

# Shelby 1923

*The Dempsey-Gibbons Fight For Glory  
and a Little Montana Town's Impossible Dream*



GERARD GIBBONS

## Cast of Characters



**TOMMY GIBBONS**  
*The Happy Warrior*



**HELEN GIBBONS**  
*Tommy's Wife*



**JACK DEMPSEY**  
*Heavyweight Champion*



**JACK KEARNS**  
*Dempsey's Manager*



**MIKE GIBBONS**  
*Tommy's Big Brother*



**TOMMY GIBBONS, JR.**  
*Tommy & Helen's Son*



**BODY JOHNSON**  
*Shelby Dreamer*



**LOY MOLUMBY**  
*Shelby Entrepreneur*



**EDDIE KANE**  
*Tommy's Manager*



**CURLY BEAR**  
*Blackfeet Indian Chief*



**JAMES A. JOHNSON**  
*Mayor of Shelby*



**ONE-EYED CONNELLY**  
*Gate-Crashing Legend*



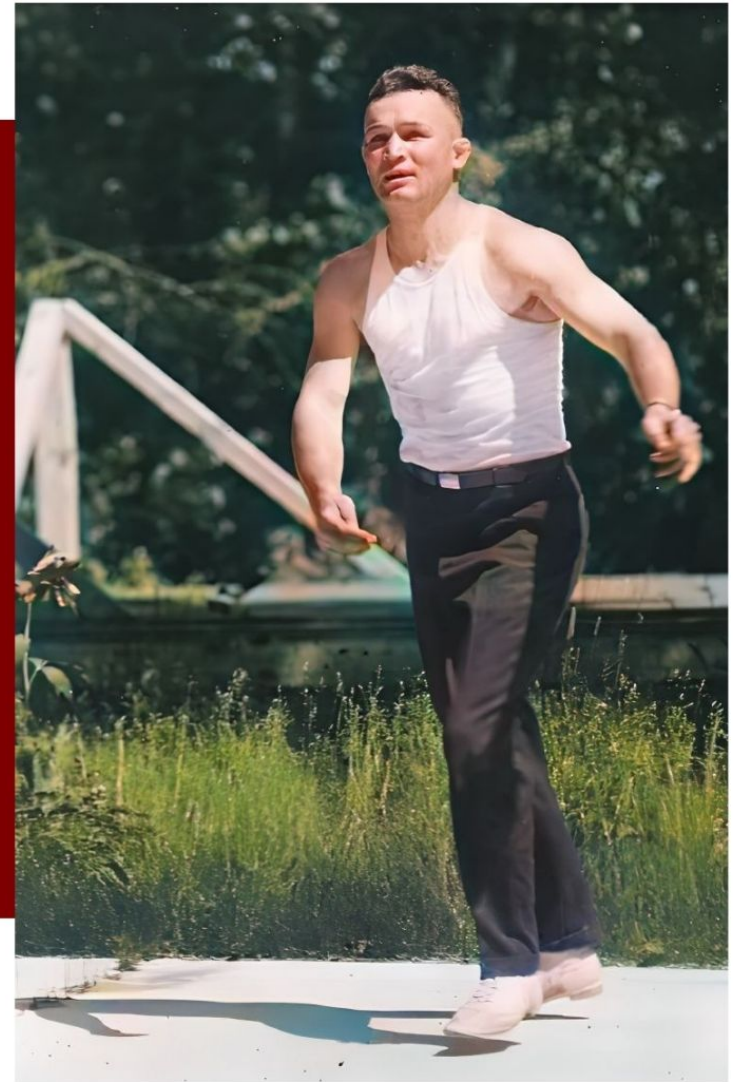
## 2. IN THE WILDERNESS

**IT'S 1923, AND THE WORLD LIKES TO PRETEND THAT HISTORY NEVER HAPPENED.**

The world war, the global pandemic, the dried gullet of Prohibition, the rampant corruption, the turbulent uprisings over civil rights and political ideologies. The suffering and the loss, immeasurable. Only yesterday, and still too damned close.

Everything is different now, but no one cares to remember how or why. They'd cheated death, the ones who hadn't vanished altogether, and they don't want to talk about it. So the world explodes, suddenly bigger, louder, and faster. The scars of history, no longer visible, but merely the foundation of everything after.

To some, the 1920s are the Jazz Age. To others, the Era of Wonderful Nonsense. For heavyweight boxer Tommy Gibbons, finally, it's his moment in the sun. Or it should be anyway.



Thomas Joseph Gibbons

**IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING.** September 1911, 20-year old Tommy Gibbons makes his ring debut — an illegal “sneak fight” held on the sly in the basement of City Hall in his hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota. Oscar “Cyclone” Kelly, thrashed flat in five-rounds. A quick knockout and a slim, but easy, purse of fifteen-bucks to Gibbons, the victor. A month later, Tommy repeats, running a wrecking ball through Kid Brown in a dozen-minutes.

After that, Tommy Gibbons is dubbed “a fast climber” and “a genuine glove artist.” Fight fans and sportswriters alike are roused by his swift and powerful ring victories, charmed by his “smoke-less, drink-less, and swear-less” persona. They are enchanted by his constant smile, which earns him the sobriquet, The Happy Warrior.

But in 1923, even after 74 consecutive victories, half of them by knockout — including 20 in a row in 1921-22 — the much-loved Tommy Gibbons remains perennially underrated.

From the beginning, Tommy Gibbons has lived in the boundless shadow of his big brother, Mike Gibbons, the erstwhile St. Paul Phantom — “the greatest middleweight boxer who ever lived,” many sporting experts agreed. Sure, broken-handed, half-blind, and retired in 1919, Mike Gibbons is over and done with, but the fight game’s never forgotten him enough to make room in the fistic spotlight for his kid brother’s pursuit of the heavyweight crown. This is despite the fact that Tommy is recognized as the top contender for the heavyweight title and he’s been chasing Dempsey for 4 years.

Time is running out for Tommy Gibbons. In 1923, he turns 32-years old, the age by which most fighters have lost all craft to become mere punching bags for younger fists. At home, there is a wife and three children. Mouths to feed. More than that, there lies a painful truth behind the cheerful visage of The Happy Warrior: his wife, beloved Helen, is seriously ill, often bed-bound, and urgently requires costly medical treatments.

There is, then, a happily ever after to forge. Without winning the heavyweight championship of the world, worth at least \$250,000 according to top sportswriters of the day, Tommy Gibbons will lose everything that matters most.



**TOMMY GIBBONS**  
The Happy Warrior

*Illustration by T. Sords, Nevada State Journal*



**MIKE GIBBONS**  
The St. Paul Phantom

*Illustration by Johnstone, Winnipeg Tribune*

**IT'S BEEN FOUR YEARS SINCE JACK DEMPSEY**, a 24-year old loner “born with a bear’s wallop” and conditioned to take a punch in the west’s hardscrabble mining camps, beat Pottawatomie Giant Jess Willard in Toledo, Ohio, into a soggy bloodstain of broken bones for the heavyweight crown, and four years since Tommy Gibbons has challenged him. The answer’s always been no.

Boxing commissioners and many sporting experts alike declare that Tommy Gibbons is “too small,” “too light,” and “not skilled enough” to give Dempsey, a powerhouse “without pity, fueled by all the bitterness and starvation of his early life” and now called The Manassa Mauler, a credible fight.

Dempsey’s manager, Jack Kearns, plays along with the hullabaloo, though his reasons for dodging a bout with Gibbons run somewhat deeper. Through the years, Kearns has too often witnessed Tommy Gibbons’s virtuosity in the ring — The Happy Warrior’s almost supernatural ability to evade all attacks, wear out his opponents, and then blitz in with a killshot. In 1915, Tommy Gibbons had applied such methods to “surefire heavyweight contender” Billy Murray and cost Jack Kearns almost everything.

Which is to say: in 1923, the only people in the world who can guarantee Tommy Gibbons a fight with Jack Dempsey will never, not even a hundred years from tomorrow, allow the battle to happen. There’s only one play to make: razzle-dazzle the nation’s fight fans, those who fill the tills at the box office, so they demand the match.

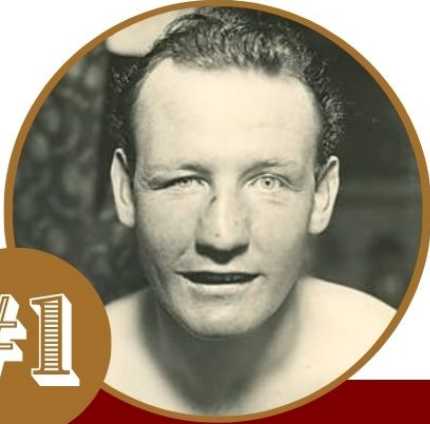
“We’ll fight our way to Dempsey!” howls Tommy’s diminutive manager, Eddie Kane, announcing a slate of mettle-testing brawls against a trio of the hardest-hitting behemoths in the ring: Jim Tracey, Andy Schmader, and Chuck Wiggins.



Jack Dempsey  
The Manassa Mauler

# TOMMY'S GAUNTLET

#1



**JIM TRACEY:** A skyscraper in padded mitts and a one-punch wrecking ball, the Australian heavyweight is 6'4" of pure muscle. In the first round, Tommy Gibbons clobbers Tracey "from pillar to post."

In the second, according to *Chicago American* ringside reporter Ed Smith, "Gibbons hit Tracey so hard on the right glove that Tracey punched himself in the face — and fell right over, knocked out!"

#2



**ANDY SCHMADER:** Trained in the fistic arts during the war by Tommy Gibbons' big brother Mike, Schmader can only endure Tommy's "stinging rights" and "streaky lefts" for roughly 30-seconds.

After that, there's nothing to do but crumble to the canvas for a long, deep sleep.

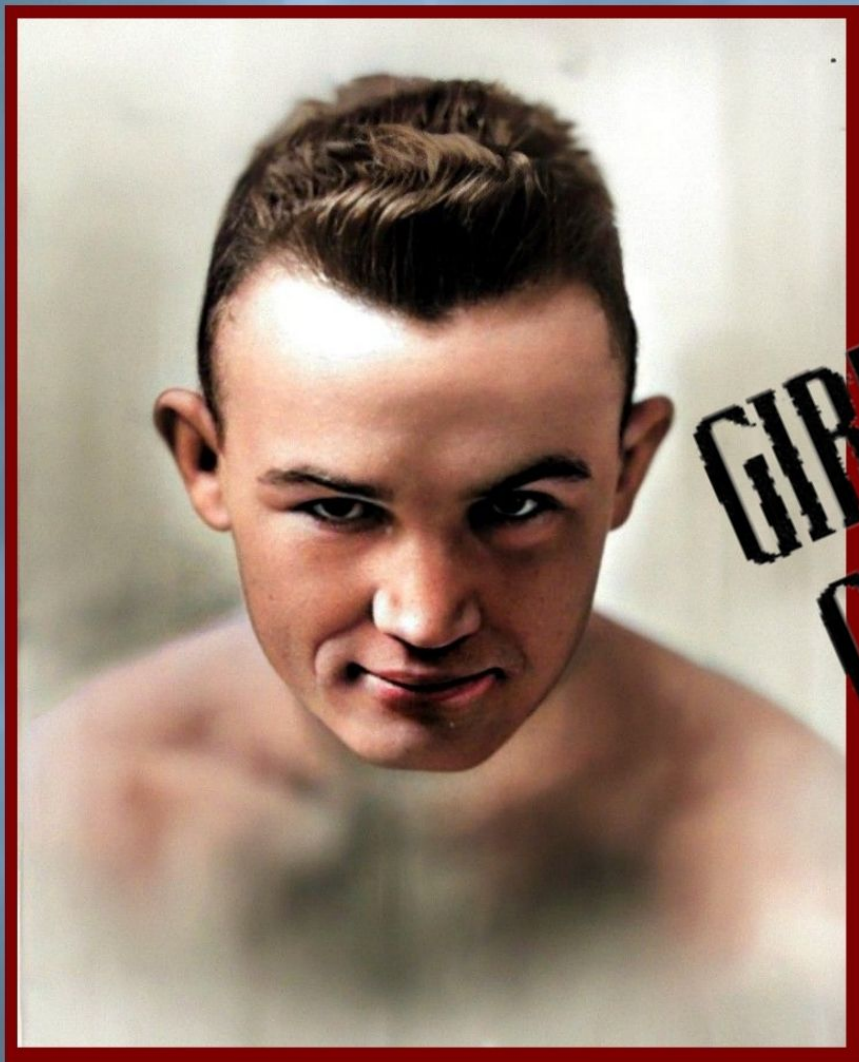
#3



**CHUCK WIGGINS:** A wild man who's done nearly as much time in prison as he has in the ring, Wiggins has a reputation as one of the fight game's dirtiest brawlers.

"With murder in his eyes" at first bell, Wiggins, fists blazing, tomahawks across the ring toward Tommy Gibbons. Steady and sure, Tommy ducks and dodges. When the opening appears, it's easy as pie. Pop, pop, pop! Wiggins, suddenly wearing a death mask, a grizzly's mug reworked by fear, shock, and fury, is knocked out.

## THREE KNOCKOUTS IN A ROW!



GIBBONS AFTER  
CROWN WORN BY  
JACK DEMPSEY

"DEMPSEY! LET ME AT HIM! NOW!!!"

*Tommy tells the press...*

"I'll beat him for sure.

He won't have a chance in the world against me  
because I'm fighting for my family."