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SPORTS

St. Paul's link with a pricey title bout

PATRICK KEARSE



The latest census puts the number of people in Shelby, Mont., at 3,176. It's a town 85 miles north of

Great Falls and 35 miles from the Canadian border.

On Tuesday, Shelby was celebrating more than the 247th anniversary of the United States (for which Montana became the 41st state in 1889). It was also celebrating the prize fight that has allowed this small, out-of-way place to be infamous for 100 years.

No thorough history of boxing in the United States could be offered without mention of what took place on that Independence Day in 1923, when Jack Dempsey defended his heavyweight title against St. Paul's Tommy Gibbons in a makeshift arena constructed to hold 40,000 in Shelby.

"There was already train service to Shelby, and a couple of side tracks were added to serve the Pullman cars envisioned to be arriving by the dozens from major cities across the country," said Ken Robinson, Montana native, retired Navy captain, Great Falls resident and devoted historian of that area.

As it turned out, America's sportswriting elite were more interested in traveling to north or south Montana to see Dempsey than were the Pullman car dandies of the boxing crowd.

"There was one world heavyweight champion then and for several more decades. When that champ defended his title — particularly Dempsey, the indomitable "Manassa Mauler" — it was the closest that nation of America had to interest in a modern Super Bowl.

"What has fascinated me is that several of the most famous names in American sportswriting came to cover a fight in this small, rural place in Montana," Robinson said. "Gimondal Knox, Dawson Ramsey, Otto Flinn and others... and not for a few days. They were in Great Falls for weeks, writing daily about the fight."

Flinn was *Dress Designer*, a legend of the West. He had an immense background in boxing.

"He was considered the top boxing writer in the country," said Robinson, making it a coup for the Great Falls Leader to carry his coverage on the fight.

See **WRESTLING** on C2



Star Tribune

Jack Dempsey, left, unloaded a left to the chin of Tommy Gibbons of St. Paul during their heavyweight championship fight on July 4, 1923, in Shelby, Mont. The bout turned into a promotional disaster.

Gibbons goes the distance vs. Dempsey

A VICTOR IN DEFEAT

The Star congratulates Mr. Gibbons. We are proud of his physical prowess, but more so the qualities which make him a good neighbor and a clean sportsman. He is one of the men who honor the world of sports.

Note: Tommy Gibbons' grandson, Gerard Gibbons, has written a book on these events titled, "Shelby 1923." There were nearly 100 members of the Gibbons extended family in Shelby for the anniversary celebration on Tuesday.



As it turned out, the one good thing about the fight was the actual fight. Against long odds, Gibbons became the first opponent to go the distance against Dempsey — outboxing the champ in middle rounds, then surviving the Mauler's vicious attack to knock him out in the final two rounds.

The decision was lost, but Tommy Gibbons — later a five-term sheriff of Ramsey County before his death in 1960 — was lauded universally for going 15 with Dempsey.

Barton, covering for the Minneapolis Tribune, was effusive in his praise for Gibbons. And there was also this blurb in a rival Twin Cities paper to draw in readers:

"Cleopatra Tommy Embraces Antony Jack So Vigorously He Doesn't Have to Kiss Canons." Haman. Well, it couldn't have been from Sid Hartman, since he was only 3 at the time.

Write to Patrick Kearse by emailing sports@startribune.com and including his name in the subject line.

Minnesotans had their own opinion on the top boxing writer in the country — that being George Barton, who had been an actual boxer when prizefights were not exactly legal in the state. For years, Barton also gave punching bag demonstrations to awed audiences.

They, no TV... what else were you going to watch? Barton also refereed thousands of fights, all the while producing his columns in Twin Cities newspapers. He covered every heavyweight title for four decades, starting with Jack Johnson vs. Jim Jeffries in 1910.

He was a tremendous admirer of Mike Gibbons, Tommy's older brother, a welterweight/middleweight, and a legend as the "St. Paul Phantom." He was in Montana building up the fight along with several other Twin Cities sportswriters.

The fight had come to Shelby basically through the wild dreaming of James "Body" Johnson, son of the mayor. Oil had been struck near Shelby; Body

owned land and dreamed of Shelby becoming one of those western "boom towns."

He ended up promising Jack "Doc" Kearns, Dempsey's nefarious manager, a \$200,000 guarantee to bring the champ's defense to Shelby. The American Legion signed up as the state-required service club to sponsor the fight, and state chairman Loy Moulumbly Jr. went to Chicago to sign the deal with Kearns.

No one knows what happened — although there were rumors of Kearns hosting quite a party in a Chicago hotel — but Moulumbly came back with a contract calling

for a \$300,000 guarantee. Kearns and Dempsey set up training camp in Great Falls. Gibbons trained in Shelby; his family was with him, and he became a local hero. This included the nearby Blackfeet Tribe.

Tommy visited the Blackfeet lands. He was made an honorary tribal member. He was given a head dress and declared to be "Thunder Chief!" Back in Great Falls, Kearns announced the fight was off because he hadn't received the third \$100,000 payment. Big headlines appeared in newspapers around the country.

Dempsey finally overruled Kearns and said the fight was on. Too late. Only eight Pullman cars showed up. The crowd was less than 8,000. It was a financial disaster for the promoters. The legend became that the fight "busted" Shelby and caused four banks to foreclose.

"Only partially true, I would guess," Robinson said. "Montana's worst-ever drought started in 1917 and lasted for five years. We were five years ahead of the Depression that would hit the rest of the country. People were walking away from their farms. Banks already were closing."