

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

A Paper: The Awesome Opossum

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Clue No. 1: The topic of my paper has a direct connection to Marshall County, Kentucky. It is an unincorporated community located near Calvert City. Clue No.2: It has a direct and tangible connection a nightclub on Broadway in Nashville, opened in 1967. It was across the street from Ernest Tubb's record shop and right beside Tootsie's. Roy Acuff, Merle Haggard, Charley Pride, Kris Kristofferson, Willie, Dolly, Porter, Waylon – they all could be found hanging out here. It would later be moved to Printer's Alley. Clue No. 3: The topic wound up, no surprise, referred to in a number of country songs. Clue No. 4: The topic would take on a life of its' own when the Post-Hall Syndicate launched a cartoon strip that would be published from 1948 until 1975.

Possum Trot, Kentucky, is located on Highway 62, in Marshall County, between Paducah and Calvert City. It's about ten miles north of Benton. It is listed in one article I read as one of the fifteen smallest towns in Kentucky, along with Hell's Halfacre, Eighty Eight, Dingus and Dwarf, Kentucky. George Jones opened Possum Holler on lower Broadway at a time when country music singers really seemed to be family. His back up band was the house band and there was always talent in the room. Jones is the one who explained in biography that he earned the nickname "The Possum" because he bore a likeness to the marsupial – his words. Jones is credited with being one of the premier country stars who opened their own club. Jones sang "I Don't Need Your Rocking Chair", released in 1992, wherein he says: "...This gray hair don't mean a

thing, I do my rocking on the stage, you can't put this possum in a cage, my body's old but it ain't impaired, I don't need your rocking chair...". Peak position of the song was number thirty four in 1992-1993 on the Hot Country Charts. Jones' hit Playing Possum peaked at 18 in 1975. "...Last night I climbed up in a tree a-just outside his house, and I saw him a-chasing you, a-playing cat and mouse. Then I crawled up and went on home, I didn't know what to do. I've been playing possum, yes I've been a-watching you...". Walt Kelly inked Pogo, set in the Okefenokee Swamp. The strip was written for children and adults. Some of us will remember it from the Courier Journal. It held layers upon layers of social and political satire. Kelly worked for Walt Disney until the animators strike in 1941. He left and went to Dell Comics where he developed and ultimately syndicated Pogo. Pogo was defined as: An amiable, humble, philosophical, personable, everyman Opossum. Walt Kelly is a paper/book in and unto himself. He loved what he did. Ultimately, he died of complications from diabetes that had cost him a leg. Artists and assistants surrounded him to help keep Pogo running. He often joked about getting back to the strip when he re-grew his leg.

Gentlemen, some variation of *Didelphis virginiana* has been haunting our caves and garages for 23 million years. With rhyming re-duplication I give you -
The Awesome Opossum.

For clarity, a Possum and an Opossum are not the same creature – most of the time. The Virginia Opossum is the only marsupial (an animal with a pouch), found in

North America. Possums (without the “o”), are also marsupials and are a separate suborder (Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species – Thank you Dorothy Southall!) and found in Australia, like Kangaroos, Wallabys and Koala Bears. Most people here don’t pronounce the “o”, so we have Possums and Opossums, but they are two different things. English colonists in Jamestown derived the word from the Powhatan language of the Algonquian tribe. It means, specifically, “white dog or beast”. John Smith spelled it “opassum” around 1613. William Strachey, the first secretary of Jamestown, described the “aposum” as a “...beast in bigness of a pig and in taste alike...”. These words or their ilk were used later in Australia to describe the Possums there.

Opossums tend to be solitary, except during breeding season – just after winter. Males, then, tend to be territorial and fight violently during that season. The females typically have one litter a year, but that can vary in more temperate climates. She will give birth to 16-20 babies 12-13 days after mating. This is the shortest gestation of any North American animal. The Joeys are approximately the size of a bee. They are not able to see, but will travel from their birthplace under her tale, across her belly to her pouch. Notably, there are thirteen teats and that’s not enough for all of them, if they successfully complete the journey. And, so you know, a group of Opossums is a passel. Stick that in your pipe, Jed Clampett. After about a week, their size has increased by

ten fold. At approximately 75-85 days their eyes have opened and they are weaned. They will stay with the mother until three to four months of age, riding on her back.

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Opossums make a click that is generally used to attract a mate and then a loud hiss when they feel threatened. Young Virginia Opossums will make a sneezing sound for their mothers to find them. The Opossum is additionally unique in that they are the only mammal in United States with a prehensile tale. When they are smaller, yes, they can hang by their tails – much as you might have seen in movies like Bambi. Weight tends to later interfere with the hanging, but the tail remains prehensile nonetheless and is, effectively, a fifth leg for climbing, etc. The Opossum is also the only mammal that has four fingers and an opposable thumb on each of its hind feet, and it works like a thumb. This clearly assists in picking up things, climbing and the like.

Opossums are typically nocturnal, but not always, and transient. They thrive in nearly any habitat. Clearly, they are adaptable, being found from forest to farm to inner city. They will use abandoned burrows and dens of other animals, rather than digging their own. They can best be described as opportunistic omnivores and will feed on virtually anything it can find or catch. This would include rats, mice, moles, slugs, snails,

shrews, worms, beetles, ants, grasshoppers, crickets, frogs, garbage, fruit (particularly Persimmons – don't ask me why.), corn, berries and road kill. It is estimated that carrion on the road results in 8.3 million Opossums being killed annually. So who comes up with that number! They are not fast. Nature has a limited number of carrion eaters (also known as sanitation workers of the wild). Opossum are included, along with vultures, crows, coyotes. These animals have developed gastric systems that allow them to consume what would be poisonous to us. Before I forget, Opossum have more teeth than any other mammal, except the killer whale and the giant armadillo. This clearly gave rise to the phrase “grinning like a possum eating a sweet potato”.

Notably, they are voracious consumers of ticks, around 5000 per season, and are immune to Lyme Disease. In addition, they will kill and eat ALL snakes – including rattlesnakes, Cottonmouth and Copperheads. They are immune to snake venom. A 2015 study isolated the peptide in Opossum blood that causes resistance to snake venom. There is optimism that finding may help create more accessibility to antivenom. It has been suggested that snakes and Opossums are locked in an evolutionary arms race.

A number of years ago, while visiting my brother in Florida, we went to the Everglades. On an airboat ride, one of the guides remarked on the Turkey Vultures that were all over the place in the swamp. He further noted that the only defensive mechanisms available to the vulture when threatened were two: 1. They hiss, and 2.

The empty their stomachs – they throw up. I joined the North American Turkey Vulture Association. Notably, let me add one thing. My brother and I went over to an adjoining farm to explore an old cabin belonging to the Flowers family. Logs and mortar. Stone fireplace. A loft above the living area with one set of steps up to the loft. What we also learned was that there were two baby vulture chicks in a nest under the steps. When threatened, they also puff up and with their down, they present as rather formidable. They may have been frightened, but not nearly as much as we were of the big furry things waddling from under the stairs.

Speaking of defensive mechanisms, one of the most interesting traits of the Opossum is its' ability to play dead. Yes, they can bare their teeth and bite, but tend more toward a Fainting Goat when confronted by danger. Thanatosis is an actual, physical response of the Opossum. It sinks to the ground, bares its' teeth, its' eyes glaze over and it lolls its' tongue to the side. And, again, this is an involuntary response/shock and it cannot be prodded or shaken from this state. It can last from a few minutes to up to four hours. The first sign of regaining consciousness is twitching of its' ears. Often, at the same time this occurs, the Opossum secretes an oil from an anal gland with a putrid odor. Many predators will not eat carrion. The foregoing can include a frothing of the mouth, possibly to simulate illness like rabies to fend off a predator. Notably, the body temperature of an Opossum will not sustain the rabies virus (94-97 degrees).

As previously noted by William Strachey, the Opossum was once widely hunted and eaten in the United States. In 1909 there was a "Possum and Taters" banquet held in Atlanta to honor President Elect William Howard Taft. Mark Twain noted Opossum as a fine American fare. Notably, the musk glands must be removed as part of preparation, but the meat can be used in place of rabbit or chicken. In Mexico the tail of the Opossum is eaten as a folk remedy to improve fertility. In Wausau County, Florida, there is a concrete monument erected to the lowly Opossum that reads:

"In grateful recognition of the role of the North American possum, a magnificent survivor of the marsupial family pre-dating the ages of the mastodon and the dinosaur has played in furnishing both food and fur to the early settlers and their successors. Their presence here has provided a source of nutritious and flavorful food in normal times and has been important aid to human survival in times of distress and critical need."

John James Audubon called the Opossum an excellent substitute for roast pig. Opossum were hunted, typically, like Racoons, with dogs and were typically attempted to be taken alive. This would allow the hunter to feed the Opossum a more standard regimen prior to consumption. I'm certain you are all familiar with the tune "Possum Up a Simmon Tree", played by Ralph, Carter and J.D. Whited of Alabama.

In searching for a biblical reference, the closest I could come was a spiritual reference to Ham, son of Noah, using an Opossum tale to make banjo strings.

Interestingly, there's so much stuff out there in Internet Land, and I really thought that there would be negative references to Opossums, but, for instance, the Opossum is viewed by Native Americans as clever in playing dead or acting sick, and not in a perjorative way. They are seen as excellent mothers.

In 2013, the State of North Carolina designated the Virginia Opossum as the State Marsupial. The poet Ezra Pound referred to the poet T.S. Eliot as Old Possum, probably because he had a nose like mine. T. S Eliot wrote Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats which, of course, is the basis for the musical and movie Cats. Walt Kelly's Pogo was named Ponce de Leon Montgomery County Alabama Georgia Beauregard Possum, and it was Pogo who travelled outside the Okefenokee Swamp and stated, "we have met the enemy and he is us."

So, about Roo. I had mentioned to Animal Control that I had an Opossum previously. Yes, his name was Pogo. We found him alone, having fallen from his mother's back beside one of our chicken coops. We heard him sneezing. In our estimation, Pogo was too small to leave and probably still nursing. With some research that included goat's milk from Tractor Supply, we nursed Pogo and weaned him. Pogo loved scraps and lived in a hutch near the rabbits by the coops. I left the top up on the hutch and Pogo went back to nature. At any rate, Animal Control mentioned that they run in to Opossums, often. Some time later she contacted me and said that Roo's

mother had been killed on North Drive and Roo was wandering around the roadway. Roo, as well, was tiny. I mixed some dry colostrum and nursed her and weaned her.

Along these lines, as a card carrying member of the Opossum Society of North America, and based on what you now know, when you see an Opossum in the road, what's the first thing you will want to do? Make certain it is dead. Secondly, Joey's can survive in the pouch, or as with Roo, in the vicinity. As a final measure, at least on Huffman Mill Road, if there are no survivors, removing the deceased remains will make it less likely that other Opossums will chance upon a meal. If there are Joeys and they are hairless, wrap them and keep them warm. Don't use terry cloth. In this instance, if they are hairless, you should contact someone as soon as possible. There's so much more to caring for these little Joeys. If they are furred, keep them hydrated. Pedialyte works wonders. In either instance, you can Google "Opossum rescue". If they are 10 inches long or larger, they can be left on their own. Here's the thing, you may or may not find a response. I am not an animal rescuer and I am not certified. Reaching out to Animal Control or a local veterinarian is a possibility, as well.

In the mornings, I make my coffee and then get Roo from her cage. We clean the cage. As a rule, she pees and poops once a day on the pee pad. We replace the pad and clean out her bowl. Roo eats 8-10 grapes, that I slice in her bowl and some rotisserie chicken.

Melissa retired and went right back to teaching. I am the Ag major raised on a farm. Melissa is the farmer. On the two days (plus) a week that she goes to MLK, more often than not, she takes Pickles, the rabbit, Wubs, the Serama chicken, and starting last fall – Roo. The wonder on the faces of these children is amazing – the teachers, too.

I think that too often we relegate Opossums to generalizations. You are familiar with the group Phish. Their 1993 song Possum: "...I was riding down the road one day and someone hit a possum. I was riding down the road one day and someone hit a possum. The road was his end. His end was the road, so they say...". So when Pogo stated that he had met the enemy that the enemy was us when he and the others left Okefenokee Swamp, there's some deeper wisdom there. You don't have to rescue Opossums, but now you have a few more reasons why to consider doing it. You don't have to like them, but when you think in terms of all the benefits they provide, maybe you might have a little different perspective and a little more appreciation. They are the only marsupials in North America. They have the shortest gestation period of any North American mammal. They are the only North American mammal with a prehensile tail. They are the only North American mammal with four fingers and thumb on their feet. They have the 3rd most teeth of any mammal. They eat their weight in ticks and are immune to Lyme's Disease. They eat snakes and are immune to snake venom. Their body temperature is too low for them to carry the Rabies Virus. Maybe we just need to look a little closer at the Opossum before judging them. Maybe

that's the lesson of *Didephis virginiana* – take a minute to look a little closer before judging Opossums or people. You might be surprised.