

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Last of the Bare-Knuckles

Dow Jones & Company's issuance of hand-delivered short news briefs (called "flimsies") to stock traders culminated in the publication of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, July 8, 1889 (Price Two Cents), and New Orleans made the first page of the very first issue, 125 years ago. It all had to do with a highly anticipated prize fight.

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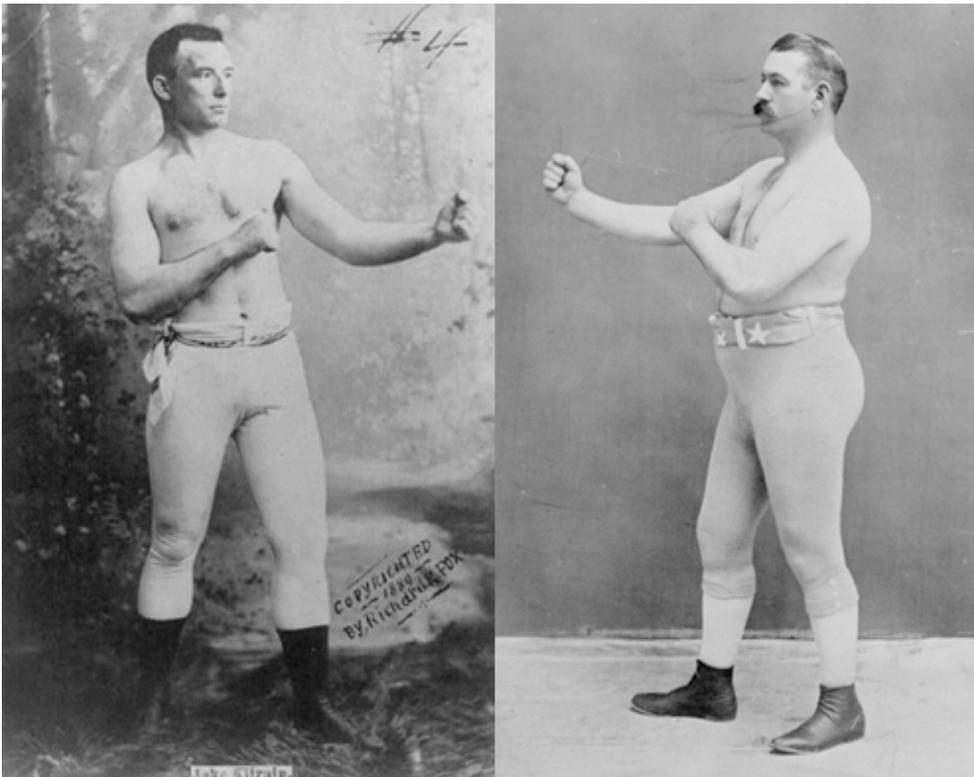
THE JOURNAL bulletins attempted to provide any updates on the Jake Kilrain vs. John L. Sullivan fight. Bare-knuckle fighting was illegal in all of the existing thirty-eight states, and (although New Orleans was at the vortex of this pugilistic whirlwind) Governor Francis T. Nicholls had forbidden the fight in Louisiana and had activated the state militia to prevent it. Governor Robert Lowry of Mississippi had taken similar measures. Where the bout was to be fought was shrouded in secrecy, unrevealed until the train leaving New Orleans deposited a multitude of enthusiastic fightgoers at the clandestinely arranged location.

An earlier announcement (January 12, 1889) in the New Orleans *Weekly Pelican* heralded the upcoming contest.

Sullivan and Kilrain have signed articles to fight for ten thousand dollars a side, the battle to take place July 8, within 200 miles of New Orleans.

The confrontation between Kilrain and Sullivan is considered to be a turning point in boxing history, being the last world title bout fought under the London Prize Ring Rules and therefore the last bare-knuckle heavyweight title bout. No gloves were worn and some wrestling moves were permitted. A round concluded when one fighter was knocked down, and the fight lasted until one contestant was unable to get up off the ring floor. It was one of the first American sporting events to receive widespread national press attention, as well as extensive pre-fight coverage. There was much speculation as to where the two warriors would ultimately do battle.

The inaugural *WALL STREET JOURNAL* provided several conflicting reports on the heavyweight championship, adding to the confusion. From *The Baltimore American* was an erroneous rumor to the effect "that Kilrain has won," while Cincinnati's "reliable source" predicted a Sullivan victory, stating "The contest was a long one and Sullivan was having the best of it". The *JOURNAL* report from New Orleans correctly stated that the "fight took place near Richburg," a small Mississippi sawmill community, located some 104 miles northeast of New Orleans.



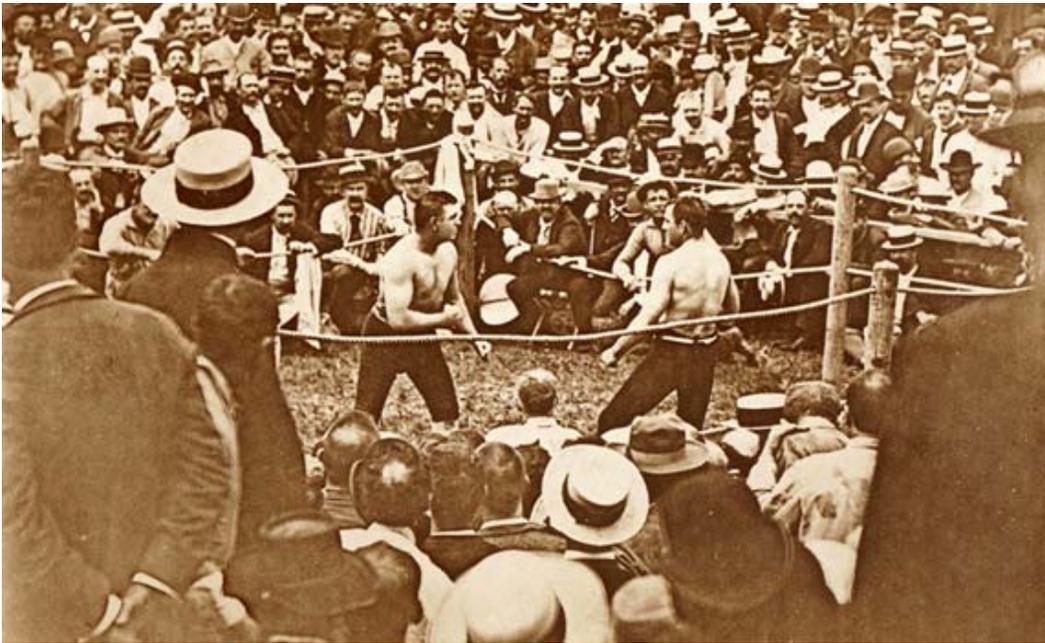
Jake Kilrain

John L. Sullivan

A New Orleans sportsman and fight promoter, Bud Reneau, had conspired to stage this illegal event with Colonel Charles W. Rich, who owned a sawmill and 10,000 acres of pine timberland just outside Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Rich, whose brother was mayor of Mobile,

guaranteed no police interference. The obscure hamlet was named Richburg after its owner, and it was there that the spectators were to be brought by train from New Orleans. The *Picayune* reported, "The aristocrats were on the first train that left the Queen and Crescent round-house on Sunday night." Others were more daring. Two fans had hidden away in boxes, Ned Dolan rode the cowcatcher and two boys were discovered hiding "on the box car that took out the ropes and stakes". They were thrown off the train and had to walk eighteen miles until finally making "connection with the passing special".

Over two thousand people turned out for the fight. The temperature was a brutal 106 degrees, and all the pine trees near the ring were stripped of their branches to prevent free vantage points. Numerous reports that day said that fighting commenced after the two boxers had "shied their castors" into the ring.



Straw hats, mustaches and bare fists in Richburg, Mississippi

To determine the meaning of that phrase, I had to "look that up" in my "Funk & Wagnalls" – literally. *The Literary Digest*, published by that company from 1890 to 1938, featured a wonderful column known as "The Lexicographer's Easy Chair" that answered readers questions "concerning the correct use of words, the Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary ... consulted as arbiter". Here's what "The Lexicographer" had to say about the expression, "To shy one's castor into the ring":



The phrase, explained *The Digest*, "is the equivalent of the practise of 'throwing' or 'flinging down the gauntlet,' common in medieval times as a sign of challenge to combat. In modern use, this phrase is a challenge to any contest." In certain competitions, the explanation continued, "challengers signified their intention to compete by 'shying' their hats, which originally were made of the skin of the beaver (genus – or scientific name - *Castor*) into the center of the ring. Beaver hats and other hats made of fur became known as 'castors,' and eventually the term 'castor' was used as an equivalent for any hat. But where the phrase originated or was first used in print is not known."

On the day of the fight, the fighters and their attendants approached the ring and "shied their castors" inside the ropes in traditional style. No beavers were sacrificed, however, in this customary toss. At 9:55, Jake Kilrain "shied" his hat first, one made of light straw. One minute later, John L. Sullivan was loudly cheered as his famous white felt hat landed in the ring.

Sullivan's cornermen were Billy Muldoon and Mike Cleary. Kilrain's seconds included Mike Donovan and Charlie Mitchell. Sullivan had trained for months under trainer Muldoon, whose greatest problem had been keeping John L. from the bottle. Sometimes he would escape from his guard, and the cry would go out, "John L. is loose again. Send for Muldoon!"

After some wrangling, Captain John Fitzpatrick (for many years regarded as the leading sporting authority in the South), was chosen as referee. He was also the referee at the Sullivan-Paddy Ryan championship bout fought on the lawn of the Barnes Hotel in Mississippi City (near Gulfport) on February 7, 1882. Sullivan won. Fitzpatrick would later become mayor of New Orleans in 1896. Timekeeper for the Kilrain-Sullivan match was none other than William Barclay "Bat" Masterson, best known as the lawman who cleaned up Dodge City, Kansas. Bat Masterson also had a career as sports writer, editor and columnist, beginning around 1883 and ending upon his death in 1921.



The real "Bat" Masterson"

portrayed by Gene Barry on TV

After the preliminaries, the fight was under way. Within a few seconds of the first round, Kilrain delivered a left to Sullivan's jaw and threw him to the turf. Kilrain drew first blood in the seventh with a left hook to John L.'s ear. Retaliation came the following round with Sullivan landing a flurry of rights and lefts to Kilrain's jaw and neck. Battering away, he scored the first knockdown. By the 35th round, Kilrain had a broken nose, split lips and one eye swollen shut. Sullivan had a black eye, his left ear was bleeding and both hands were swollen to twice their normal size. Both combatants were drenched in sweat and blood, and the fight wasn't even half over. Kilrain consumed a quart of whiskey during the fight. Sullivan, uncharacteristically drank tea (although it was apparently mixed with brandy). This may have been the cause of Sullivan's vomiting in the forty-fourth round. Kilrain did not take advantage of Sullivan's condition, however, and the duel continued. Within a few minutes, John L. floored Kilrain with a blow to the ribs.

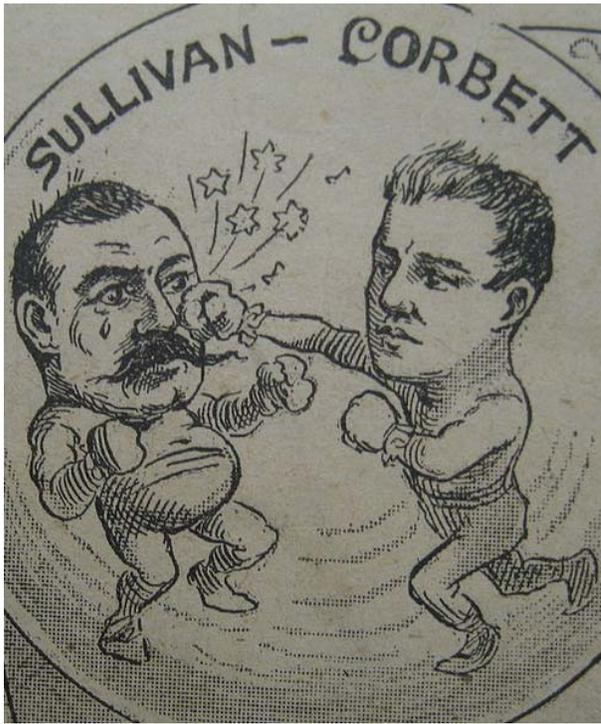
In the seventy-fifth of a scheduled eighty rounds, Kilrain was finished. The *Picayune* reported his words: "He said HE WAS NOT WHIPPED but was done." Bat Masterson timed the fight at 2 hours, 18 minutes. In the end, the larger-than-life John L. Sullivan remained the bare-knuckle heavyweight champion of the world.

Kilrain, upon reaching New Orleans after the bout, was taken by carriage to the Southern Athletic Club, drank some beer, ate very little and went to bed. Sullivan stopped over to the Young Men's Gymnastic Club and at Spanish Fort "had dinner and a good time generally, celebrating the famous victory," reported the *Picayune*.

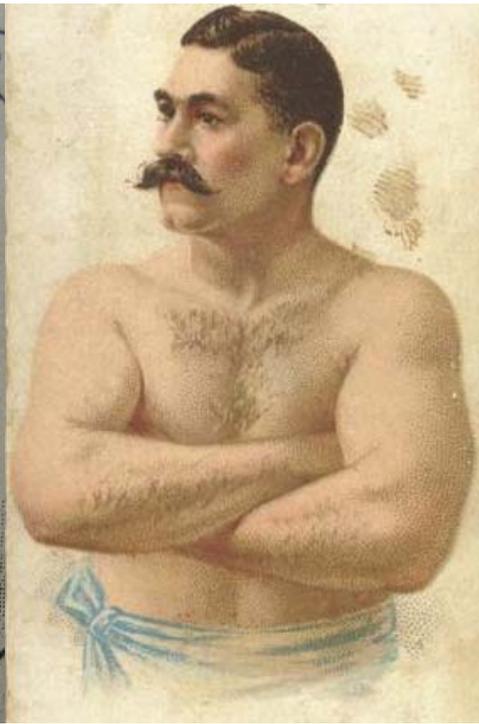
Both fighters were later arrested for participating in the illegal fight and returned to Mississippi for trial. A Purvis, Mississippi, jury found Sullivan guilty of prizefighting for which he paid \$500 and left the state. Kilrain was found guilty of assault and battery, sentenced to six months in jail with a fine of \$500. Colonel Rich paid the fine and bought the sentence (once a common practice in Mississippi), and Jake served out his time in Rich's home.

So ended the last bare-knuckle boxing championship in U.S. history. Jake Kilrain continued boxing with some success until 1899 with gloves under the Marquess of Queensberry rules. He lived his later years as a devoted family man and as proprietor of a Baltimore saloon. He also became good friends with John L. Sullivan.

Sullivan agreed to defend his title in New Orleans on September 7, 1892, under the new rules, against challenger "Gentleman Jim" Corbett. The match was held in the electrically illuminated Olympic Club in the Bywater section of the city. The spectators arrived 10,000 strong, with ticket prices ranging from \$5 to \$15. Corbett was the victor in the twenty-first round. The *Picayune* summed it up well: "Corbett's Science Outlasts Sullivan's Strength".



*From the New Orleans Mascot
October 1, 1892*



The great John L. Sullivan

The 1889 Kilrain-Sullivan fight secured for John L. Sullivan the world heavyweight championship title. The year before, he fought Charley Mitchell of Birmingham, England, in driving rain on the grounds of the chateau at Chantilly, France (the old stomping grounds of Louis Henri Joseph, Duc de Bourbon, Prince de Condé, for whom Bourbon Street was named). The bloodbath lasted for more than two hours, at the end of which both men were hardly recognizable. Neither could lift his arms to punch, and the fight was considered a draw. The *Picayune* reported Sullivan's words spoken in New Orleans after his fight with Kilrain:

"I have waited for this event ten years. It has come and I am the victor. I have no animosity against Jake Kilrain, but in licking Kilrain I get square with Mitchell, the cowardly cur."

No love lost between John L. and his previous British adversary. The first true world heavyweight champion was arguably English boxer Jem Mace, who was victorious over Tom Allen in 1870 in Kenner, Louisiana. But (as demonstrated by Sullivan's statement) strong anti-British sentiment within the mostly Irish American boxing community at that time chose to disregard him. In those rough-and-tumble years, New Orleans and its environs were often center stage in the thrilling and exciting world of championship boxing.

With years of tipping under his belt, John L. Sullivan eventually became a temperance advocate until his death on February 2, 1918,

hastened by the effects of alcohol in his early life. Big Jake Kilrain was there, serving as an usher at his funeral. Later working as a shipyard night watchman in a Boston suburb, Kilrain died December 22, 1937. And former fans of old-time fisticuffs looked back wistfully to the time when these two giants "shied their castors into the ring".



Richburg, Mississippi, Historic Marker

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