

The Pacific City Fight

In his article on "The Rise of Sports" Professor Paxson has pointed out that prize fighting in the United States suffered a decline after the famous Sayers-Heenan fight in 1860, when the London spectators broke into the ring to prevent the American from knocking out the English champion. Boxing did not regain its popularity until the early eighties, when John L. Sullivan fought his way to notoriety with his bare fists. In the two decades that intervened pugilists seldom knocked each other out to the complete satisfaction of the sporting public. But there were champions in those days, and challengers who coveted the title, and it was during this period that an Iowa village became the scene of a championship "mill", under circumstances that help to explain the obstacles to be overcome before the sport could flourish.

The contrast between the fight in Iowa in an improvised ring on the turf before a few hundred fugitive "roughs", and its present day descendent, with its elaborate preparations, its wide publicity, and its enormous stadium, shows a growth almost as great as the transition from the prairie schooner to the transcontinental Pullman train. The change in public sentiment toward affairs of this kind is equally noticeable. In 1873 the contestants met only after an arduous series of journeys to elude the vigilance of the constituted authorities. For the serious minded people of the Missouri Valley demanded

that every effort be made to prevent the desecration of the soil of their States by such a scene of brutality. The day when society ladies were to patronize the "pugs" was far distant.

In November, 1873, a steamboat with an unusual assortment of passengers headed upstream from St. Joe, Missouri. On board were Allen, who held the belt for the heavy-weight title, and Hogan, the challenger, with their trainers and backers, the newspaper reporters, and the fans who were anxious to see the fight and bet their money. After the challenge had been issued and accepted, the legal inconveniences attendant upon an affair of this kind in the Eastern States had led to the conclusion that it should be held in the West. Promoters in St. Joe had promised "a fair field and no favor" and immunity from interference by the officers of the law. But the special train from the East brought the followers of the manly art to a scene of disappointment. The lid was on in Missouri, and the governor was sitting upon it. An attempt to stage the "mill" across the river in Kansas ended in failure.

Nothing daunted by these untoward circumstances, the crowd chartered a steamboat, and these strange argonauts started up the river in search of a convenient spot upon which to determine the championship of the world. Nebraska proved inhospitable. The governor of that State borrowed some United States troops to maintain order while the fighters sojourned in Omaha, and their stay was

brief. Thus it transpired that the pugilists sought the soil of Iowa as a last resort.

On the morning of Monday, November 18, 1873, Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter received a telegram signed by a number of the prominent citizens of Council Bluffs: "The Allen-Hogan prize fight is to take place Tuesday in Iowa, and the men are here. We are powerless to prevent it." Fifteen hundred roughs were reported to be in Omaha, where the local authorities were unable to cope with the situation. Governor Carpenter was requested to send military companies from Des Moines to prevent the impending disgrace to the city of Council Bluffs and the State of Iowa. He immediately notified the prominent citizens that if the sheriff would inform him officially of his inability to enforce the law without military assistance, the troops would be sent. He received the prompt response:

I am advised that the prize fighters will come into the State at this point tomorrow. From their number I know that I am not able to arrest them. If the fight is to be prevented it must be done by stopping them here. I ask the aid of the State in doing so. There is no armed military company here.

GEORGE DOUGHERTY

Sheriff of Pottawattamie County

Within three hours after the receipt of this telegram the available contingents of the Olmstead Zouaves, commanded by Colonel F. Olmstead, and of the Crocker Veteran Guards under the command of Captain W. L. Davis, were ordered out for imme-

diate duty, served with ammunition, and entrained for Council Bluffs. They arrived late that night, and were placed in rather uncomfortable quarters, "but", their commander reported, "as most of the men were old soldiers, there was no complaint."

Before the arrival of the visiting sportsmen on Tuesday morning, preparations had been made to receive them. Colonel Olmstead's report to the Adjutant General describes the situation. "We were ready for duty", he said, "at about half-past ten A. M., on the 18th of November, subject to the order of the Sheriff of Pottawattamie County, when the train arrived, loaded in my opinion with 'roughs' and men who wished to see the Allen-Hogan fight. The sheriff should have taken possession of that train and all the paraphernalia of the fight, but he did nothing. He could have arrested, in my opinion, participators in the fight at any rate, and there were evidences enough for him to do that, but he was not backed by the moral influence or the good advice of a single man who induced the Governor to order you to send forward my command. He was therefore weak and wavering. He would do nothing" The sheriff and the troops were unable to find either Allen or Hogan on the train. The stakes, the ropes, the sledges for constructing the ring were thrown into one of the cars in full view of the officers, but the sheriff still hesitated. Colonel Olmstead, whose orders placed him under the command of the sheriff, sent a telegram to the Adjutant General asking for instructions. Various explanations were offered for

the sheriff's dilatory tactics. "The roughs on the train," said a newspaper report, "were respectful and good-natured, and made no secret of saying that the sheriff had 'been sweetened'." Whether that officer acted on account of financial considerations, or (as the governor charitably told the legislature) because of his "confusion as to the law and the 'overt act', owing to the difference of opinion which he had heard among the lawyers," may be a matter for dispute. At any rate the train pulled out unimpeded. The conductor refused to take the sheriff and the troops along unless they had tickets, which no one had provided. The sheriff showed no enthusiasm for Colonel Olmstead's suggestion that a special train be chartered to go in pursuit. Before the Colonel could obtain telegraphic orders from Des Moines to act independently it was too late.

The occupants of the train had shown signs of gleeful amusement when informed that the two pugilists were the only men wanted, for they knew that the principals were not in the vicinity. Early in the morning Allen and Hogan, with their trainers, had left Omaha in hacks, had crossed the ferry, had been driven through the principal streets of Council Bluffs, and had disappeared. No attempt had been made to follow them. Six miles south of the city the train stopped, the fighters boarded it, and the party steamed ten miles further down the line.

The quiet little village of Pacific City, just across the Missouri River from the mouth of the Platte, had been one of those frontier enterprises whose

promoters had expected it to become a western metropolis. A few years of boom had followed its foundation in 1857, but its prosperity had declined: the history of Mills County published in 1881 noted that its formerly numerous churches and Sunday schools had been reduced to a single Baptist congregation of eighteen members, and that its brick school house had a capacity more than ample to meet all demands likely to be made upon it.

The peaceful inhabitants were no doubt both surprised and interested when a train of five coaches pulled in and stopped on the siding, and three hundred sports debouched upon the right of way. A suitable place was selected, the ring was staked out, and the spectators hastened to obtain ringside seats. A diversion was created when the sheriff of Mills County attempted to arrest the wrong men, but he and his small posse were roughly handled by the crowd, and told to go about their business.

The champion tossed his hat into the ring at 11 o'clock. The challenger was not ready to "shy his castor" over the ropes until 1:15. The first round opened with "lively, beautiful sparring by both men." Hogan was the first to reach his opponent effectively. At the end of this round he scored a clean knock-down. In the second round the men clinched, and Hogan got Allen's head under his arm — this was not a foul in those days — which enabled the challenger to belabor the champion's physiognomy at his leisure. Allen was much embarrassed. Unable to extricate himself by fair

means, he suddenly struck Hogan a violent blow below the belt, which doubled him up like a jackknife.

Roars of "Foul! Foul!" came from the excited crowd. The referee ordered the fight to go on. Another blow knocked Hogan down, but he did not take the count, and was able to keep his feet until time was called.

At the beginning of the third round Hogan was evidently groggy from the effects of the punishment he had received, but he fought gamely until the final catastrophe. Allen struck him again below the belt. This was too much for the challenger's overwrought friends. Rushing in with a free display of knives, pistols, and profanity, they broke down the ring, and the fight ended in a free for all struggle. Many of the spectators were knocked down and trampled, but the weapons appear to have been used with discretion, for there were no casualties.

By nightfall all the participants were back in Omaha, and the fight had degenerated into a series of desultory verbal skirmishes between the now numerous supporters of Hogan, who considered him unfairly treated, and Allen's adherents. The referee declared that the fight was a draw and that all bets were off. The stake holder said that the men must fight again for the money in his possession and he was arrested for trying to embezzle the stakes. The financial backer of the fight wanted to pay the money to Allen, but a compromise was reached by which each of the pugilists received \$1000.

The determination of the responsibility for the

failure to suppress the bout involved difficulties. The commander of the troops blamed the Sheriff of Pottawattamie County. The sheriff's friends explained his indecision on the ground of inexperience rather than venality. There were editors who thought that the military authorities might have acted more vigorously, and that the affair was a "double disgrace", involving both State and local authorities. The governor, when he told the legislature, in his message, how it happened, absolved the officers and troops of all blame. He informed the lawmakers that the ultimate cause of the fiasco lay in the absence of any law prohibiting prize fighting in Iowa. He urged the passage of a statute that would be preventive as well as punitive. If so salutary a measure should result from this unfortunate occurrence, he said, the State would be well repaid for the otherwise useless expenditure.

Allen afterwards succumbed to "Paddy" Ryan, who held the championship until he was knocked out by the redoubtable John L. Sullivan. Hogan in after years became an evangelist, in which capacity he doubtless fought Satan as gamely as he had fought Allen. And the quiet village of Pacific City, after a brief period of publicity almost as great as the promoters of the would-be metropolis could have anticipated, relapsed into obscurity and pursued the even tenor of its way in a manner more befitting its name.

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