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# Shelby will host Dempsey vs. Gibbons centennial celebration



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**SHELBY** — July 4th, 1923, a major event brought people from all over the country to the town of Shelby. While Montana has seen its fair share of major sporting events, this one remains to be the biggest due to high interest and impacts on the community.

Jack Dempsey, a well-known boxing legend, defended his heavyweight crown against challenger Tommy Gibbons. The fight was designed to bring all sorts of riches and influence to a town of only several hundred people.

"Shelby is kind of like the last stand of the Wild West to pull off this audacious dream, to hold a world championship fight in the middle of nowhere," said Gerard Gibbons, the grandson of Tommy. "But they pulled it off. It's one of the most panoramic, kaleidoscopic stories you've ever heard."

In the early 1920s, oil was discovered in Shelby. Being the only northern Montana town to have the material, it was said that was a major influence of the fight taking place in the rural town. Shelby also had a train service. The town's officials saw this as an opportunity to become an economic and tourist center. The money would be provided by revenues that the oil would bring. Multiple bank branches opened since the discovery, and people would make their way to town.



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Shelby spotlight: the 1923 Dempsey vs. Gibbons fight

Larry Munson, president of the Marias Museum of History and Art said there was a lot of rumors and speculations from what occurred in the making of this fight, and that no one really knows what happened behind closed doors. He explained the direct impacts that money had on this particular fight.

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars in a town this size was promised. Oil was just discovered a year before, and a couple promoters decided they'd better have a fight. That's how it evolved. In the railroad industry, they had everybody from back east involved. There were several places that wanted this fight. New York and even a place in Canada that wanted to have this fight, and somehow, these guys pulled out enough money, but when it came time to pay, the ticket sales weren't enough to cover what it was," said Munson.

A 40,268-seat wooden octagon was built in a month in preparation of the fight. As the bout was inching closer, Shelby had up to \$500,000 in committed reservations along almost 30 passenger trains.

- **Shelby spotlight: Dempsey vs. Gibbons**

Ticket prices were not cheap. The day of the fight, only a few trains arrived, and up to 8,000 spectators purchased tickets. It was said that locals stormed the arena to fill empty seats.

Dempsey, who is known to be the aggressor in his fights, ending within the first two rounds, won a 15-round unanimous decision over the determined Gibbons.

While the fight went the distance, some would say it was a K.O. for the town. Costs of the fight were so high, and the town was left in economic ruins shortly after. Four banks went bankrupt shortly after the fight.



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Shelby spotlight: the 1923 Dempsey vs. Gibbons fight

Most of Shelby's residents and nearby towns were unable to afford ticket prices, in order for the city to come up with the money guaranteed to the participants. It is noted that 7,702 paying fans showed up for the fight.

Two rodeos were held in the aftermath, in which city officials tried to take advantage of the huge crowd that came to the fight, although the rodeos were also said to be financially unsuccessful.

To this day, the fight not only remains the biggest sporting event in the Treasure State - it also is remembered as the most impactful event in the Shelby community.

Each year, Shelby celebrates the historic fight that took place, while remembering the hardships that occurred in the aftermath. The celebrations are held at Champions Park, the exact location of the fight.

Gerard Gibbons is expected to be in attendance. He wrote his own book, titled "Shelby 1923," surrounding the Dempsey vs. Gibbons fight and the small town dream.



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Champions Park in Shelby

golden age," said Gerard. "It happens in 1923, but it's about the buildup of that. It's a story of America coming of age. You've got the vanishing people such as the Blackfeet, the color line in the sport, where the blacks fought for their place to get to the heavyweight championship. There is the Spanish Flu, World War I, and women's right to vote. Everything is happening in this period of history."

Fighting runs in the Gibbons family. Gerard said his father, Tommy Gibbons Jr, was in attendance during his father's fight at six years old.

"He was very proud of his father. He adored him like I adored mine. That gets passed down from family to family. I grew up with the stories of the fight in Shelby."

People from across the country are expected to make their way to Shelby on July 4th, in remembrance of the fight and the impacts it had on the people.

Lorette Carter, Community Development Director for the City of Shelby said, "this is a hundred years in the making, so it's an incredible event, in which we will celebrate Shelby's colorful past and even brighter future."

Gerard said remembering a historic event such as this is something that is needed. "This is a true good story, and there's not many of those anymore. It's going to be great to be back and celebrate with this beautiful state and great people."

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