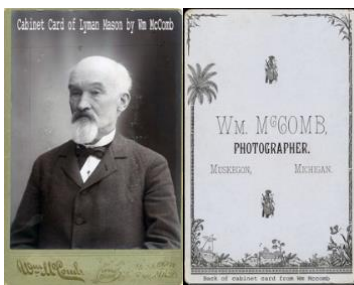


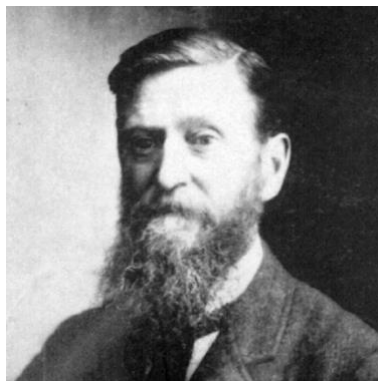
William McComb
Pioneer Photographer of Muskegon
By Frances Harrington

When you go to the Local History & Genealogy Department of Hackley Public Library (Torrent House) you need to check out the approximately 4' by 6' composite picture of the "Old Settlers & Representative Men of Muskegon, Mich. 1885." There are 380 men in that composite. There is a list next to the photo, that gives the names of each person (that they were able to identify). Each one of those men had their picture taken, at some point since 1878, by William McComb. William then, painstakingly, cut out each photo and arranged them into the composite. So, to arrange 380 cutouts into a 4' by 6' composite and have each man recognizable and of similar size, was a pretty amazing work of art. Remember, this was 1886 – no Photoshop or digital copies to manipulate back then, it was all done by hand. An article in The Philadelphia Photographer magazine from 1886 called it "His Crowning Work". He had the photo copyrighted and displayed in a local store window. He also sold smaller mounted copies of this group that was 18" by 22" in size. The original ended up in a collection owned by former Mayor, R. Andrew Fleming. After his death, his heirs donated the composite to Hackley Library in 1919.



(front & back of typical cabinet card)

William McComb was one of Muskegon's pioneer photographers. He grew up on Prince Edward Island in Canada. He became interested in photography while a teenager. In 1859, he started volunteering as an assistant to a visiting photographer. He was able to learn all about photography and chose this as his career. He later operated a gallery in Ottawa, then moved to Montreal and worked for Notman's gallery. He then moved back to Ottawa and worked for a photographer named Topley. After coming to the United States to buy his own photographic gallery, he met J.D. Westervelt in Chicago, a photographer from Muskegon, and the two of them formed a short partnership that only lasted one year. In 1879, William opened his own studio in Muskegon, above the Jiroch Cigar Store. He became one of Muskegon's most popular photographers having reportedly photographed more people in Muskegon than any other photographer.



Wm McComb

William was born on August 28, 1844 to James and Ann (Thompson) McComb, both of Irish descent. He married Ellen Walker, daughter of John and Margaret (Smith) Walker, in 1864, in Canada. Both Ellen's parents were of Scottish descent. William and Ellen had no children of their own but adopted a daughter named Evelyn who was born in 1895. William had a sister named Margaret, and two brothers, James and George. His brother, George, married Agnes Walker, sister of William's wife, Ellen. George was in charge of the printing department of William's gallery.

William was also interested in weather forecasting. In 1893, along with his photography business, he joined the US Weather Bureau. His job was referred to as a "Displayman". He would telegraph the Bureau in Chicago of the current condition here. In return, they could inform him of the approaching conditions he could expect. He would raise flags to notify mariners of what the weather forecast was. In 1900, Muskegon received a 75-foot tower and weather vane, with a 4-foot-long arrow and electric signal lights, that was to be operated by the Displayman instead of the old flag system. It was located just west of the Train Station. When he resigned in 1905, he received a letter from Professor H. J. Cox of the Bureau stating, "Your work has always been satisfactory and in fact, I had looked upon it as a model for other Displaymen to follow".

On June 27, 1900, William gathered ten citizens together for a group photo. The men ranged in age from 69 to 88 and had come to Muskegon between the years 1840 to 1868 - the last of Muskegon's living pioneers. The photo is referred to as the "Group of Muskegon's Grand Ole Men". They were: George B. Woodbury (1840), E. W. Merrill (1844), Charles T. Hills (1852), Joseph D. Davis (1852), S. H. Stevens (1856), Luther Whitney (1864), George J. Tillotson (1865), Hiram Parker (1866), William McKillip (1867), and A. Gustin (1868).



In 1895, a fire destroyed almost all his photographic supplies and furnishings, and also 40,000 of his negatives were cracked or ruined. The negatives were a photographer's most valued possessions and William had the biggest collection in town. The largest portion of his income came from re-orders off those negatives. He did have insurance but it didn't cover the income he would have generated from those negatives. Fortunately, in another room, he had another large collection of negatives of Muskegon pioneers dating back to 1879, that were not destroyed. The next year, he once again opened a gallery but this time, in the Lyman block. His new gallery was said to be the most attractive and complete in all the state, with the most modern appliances available.

In 1905, William decided to sell his gallery in Muskegon and open a new one in Cadillac, Michigan. In 1909, in an adjoining dentist's office, a fire broke out. William's new gallery was almost completely ruined by smoke and water damage.

William was very active in the Masonic Organization. He became an apprentice in the Cataraqui Lodge 92 of the Free & Accepted Masons at Kingston, Ontario on March 10, 1869, taking the Fellowcraft degree on April 21st, and made master Mason on June 2nd. He became a member of the Muskegon Lodge 140 in 1880 and was the recorder of Muskegon Commandery No. 22, Knights Templar for 22 years. He also received many titles and degrees over the years with various Mason organizations.

By 1912, William and Ellen are living at the Masonic Pathways, a Masonic operated home for the purpose of providing a home for the aged Masons, Masons' widows, and orphans in Alma, Michigan. William died there in 1921. Ellen died in 1933. They are buried at Oakwood Cemetery.

You can see some of William McCombs work by going to the Lakeshore Museum's website at: <http://5091.sydneyplus.com/final/Portal/Default.aspx?lang=en-US> and typing McComb in the search box

Sources: Hackley Public Library Local History & Genealogy Dept., Ancestry.com, findagrave.com, Genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Philadelphia Photographer 1886 V 23 Pt 1, Cabinetcardgallery.com, Lakeshore Museum Center, HLP Quarterly Bulletin vol 13-25, 1919.