

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Battle in the Bywater

Scottish nobleman John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry, was a patron of sports and a boxing enthusiast. He publicly endorsed (and thereby lent his name to) a new boxing code written in the mid 1860s. These rules provided for the duration and spacing of the rounds, the 10 second count and the use of boxing gloves (as opposed to bare fisticuffs). The Marquess was also an outspoken atheist unwilling to participate in any "Christian tomfoolery", which made him an unpopular figure in Victorian London Society. He was certainly disliked by Oscar Wilde, who Queensberry accused of improper behavior with his son, Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde sued for libel, which brought about Wilde's conviction for gross indecency (under then enacted law) and a trip to Reading Gaol.

Wilde had visited New Orleans in 1882 and delivered a lecture on aesthetics. Ten years later, the city would see an historic encounter under the Marquess of Queensberry Rules.

New Orleans had been the dueling capital of the world, but by 1890 that form of personal conflict was mostly a memory. A new form had taken over that very year as the city legalized boxing under the Queensberry rules. The previous year marked the end of an era when John L. Sullivan, "The Boston Strong Boy", duked it out for 75 rounds to defeat Jake Kilrain in the last official bare-knuckle heavyweight title bout. New Orleans had been the vortex of activity for this legendary pairing, but the governor had forbidden it from happening in Louisiana. On July 8, 1889, at Richburg, Mississippi (just south of Hattiesburg), some 2,500 fans went by special trains from New Orleans to see history pounded away amidst the pines in the hot Mississippi sun. Bat Masterson, Dodge City lawman turned sports columnist, was among the spectators.

Prizefighting was illegal in all thirty-eight states in 1889. The Louisiana legislation of 1890 paved the way for a new match-up in 1892. The Crescent City would be the location for the first heavyweight championship fought with gloves. The battle would be waged by the

hard-drinking John L. Sullivan and "Gentleman Jim" Corbett. The four-story Olympic Club, festooned with banners and filling a long Bywater block (bounded by Chartres, Royal, Montegut and Clouet), was to be the battleground. College educated Corbett came calling from the Olympic Club in San Francisco. He and the formidable brawling bully of Boston were to vie for a \$25,000 purse and a \$20,000 side bet.

Imagine the thrilling atmosphere that Wednesday evening as 10,000 fight fans arrived by streetcars and trains from near and far. Their tickets were scaled from \$5 to \$15 and promised a "grand glove contest". The club's program promoted "respect for honest, unafraid muscle". Sixty electric lights were spitting noisily. Fifty Western Union telegraphers were on hand to relay round-by-round results back to New York and beyond. Hacks were clogging up the heavily trafficked thoroughfares.

This Bywater neighborhood had been the center of another significant event exactly three months earlier when Homer Plessy fought his own kind of fight upon boarding the train at Royal and Press Streets. On September 7, 1892, Corbett's kind of fight was to be brains and science versus brute force.

On that date "Professor" John Duffy, the referee, stepped into the ring to a deafening ovation on this third day of the Carnival of Champions. Jack MacAuliffe and George Dixon each retained their titles by knockouts on the two previous days. Dixon was a black boxer who defeated his white challenger, Jack Skelly, in an interracial match. Seats were set up in the club for seven hundred black spectators.

Sullivan was twenty-five pounds heavier and eight years older than the 26-year-old Corbett, yet he was a 4-1 favorite. The Boston battler rushed the young challenger the first two rounds but was seriously sidestepped. In the third round, Corbett broke Sullivan's nose and it spewed forth a copious amount of blood.

By the seventh round, "Gentleman Jim" had changed his focus to serious attacks to the champ's midsection. All through the fight the challenger danced around the champion, avoided his irate advances and kept up the counter punches. The 21st round had John L. totally tired, battered and bleeding. Corbett unleashed a barrage a crushing blows with a final left-right combo that brought his opponent pitching forward upon his face and chest. There in the ring he was finally counted out.

The defeated gladiator gathered himself together to address the crowd. "I'm glad I was licked by an American. I remain your warm and personal friend, John L. Sullivan."

April 6, 1893, Andy Bowen and Jack Burke fought the longest boxing match in history. Held in New Orleans, it went 110 rounds with both men totally spent. The "no contest" decision was later changed to a draw. Andy Bowen, the hero of Annunciation Square, had his luck run out the following year. A right to the jaw by George "Kid" Lavigne propelled Bowen's head fatally against the ring's unpadded wooden floor. Unaware of what was to happen, Pokorny's Shoes ran their usual ad touting the winner's boxing footwear to have been made from "the finest kangaroo". Bowen died close to dawn, which resulted in the state outlawing prizefighting until the 1920s. But that was the dawn of another era.

"Putting up one's dukes" is an expression that came from England by way of Cockney rhyming slang. Forks were fingers attached to the hands, and "Duke of York" was slang for fork. Raising those "dukes" became slang for putting up one's fisted hands. The Marquess of Queensberry died in 1900 stipulating in his will that he be buried upright. It is rumored that the gravediggers buried him with his head down. Dukes up. Marquesses down.

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