusiasm or success for a seat in the Florida House of Representatives. Yet, he enjoyed entertaining William Jennings Bryan again. The Silver Tongued Orator was in town campaigning successfully to become one of Florida's delegates-at-large to the Democratic national convention.⁵⁷ The familiar energy was there, but he failed to regain control of the Oyster Growers' Co-Operative Association, and a new venture, the Florida Wholesale Land Company, Inc., attracted few customers. Even so, Popham came up with an appealing slogan: "The Best Investment On Earth, Is the Earth Itself."⁵⁸

The trial finally was held from January 12-21, 1925. In the interest of fairness, W. I. Grubb, judge of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, was brought in to preside. Before a verdict was reached there were 81 witnesses, 600 exhibits, and 1,187 pages of testimony. The courtroom audience was disappointed that Popham did not testify. It was a blunder of catastrophic proportions. The testimony of Ruge and Shellfish Commissioner Hodges was devastating, and after two days of deliberations, the jury brought in its verdict. Judge Grubb read the members' decision: all of those indicted were declared innocent except for Popham. Found guilty, he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment at the Atlanta federal prison.⁵⁹

55. *Florida Times-Union*, January 1, 1924; *Apalachicola Times*, January 19, 1924.

56. Franklin County Chancery Order Book G, 34-38, Franklin County Courthouse; for the case see *ibid.*, Book G, 17-21.

57. Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1971), 619; Wayne Flynt, *Duncan Upshaw Fletcher* (Tallahassee, 1971), 137-38.

58. *Apalachicola Times*, May 3, August 2, September 30, 1924.

59. See *Record* for the entire trial.

In the following months all attempts to secure a new trial failed. Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review his conviction. In late November the stoical Oyster King was picked up in Tallahassee by federal marshals and escorted to Atlanta. Popham explained his heavy suitcase: it was filled with his books that he intended to donate to the prison library. The library clerk accepted them with thanks, and thus did Popham go to jail in what, under the circumstances, would have to be considered style.⁶⁰

With Popham in jail, the people of Apalachicola soon became concerned with their own problems, especially as the Great Depression approached in the late 1920s. There were various receivers for the Popham Trust Estate, and several attempts were made to sell it. Bad economic times were accentuated by a hurricane that hit in 1929 and by a disastrous oyster season in 1930-1931. The opening of the Intracoastal Waterway in 1930 was a bright spot. St. George Island remained sparsely settled, its stillness broken only by the turpentine lessee making his rounds, hunters, occasional excursionists, and a few goats, cattle, and hogs. Tax sales of island lots remained slow. Then in 1932 the Estate was sold to the Cultivated Oyster Farms Corporation. Local citizens experienced a sense of *deja vu* on discovering that the company was owned by William Lee Popham.

The multi-talented promoter had entered the penitentiary on November 27, 1926, and had spent his time there as prison librarian. Polishing his literary talents, he quickly produced a slim volume of verse entitled *Prison Poems*. Published in 1927 at Apalachicola for ten cents, the softcover edition sold only a few copies. A model prisoner, William Lee was paroled after serving less than two years. Maude, Clara, and Jim Estes had remained at Apalachicola and suffered no social ostracism. En route home on July 1, 1928, Popham was entertained by Senator William C. Hodges and his wife Margaret at Goodwood, their plantation on the outskirts of Tallahassee. Hodges had been one of his lawyers during the trial. Glad to leave prison and grateful to his hosts, Popham wrote a long poem in the Hodges's guest book. Entitled "From Prison to Palace," its last ten lines declare:

Preserved within this rare abode
By happy hearts along the road

60. *Apalachicola Times*, November 27, 1926.

Of simple life, where knightly lords
 With peasants share the rich rewards
 Of honor which a prince of men
 Accords a convict from the "pen"
 To sup with him and his at tea
 Upon the day that he is free;
 And thus, dear host, you courage bring
 To one who was the "Oyster King."⁶¹

On reaching Franklin County, Popham got off the ferry, and, in a moment never forgotten by his then eight-year-old son, "it seemed that every man, woman, and child in that little town of Apalachicola was gathered there in the moon-lit Florida night to 'Welcome him home!' "⁶² He had, the tactful *Apalachicola Times* remarked, been on "an extended stay in Atlanta."⁶³

Popham, in desperate need of cash, quickly turned out a book entitled *Heart Poems* and braved the necessary bureaucratic red tape to get his mail fraud order of 1923 revoked. *Heart Poems* sold no better than *Prison Poems*, and the forty-five-year-old self-described "has-been" was further stigmatized by a prison record. Yet, as indomitable as ever, Popham began his comeback with the Cultivated Oyster Farms Corporation (an outgrowth of the Modern Oyster Farms Corporation that he had organized in 1931). He also formed the Whatley Farms Corporation (connected with oyster production) and the William Lee Popham Corporation (a real estate business). Still, the Cultivated Oyster Farms Corporation was his chief interest and involved William Lee's persuading investors to lease oyster bottoms in combination with purchasing lots on St. George Island. For a while William A. McRae, former state commissioner of agriculture, was one of his associates. "United Holders" (investors) signed up, and the work, similar to the plans of the 1920s, went forward.⁶⁴

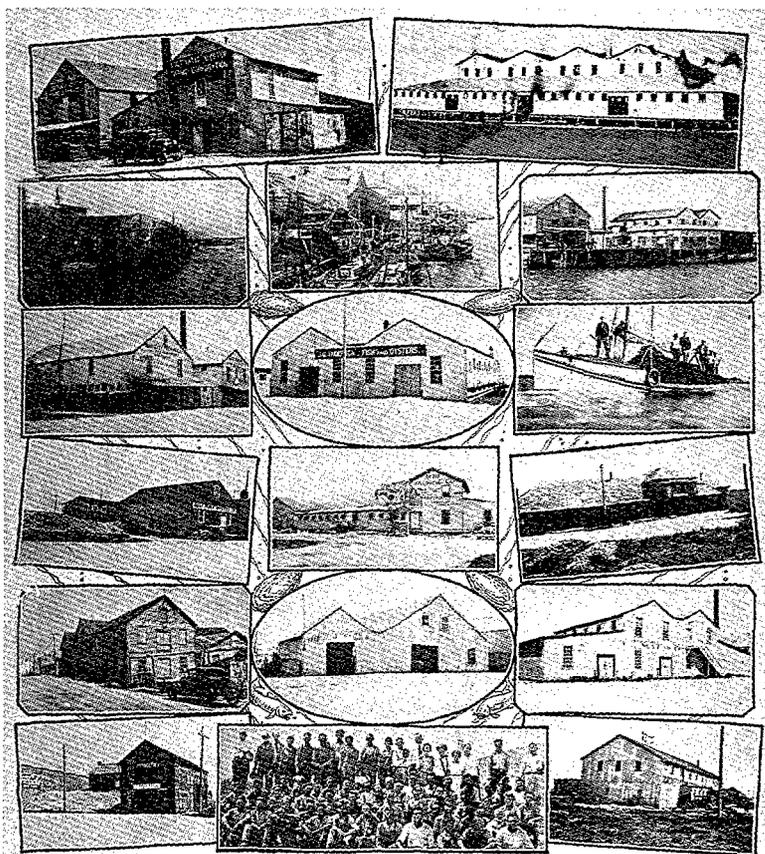
In 1934 the inventive Popham formed two more companies: World-Wyde Products, Incorporated, and Florida Oyster Farms, Incorporated. Here was Popham at his most imaginative and, consid-

61. Goodwood Guestbook, Goodwood Plantation Archives, Tallahassee.

62. William Lee Parker to author, January 31, 1982.

63. *Apalachicola Times*, July 7, 1928. William Noonan Jr., executive assistant to the warden, United State Department of Justice, Bureau of Prisons, United States Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia, to author, December 8, 1977.

64. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 247-49.



This collection of Apalachicola fish and oyster houses includes, top left, William Lee Popham's Cultivated Oyster Farm Corporation's packing house. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

ering the time, impractical. He planned to build three thousand Oyster Huts and Seafood Restaurants nationwide to market World-Wyde Oyster Puree (powdered oysters that could also be packaged as cubes and tablets in paper-fiber containers and shipped). Oyster Nip was a Popham drink that would sell for five cents a glass and could be consumed hot or cold. Here were two products, nutritional as well as tasty, but years in advance of their time. Even so, variations of William Lee's ideas were used later by thousands of

“quick food” chain restaurants and by manufacturers of liquid health products.⁶⁵

Further proof that incarceration had not diminished his ideas came in 1935 with Popham’s Florida Sunland Farmers (successor to his Florida Sunland Company, Unincorporated, founded a few months earlier). His new “Kingdom of the Sun” lay in south Florida, especially DeSoto County, and was aimed at small investors who could pay sixty dollars for five-acre farms. Writing his son in vintage Popham prose, he declared, “Our land proposition is going like wild fire, as I predicted; and is going to be, and in fact already is, a tremendous success, with very bright prospects in the future for unlimited business.”⁶⁶

Promoting the Cultivated Oyster Farms Corporation took the indefatigable Popham throughout the length and breadth of Florida from 1931 to 1935. Potential customers were bombarded with circulars and personal letters, handbills, plans, photographs, folders, maps, cards, and blueprints. He even produced a talking movie, and the film, as well as gramophone records played over loudspeakers, became part of his presentation. Regrettably, even Popham could not overcome the Great Depression. Even though he expanded his territory to include the Carolinas, the polite audiences listened attentively but few made purchases. Popham’s economic situation worsened.⁶⁷

Apalachicolans struggled manfully, aided by various New Deal agencies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the opening in 1935 of the John Gorrie bridge linking their town to Eastpoint. Although poor, the Pophams kept up appearances and managed to send William Lee Jr. to the University of Florida. The hard pressed Oyster King, hoping for a miracle, formed the quixotic and vaguely defined Florida Goat, Sheep, and Turkey Farm, Incorporated. He also borrowed \$5,000 from George M. Counts by mortgaging St. George Island. Counts subleased turpentine rights to Clifford C. Land of Eastpoint.⁶⁸

Then in the midst of crippling times Popham was suddenly charged once again with violating Section 215 of the U.S. Penal

65. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 250-51.

66. William Lee Popham to William Lee Popham Jr., May 17, 1935, Popham-Shoelles Papers, in the possession of Ruth Shoelles, Apalachicola.

67. Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf*, 251-52.

68. Franklin County Deed Book M, 418-20; Counts Sr., interview; Clifford C. Land, interview with author, August 5, 1977.

Code: mail fraud. He had his mailing privileges banned and was summoned to a hearing before the U.S. Postal Department in Washington. William Lee, Maude, and William A. McRae were indicted on September 5, 1936. Arrested in Texas, where, typically, he was attempting to purchase gold and silver mines, and taken to Jacksonville, Popham denied the accusations. McRae easily made his own bond, but Popham, able to raise the required amount for Maude, could not secure the necessary \$10,000 for himself. The difficulty was compounded when the trial was delayed by U.S. federal judge Louis W. Strum until the January term of 1937. Popham was forced to endure the indignity of waiting in jail for three months. Finally posting bond, Popham became galvanized in his resolution, and impressed one of his lawyers, Clyde A. Atkinson of Tallahassee, with his mastery of words. As an acquaintance remarked, the Oyster King “had wind enough to last a thousand years.”⁶⁹

By this time William Lee and Maude were penniless, subsisting on fifteen dollars a week supplied by his brother. Yet, he had a first-rate defense team in Senator Hodges, Atkinson, and two other attorneys. The trial began on January 4 and ended on January 15, 1937. Government lawyers plunged into an arcane and confusing jungle of memoranda, deeds, charters, letters, and contracts.⁷⁰ As before, the most serious charge was whether Popham had used the mails for fraudulent advertising. No less than ninety prosecution witnesses were heard. Determined not to repeat the strategic mistake of the first trial, Popham’s lawyers, for all of their ability, merely read letters declaring that Popham was a good citizen. Then, they put the Oyster King on the stand to testify for himself.

In no Chautauqua lecture, in no political speech, in no revival sermon had William Lee ever been so brilliant. Throughout two days of direct examination and cross examination he held the jury, lawyers, court officials, and spectators spellbound with his evangelistic fervor. In a classic performance Popham educated his listeners about the life cycle of oysters, the intricacies of land promotion, and the science of oceanography. He was reluctant to stop talking— “Now I want to take time to explain another feature of this splendid organization” – and continued long after he had con-

69. Clyde A. Atkinson, interview with author, July 27, 1977; Counts Sr., interview; *U.S. vs. Popham*.

70. See *U.S. vs. Popham*; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, January 17, 1937; *Jacksonville Journal*, January 14, 1937.

vinced the jury and thrown the government lawyers into consternation. It had been Popham's finest oratorical performance, a tour de force. The prosecution had no rebuttal. No north Florida jury was so hardened as to resist the Oyster King's mellifluous words.⁷¹ Judge Strum directed the jury to declare Maude Popham not guilty. As for Popham and McRae, the jury took three and a half hours to find the defendants blameless on all counts.⁷²

The verdict meant that William Lee was innocent and would not have to return to prison. That was all it meant. He had no means of compensating his attorneys. Forced to rely on his old standby, St. George, he surrendered the island to his lawyers, and they cancelled his legal fees. The attorneys then settled Popham's mortgage with Counts. Shortly after the trial, Clara Popham died. In 1938 Popham and his family had nothing to hold them in Apalachicola and moved away. During the next years Popham failed to make a living in Detroit, was unsuccessful at exploiting Carborundum (a compound of sand and carbon) in Ely, Nevada, and wound up in Los Angeles, California, as a realtor. He always talked about making a comeback but died in greatly reduced circumstances on August 22, 1953. The sixty-eight-year-old Popham had a number of health problems, but uremia was the major cause of his death. Maude outlived William Lee by many years, dying in 1980 at the age of ninety-three. Like her husband, she was buried in Los Angeles. William Lee Jr. also settled down in California and raised a family.⁷³

The Oyster King remains a controversial figure in the history of Apalachicola, St. George Island, Franklin County, and Florida. His critics reject anything positive about Popham. To them he is a criminal, charlatan, con-man, and fraud. His admirers, who are much more numerous, see him as well meaning and honest (but admit he was a poor businessman) and admire his attempt to develop the Gulf coast. They regard Popham as a kind, religious man of great talent, a person of undoubted power with the spoken and written word.

71. *U.S. vs. Popham*; *Florida Times-Union*, January 16, 1937; *Jacksonville Journal*, January 14, 1937; Atkinson, interview, July 27, 1977.

72. *U.S. vs. Popham*.

73. William Lee Parker Jr. to author, January 9, 1996. The death certificates for William Lee and Maude are on file at the California Department of Health Services, Office of the State Registrar of Vital Statistics, Sacramento.

Years later Clifford C. Land, a business associate, declared, "Popham was crucified." Alice Hodges, a longtime resident of Apalachicola, was convinced, "if they had left Mr. Popham alone he would have made something out of the island and out of the town."⁷⁴ If Popham had difficulty in separating dreams from reality, he was imaginative and innovative and blessed with resiliency and fortitude. People who met him never forgot him, and both foes and friends agreed that he was far in advance of his times.

74. Land, interview; Alice Hodges, interview with author, August 18, 1981.