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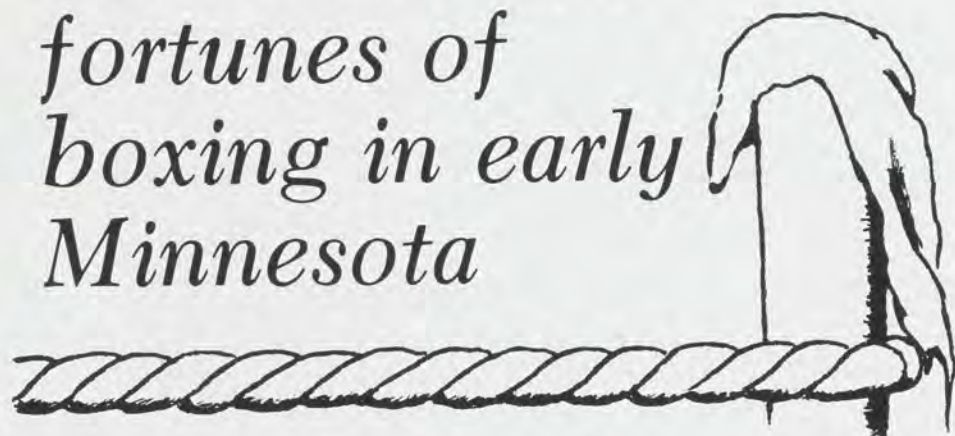
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ON THE COVER: Minnesota Boat Club picnic at Crosby's Bottoms, Ca. 1890.

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Tough Times —

The sometime fortunes of boxing in early Minnesota



The following sketch is from the Junior Pioneer Association which issued a number of papers on Ramsey County's history.

Prize fights were rare in St. Paul during the early days, no doubt because fights could be seen for free on the streets or at the levee almost any day. The steamboat men had a reputation for being a particularly pugnacious lot. Frequently an argument between two of them would wind up in a free-for-all with 20 or 30 men involved. Two such brawls occurred within a week during June, 1857.

Prize fights, while obviously popular among certain social sets were looked upon with disdain by others. The *Pioneer-Democrat* for Aug. 29, 1857, reported a rumor of a prize fight to be held at the race track that afternoon and urged that the authorities break it up. How it ended is anybody's guess, for the paper made no mention of it the next day.

At least one fight of the bare-knuckle variety was held on July 13, 1869, at a spot about three miles from the city "on the Robert Street road." William Mulowney, alias "Chicago Red," fought William Johnson for a purse of \$100. Both were boys about 14 years old. There were about 150 spectators. Johnson lost when he was unable to "come to time" after the 14th round. The promoter, a man by the name of MacDonell, was fined \$50 the next day and ordered to get out of town.

The police were tipped off about another fight set for November between Johnny Hannon and Mike McDonald; they promptly arrested both men and each one was obliged to put up a \$500 bond to keep the peace. A fighter called "Red-handed Mike" O'Connor claimed the lightweight championship of the state during this era, but so far as can be found he never fought in St. Paul.

The first recorded "scientific" boxing exhibition was on Aug. 23, 1871, at the Opera House (then on Wabasha, between Kellogg Boulevard and Fourth St.). Apparently the sport had acquired some measure of respectability, for Ned O'Baldwin, a professional fighter, and his manager "Mr. Kelly," gave an exhibition, and there were several bouts by local amateurs and all were treated as regular news items. On July 15, 1872, there was an evening of boxing at the Music Hall, in the old "Tilden" building on Third Street. The prize fights in other parts of the country were always described in the papers.

The Mullin-Keefe fight of June 15, 1884, was the first professional local bout to be covered by reporters. A special train left the Minneapolis depot about 9 a.m. on Sunday with about 200 fans on board. Keefe and his



"Practicing boxing" — early prizefights were relegated to the woods.

trainer were picked up outside of town, and Mullin's party got on at Excelsior. The train stopped about a mile east of Young America and a ring was set up on a level spot in the shade of some oak trees. The fight lasted 56 minutes with Mullin the victor. They fought with "hard" gloves, for a purse of \$250. On the return trip Mullin "passed the hat" and raised \$75 for the loser.

Jack Dempsey took a licking from a local.



Interest in boxing increased rapidly during this time. Several matches were held in the Market Hall at Seventh and Wabasha, in which Liverpool, a black heavyweight, Patsy Cardiff, and C. A. A. Smith took part. Large gloves were used (by police orders).

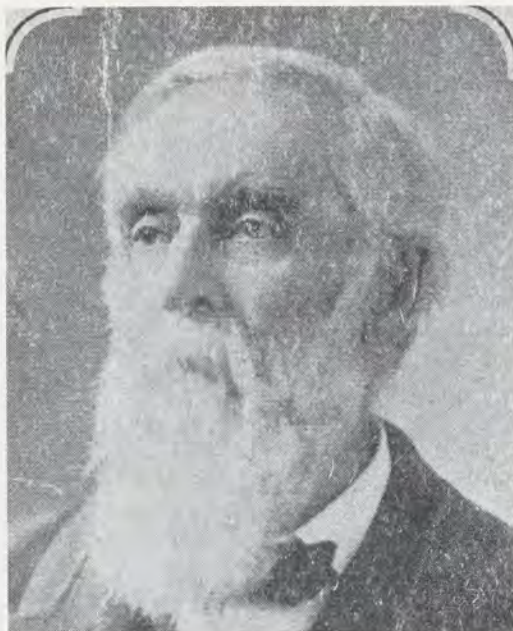
Then there was promoter-fighter John S. Barnes. He is mentioned first in 1884 as the manager of the St. Paul League Baseball Club and the promoter of a couple of sports carnivals at White Bear on Decoration Day and July 4th. There, prizes of up to \$800 were advertised. On Nov. 2, 1884, he arranged a fight between himself and Tom McAlpine, an old-time prize fighter. The newspapers announced the date and said the fight would be "on one of the railroad lines." Instead, the steamer "Luella" was used, and the fight was held near Red Rock on the river bank. Barnes won by a knockout. There was nothing said about gloves being worn. For Thanksgiving Day, Barnes lined up another fight with a man named Norton, to be held at the St. Paul gym. Small gloves were to be used and the purse was worth \$500. The police stopped this one. It appears that some prizefights were legal, and others were not. One such contest of the latter variety was between Fred Webber of St. Paul and Patsy Mellen of Minneapolis. It was held in a barn near the Milwaukee Short Line in Hennepin County, on Dec. 7, and it turned

into a regular riot. The spectators did more fighting than the principals. The newspapers said "plenty of blood was spilled," and "it was a brutal affair."

Another such fight was the Patsy Cardiff-Billy Wilson match held on June 14, 1885. About 500 spectators on the steamer "Aunt Betsy," left the Chestnut Street dock at 2 p.m. for an undisclosed spot. They landed about three miles below the city limits on the west bank, and the crowd walked about a mile through the woods, only to find it was the wrong place. The group then hiked back to the boat. Two or three fell into the river while re-boarding. The crowd proceeded about a mile farther, finally reaching the "arena" at about 5 p.m. Cardiff was an especially "aggressive" fighter; he "threw" Wilson repeatedly and, when possible, fell heavily upon him. Cardiff won by a knockout in the ninth round. The *Pioneer Press* commented that "It was the best fight seen in this vicinity." Cardiff took up the usual collection for the loser on the way back and got \$35. Both fighters left the steamer in a skiff before it docked, however, when they learned that the police were waiting for them.

As time went by, boxing gained increasing

Bob Fitzsimmons — the best of his day — was no match for the heavyweights of Church and State.



Mayor Robert A. Smith: "We might just as well fence up the city."

respectability. Pat Conley, manager of the Olympic Theatre at Seventh and Jackson, inaugurated boxing bouts as a regular weekly feature late in 1885. And since there seemed to be no protest, fights were soon being held openly. In 1884 a roller skating facility, the Exposition Rink, was constructed on Fourth near St. Peter (present site of the Lowry Building). After the skating mania subsided, the rink was frequently used for fights. One such contest occurred on Dec. 2, 1886. It was a 10-round go between Billy Wilson and McHenry Johnson and was advertised as "for the colored championship of America."

Several first class fighters developed locally. Pat Killen, a talented heavyweight, met some of the day's best fighters, including Joe McAuliffe, a boxer with a national reputation. In the middleweight division, locals like Dick Moore, Tommy Hogan, Danny Needham, Charley Kemmick and Charley Gleason all saw plenty of action. Lighter men who also had important fights were Jimmy Griffin, Charley Johnson, Dick Ward, Tommy Dixon and Oscar Johnson. Some of these fights were tortuous, protracted affairs. Danny Needham lost to Tom Ryan of Chicago in a 76-round fight at Minneapolis. Both were using two-ounce gloves. In another fight near Fort Snelling, where skin-tight gloves were used, Charley Gleason gave young Jack Dempsey of California a frightful beating.

Boxing rules were generally rather elastic. At the Jackson Street Roller Rink, Tenth and Jackson, Killen met Joe Sheehy of Minneapolis on Dec. 19, 1890, with four-ounce gloves. After knocking Killen down, Sheehy jumped astride him and started punching. Killen's brother, Denny, jumped in the ring and pulled Sheehy off. The police then climbed in and stopped the fight.

By now, the insistant public demand for boxing was beginning to draw mounting official opposition to the sport. On July 22, 1891, encouraged by the local interest, some promoters signed Bob "Fitz" Fitzsimmons, then the U.S. middleweight champ, to meet Jim Hall of Australia at St. Paul in a "fight to the finish." The contest drew wide interest. Hall was no set up. He had beaten Fitzsimmons about three years earlier in Australia. The real backers are today still unknown. The *Pioneer Press* only reported, "some of the leading business men of St. Paul had subscribed \$50,000 to promote the affair." July 22 was the opening day of the Twin City Jockey Club races at the fair grounds. Racing was legal then and the fight was scheduled for 9 p.m. An amphitheatre with a capacity of 7,000 was built at Jefferson and Toronto; the purse was \$12,000, of which the winner's share was to be \$11,000. Fitz put up \$7,000 to bet on himself and began training at White Bear. Hall trained at Beloit, Wisconsin.

Gov. William R. Merriam KO'd boxing in Minnesota.



On the Sunday before the fight, public opposition crystallized in a large, mass meeting at Market Hall. Archbishop John Ireland was the main antiboxing speaker. During the meeting, D. R. Noyes, a prominent businessman, asked Mayor Robert A. Smith to stop the fight. The Mayor replied, "If we let these ministers and some of these religious people have their way we might just as well fence up the city. They are even sending me protests against the Jockey Club races!" The morning paper for July 22 carried the headline, "THEY WILL FIGHT," but at about 11 a.m. four companies of the National Guard, acting on orders from Governor William R. Merriam, marched into the amphitheatre, and the event was over before it began. The promoters announced that ticket holders would be refunded, and \$17,000 was returned the first day.

Officialdom finally got its way in 1892 when Governor Merriam induced the legislature to ban professional boxing entirely.

Down — but not out — sport promoters responded by holding "non-professional" bouts. On Dec. 7, 1892, John Barnes opened the Phoenix Club in the Drake Block on Third Street and conducted fights there regularly. One, on June 29, 1893, was advertised as a "friendly," 20-round bout between Dick Moore and Shadow Maber of Australia. Moore won, and his backers made no secret of the fact that with the victory only Billy Smith remained in the fighter's way to the welterweight championship. Conley then scheduled a 25-round fight at the Olympic between Danny Needham and Maber for Aug. 24, 1893. This was stretching "friendly" boxing matches just a little too far and the police stopped it. Three days later the city closed down the Phoenix Club.

Secret fights were still frequently held — according to newspaper reports, mostly in Anoka County. An Anoka paper vehemently denied it, however, and said many of the fights allegedly held in Anoka County actually were held in a building a block from the Minneapolis police station.

Some professional bouts were not so secret. On March 31, 1894, a fight to be held in South St. Paul's city hall was just about underway (the mayor was one of the spectators) when a deputy sheriff, who just happened to be an ex-mayor of the city, walked in, stopped the fight, and threatened to arrest everybody.

Great lengths were gone to to circumvent the law. A fight was arranged between Danny Needham and Dick Moore for Sunday, Oct.

13, 1895. It was to be held on a barge in the middle of the river. The steamers, "Gracie Mower" and "Daisy," were to power the barge out of the reach of the authorities. About 1,000 people were waiting at the dock when the barge moved into pick them up. Some of them, however, turned out to be deputy sheriffs, who immediately arrested the captains of both boats and Danny Needham as well. Moore managed to escape. The arrests had been ordered by Governor David M. Clough himself. Each of the captains filed suit against him for \$25,000 for false arrest. A few months later, however, the suits were quietly dropped.

Boxing went into an eclipse locally after this. Although there were some secret fights, they generally were between beginners who worked for very small purses. Occasionally, however, there might be an excursion fight, such as the Hugh McMahon-Hermann Shreck match on Aug. 2, 1903. For this event, a steamer took 500 fans to a small clearing on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix.

With the sport's decline, there appears to have been a commensurate slacking off of official prosecution of boxing. Indeed, the police seemed not at all interested, for boxing matches were staged in halls and gymnasiums right in the heart of the loop without interference. Many of these bouts (such as George Barton's at Bowlby Hall, Sixth and Robert, on Jan. 5, 1906) were reported in the papers. Bud Brown of Chicago was hospitalized after a fight on Oct. 18, 1904, and still the police took no action.

The fact was, however, boxing's fans had found a new love — wrestling. The sport's big names became public heroes with huge followings. Several of the local men were not without talent. Theodore Peter, Walter Miller and Jim McAuley would always draw capacity crowds. Matches were held in almost every hall in town. Today's fans would probably find the old-style wrestling rather boring; the Miller-Suter match at the St. Paul Auditorium on Nov. 10, 1910, for instance, went three and a half hours without a fall and was called a draw. But the diversion was exciting enough for the times, and prizefighting, for a while at least, suffered the consequences.

It has been said that the revival of boxing in St. Paul was mainly due to one man — Mike Gibbons. This may be so, although the start of his career gave little indication of such a capability. As an amateur in 1907, Gibbons saw a lot of action and got himself knocked around in any number of fights of the paid-



Mike Gibbons — credited with bringing respectability to prizefighting in the state.

but-illegal kind. They gained him a cauliflower ear, and little else. Then, in 1911, practically penniless, he left on a tour of the east, meeting fighter Jim Clabby first at Milwaukee on Sept. 1. From there he went on to New York, where he suddenly seemed to find his form. Over the next three months he scored such impressive victories that when, in December, he returned home, he was welcomed as a hero. A big banquet was given in his honor at the Ryan Hotel on Dec. 19. From then on, it seemed, every husky kid in town began donning boxing gloves and trying to follow his example. Boxing was still legal in Wisconsin so it did not take long for promoters to discover that Hudson was close enough to the Twin Cities to provide a handy stage. For the next four years, the Wisconsin town became the scene of many topnotch cards. For instance, on April 6, 1915, Mike O'Dowd and Billy Miske, two popular fighters of the day, provided the warmup contest for the main event which pitted widely known fighters, Billy Murray and Jack Dillon. A month earlier Mike Gibbons beat Eddie McGoorty in the same ring. The fans came by train and were reported to have had a few fights of their own en route.



Gene Tunney in 1925.

In 1915 a bill to legalize boxing was introduced into the state legislature by George H. Moeller and A. L. Lennon. With fights being held everywhere in the state — sometimes under dangerous conditions — it was apparent that effective regulation would be better than an unenforceable ban. The bill was passed and signed by Governor Winfield S. Hammond on April 24, 1915, and the first card was held at the St. Paul Auditorium, July

12, of that same year. A multitude of important fights have been held here since that time. Among them would be the Jack Dempsey-Billy Miske fight in 1918 and the Tunney-Greb fight in 1925. The all-time high for local interest in those early contests was undoubtedly the Mike Gibbons-Mike O'Dowd fight in 1919, for which the gate was a mind-boggling \$41,000.



THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County Historical Society will be located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society presently has its offices at the Gibbs Farm. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.