

## Robert Pepper McCoun (1860-1940), Ancestor 10 By his great granddaughter, Linda R. Horton, 18 December 2021<sup>1</sup>

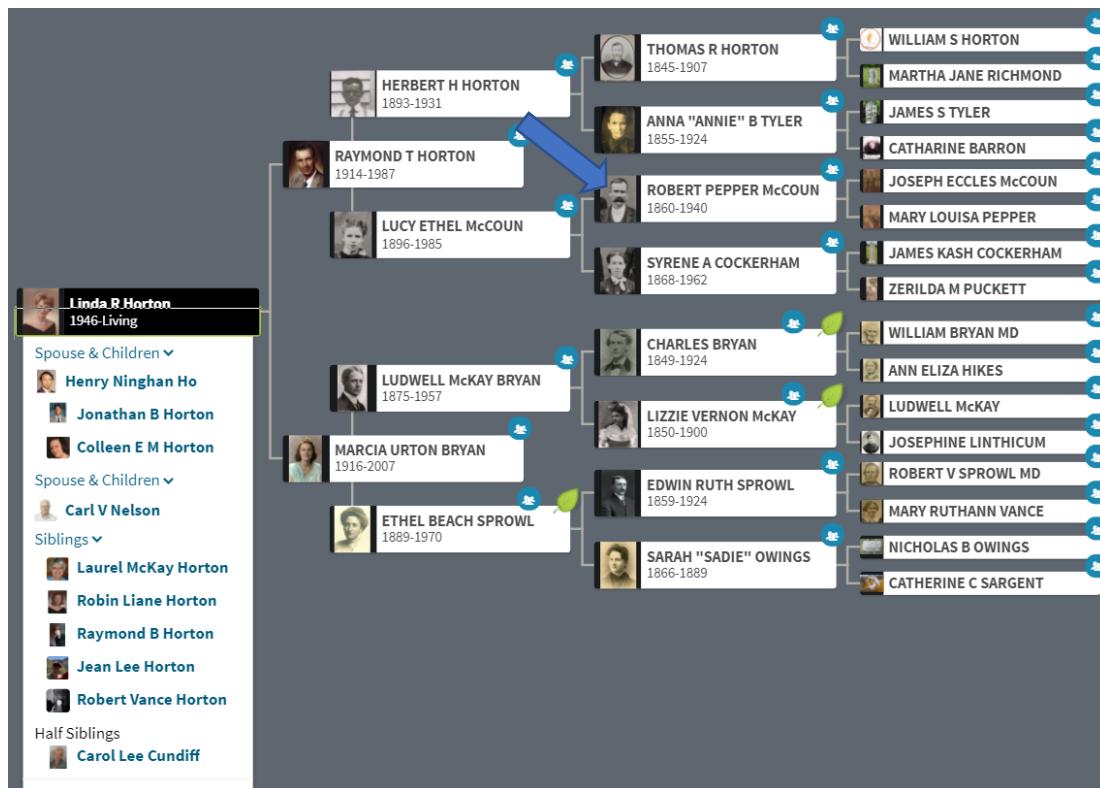
On Valentine's Day 1891, 30-year-old Rob McCoun and 22-year-old Syrene Cockerham exchanged wedding vows in the parlor of her Aunt Mary Sebastian's home in Morgan County, Kentucky. Both the newlyweds were Kentuckians but, before their vows, their life experiences could not have been more different.

Syrene had never ventured beyond the counties, such as Morgan, that bordered her native Wolfe County. And, she had never attended school nor learned to read and write. Rob was born in Mercer County in the Bluegrass Region; lived as a child in a mansion in genteel Woodford County; was part of a family where everyone learned to read and write; witnessed his parents' financial ruin; migrated a thousand miles to Texas, where after his mother's tragic death Rob lived the cowboy life herding cows on the Great Western Trail; and returned to Kentucky to make his living as a lumberjack in the Appalachians. It was there that he and Syrene met.



Despite their different backgrounds, the couple had a successful marriage. They had seven children and owned a farm in Wolfe County, Kentucky. It was there that Rob, after nearly a half century as family patriarch, died at age 80 on 25 September 1940. Syrene outlived him by 22 years, so some of the couple's great grandchildren had a chance to know her. Rob and Syrene are buried together in the Evans Cemetery in Campton.

## Placing Robert Pepper McCoun on the Family Tree



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Biographies are available for those individuals mentioned below whose names appear in bold.

### Rob's Birth and Early Years

Robert Pepper McCoun was born on 8 May 1860 in the Joseph McCoun House<sup>1</sup> in Salvisa, Mercer County, Kentucky, the same year in which the only Kentucky-born president, Abraham Lincoln, was elected. Rob's father was **Joseph Eccles "Joe" McCoun** (1825-1897). Joe was the son of **Esther Eccles** (1792-1881) and **Joseph McCoun** (1784-1829), who built the house in which Joe and Rob were born. All were descendants of Ulster Scots Presbyterians who were among the first settlers in Kentucky eight decades earlier.



Rob's mother was **Mary Louise "Luta" Pepper** (1834-1874), the daughter of a wealthy farmer, **Samuel Pepper** (1802-1874) and granddaughter of still-famous-today **Elijah Pepper** (1760-1831), who in 1812 founded the Kentucky bourbon industry. Luta's mother, **Mahala Perry** (1804-1865), was a member of another wealthy Woodford County family. After their 1856

Joseph E McCoun	34	m	Farmer	8000	11,100
Mary E	24	f			
Luc P	2	f			
Robert P	2	m			
Esther McCoun	68	f			

marriage, Luta moved into the Joseph McCoun house, sharing it not only with Joe but also with his mother, Esther. The 29 August 1860 census, excerpted above, recorded this living arrangement when Rob was two months old. But the plan even then was for Joe and Luta to purchase a home in Luta's native Woodford County.

During the time in which the Joe McCoun family still were living with Esther, Rob was taken to a professional photographer who took this photograph in about 1862. The toddler looked the part of the princeling that his mother may have dreamed he could be. In fact, the trajectory of Rob's childhood years was deeply influenced by his mother's ambitions for a grand lifestyle. Rob's eyes were the palest shade of blue, according to his grandson and namesake, Robert Coldiron McCoun (1928-2019), who as a child spent a lot of time with his paternal grandparents.<sup>2</sup>

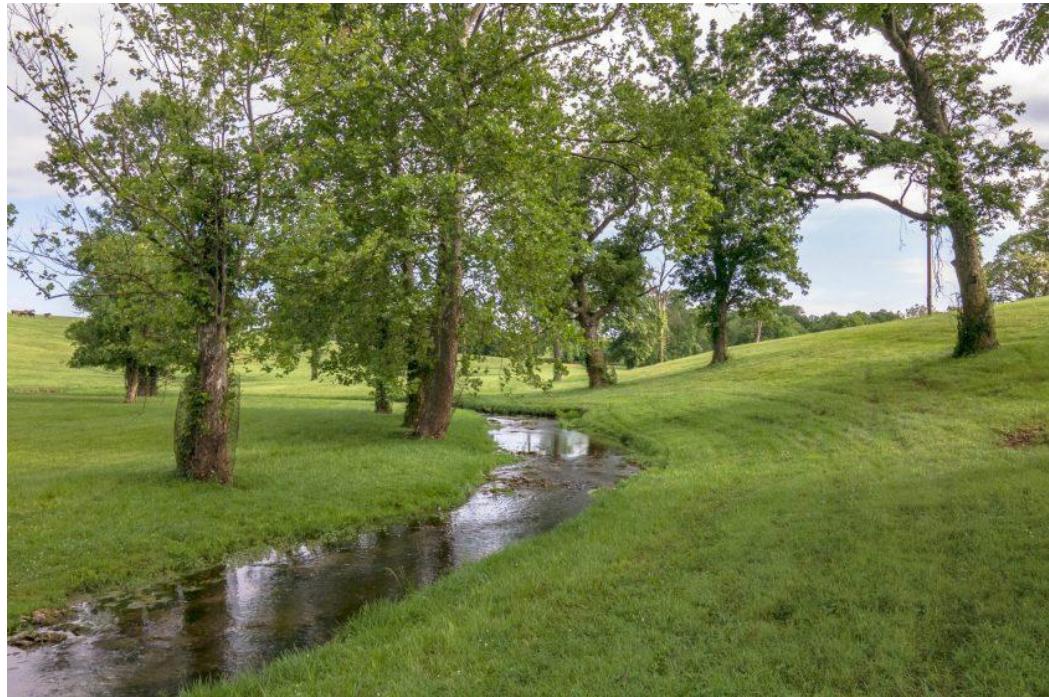


In early 1865, Rob's grandparents, Samuel and Mahala Pepper, decided to move into the home of their son, Robert, in nearby Frankfort. (Perhaps Mahala was ill: she died soon after the move.) Their desire to move into town dovetailed with the desire of their daughter and son-in-law to buy a home in Woodford County. Samuel offered to sell Joe his homestead, Sweet Lawn, shown at right, along with the surrounding 205-acre farm. This was where Rob's mother was born in 1834. In addition, her parents offered to sell an adjacent 82-acre tract that had once belonged to her grandparents, Roderick Perry (1776-1821) and Susannah Brown Perry (1785-1853).



Of course, Joe and Luta wanted these properties, but it took Joe needed first to acquire sufficient McCoun ancestral property for resale that he had the money needed to buy Sweet Lawn. The purchase was made on 18 March 1865 when Rob was almost five years old. The boy spent the next seven years as the scion of a wealthy family living in the lovely brick house on a hill, surrounded by lush countryside on both sides of Glenn's Creek. We can be sure that the McCoun children must have enjoyed life in the mansion, which had two stairwells and many more rooms than the compact Joseph McCoun House in Salvisa in which Rob had drawn his first breath.

The family no longer lived beside the Salt River but, in its place, the children had the meandering Glenn's Creek and its tributaries, one of which was as shiny as a mirror and flowed right through their plantation.<sup>3</sup> Like generations of Kentucky youngsters, they likely spent many a summer's day wading on the creek's slippery rocks and capturing tadpoles and crawfish. They may have built dams of rocks and logs to create a watering hole, to cool off on hot days.



If ever the McCoun children were tired of exploring their beautiful plantation, they lived only a short walk from the Pepper family's distillery business. The distillery was run by their Uncle Oscar Pepper with assistance from their father, Joe McCoun, now that he was living nearby.

### **Not everyone living on Sweet Lawn was happy**

Both of Rob's parents came from families who owned slaves. In the slave schedule accompanying the 1860 census when Rob was an infant, Joe McCoun reported that his real estate was worth \$8000 (\$262,000 today) and that his personal estate was worth \$11,100 (\$363,400 today). The 1860 Slave Schedule that indicates that Joe's personal estate included 10 enslaved persons: males aged 49, 21, 21, 19, three, and two, as well as females aged 40, 19, 15, and 15.

Following Union victory in the Civil War on 9 April 1865 and the effective date of emancipation in Kentucky, 6 December 1865, slave ownership was a thing of the past. Although the 1870 census's listing of persons in the Joe McCoun household, discussed below, included no black individuals, black families lived in households on both sides of the McCoun home. They may have been farmworkers on the McCoun farm or servants in the mansion.

Before the decade of the 1860s was through, Rob and his older sister Perla were joined by four younger siblings, as may be seen in the family's entry in the 1870 U.S. census for Millville, Woodford County, Kentucky: Joe McCoun, age 44, a farmer; Louiza [Luta], 32, keeping house; Perla, 13; Robert, 11; Samuel, seven; Hettie, five; Lutie, three, and Joseph, one.

11/11	Joe McCoun	44	Male	White	Farmer	Hannah	85yo	"			1.
	— Lanta	32	Female	White	Keep house			"			
	— Perla	13	Female	White				"		11	
	— Robert	11	Male	White				"		11	
	— Samuel	7	Male	White				"			
	— Hettie	5	Female	White				"			
	— Luta	3	Female	White				"			
	— Joseph	1	Male	White				"			

### **Rob's family was financially ruined**

Not long after the 1870 census, the family's life of luxury ended abruptly when Joe and Luta lost everything they owned. Her brother, Robert Perry "Bob" Pepper, wanted to build a toll road from Versailles, the Woodford County seat, to McCoun's Ferry, which crossed the Kentucky River near Salvisa. From there, travelers could continue their journey toward Harrodsburg on existing roads. The Kentucky government had a program enabling turnpike builders to obtain state funding through issuance of bonds. There was a creditworthiness requirement intended to ensure that loans to road builders would be repaid. Unfortunately, Rob's Uncle Bob had a blemished credit record including at least one bankruptcy.

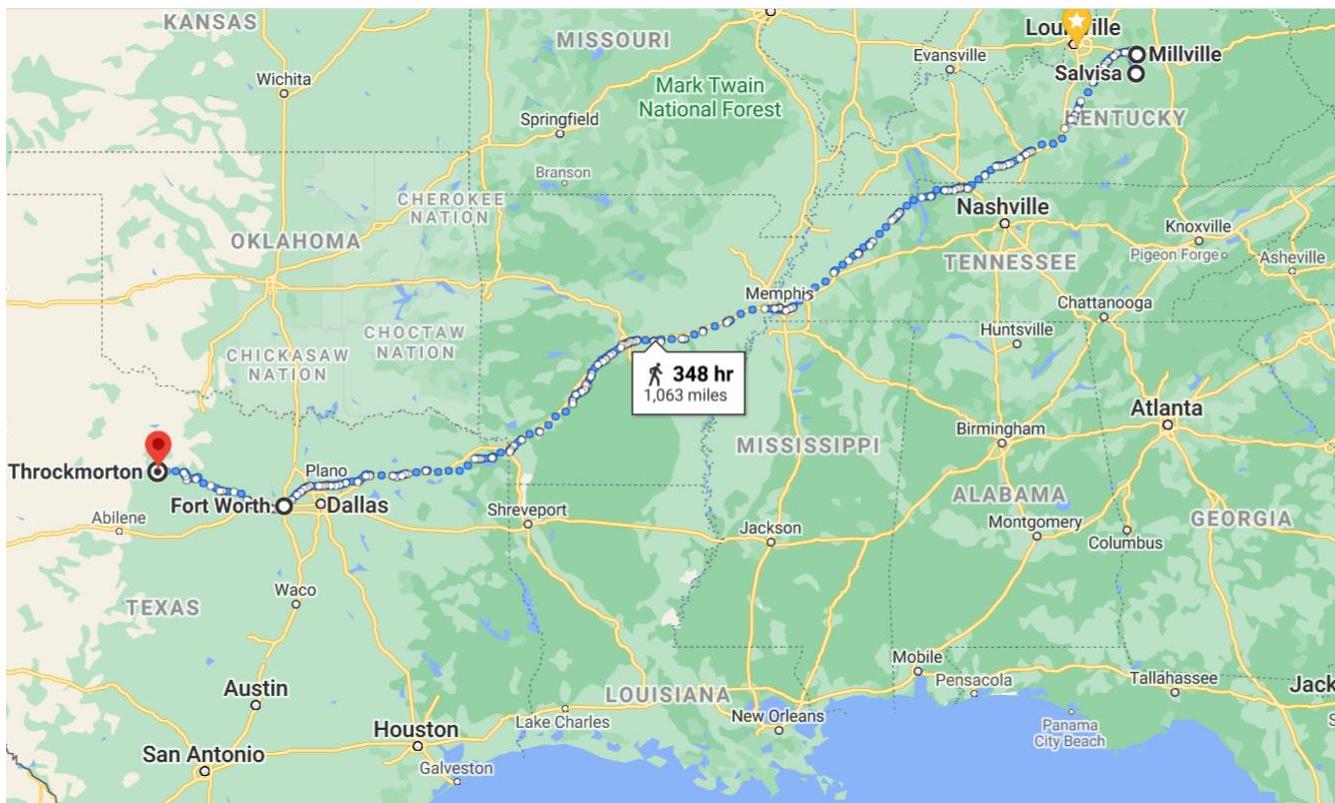
For reasons unknown, Rob's father Joe agreed to act as surety for his brother-in-law Bob's turnpike bond, to the tune of \$90,000, and Joe put up his own real and personal property as security. Bob Pepper did not complete the road project, and Joe was on the hook to pay \$90,000 due to the non-performance of the contract. That amount equates to more than two million dollars today.<sup>4</sup> Because Joe's own property had been made collateral for the turnpike project, that property had to be sold. It went for less than Joe had paid for it, and the proceeds from the sale came nowhere close to the \$90,000 owed.

It is difficult to understand why Joe was willing to endanger his ownership of property he worked so hard to acquire, by agreeing that it could serve as security for funding for his brother-in-law Bob Pepper's turnpike project.

It is difficult to gauge how Rob and his siblings felt when his parents told him that their house, and everything in it, had to be sold at auction and that the family was moving to Texas. This news was bound to be upsetting to the entire family. Did the children pick up on the sorrow and apprehension of the parents, especially their mother? Or had the name "Texas" acquired enough intrigue so that Rob and the others looked forward, at least a little bit, to the chance for new adventures in a faraway frontier land?

### The McCoun family moved to Texas

In 1872, when Rob was on the brink of adolescence, he left a life of luxury and moved with his family to Fort Worth, Texas. The family probably traveled overland, as shown here:



The trip was more than a thousand miles. They may have traveled initially by boat as, in those days, steamboats maintained regular schedules on major rivers like the Kentucky, Ohio, and Mississippi. The McCoun family could have traveled by boat as far as Memphis and from there to Fort Worth by wagon or stagecoach. It seems unlikely that they traveled by river boat all the way down the Mississippi to New Orleans and then via a coastal boat to Galveston, Texas. The trip from Galveston to Fort Worth was hundreds of miles, making such a mode of transportation impracticable.

In any event, the McCoun family arrived in Fort Worth and acquired a homestead. Not long after their arrival there, the photo on the next page was taken.

From left in the 1872 photo were Hettie McCoun (1865-1955), age seven; Joe, age 47; William, about six months old; Luta, age 38; and Joseph Eccles McCoun, Jr. (1869-1941), age three. The photo was cut, but the two parts of the photo have been realigned.

Three of Joe and Luta's children were not included in the photo: Perla Sue McCoun (1857-1942); our great grandfather Rob McCoun (1860-1940); Samuel Pepper McCoun (1862-1944); and Mary Louise McCoun (1867-1940). Below right is a photo of Rob as a young adult, probably taken in Texas.



### Tragedy in Texas

When they left Kentucky, the family may have thought things could not get much worse, but they did. Just two years into the Texas sojourn, Luta died on 27 December 1874, only 40 years old. Rob was 14 when his mother died. Little William, the infant in the photo, died nine months after his mother, when he was only four. In other words, the move to Texas did not have a happy outcome, and soon the family would be split apart. All of Rob's younger siblings other than Sam returned to Kentucky to live with their grandmother, Esther Eccles McCoun.

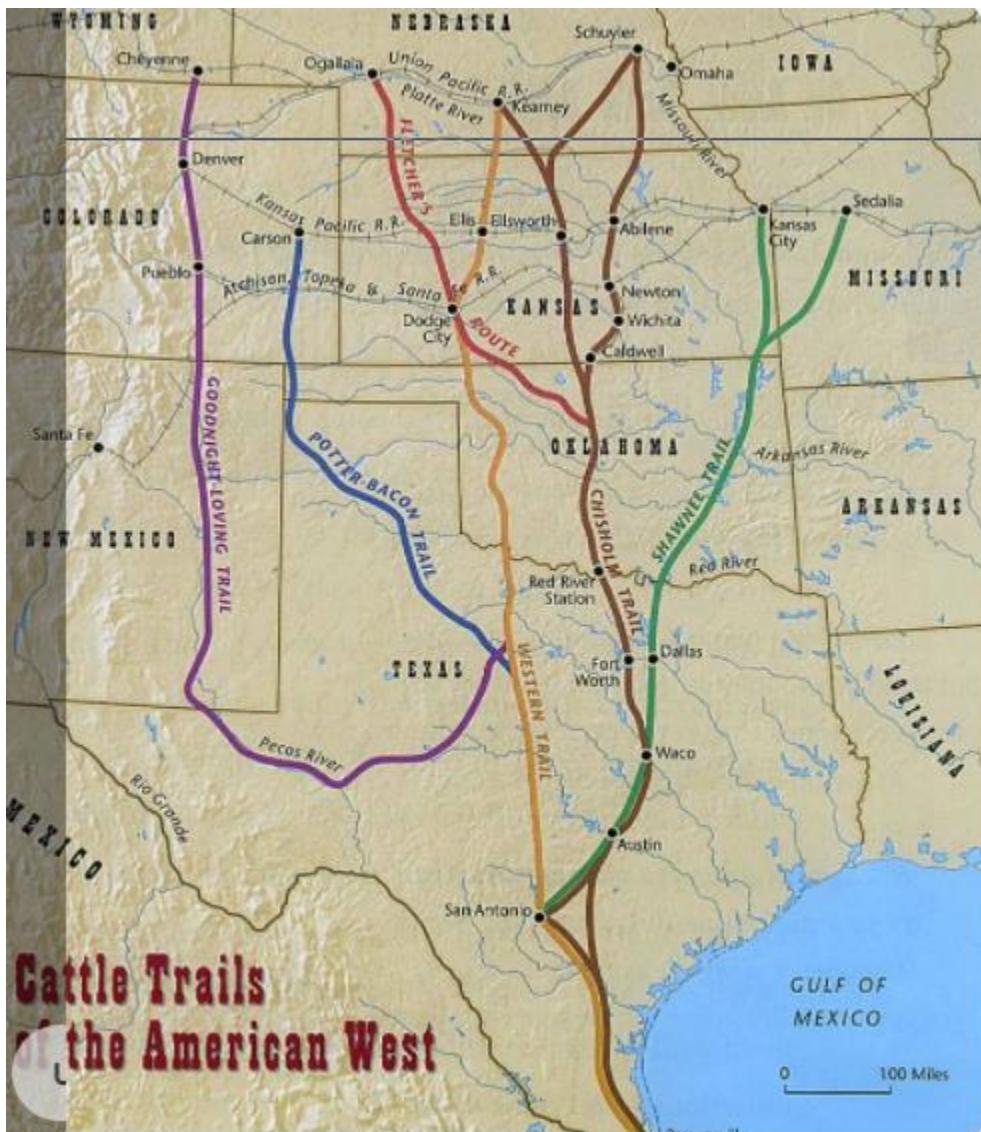
### Joe, Rob, and Sam became cowboys

Shortly after the deaths of Luta and William, Joe and his sons Rob and Sam joined a cattle drive from Fort Worth, where they had been living, to Throckmorton, Texas, about 100 miles west.<sup>5</sup> As cowboys, Joe, Rob, and Sam drove cattle northward from there, all the way to railway stops in Kansas. Cattle were worth next to nothing in Texas, where they were plentiful, but those same cattle were valuable in markets in the northern United States, where Americans' taste for beef had grown. <sup>6</sup>The four-



dollar steer in Texas was worth 30 to 40 dollars in the north. The problem was getting the cattle to the place where they had value. The construction of the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads solved that problem. Texans could drive their cattle north to meet the railhead. Loaded onto trains, Texas longhorns could either be transported east to slaughterhouses or west to new cattle ranches established in Wyoming and Montana.

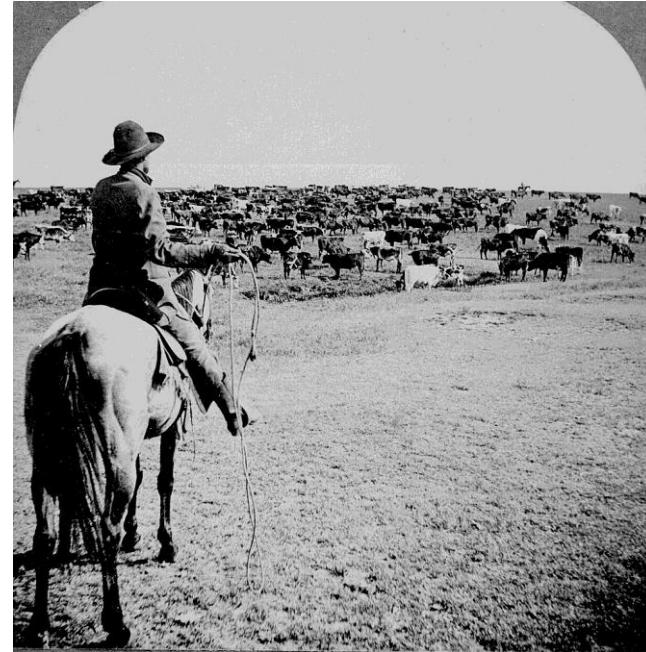
To get an idea of what Joe, Rob, and Sam experienced on a cattle drive, consider that the typical drive would move ten to twelve miles a day and included the trail boss, a wrangler, and a cook as well as cowboys. A drive from Texas to Kansas took about two months, and the pay was \$1000 in wages and provisions (\$25,000 today). Joe's biography includes details about cattle drives.



Joe, age 50 in 1875, likely participated in only the one drive on the Western (or Great Western) Cattle Trail, shown on in amber on the above map.<sup>7</sup> Rob and Sam were cowboys for several years, driving cattle along the Western Trail.<sup>8</sup> When the McCoun men first rode over from Fort Worth to join the Western Trail cattle drive at Throckmorton, Texas, they must have liked the looks of this new community and soon moved there. Perhaps they were happy to leave Fort Worth and its sad memories of the deaths of Luta and William.

In Throckmorton, Joe acquired land for a homestead and additional investment property. He intended to subdivide the latter property into plots for resale to settlers. We do not know if his residential development plan was successful, but to this day there is a street in Throckmorton named McCoun Avenue, marking the time in which our ancestors lived in that dusty north Texas town. Joe became the first county judge in Throckmorton County, as is recorded in the 1880 census, excerpted below. Joe and his sons became friends with a neighbor, the county's first sheriff, a young man named Glenn Reynolds who is enumerated on the same page of the census as Joe's family.

Reynolds must have been a good friend to Rob McCoun, eight years younger. In 1891, Rob and his bride, Syrene, would name their eldest child Glenn Reynolds McCoun



8 8	McCoun Joseph W M 53			1	County Judge
	— Robert P W M 20	Son	1		At Home
	— Samuel P W M 17	Son	1		At School

Years later, that same Glenn Reynolds McCoun told Marcia Horton that his grandfather, father, and uncle were in Texas long enough for his father to acquire a Texas twang in his speech, traces of which were detectable in the speech of some of his grandchildren.<sup>9</sup> Rob also learned to rope cattle. Robert Coldiron McCoun (1928-2019), Glenn's son Robert, the namesake of his grandfather Rob McCoun, told the author that his grandfather was a fast runner and liked to challenge his grandchildren to races.

While he was running, Rob could swing a lasso and capture his young competitors who, caught like calves, collapsed to the ground in laughing and uproarious defeat.<sup>10</sup>

### **Joe and Rob returned to Kentucky**

In the late 1880s, Joe and Rob decided to return to Kentucky, visiting family briefly in Mercer County before proceeding to eastern Kentucky where they started a business cutting white oak timber.<sup>11</sup> That put Rob in the right place at the right time to meet Syrene Cockerham, a meeting essential to our very existence.



Figure 1 Hillside in Breathitt County near the Devil's Creek, Wolfe County location where Joe and Rob worked.

In her *McCoun Family History*,<sup>12</sup> Marcia Bryan Horton wrote that,

It was probably in the late 1880s that Joe and Rob ventured into the mountains of Eastern Kentucky to cut white oak timber, which was in great demand for railroad ties and barrel staves. They found white oak trees plentiful in southern Wolfe County. The ties or staves were cut and shaped and piled in a nearby creek, waiting for a hard rain to wash them down to the Kentucky River. A small loop of the North Fork of the river ran into Wolfe County not far from Devils Creek. There Joe and Rob found lodging at a boarding house run by James K. Cockerham and his wife Manervia.

Devils Creek is an eight-mile tributary that joins the North Fork of the Kentucky.

A Kentucky historian explained the rise and fall of the timber industry in the broader context of the region's continuing economic challenges:<sup>13</sup>

For most of the nineteenth century, Wolfe County's economy centered on subsistence farming. By 1900 Swann-Day and other lumber companies were processing and shipping to the Bluegrass hundreds of thousands of feet of timber from land they had acquired in the Red River and North Fork valleys. Within a few years, though, the timber was depleted. Later oil and some coal resources were developed but they were of limited significance, as was more recent hillside stripping. Seasonal tourism, now considered one of eastern Kentucky's most promising economic ventures, early came to Wolfe County with resorts at Torrent and Swango Springs (near Hazel Green). But they failed to survive the Great Depression. Recently the attractions of Wolfe County's Red River Gorge area have brought a new influx of paying visitors.

*At right: sawmill in Breathitt County with some workers on the deck and others standing on logs in creek; workers' cabins are seen in the background.*<sup>14</sup>

Sam did not return to Kentucky, preferring life in the west. He stayed in Texas a few years, buying back his father's investment property, which Joe had sold before returning to Kentucky. Then Sam migrated to Pueblo, Colorado. The biography of Mary Louise "Luta" Pepper includes brief sketches about Sam and other siblings of Rob McCoun.



## Rob and Syrene met

While staying in the Cockerhams' boarding house in Vortex, Rob noticed the landlords' daughter, Syrene, who worked there, helping her parents. Rob later told his family that, when he saw her, he thought, "That's the girl I'm going to marry!" This was just one version of how the two met, as recounted in Syrene's biography. Rob had met a girl when he and his father had stopped briefly in the Bluegrass, but she was history after Rob met Syrene.<sup>15</sup>

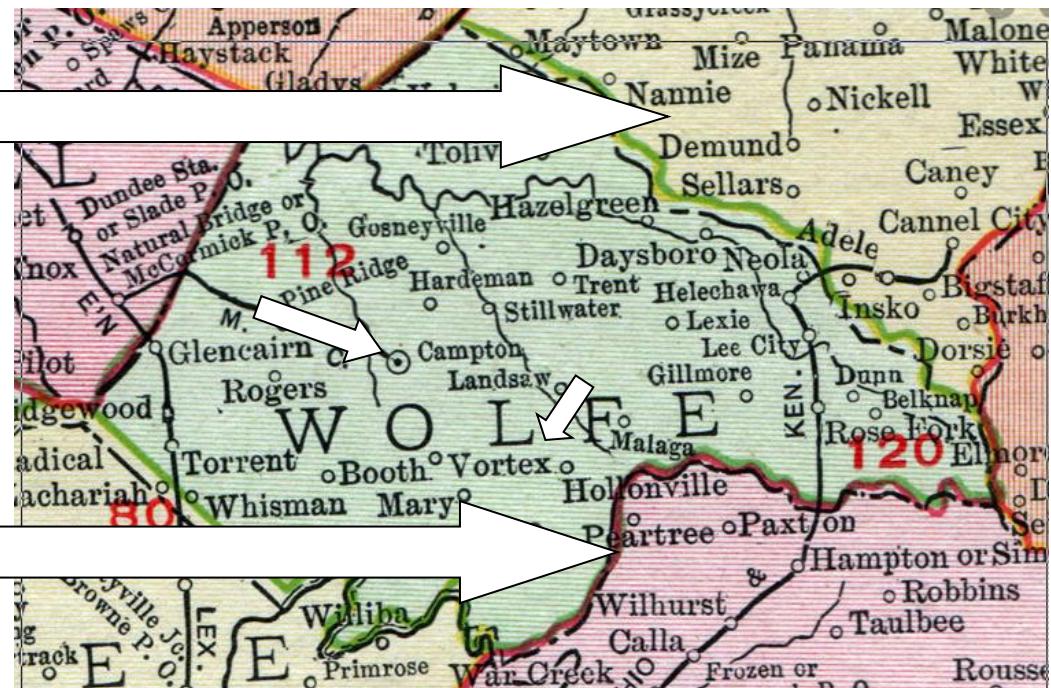
Vortex is a tiny community named for a section of nearby Devils Creek "that would rampage during the rainy seasons and was especially addicted to whirlpools."<sup>16</sup>

*Morgan County, location of Rob and Syrene's wedding at her aunt's home.*

*Campton, county seat.*

*Vortex, location of Rob and Syrene's farm.*

*Breathitt County, location of 1900-1904 timber industry photo on page nine.*



It would be tempting to form the opinion that Rob, with his colorful personal history, had little in common with the tiny, bright-eyed woman who charmed him while serving meals at her parents' boarding house. Her world, much smaller than his, was defined by the map above.

One thing they had in common was growing up in families where hard work was valued and in which there was a willingness, when necessary, to try a new way to make a living. We have seen how Joe McCoun, a farmer, undertook complex property transactions, bet everything he owned on a turnpike venture, moved a thousand miles to Texas, tried life as a cowboy, served as a county judge, and returned to where his life started. Syrene's father was a farmer, then a carpenter. Later her parents ran a boarding house for timber workers such as Rob and then, when the timber was largely depleted, they moved into Campton, the Wolfe County seat, and ran a livery stable where they boarded and rented out horses. Although Syrene's family never experienced the wealth that Rob's family enjoyed for several years, they never went hungry, not only because of her parents' entrepreneurial skills, but also because they always maintained a garden and a few cows and chickens.

At 30, Rob might have been ready to settle down and enjoy a quieter life in a single place. In addition to being smitten with tiny, energetic Syrene, he may have seen in her the perfect partner

in what he may have envisioned as a future more stable than his past as proprietor of a family farm in the Appalachian foothills.

### **Rob and Syrene married and started a family**

Rob and Syrene's wedding on 14 February 1891 took place at the Morgan County home of her Aunt Mary Jane Cockerham Sebastian and Uncle Calloway Sebastian.<sup>17</sup> Syrene's uncle and his sister, Margaret "Peggy" Sebastian Elam, served as witnesses. A minister known as Brother Benton performed the ceremony.<sup>18</sup> As newlyweds, Rob and Syrene lived for a while with her parents in what had been their boarding house near Vortex.

The young couple had the opportunity to move to Mercer County, where Rob was born. His father Joe McCoun had quit the timber business and had moved back there. In about 1889, Joe had married a childless widow named Mary Priscilla Adams Sea who owned a house and farm. She happened to be Joe's second cousin, as she also was a great grandchild of the immigrant Kentucky pioneer couple, James McCoun IV (1716-1800) and Margaret Walker McCoun (1717-1784). After Joe's death in 1897, Mary Priscilla invited Rob and Syrene and their children to live with her, promising that she would leave them the Mercer County farm when she died, as she had no children of her own.

But Syrene did not want to leave Wolfe County, so they declined Mary Priscilla's offer and instead bought a hilly farm, near Devils Creek and Vortex in Wolfe County.<sup>19</sup> There Rob lived for the rest of his life. Marcia Horton was uncertain about this issue, but it is possible that Rob purchased his in-laws' farm, as the described location of the Cockerhams' farm and the property Rob purchased appear to match. Also, it is known that James K. and Manervia Cockerham moved to Campton at about the same time as Rob's purchase of a farm.

In any event, Rob built a comfortable frame house atop one of the highest hills in the area and set about farming Bluegrass-style, using methods that seemed strange to some of his neighbors. He had his own blacksmith shop and tools to make wagon wheels and other necessities. There were apple trees, grape vines, beehives, and a spacious root cellar to store the vegetable crops. Rob and Syrene worked hard and made a good living.<sup>20</sup>

Their birthdates and names of Rob and Syrene's children were:

1891, 24 November. Glenn Reynolds McCoun.

1892, 12 December. Hettie Frye McCoun.

1894, 28 August. Mahalah McCoun (born and died the same day).

1896, 22 September. Lucy Ethel McCoun ("Ethel").

1898, 6 April. Samuel Caesar McCoun ("Caesar").

1899, 10 December. Effie Wayland McCoun ("Wayland").

1901, 29 December. Nancy Mayo McCoun ("Nannie").

Sketches about the children are appended to Syrene's biography<sup>21</sup> and there also is a biography of our grandmother, Ethel.<sup>22</sup>

As shown on the next page, the Census enumerated on 8 June 1900 listed Robert, age 39, a farmer, and indicated that he could read and write. Neither "Sarha" (Syrene) age 30 nor her brother Harvey living next door could read or write. Syrene and Rob's children were Glenn, age 8; Hettie, age 7; Ethel, age 4; Samuel C, 2; Effie W, 5 months. Glenn and Hettie had each attended school for three months earlier in the year. Hettie was counted twice in the 1900 census. She was listed not only with her parents but also in the Campton household of her maternal grandparents, James and Manervia Cockerham, where she was probably staying to help them.

10	Cockerham, Rob	Head	M	M	May 1872	28	M	7
	— Lou C.	Wife	M	F	June 1872	27	M	0
	Bailey, Willard	Head	M	M	Mar 1895	12	S	
5	McCormick, Rob	5 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> yrs.	M	M	May 1861	31	M	9
	— Syre	Wife	M	F	May 1870	30	M	5
	— Glen	son	M	M	Mar 1891	3	S	
	— Hettie	Daughter	M	F	Dec 1872	7	S	
	— Ethel	Daughter	M	F	Sept 1891	4	S	
	— Samuel C.	son	M	M	Apr 1893	2	S	
	— Effie W.	Daughter	M	F	Jan 1900	5 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	S	
	Wiley, Cal	son	M	F	Oct 1883	17	S	0



#### About the 1904 Family Photo

Clockwise from left in the photo were Caesar, Ethel, Rob age 44, Glenn, Syrene, Hettie, Wayland, and Nannie, between her parents.

The photograph was taken in 1904 by a professional photographer, probably Syrene's brother, Harvey. At age 20 in the 1900 census, he was described as a photographer, listed with his parents.

The family was very well-dressed. The dresses worn by Syrene and her daughters were beautiful. Hettie's dress is styled similarly to her mother's, in terms of the pleats and triangular decorations, while the two youngest daughters wore nearly identical frilly dresses.

We do not know whether Syrene sewed the children's clothes. She probably did, but they may have been store-bought because, by that time, nearby Campton had several general merchandise stores that sold clothing, according to a 1905 issue of the *Campton Courier*. It also listed four doctors, one dentist, four lawyers, a bank, grocery stores, a grist mill, an oil drilling company, and a company that manufactured saddles, harnesses, and shoes.<sup>23</sup> In short, Syrene would not have to travel far to buy either ready-to-wear clothes or the fabric and notions needed to sew the clothing herself. By 1894, the Sears, Roebuck and Company catalogue was offering sewing machines, musical instruments, buggies, and clothing.<sup>24</sup>

Ethel's outfit was less remarkable—and it is unclear whether the two straps down her chest attached to a handbag or to a skirt—but what stands out is her beauty she was. No one could have guessed that this beautiful child would grow up and turn into the cranky and unhappy old woman her grandchildren knew.

In the 1910 census, enumerated on 25 April, Robert, age 49 and still a farmer, reported that he owned his farm free of mortgage. For Syrene, 41, the occupation was housework while Glenn, 18, was a laborer. Also in the household were Ethel, 14; Caesar, 12; Effie, 10; and Nannie, 8. Everyone in the family except Syrene could read and write.

McCoun, R. P.	Hector	m w 47 M 18	Kentucky	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	Farmers
—	wife	m w 41 M 17 7 b	Kentucky	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	Housework
—	Glenn	son	m w 19 S.	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	Labor
—	Ethel	daughter	m w 14 3	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	None
—	Caesar	son	m w 12 8	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	None
—	Effie	daughter	F w 10 8	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	None
—	Nannie	daughter	F w 5 8	Kentucky	Kentucky	English	None

Hettie, age 17, had married Eugene Horton, age 27; in the 1910 census, they were living elsewhere in Wolfe County, next door to her brother-in-law Corsa Horton and two doors from Eugene's widowed mother, Anna Tyler Horton and her three youngest sons (Richmond, Herbert, and Marion). Fourteen-year-old Ethel was listed twice in the 1910 census, for she was shown not only with her parents on the family farm but also in Campton, with her maternal grandparents, James Kash Cockerham and his wife Manervia, then running a livery stable. On 1 January 1914, Ethel would marry Herbert Hilary Horton, the younger brother of Hettie's husband, Eugene Horton.

Rob was probably the photographer in the 1919 picture on the next page, as we do not see him in the group. Syrene, age 53, was the proud matriarch of a growing family. Standing from left were (probably) William "Bill" Elkins (1900-85), the long-time beau of Wayland McCoun, who sat in front of him, beaming; Herbert Horton, Glenn McCoun, Eugene Horton, and Caesar McCoun. Middle row consisted of Wayland, Ethel McCoun Horton (marked by an arrow and holding Glenn), Syrene Cockerham McCoun, Hettie McCoun Horton holding Geneva, and Nannie.

In front were Ethel's sons Wilson and Raymond and Hettie's children Eunice and Seldon. As a beleaguered 22-year-old mother of three boys, Ethel was still pretty but no longer the little girl in the 1904 photo. Before Ethel's childbearing was done, she would have two daughters as well as two more sons.



According to Rob and Syrene's grandson, Robert Coldiron McCoun, she was the boss of the household. Despite her small stature, Syrene thoroughly hen-pecked Rob, but he had his own defense mechanisms. Said their grandson Robert, "Grandpa was psychologically deaf. Grandma would be screaming, 'Rob, Rob, Rob!' and he couldn't hear her."<sup>25</sup>

Robert also said that it was expected in those days that one of the children would not marry but would continue living with the parents to care for them in their old age. Often this would be the youngest daughter. When Nannie, the youngest child, got married, the task of caring for aging parents fell to Wayland. Her beau, Bill Elkins, had similar responsibilities to care for his parents, so the two never married. Grandson Robert believed that Wayland was bitter that the family eldercare responsibilities had devolved to her. Rob and Syrene seemed oblivious to the sacrifice their daughter had made; it simply was something they expected one of their children to do.

McCoun Robert P. Head	OF	M 41 59	II	Robert Kennedy
— Syrene wife	W	W 42	II	Robert Kennedy
— Glenn	S	W 28	II	Robert Kennedy
— Caesar son	S	W 21	II	Robert Kennedy
— Wayland daughter	F	W 20	II	Robert Kennedy
— Nannie daughter	F	W 18	II	Robert Kennedy

In the 1920 census, enumerated on 19 January, with only the two eldest daughters married, the family consisted of Robert, age 59, farmer; Syrene, 42; Glenn, 28, occupation, oil; Caesar, 21, occupation, oil; Wayland, 20; and Nannie, 18. Between this census and the 22 April 1930

census, Glenn, Caesar, and Nannie would marry. Still on the family farm were Robert, age 69, who continued to farm; Syrene, 52; and Wayland, 28.

Next door in the 1930 census were Herbert Horton, an oil driller, and his wife, Ethel, Syrene and Rob's daughter. The Horton children were Raymond, 15; Wilson, 13; Glenn, 11; Leona, eight; Herbert Jr, five; and Samuel, two. A seventh child, Virginia, was born on 16 December 1930. Herbert's death in July 1931 would result in his widow and children moving away from Wolfe County. Ethel took a job in Louisville as a housekeeper for a recently widowed man named Charles Homer Shuck, whom she later married. Raymond attended Berea Academy and College from 1931-35, then enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps, before he too moved to Louisville, in 1937.<sup>26</sup> Except for his brother Wilson, working on the Mercer County farm of their great uncle, Joseph Eccles McCoun Jr., Raymond's siblings already were in Louisville by the time he moved there in 1937. The youngest five lived for varying periods of time in the Louisville Masonic Widows and Orphans Home.

In May 1938, a McCoun family reunion was held at the home of Rob and Syrene McCoun. The six children of Syrene and Rob gathered with their parents for a group shot. Standing were Glenn, Ethel, Nannie, Hettie, Wayland, and Caesar. Rob and Syrene were seated.

The photo on the next page shows the grandchildren of Syrene and Robert at the 1938 reunion. The McCoun parents of the young people in the photo were Glenn (G), Hettie (H), Ethel (E), Samuel (S), and Nannie (N). Someone must have told the children to clasp their hands in front. Several complied, and the effect is adorable.



The names of each child (and the first initial of the McCoun parent's first name) were: *In the back row, Joe Horton (H), Mary Alene Horton (H) holding infant Carl B. Strong (N), Glenn Horton (E), Wilson Horton (E), Robert Horton (H), and Raymond Horton (E), age 23, marked with an arrow. Middle row, Anita Strong (N), Margaret Portes Strong (N), Lillian McCoun (S), Cyrenne McCoun (G), Thelma Horton (H), Helen Rose McCoun (S), William Robert Strong (N), and Glenn H. McCoun (G). Front row, Edsel McCoun (S), Thearon Horton (H), Robert Coldiron McCoun (G) [a source for many family stories], and Fred McCoun (G).*



*In the photo below, standing: Ethel McCoun Horton Shuck, age 42, and Charles Shuck, Mary Alene Horton (H), Carl Strong and wife Nannie, Wayland McCoun, Eugene Horton and wife Hettie, Grace Coldiron McCoun, in hat (wife of Glenn McCoun), Glenn Horton (E), Wilson Horton (E), Emma McCoun (Caesar's wife), Raymond Horton (E), William Strong (N). Middle row seated: Robert and Syrene McCoun. Standing: Thelma Horton (H), Anita Strong (N), Helen Rose McCoun, laughing (S), Cyrenne McCoun behind her (G), Edsel McCoun in hat (S), Margaret Portes Strong in front of Raymond (N), Lillian McCoun (S). Seated on ground, Thearon Horton (H) laughing, Robert Coldiron McCoun (G), Glenn Hatchet McCoun (G), and Fred McCoun (G)*





*In the photo above, standing: Ethel and Charles Shuck, Nannie McCoun Strong, Wayland McCoun, Eugene Horton, Hettie McCoun Horton, Glenn R. McCoun, Raymond Horton behind Caesar McCoun (in hat), William Robert Strong (N), Glenn Horton (E). Middle row seated: Robert and Syrene McCoun. Standing, Thelma Horton in spotted dress (H), Robert Coldiron McCoun (G), Helen Rose McCoun (S), Emma Swango McCoun (Caesar's wife), Thearon Horton (H), Cyrenne McCoun (G), Lillian McCoun (S), Margaret Portes Strong (N). Front row: Anita Strong (N), Mary Alene Horton (H), Wilson Horton (E), Grace Coldiron McCoun (in hat), Robert Horton (H) with Fred McCoun (G) and Glenn Hatchett McCoun (G).*

Comparing the above photo to the one on the previous page, several people had moved around. Rob McCoun's cane was leaning against his rocker, and we get a better look at what appears to be a greenhouse with a peaked roof.

*At right: Rob and Syrene McCoun at the reunion.*

It seems from the photos that the grandchild generation enjoyed this reunion as much as did their parents and grandparents. Raymond, Wilson, and Glenn Horton probably weren't as boisterous as the little kids but must have enjoyed the chance to return to Wolfe County and see once again the country and their kin. The three boys' four younger



siblings were not at the reunion. The three youngest Horton children (Herb, Sam, and Virginia) had since 1934 been living in the Louisville Masonic Home for Widows and Orphans. The third and fourth children had also lived there awhile, Glenn until he reached adulthood and began working, and Leona to age 15. Leona told her daughter that living at the Masonic Home was the best thing that could have happened to the younger Horton children, because in her view Ethel was not a loving mother.

Not quite two years after the 1938 McCoun family reunion, the 1940 census was enumerated in Wolfe County on 18 April. As in 1930, only three people were still on the farm: Rob, age 79; Syrene, 72; and Wayland, 40. The census asked about years of education. Rob reported eight years, Syrene zero, and Wayland four.

McCoun, Robert (8)	head	9	M	W	79	M	No 8	8	Kentucky
—, Syrene	wife	9	F	W	72	M	No 0	0	Kentucky
—, Wayland	daughter	2	F	W	40	S	No 4	4	Kentucky

### Death of Rob McCoun

Robert Pepper McCoun died at home later that year, on 25 September 1940. He was 80 years old, and the cause of death was cardiac dropsy (edema) due to chronic myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle). He had been to see the attending physician, Dr. Taylor Center, 15 days earlier. (Dr. Center was the brother-in-law of Glenn Reynolds McCoun's wife, Grace Coldiron McCoun, the husband of Grace's sister, India.) The informant on the death certificate was Rob's daughter, Hettie, then living in Winchester.

We know that Rob's grandson, Raymond Horton, attended Rob's funeral because this fact was mentioned by Marcia Bryan Horton in a letter to her mother back in Jeffersontown. Marcia, whom Raymond had married four days before Rob's death, was unable to get off work for the funeral. The newlyweds were living in Campton at the time. Rob was buried in the Evans Cemetery in Campton, where Syrene would join him 22 years later.

The family of Raymond and Marcia Horton periodically took day trips to the area where he was born and grew up. Usually, they visited Natural Bridge State Park but occasionally they went in search of ancestral homes. In Marcia's *McCoun Family History*,<sup>27</sup> she wrote that,

It must have been around 1960 that my husband wanted to show our children where his grandparents had lived. We drove the rocky road up the hill only to see the still smoldering ruins of the house. It was sad. That fire seemed to punctuate with emphasis the end of an era which actually was already past.

If I had a ticket for time travel and could pick an ancestor to visit, Rob McCoun would be high on my list. He had such an interesting life. What was it like being a rich kid in a mansion in one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen? What was it like being a cowboy? Was it love at first sight when he encountered Syrene? What was my grandmother like when she was a little girl? Yes, if great granddad Rob McCoun was willing to talk, I am eager to listen.

I hoped you enjoyed reading about one of my favorite ancestors.

Linda Horton, [lhorton@comcast.net](mailto:lhorton@comcast.net), 18 December 2021.

**Appendix A: The 1975 McCoun Family Reunion  
The Wolfe County News, Campton, Kentucky**

**Campton, Ky., Sept. 26, 1975  
McCoun Reunion Held Sept. 7**

On Sunday, September 7, 1975, the descendants of Robert McCoun and Sirene Cockerham McCoun met for a family reunion, [at] the lodge of Natural Bridge State Park. Twenty-seven members of the family were present, Mr. Caesar McCoun: Jackson, Kentucky, Mr. and Mrs. Glenn McCoun: Winchester, Kentucky, Mrs. Ethel McCoun Horton Shuck: Louisville, Kentucky, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Baber (Eunice Horton); Middletown, Ohio, Mr. and Mrs. Carl B. Strong, Jr: Nicholasville, Kentucky, Mr. and Mrs. Edsel McCoun and children; Jackson, Kentucky, Mrs. C.B. Slade (Helen Rose McCoun); Cynthiana, Kentucky, Mr. Joe Horton; Middletown, Ohio, Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Nantz (Lillian McCoun) and Vannah; West Carrollton, Ohio, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond T. Horton; Jeffersontown, Kentucky, Mr. Raymond B. Horton, Louisville; Miss Jean Lee Horton, Louisville; Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Horton; Louisville; Mr. Robert Horton; Middletown, Ohio, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Horton; Louisville.

Mrs. Nancy Strong, Mrs. Ethel Shuck, Mr. Glenn McCoun, and Mr. Caesar McCoun are the children of Mr. and Mrs. Robert McCoun, formerly of Vortex in Wolfe County. Mrs. Hettie McCoun lives in Carlisle, Ohio and is recovering from a recent illness. She is very much missed by the rest of the family.

\*“The history of the McCoun family traces back to May 1773, when James McCoun, Jr. left his residence on Sinking Creek, [Botetourt] County, in Virginia and came to the banks of the Salt River the 27<sup>th</sup> day of July 1773 with the McAfee Company (James, George, and Robert McAfee, and also Samuel Adams). After several visits of the McAfee Company to Kentucky and the war with Great Britain, it was not until August 1779, that they, with their families came to the new County of Kentucky, arriving on the banks of Salt River the first day of October 1779.

The party erected a stockade as one of the first things, as protection from the Indians. The winter of 1779-80 was a most severe one and food became quite scarce and most of the animals froze to death.

Rev. David Rice, a Presbyterian preacher, moved from Virginia to Kentucky and began his labors in the neighborhood of Danville, (Ky.) and Harrodsburg in 1783. On June 4, 1784, Mr. Rice preached his first sermon ever preached on Salt River. It was a funeral discourse, occasioned by the death of the wife of James McCoun, Sr.

Thus was the beginning of the McCoun family in Kentucky. Robert McCoun came to Wolfe County to work in the logging business and later married Sirene Cockerham. They had seven children.

The next reunion will be held the Sunday after Labor Day in 1976, at the Lodge in Natural Bridge State Park. Hopefully, after the first reunion, more relatives and friends will join “The McCouns.”

\* From the History of the New Providence Presbyterian Church in Mercer County (Founded in 1784).

# The Wolfe County News

CAMPTON, KENTUCKY

Campbell, Ky., Sept. 26, 1975

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Mrs. Nancy Strong, Mrs. Ethel Shuck, Mr. Glenn McCoun, and Mr. Caesar McCoun are the children of Mr. and Mrs. Robert McCoun (deceased), formerly of Vortex in Wolfe County. Mrs. Hettie McCoun Horton lives in Carlisle, Ohio and is recovering from a recent illness. She was very much missed by the rest of the family.

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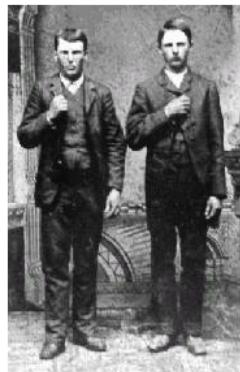
## **Appendix B: Are we related to the outlaws Jesse James and Frank James?**

From 2013 until his death in 2019, I was friends with our cousin, Robert Coldiron McCoun (1928-2019). An appendix to the biography of his grandmother, and my great grandmother, Syrene Cockerham McCoun includes a tribute to cousin Robert. As was recounted in that tribute, Robert periodically asked me to research various legends he had heard about family history.

One was that the father of the famous outlaws, Jesse and Frank James, may have been our great great grandfather Joseph Eccles McCoun. When Robert Pepper “Rob” McCoun was a very young man, he was kneeling on the ground at a livery stable, picking up a horse, when a loud male voice ordered him to hand over the horse. “Give it to me—I need a fresh horse!” Rob stood and looked into the stranger’s face—and felt he was looking into a mirror, so remarkable was the resemblance of the stranger’s face to his own. Rob sensed that he needed to do what the man requested. Later someone told him he was wise to comply because that man was Jesse James!

Although I found no way that Rob’s father, Joe McCoun, was the father of Jesse James, it is possible that Joe’s older brother, William McCoun, was Jesse’s father, though not Frank’s. The two James brothers did not resemble each other, as may be seen below on the second slide. Anyone who has followed the life of William McCoun, the one who was shot by the Mexican firing squad, would not be surprised to hear that he might have had an affair with a married woman, living nearby, whose husband was usually away as a graduate student in theology.

This research project was a lot of fun. With the reader’s indulgence I will simply replicate here the PowerPoint presentation that I emailed to Robert, and which he thoroughly enjoyed.



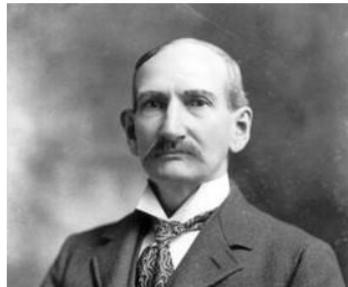
## **Are we related to the outlaws Jesse James and Frank James?**

**Family legend is that their father was a  
McCoun, possibly even our ancestor Joseph  
Eccles McCoun, father of Robert Pepper  
McCoun! Can that be true? (No, but there  
are some interesting kinships....)**

Linda Horton, Rockville, MD 12 Feb. 2017  
LRHorton@comcast.net

# Do Frank and Jesse look like McCouns?

Frank James



Jesse ← James



Robert S. & Zerelda James

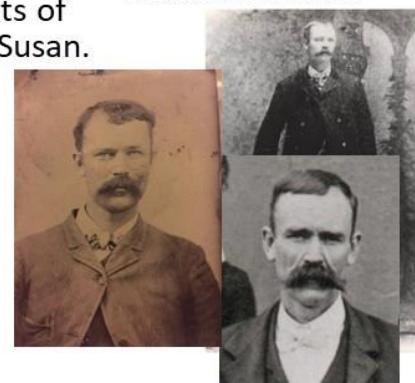
People in our McCoun family thought so...

But the James boys also resemble Robert Sallee James, husband of their mother Zerelda Cole.

All biographers say Robert James and Zerelda Cole James were the parents of Frank, Jesse, and sister Susan.



Could our ancestor Joseph Eccles McCoun (above) be their father? Which would make Robert Pepper McCoun (below) their half brother...No.



Timelines: our ancestor Joe McCoun Jr. (father of great grandfather Robert Pepper McCoun) was not in the right place at right time to have fathered Frank or Jesse

## James Family

- 1818 Robert James born in Russellville, Logan County, KY.
- 1825 Zerelda "Zee" Cole born in her grandfather's tavern in Woodford County, KY.
- 1839 Robert began theology studies at Georgetown Coll.
- 1839 Zee went to live with her uncle in Stamping Ground, Scott County. She didn't want to move to Clay County, Missouri with her mother and stepfather.
- Abt 1840- Zee at St. Catherine's convent school, Lexington.
- 1841 Robert & Zee met at the Stamping Ground Baptist Church (which she had joined in 1839).
- 28 Dec 1841. Robert & Zee wed at her uncle's home.
- Feb. 1842 Zee went to mother & stepfather's farm in MO.
- June 1842 Robert finished junior year. He visited the farm.
- By 1843 Robert returned to Georgetown College to finish.
- 19 Jun 1843 Frank James born near Kearney, Clay Co MO.
- 29 Jun 1843 Robert received B.A. in Theology from Georgetown, tied for 3<sup>rd</sup> place honors (though was in MO).
- Between 1843 and 1847, Robert divided time between MO and Georgetown College in KY.
- 19 Jul 1845. Robert S James born; died 33 days later.
- June 1847 Robert received an M.A. in divinity.
- 5 Sep 1847 Jesse James born near Kearney, Clay Co MO.
- 1849 Susan James born same place.
- 1849 Robert founded William Jewell College.
- April 1850 Robert left for Calif to visit brother, prospect for gold, and preach to gold prospectors.
- Aug 1850 Robert arrived in Calif, became ill, and died.

## McCoun Family: Joseph McCoun: in Kentucky and Texas but not Missouri

- 1825 Joseph E. McCoun born in Mercer Co KY.
- 1833 Mary Louise Pepper born in Woodford.
- 1850 census; both single, living with parents.
- 1856 Joe and Mary Louisa wed; neither previously married. Their eldest three...
  - 1857 Perla born, Mercer Co
  - 1859 Mahalie born/died, Mercer Co
  - 1862 Robert Pepper born, Mercer Co etc.
- 1870 Financial setback causes family to move to Texas: Joe co-signed on a loan to his wife's brother to build a tollroad—road wasn't built—Joe had to sell his house to repay the lenders.
- 1871 Son William (named for dead uncle) born.
- 1874 Mary Louisa died in TX. 1871 Son Wm died.
- 1880 census, Throckmorton, TX: Joseph E age 53 (county judge), Robert Pepper age 20, Sam age 17
- 1891 Robert Pepper McCoun, in Kentucky working in the KY timber business.
- He met/wed Syrene Cockerham in Morgan Co KY.
- Between 1891 and 1895 Joseph returned to Kentucky, where he married Mary Adams Sea in Mercer Co KY (she was widow of Union soldier)
- 1897 Joseph died in Mercer Co, KY.

Timelines: Joe's brother William could *theoretically* have fathered Frank and Jesse—  
William was also in Clay County, MO when Frank and Jesse were conceived...

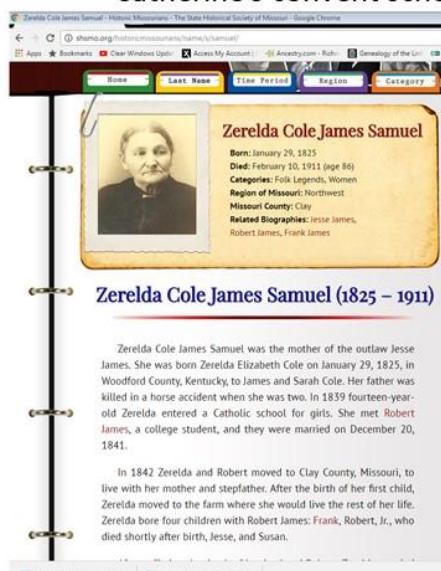
### James Family (continuing)

- Feb 1842-47 Zee in Clay Co MO; Robert spent a lot of time in Kentucky at Georgetown College, completing his B.A. and M.A.
- Sep 1850 census: Robert, Zee, Frank, Jesse, and Susan reported in Platte City, Clay Co, MO
- Aug 1850 Robert James died in Calif.
- 1852 Zee married Benjamin Simms, a neighbor. Benjamin was not a nice stepfather to Frank & Jesse (ages 9, 5).
- 1854 Benjamin was thrown off a horse & died
- 1855 Zee married Reuben Samuel, MD
- 1858-66 four children born to Zee, Reuben
- 1862-66 Frank & Jesse were in guerilla gangs.
- 1866-81 Frank, Jesse and Cole Younger planned and executed numerous bank, stagecoach and train robberies as the "James-Younger Gang" (Cole Younger was related by marriage to McCouns).
- 1875 Zee was maimed during raid on family home.
- 1882 Jesse James was shot & died. Frank surrendered and later was acquitted.
- 1903 Frank & Cole Younger start Wild West Show.
- 1908 Zee's 3<sup>rd</sup> husband, in insane asylum, died.
- 1911 Zee died during a train ride.
- 1915 Frank James died of natural causes.

### William McCoun, Joe's brother

- 1819 Wm McCoun born, Mercer Co KY.
- By 1842, Wm McCoun living in Clay Co, MO, where in:
- 1842 Wm McCoun married Vienna Simms Peters, whose mother's brother Benjamin Simms would, 10 years later, marry Zee Cole James, the mother of Frank & Jesse.
- 1844, 1845, 1848, 1850 children—James, William, Frank and Ella McCoun—born in Clay County, MO
- 1850 census William & Vienna in Liberty, Clay Co with children William & Frank; also a female slave, age 35.
- Abt. 1851. William joined the California Gold Rush.
- 1854-55. William was a Calif. state senator representing Contra Costa County (east of San Francisco Bay).
- Wm became a friend of former Calif. Sen. Henry Crabb, who lost his bid for re-election in 1854 as a Whig and again in 1856, this time as member of "Know-Nothings."
- 1857 Crabb organized an expedition to the Mexican State of Sonora to aid one side in a Mexican political conflict (he hoped payoff would be land for a future slave state).
- 1857 William McCoun joined the expedition. It ended tragically in Sonora on April 7. He and others were shot.
- 1860 census shows Vienna with son Wm age 14, daughter Ella age 11, and her parents with her in Liberty MO.
- 1868. Vienna died at age 46.

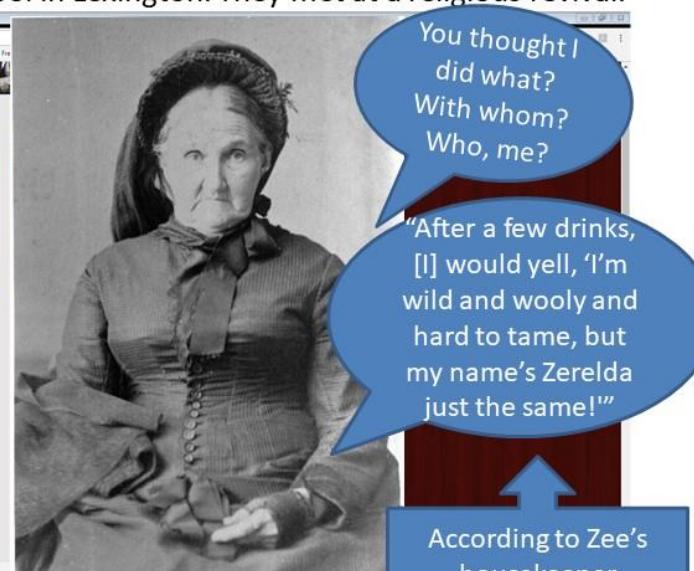
I think likely that the father of Frank and Jesse was Zerelda's 1<sup>st</sup> husband, Robert S. James. She was just 16 when they married. Both had religious educations—he in Baptist Theology at Georgetown College, she at St. Catherine's convent school in Lexington. They met at a religious revival.



**Zerelda Cole James Samuel (1825 – 1911)**

Zerelda Cole James Samuel was the mother of the outlaw Jesse James. She was born Zerelda Elizabeth Cole on January 29, 1825, in Woodford County, Kentucky, to James and Sarah Cole. Her father was killed in a horse accident when she was two. In 1839 fourteen-year-old Zerelda entered a Catholic school for girls. She met Robert James, a college student, and they were married on December 20, 1841.

In 1842 Zerelda and Robert moved to Clay County, Missouri, to live with her mother and stepfather. After the birth of their first child, Zerelda moved to the farm where she would live the rest of her life. Zerelda bore four children with Robert James: Frank, Robert, Jr., who died shortly after birth, Jesse, and Susan.



*You thought I did what?  
With whom?  
Who, me?*

*"After a few drinks,  
[I] would yell, 'I'm  
wild and wooly and  
hard to tame, but  
my name's Zerelda  
just the same!"*

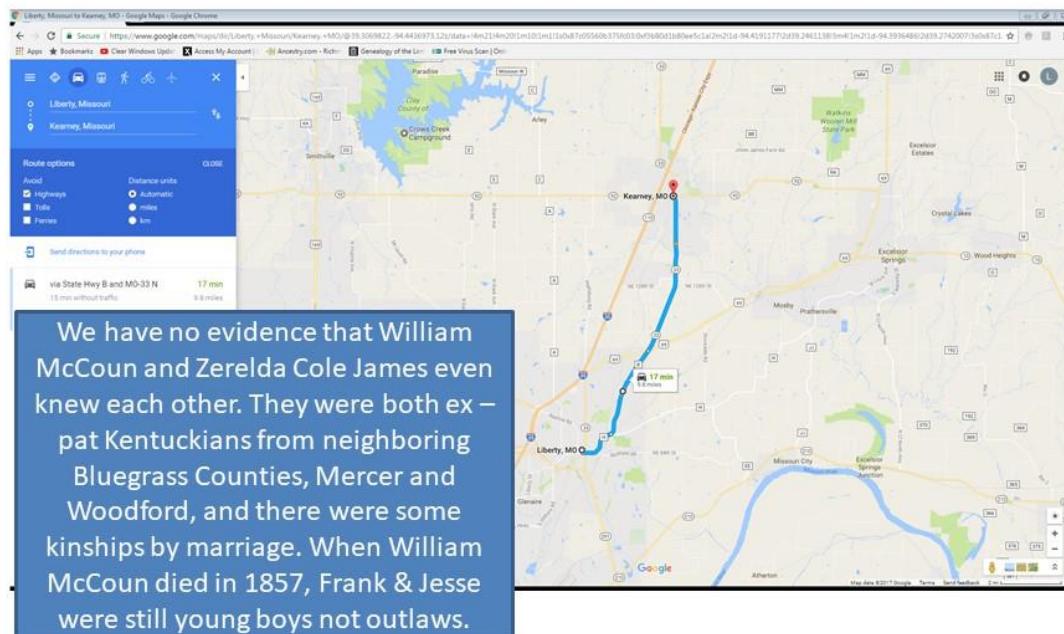
**According to Zee's housekeeper**

Was Zee the kind of woman who would have an extra-marital affair?

# Was Zee the kind of woman who might have an extramarital affair?

- Evidence is mixed.
- Zee was educated in a Catholic convent and at age 16 married a Baptist preacher. She was said to be religious in her own way.
- On the other hand, she was born & raised in a rowdy tavern ("Little Sodom"). She was in the convent school because her uncle found her a handful.
- Also, Robert was away a lot. Notably, Robert James was back in KY completing his education during much of the time in which Frank and Jesse were conceived, though we don't have precise records of when Robert traveled back and forth.
- Many have wondered why Robert went to Calif. Some say that Zerelda had been unfaithful and he wanted to get away. [Rumors, true or not true, were bound to happen in light of Zerelda's personality and Robert's frequent absences.]
- In her later years, she loved her bourbon and cashed in on her sons' notoriety. She charged 10¢ for admission to the house where son Jesse was shot. She sold random pebbles, claiming they were from his grave.
- And Missouri was, at that time, the wild wild west.
- I cannot rule out the possibility that William McCoun, brother of our ancestor Joseph E. McCoun, fathered one or both of the James boys. (For example, perhaps he was not Frank's father but was Jesse's.)
- In doing this research, I encountered an astonishing number of tall tales about Jesse James (for example, that he staged his own murder and lived on for many years).

The William McCoun family lived in Liberty, MO, is only about 10 miles south of where the James boys were born near today's Kearney, MO



# We need DNA evidence

- I am seeking information on any YDNA testing of men today with a clear pedigree back to Jesse James. There may be no such men.
- There probably are collateral James-surnamed males to test (descending from Robert James' brother, for example). However, if Frank's or Jesse's father was someone other than a James male, that doesn't really tell us who the true father was of Frank or Jesse or both.
- An opportunity was missed when, in 1998, a GWU law professor James Starr (one of my professors) got heirs' permission to exhume remains from the family cemetery including what were believed to be teeth of Jesse James. Enough material was extracted to identify the mitochondrial DNA but apparently no effort was made to test for YDNA.
- Professor Starr announced his conclusion that the DNA test of the teeth proved that the man in the grave was Jesse James. Many critics have poked holes in that finding. For example, the chain of custody for the teeth was unreliable—the remains may have been someone else's teeth.
- If there is a living James-surnamed male descendant of Jesse to test, and if that descendant matched Robert Coldiron McCoun closely on YDNA, we would have our answer! Likewise we would have our answer if there is not a match!

There were multiple in-law relationships between William McCoun and the James gang.

- As noted, in 1852, after Robert James' death, Zee Cole James married Benjamin Simms, the uncle of William McCoun's wife, Vienna Simms Peters. Benjamin was the brother of Vienna's mother.
- Note that Frank and Jesse were little boys aged 9 and 5 at the time.
- Benjamin Simms reportedly was cruel to his stepsons. Zee and the children left Benjamin.
- In 1854, Benjamin fell off his horse and died.
- After that, Zee married a third time to Dr. Reuben Samuel.

So, one way we are related to Jesse and Frank James is through the marriage of our 3<sup>rd</sup> great uncle William McCoun to Vienna Simms, the niece of their stepfather

- **Jesse Woodson James (1847 - 1882)**  
**stepson of uncle of wife of 3rd great-uncle**
- [Zerelda E Cole \(1825 - 1911\)](#)  
*mother of Jesse Woodson James*
- [Benjamin Simms \(1800 - 1854\)](#)  
*husband of Zerelda E Cole*
- [Richard Simms \(1752 - 1850\)](#)  
*father of Benjamin Simms*
- [Frances A Simms \(1796 - 1848\)](#)  
*daughter of Richard Simms*
- [Vienna Strother Simms Peters \(1822 - 1868\)](#)  
*daughter of Frances A Simms*
- [William H. E. McCoun \(1819 - 1857\)](#)  
*husband of Vienna Strother Simms Peters*
- [JOSEPH McCOUN \(1784 - 1829\)](#)  
*father of William H. E. McCoun*
- [JOSEPH ECHOLS McCOUN \(1825 - 1897\)](#)  
*son of JOSEPH McCOUN*
- [ROBERT PEPPER McCOUN \(1860 - 1940\)](#)  
*son of JOSEPH ECHOLS McCOUN*
- [LUCY ETHEL McCOUN \(1896 - 1985\)](#)  
*daughter of ROBERT PEPPER McCOUN*
- [RAYMOND THOMAS HORTON \(1914 - 1987\)](#)  
*son of LUCY ETHEL McCOUN*
- [Linda Rae Horton](#)

This is a distant relationship!

## Zerelda Cole James with 2<sup>nd</sup> husband Benjamin Simms in about 1851

After suffering the death of her husband Robert, Zerelda married Benjamin Simms briefly, then a doctor named Reuben Samuel in 1855. She had several children with Dr. Samuel.

Zerelda Cole James Samuel was a Confederate sympathizer who fiercely defended her son Jesse's guerrilla activities. In 1875 she was maimed when Pinkerton agents threw a firebomb into her farmhouse in the hope of catching Jesse. After Jesse's death, Zerelda had him buried on her property. She lived the rest of her life in the shadow of her son's controversial legacy. She died on February 10, 1911.

TEXT BY CAROLYN TROUT WITH RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY ELIZABETH ENGEL

Meets Show-Me Standards SS-2, 6, 7, 4th grade GLE 2a.A.

**References and Resources**

For more information about Zerelda Cole James Samuel's life and career, see the following resources:

**Society Resources**

The following is a selected list of books, articles, and manuscripts about Zerelda Cole James Samuel in the research centers of The State Historical Society of Missouri. The Society's call numbers follow the citations in brackets. *All links will open in a new tab.*

**Books**

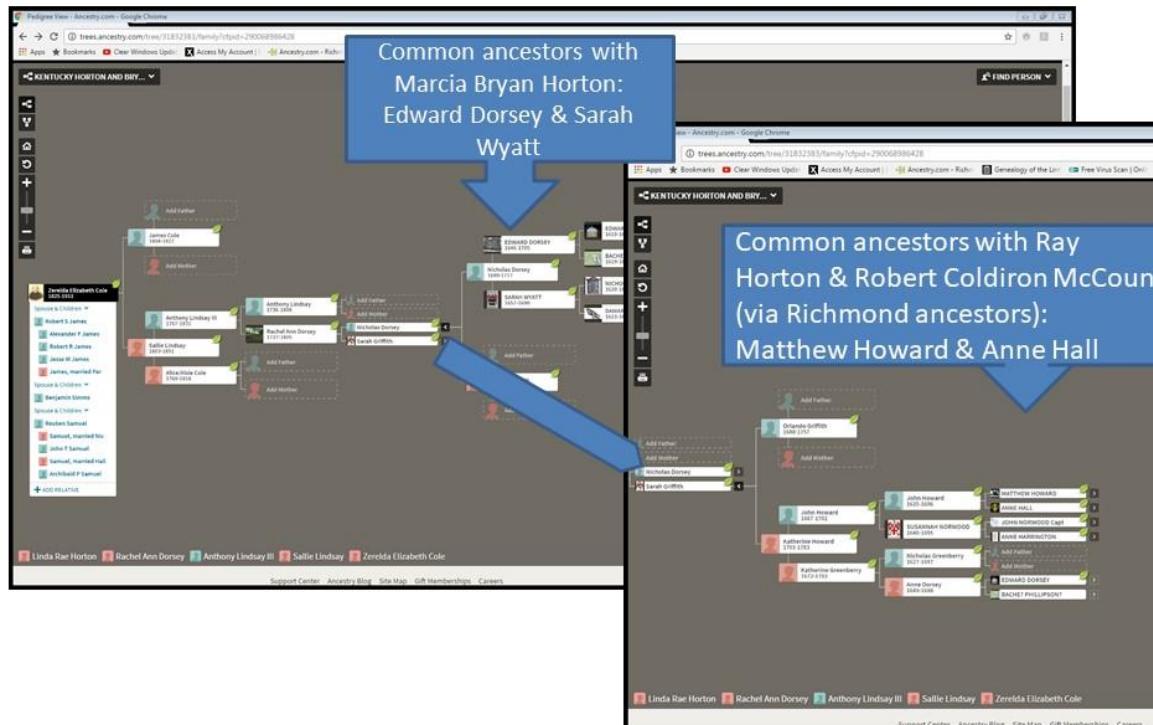
→ James, Stella F. *In the Shadow of Jesse James*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Revolver Press, 1990. [REF F508.1 J236]



# There were other connections to outlaws

- William McCoun's wife Vienna Simms Peters had four sisters. Two of them married men who, later in their lives, had connections to outlaws.
- Vienna McCoun's sister Augusta's 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage, in 1853, was to a man whose nephew (Thomas Younger, 1844-1916) would later become a member of the James-Younger gang.
- Vienna's sister Mary was the mother of the desperado Johnny Ringo who was among the bandits hanging out in Tombstone, Arizona. He was born in Indiana in 1850 and shot to death in 1883 near Tombstone, possibly by Wyatt Earp.

Zerelda Cole James & her outlaw sons are my maternal & paternal cousins thanks to shared Anne Arundel County MD ancestry!



# We may never know

- The idea that William McCoun, our ancestor's brother, might have been the father of Frank James or Jesse James, or both, is highly speculative and seems improbable.
- At the same time, the possibility cannot be ruled out.
- YDNA evidence might be useful if an appropriate test taker could be found.

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<sup>1</sup> The Biography of Joseph McCoun (1784-1829), Ancestor 40, 16 December 2021, includes details about the Joseph McCoun House, included in a 2005 application for listing on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

<sup>2</sup> Interview of Robert Coldiron McCoun by Linda R. Horton, 22 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Photograph was from <https://kirkfarms.com/property/5876-mccracken-pike/> (accessed 18 December 2021).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.measuringworth.com/dollarvaluetoday/?amount=90001&from=1871>

<sup>5</sup> Horton, Marcia Bryan. *A History of the McCoun Family compiled as a Memorial to my husband, Raymond Thomas Horton (1914-1987)* 1989 (hereinafter Horton, Marcia Bryan, *History of the McCoun Family*), at A-24.

<sup>6</sup> <http://nebraskastudies.org/en/1850-1874/beef-moves-to-nebraska/cattle-drives/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/155796468336456411/>

<sup>8</sup> Photo of the cowboy and cattle is from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle\\_drives\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#/media/File:Cowboy1902.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle_drives_in_the_United_States#/media/File:Cowboy1902.jpg)

<sup>9</sup> Horton, Marcia Bryan, *History of the McCoun Family*, at A-24.

<sup>10</sup> Interview of Robert Coldiron McCoun by Linda R. Horton, 22 October 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Id. View of logs from the bottom of a hillside in Breathitt County Kentucky in about 1900-1904. Photographed by Earl, A.J. University of Louisville Digital Archives, image number 1977.01.055 in the Arthur Younger Ford photograph album collection. <http://library.louisville.edu/archives/order>

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<sup>12</sup> Horton, Marcia Bryan, *History of the McCoun Family*, at A-25.

<sup>13</sup> Rennick, Robert M., Wolfe County-Post Offices (2000). County Histories of Kentucky at 304. [https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/kentucky\\_county\\_histories/304](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/kentucky_county_histories/304)

<sup>14</sup> View of sawmill in Breathitt County in about 1900-1904. Photographed by Earl, A.J. University of Louisville Digital Archives, image number 1977.01.061 in the Arthur Younger Ford photograph album collection. <https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/ford/id/30/rec/291>

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Rennick, Wolfe County Post Offices, at 16-17.

[https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1304&context=kentucky\\_county\\_histories](https://scholarworks.moreheadstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1304&context=kentucky_county_histories)

<sup>17</sup> Id.

<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> Id. at A-24.

<sup>20</sup> Id. at A-25.

<sup>21</sup> Syrene Cockerham (1868-1962), Ancestor 11, 19 August 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Lucy Ethel McCoun Shuck (1896-1985), Ancestor 5, 12 October 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfe County Woman's Club, *Early and Modern History: Wolfe County Kentucky, 1860-1957*. 1957; 2019: Commonwealth Book Company, at 6.

<sup>24</sup> Sears Archives <http://www.searsarchives.com/catalogs/chronology.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Interview of Robert Coldiron McCoun by Linda R. Horton, 22 October 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Thomas Horton (1914-1987), Ancestor 2, 31 May 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Horton, Marcia Bryan, *History of the McCoun Family*, at A-25.