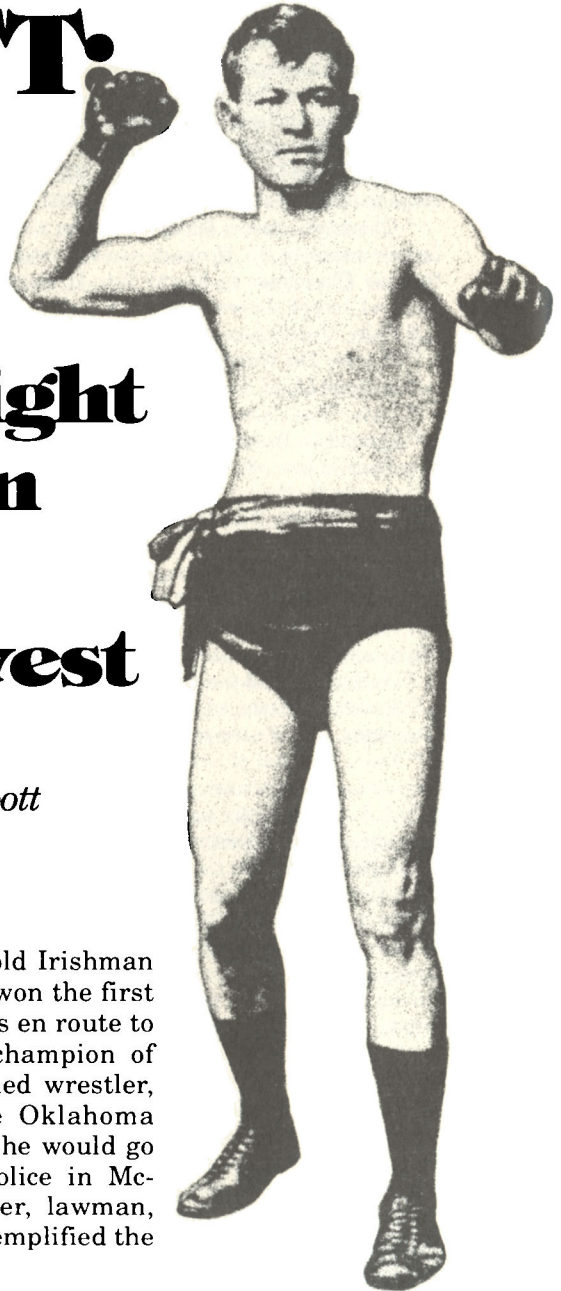


Gentleman Tom ABBOTT

Middleweight Champion of the Southwest

By Devon Abbott

In 1911 a twenty-two-year-old Irishman named Thomas James Abbott won the first in a long line of boxing matches en route to becoming the middleweight champion of the Southwest. An accomplished wrestler, he already had clinched the Oklahoma state championship, and later he would go on to become the Chief of Police in McAlester. Tom Abbott, as fighter, lawman, railroader, and family man, exemplified the



rough and tumble adaptability necessary to succeed on the frontier of Indian Territory and early Oklahoma statehood.

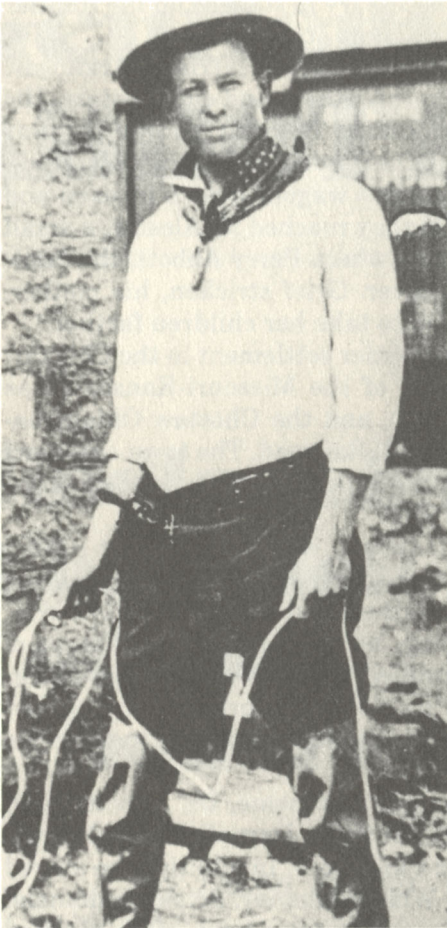
Tom Abbott was born on June 22, 1889, in Harrison, Arkansas, the youngest son in a family of four brothers and eight sisters. His parents hoped to acquire land in Indian Territory, so when he was only a few months old, they left their home on Gather Mountain and made their way southwest in two wagons drawn by oxen and a pair of Belgian horses. In 1890 they reached McAlester, a small mining village in Indian Territory, where Perry Abbott, the family's eldest son, died of typhoid fever. Grief stricken, his mother, Martha Jane Bell Abbott, refused to take her children farther.¹

In 1890 McAlester was a raw frontier settlement in the Choctaw Nation, located at the crossroads of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad (known as the Katy line), and the Choctaw-Oklahoma-Gulf (later renamed the Rock Island) Railroad. The town consisted of a handful of inhabitants, a few buildings, with no lawmen or doctors.²

Tom's father, William Elliott Abbott, was a coal miner turned physician. Born in Kentucky, the elder Abbott supported eleven brothers and sisters after their father died during the Civil War. With wages earned from mining, he paid for the education of several of his siblings, then enrolled in a medical college in Paducah, Kentucky. After completing a one-year program, he worked as a physician for local mining companies prior to moving his family to McAlester.³

With his family settled into their new home, Dr. Abbott found employment as a physician with the Bolen Darnell, Dan Edwards, Galveston, and McEvers mining companies. In addition, he served the neighboring settlements of White Chimney, Scipio, Indianola, Canadian, and nearby Krebs, a coal mining town often plagued with mine explosions. As one of the few physicians in the area, Dr. Abbott answered calls many miles from home. If he took his wagon, he would sleep on the return journey, trusting the horses to make their way home to McAlester. Like other frontier physicians, he often accepted chickens and produce in lieu of payment.⁴

Active in civic affairs, Abbott was elected the first mayor of McAlester and served two terms. He drew the blueprints for the township of North McAlester, which was incorporated in 1907. With statehood came more stringent laws for licensing physicians. Despite his years of practical experience, Dr. Abbott had little formal training and was forced to retire from his practice. After 1907 he worked first for the Hotel Eller, a Texas Road stop-over, then conducted a successful fruit and vegetable farming business.



At age nineteen, Tom Abbott served as a member of the McAlester Fire Department (All photos courtesy of the author).

He died in 1936 at eighty-seven in the same North McAlester neighborhood where he had lived for forty-four years. His wife Martha had died fourteen years earlier.⁵

With William Abbott often absent for days treating his patients, the Abbott children vied for their mother's attention. Preoccupied with the house and farm, she had little time for her children and the Abbott brothers fended for themselves, developing a lasting independence. One of Tom's brothers, Walter, became a United States Marshal. William Abbott, Jr., a self-educated coal miner, had part of one ear bitten off in a fight, but later became a preacher before succumbing to black-lung disease. Tom's closest brother, Gus, suffered an accidental gunshot wound to his head when only ten years old. Although the injury later induced epileptic seizures, Gus joined the army and was wounded during World War I. He lived to be over eighty years old.

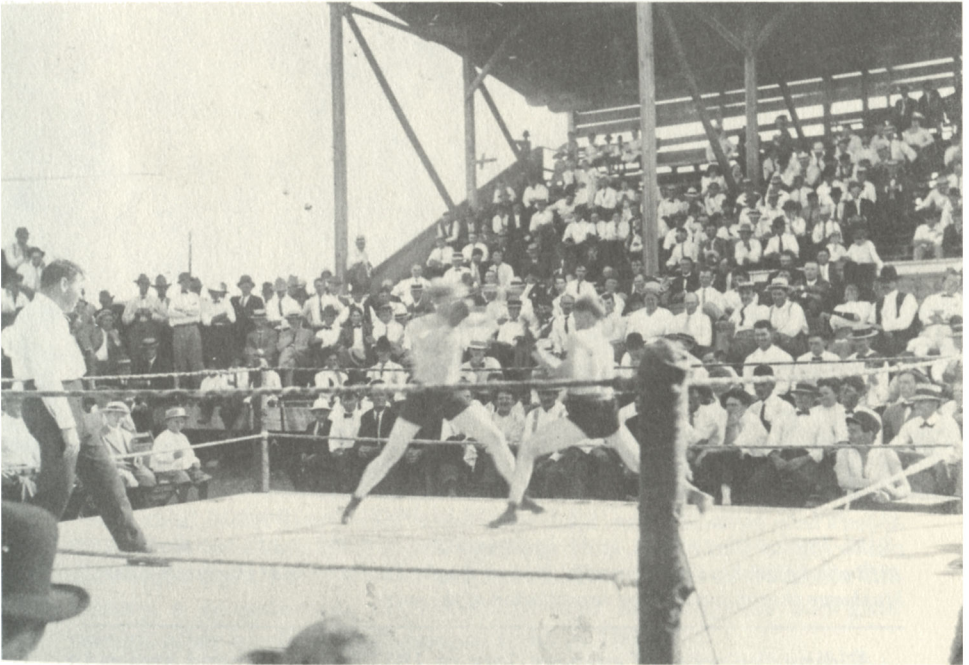
Tom's early years were less eventful. As a teenager he served in the McAlester Fire Department, enrolled at the University of Oklahoma at Norman, and left school for a job as a brakeman with the Katy Railroad. In his free time, he participated in local wrestling exhibitions, then decided to use his athletic abilities to pursue the sport of boxing.⁷

Despite his lack of formal training, Abbott fought and won several bouts near McAlester in 1909. He wanted to improve his skills, so he used part of his railroad salary to work with well-

GENTLEMAN TOM ABBOTT

known trainers. He traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to train with Yankee Swartz, and to Springfield, Missouri, where he worked with Jack O'Leary on fundamentals and conditioning. In Joplin, Missouri, he trained with Joe Cox at Jim Bronson's Athletic Club, and in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, he fine-tuned his uppercut and feint with Jimmy Kelly and a future opponent, Tommy Smith. Although Abbott was still relatively inexperienced, he was asked to train Clarence English and Guy Buckles before returning to Oklahoma to resume his boxing career.⁸

An experienced all-around athlete, Abbott thrived on conditioning and never entered the ring unprepared—or over 158 pounds. If



Although this contest with Tommy Smith on July 4, 1911, ended in a draw, Abbott had developed a reputation as a promising fighter.

he did not win his bouts quickly through outright skill, his conditioning and stamina gave him the edge over better opponents. Coaches and managers praised his aggressive style, which included a straight stance, jabs, and a left-handed uppercut that came to be known as “the sleep producer.” Defensively, he was agile and evasive. Only one fighter, “Lightfoot” West from El Reno, knocked him down in a close fifteen-round bout in 1912. Abbott

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

won the decision, but later described West as one of his toughest opponents.⁹

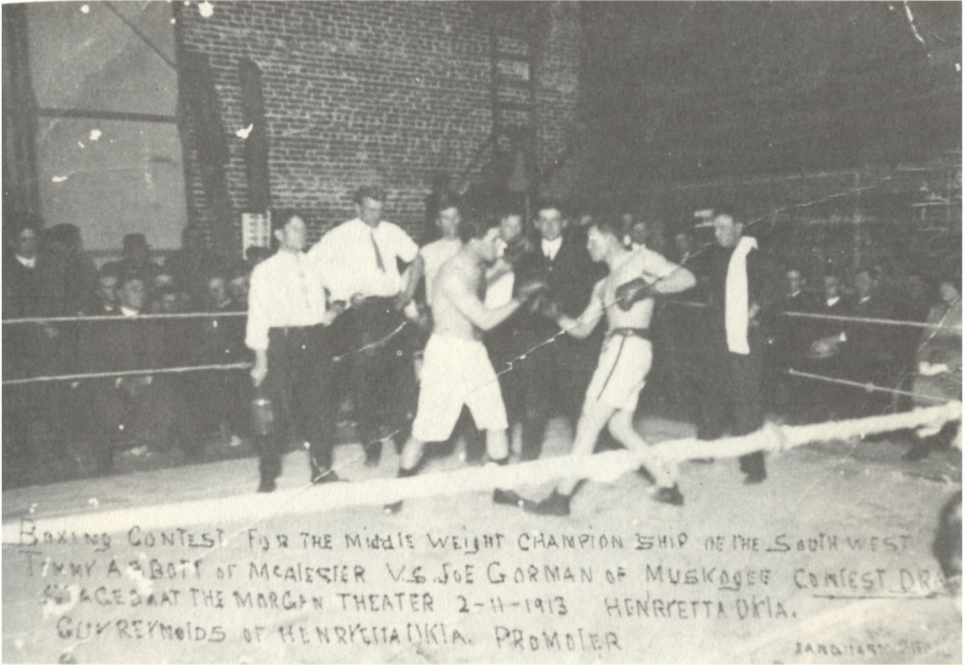
Abbott began his winning streak in 1911. That year he twice defeated “Young Jeffries,” the former welterweight champion of the Pacific Coast. He also knocked out Britt Henderson of Fort Smith, Arkansas, “Slim” Pack, the Wyoming champion, and Johnny “Kid” Gilsey—each within four rounds.¹⁰



Abbott's team included (above, left to right) coach “Rube” Ferns, Abbott, McDonald, trainer/fighter Carl Morris, sparring partner Jimmy Kelly, and Fields. In the 1913 championship bout (opposite), Abbott fought Joe Gorman at Henryetta after Muskogee churchgoers forced cancellation of the event.

Riding the crest of success, late in 1911 he challenged any man in Oklahoma who could make the 158 pound weight. His skill and popularity grew with each fight, and carloads of loyal fans from McAlester began following “That Marvel of Speed, Our Man From McAlester, Gentleman Tommy Abbott,” to all his engagements.¹¹

His first bout in 1912 was against Claude Foster. The largest and most enthusiastic crowd yet to witness a boxing match in McAlester gathered at the Busby Theatre to watch Abbott quickly dispatch Foster as he broke the Haileyville man’s nose in the fifth round. He also defeated “Mysterious” Billy Ross of Seattle, Wash-



ington, in two, fifteen-round non-championship bouts. For his second fight with Ross, special seating was built at the Krebs Ball Park Arena. The crowd was so large that a section of the seats constructed over the race track collapsed, dropping more than 100 people to the ground. Surprisingly, there were few injuries, and the rest of the audience hurried to another part of the park to see the ring. Referee Carl Morris commented that it was the best middleweight fight he had ever witnessed. Tom received \$600 for his victory, a considerable improvement over splitting the \$38 gate receipt after his first professional fight in 1911.¹²

While training with heavyweight Carl Morris of Sapulpa for his first match against “Rube” Smith of Denver, Colorado, Abbott was observed by the older but respected fighter and trainer, “Rube” Ferns. Ferns commented that Abbott had the quickest feet and hands of any boxer he had ever seen and predicted that his rise to fame as champion was “as sure as the sun is to go down tonight.” He also was impressed by Tom’s willingness to take advice. After Abbott finished sparring, Ferns asked him if he would like to go a few rounds. Abbott accepted, and following the workout, Ferns agreed to serve as his new coach.¹³



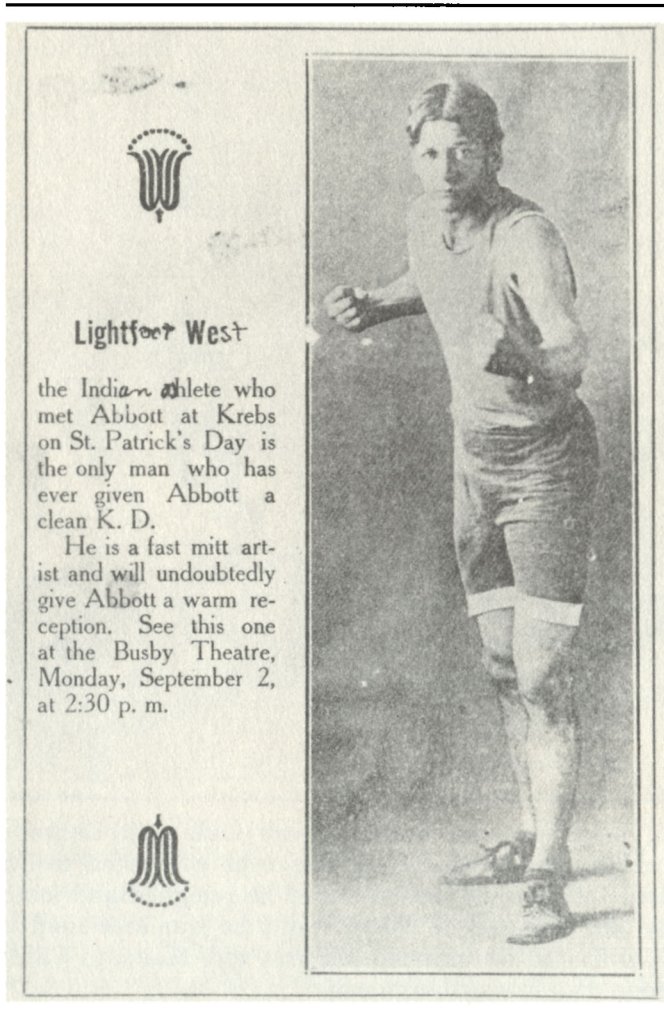
Abbott retired as middleweight champion of the Southwest in 1914 after an illustrious five-year career. One of his toughest opponents was "fast mitt artist" Lightfoot West (opposite).


Prior to the May, 1912, Abbott-Smith bout, a group of disgruntled McAlester church members voiced their concern over the violence inherent in prize fighting and demanded that the event be cancelled. The promoter refused, but a compromise insured peace; under the command of Governor Lee Cruce, twenty-five state militiamen encircled the building where the fight was to be held, each carrying ammunition. The contestants were warned to fight fairly and both Smith and Abbott promised not to draw blood deliberately or to knock each other out. Despite its slower pace, the match

GENTLEMAN TOM ABBOTT

was exceptional, and the 800 spectators included the leading opponents of boxing from the church. Abbott's new respectability soon led to his selection as the new manager and promoter of the Business Man's Athletic Club, replacing W.R. Crowder, Rube Smith's manager.¹⁴

On July 4, 1912, Abbott fought Smith again in a contest billed as one of the biggest events in the history of Pittsburg County. Even more seats were added to Krebs Ball Park and a special interurban line ran from McAlester to Krebs every thirty minutes. Abbott again won in ten rounds, but acknowledged Smith as his most






Lightfoot West

the Indian athlete who met Abbott at Krebs on St. Patrick's Day is the only man who has ever given Abbott a clean K. D.

He is a fast mitt artist and will undoubtedly give Abbott a warm reception. See this one at the Busby Theatre, Monday, September 2, at 2:30 p. m.



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

memorable opponent. That year he also defeated the six-foot Pete Shaughnessy of Joplin, Missouri, and Joe Hagan, "The Whirlwind from Missouri." A few months later he pummeled the eccentric Brooklyn fighter "Mikey" McDonough, also known as "Izzy Yallow," who wore a top hat on training runs.¹⁵

Abbott's seventeenth fight was against Muskogee's Joe Gorman at the Henryetta Athletic Club on February 11, 1913. The event was originally slated for Muskogee, but because of persistent protests from local church members against the "rough stuff," county attorney W.E. Disney cancelled the match. Gorman, a quick and experienced fighter, inflicted more damage on Abbott than anyone had in the past. Despite tremendous support from his fans and friends from the McAlester coal fields, Abbott had to accept his first draw. Within a few months, however, he decidedly outclassed "Battling Minor" of Memphis, Tennessee, at the Lyric Airdome in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and Scotty McMurdo of Mulberry, Kansas, at Hartford, Arkansas.¹⁶

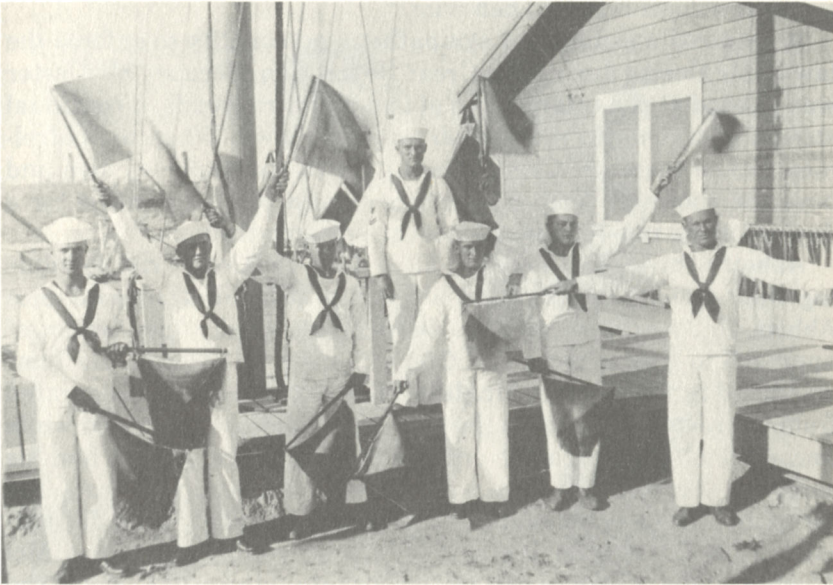
Tom retired from boxing as the undisputed middleweight champion of the Southwest in 1914. He accepted a position as football



and track coach at Sacred Heart College (Oklahoma Catholic University) in Shawnee, Oklahoma, where he converted to Catholicism. When the football season ended he resigned and joined the Navy. For the duration of World War I he was stationed off the coast of California. He married his first wife Mabel in California, but she soon died from tuberculosis.¹⁷

GENTLEMAN TOM ABBOTT

After the war, he returned to McAlester and a job with the Katy railroad. He also married his second wife, Eula Self, a Choctaw from Red Oak. He worked for the railroad until March 12, 1929, when he joined the McAlester police force.¹⁸



After serving as football coach at Sacred Heart College for one year (opposite), Abbott (above, right) joined the Navy, serving in California during World War I.

In 1933 Patrolman Abbott was assigned to meet FBI officials in Hot Springs, Arkansas, to identify and arrest Frank “Jelly” Nash, who had escaped from the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas. Following the arrest, Abbott and three FBI agents planned to escort Nash back to Kansas. At that time FBI agents did not carry weapons, and depended on local law enforcement officials to make arrests for them. At the last minute, McAlester Police Chief Ott H. Reed, who also could identify Nash, decided to go in Abbott’s place. It proved a fatal decision, for after reaching the Kansas City Union Station, Chief Reed, the three FBI agents, and two Kansas City detectives who were escorting Nash were ambushed by the Miller Gang, which included Verne Miller, Adam Richetti, and possibly Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd. The machine gun attack killed Chief Reed, Nash, and three other officers.¹⁹

Following the “Kansas City Massacre,” Abbott was appointed the new police chief of McAlester. It was not a difficult choice; Reed

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

had previously commented that Abbott was one of his best officers. Indeed, Abbott was a professional. He knew the town and the people, while local officers and state penitentiary officials considered him an expert on fingerprint identification. Growing up among the rougher element of McAlester also had given him insights into local criminal behavior.²⁰

It required a strong, yet sympathetic personality to enforce the law in McAlester during the Great Depression. Because McAlester was located at the intersection of two major railroads, a continual stream of transients made their way into town. When his patrolmen picked them up, Chief Abbott gave the unemployed men and boys the choice of cleaning the streets and receiving meals for a day or sitting in jail until the next train came through.²¹

Abbott's three children often visited the McAlester city jail during their father's tenure, and his youngest child, Thomas James Abbott, Jr., fondly remembers his father's kindly "no nonsense" approach to law enforcement. One afternoon in 1938, "Little Tom" wandered into the empty McAlester drunk tank, an area separated from the rest of the cells so the "clients" would not be abused while unconscious. As soon as he entered the cell, Chief Abbott had his sergeant shut the door for ten minutes to impress upon his son the consequences of over-imbibing. In another incident, Tom, Jr., witnessed his father's boxing skill. While patrolling downtown McAlester, Chief Abbott spotted two drunks staggering along the main street. When he suggested that the men go home, one swung at him. Two careful uppercuts rendered both men unconscious on the sidewalk. Yet the three Abbott children also remembered that despite his long days of police work, he often took them to the park for several hours in the afternoons and spent many weekends hunting and fishing with his son.²²

In 1940 Chief Abbott resigned from the police force, lured back to the M-K-T by higher wages. He moved his wife and children to Muskogee, where he served as baggage man in the mailcar of the "Texas Special" passenger train that ran from Houston to St. Louis. After hearing a radio report of the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor, he immediately contacted his friends in state government in a futile attempt to reenlist in the Navy. Because of his age, he was limited to serving his country through the railroad.²³

Tom, Jr., often accompanied his father on trips to McAlester, then east to Wilburton, a mining town situated between the Kiamechi and Sansbois mountains. Tom, Sr., kept rooms in Denison, Texas, and Springfield, Missouri, as rest stops for lengthy trips. He



Tom and Eula Self Abbott in the 1920s.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

often took freights out during the night and frequently made two trips a day. Sometimes he finished a twelve-hour run, slept for six hours, then was called back for another run. Despite this heavy schedule, he still found time to spend with his family and to attend his son's athletic events. In 1947 he watched Tom, Jr., help the Muskogee Central High School Roughers win the state basketball championship.²⁴

Although Tom retired from the railroad in 1955, he remained active in the Elks, the American Legion, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. He corresponded with friends from his boxing years and spent several hours each day cultivating his half-acre garden on Elmira Street, across the field from Alice M. Robertson Junior High School. In 1971 he succumbed to cancer and was buried in the Oak Hill cemetery beside his wife Eula; his parents William Elliott and Martha rest nearby.²⁵

Tom Abbott's life and career reflect the adaptability and rugged individualism characteristic of many Oklahomans during the early decades of statehood. Incorporating physical strength and a solid, common-sense philosophy of life, Abbott combined careers as professional sportsman, law enforcement officer, and railroad worker. He never claimed to be an intellectual, but like many Oklahomans of his generation, he was well-schooled in the practicalities of life. Moreover, like many other early residents of Oklahoma he was a staunch patriot and a devoted family man. He also was my grandfather, and although he died before I had the chance to know him well, I appreciate the qualities he epitomized.

ENDNOTES

* Devon Abbott is Assistant Professor of Native American History at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff.

¹ Information on Dr. William Elliott Abbott can be obtained through the Pittsburg County Historical Association; Unpublished memoirs of Clara M. Abbott Hopkins (sister of Thomas Abbott, Sr.), written October, 1977, 1 (hereafter cited as Hopkins memoirs).

² "Doctor Abbott Would Have Been 87 the 17th," *McAlester News-Capital*, June 10, 1936.

³ *Ibid.*; Corporal James Madison Abbott served in Company K of the 136th Illinois Infantry. He died October 25, 1864, at Post Hospital at Benton Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri.

⁴ "Doctor Abbott," *McAlester News-Capital*, June 10, 1936.

⁵ Hopkins memoirs, 2, 5, 10.

⁶ Hopkins memoirs, 5; Gus Abbott died February 2, 1977.

⁷ Unpublished autobiography of Thomas James Abbott, Jr., written 1954, 9-10 (hereafter cited as Tom Abbott, Jr., autobiography).

⁸ "How Abbott Learned the Game," *McAlester News-Capital*, December 20, 1911.

⁹ "Abbott Won the Decision," *McAlester News-Capital*, September 2, 1912.

GENTLEMAN TOM ABBOTT

¹⁰ “Young Jeffries” fought under the names “Billy McCarthy” or “Bull” until 1899. From 1899 to 1905 he went by his real name, Billy Evarts, then changed it to “Young Jeffries.” “Jeffries and Abbott Contest,” *McAlester News-Capital*, September 20, 1911; Letter from W.P. Evarts, Haileyville, Oklahoma, November 30, 1911, in *McAlester News-Capital*, December 2, 1911 (in reference to article in *McAlester News-Capital*, November 30, 1911); “Slim’ Pack Was Knocked Out,” *McAlester News-Capital*, November 20, 1911; “Tom Abbott Won the Decision,” *McAlester News-Capital*, November 28, 1911; “It Was All Abbott Last Night,” *McAlester News-Capital*, December 23, 1911.

¹¹ “Abbott Challenges Boxers,” *McAlester News-Capital*, December 23, 1911.

¹² “Abbott Won in Five Rounds,” *McAlester News-Capital*, January 24, 1912; “Tom Abbott Won the Decision,” *McAlester News-Capital*, February 13, 1912; “Tom Abbott the Winner Again,” *McAlester News-Capital*, May 18, 1912. A sidelight to the Abbott-Ross main event was the six-round bout that pitted Carl Fleming against Leslie Jennings. It was a tremendously violent contest. Rumor had it that a woman had donated herself as the prize. Unfortunately for the contenders, it ended in a draw. The Busby Theatre also was the site of numerous plays, ballets, and operas such as “The Wolf” by Eugene Walter, “Excuse Me” by Rupert Hughes, and “The Spring Maid” ballet featuring Mizzi Hajos.

¹³ “What Ferns Thinks of Abbott,” *McAlester News-Capital*, May 7, 1912.

¹⁴ “State Militia Guards as Fighters Mix” *Kansas City Journal*, May 8, 1912; “General Canton ‘Referees’ Bout,” *McAlester News-Capital*, May 10, 1912; “Crowder Has Resigned,” *McAlester News-Capital*, May 11, 1912.

¹⁵ “Abbott and Smith to a Draw,” *McAlester News-Capital*, July 5, 1912; “Tom Abbott Makes Good,” *Bartlesville Examiner*, June 2, 1912; “Abbott and Clarke Winners,” *McAlester News-Capital*, June 2, 1912; “Tom Abbott Won the Decision,” *McAlester News-Capital*, August 2, 1912; “Mikey Out of His Class,” *McAlester News-Capital*, September 20, 1912.

¹⁶ “Abbott and Gorman Draw,” *McAlester News-Capital*, February 11, 1913; “Bat-tling Minor’ Easy Pickings for Tom Abbott,” *McAlester News-Capital*, April 15, 1914; “Abbott is Winner,” *McAlester News-Capital*, April 27, 1914.

¹⁷ Hopkins memoirs, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Five Slain in Battle by Gang to Free Oklahoma Bandit,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1933; “Patrolman Tom Abbott New Police Chief; Is Successor of Reed, Killed by Bandits,” *McAlester News-Capital*, July 4, 1933; “Turning Back the Clock,” *McAlester News-Capital and Democrat*, July 3, 1983.

²⁰ “Patrolman Tom Abbott,” *McAlester News-Capital*, July 4, 1933.

²¹ Tom Abbott, Jr., autobiography, 11.

²² *Ibid.*; Tom and Eula Abbott’s three children are Mary Catherine (E.G.) Gilmore of Muskogee; Betty Jo (Dawson) Watson of Tulsa; and Thomas James Abbott, Jr., of Ft. Worth, Texas.

²³ Thomas James Abbott, Jr., “The Days we Loved: A Short Remembrance,” unpublished manuscript dedicated to Muskogee Central High School Roughers basketball coach John A. Grayson, 12–13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat*, September 24, 1971.