

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

Sullivan Comes to Allegheny City Allegheny's Coliseum hosts the 1886 championship

Jon Klosinski

John L. Sullivan was the first heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Boxing historians often trace the “lineage” of the heavyweight championship through all the legendary names who have held the title back to John L. Sullivan. Hailing from Roxbury, Massachusetts, Sullivan was in many ways America’s first sports superstar, traveling the country and taking on all comers in front of thousands of spectators. Known as “The Boston Strong Boy,” Sullivan also bridged the gap between the popular “bareknuckle” style of the 19th century and the modernized “Marquis of Queensbury” ruleset, which had the elements of boxing as it became known the 20th century. Despite its popularity, Boxing during the 19th century was banned in many areas. Boxing events were criticized as a place where spectators gathered for an evening full of drinking, gambling, and lust for violence. To avoid protest or cancellation, promoters of events often worked to elude authorities, loading fans and fighters alike onto trains destined for a secret location to witness a fight.

Historians often debate exactly when Sullivan technically won the “heavyweight title” under the Marquis of Queensbury rules. One strong claim points to his fight against Dominick McCaffrey (who was a native of Allegheny City) in Cincinnati in August 1885. After his defeat of McCaffrey and a prolonged layoff lasting into the late summer of 1886, which saw several planned fights canceled over public objections to prizefighting, Sullivan was again seeking an opponent. One name – Frank Herald of Nicetown, Penn., had

been repeatedly floating around in the press, and rumor in the boxing world was that he packed a harder punch than even the great Sullivan himself.

Herald, known as the “Nicetown Pet” hailed from the greater Philadelphia area and was on a short streak of knocking out inferior opposition, though some claimed dubious tactics on the part of his management. In 1886, Herald had been coming off a knockout victory in June over Mike Conley, known as “The Ithaca Giant” who had allegedly been fed large amounts of beer by members of Herald’s team the night before the match, rendering “The Giant” unable to give Herald any contest the next day. Sullivan, unimpressed, telegraphed to a friend that

if “Mr. Herald was not a “duffer” he would undertake to knock him out within three seconds by the watch.” (*New York Times*, Jun 23, 1886)

On August 23, managers for both Herald and Sullivan relayed to the press that the District Attorney of Hudson county, N.J. had given an opinion that such a contest was not in violation of the law and was cleared to continue (*Detroit Free Press*, Aug 24, 1886). Agreements were made between the two sides for a six-round contest, with gloves, under the Marquis of Queensbury rules, the man making the highest number of “points” to be declared the winner. However, by the end of the month the residents of North Bergen had appealed to New Jersey Governor Abbett to prevent

the fight from happening, leading to a series of rescheduling and cancellations over the next few weeks in the New York/New Jersey area. After the Sheriff of Queens County, N.Y. declared unlawful a proposed event at Ridgewood Park in Newton, a frustrated Sullivan declared the fight off for good, and stated that he believed he would “. . . no longer receive fair play in this

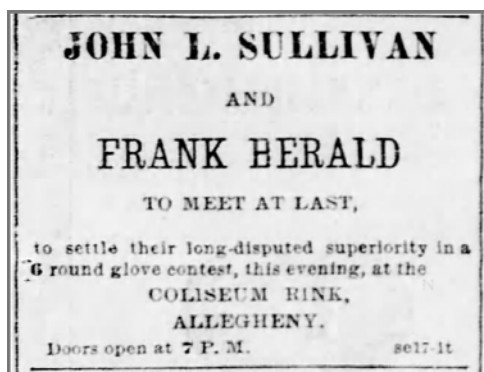


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country.” (*New York Times*, August 29, 1886) Management representatives for both Herald and Sullivan again worked feverishly to find a suitable replacement site. On September 15, an article in the *New York Times* stated that a new site had been found where the two fighters could meet without fear of interference upon the part of the police. The event would take place that Friday, September 18, with no public announcement of the selected site given until the afternoon of the 16th (*New York Times*, September 15, 1886).

It was Allegheny City’s Coliseum that would serve as the selected venue. The area already had a well-established history in boxing, and Sullivan had already appeared in exhibitions in the area several years prior. Other 19th century boxing legends such as the original “Nonpareil” Jack Dempsey had fought there as well. The Coliseum, otherwise known as the Allegheny Coliseum, Coliseum Rink or Grand Central Rink was described as a “large, barn-like structure” at the meeting of Federal Street and River Avenue near the Suspension (6th Street) Bridge. Often used for dances, musical performances, skating, and other sporting events, the structure burned down in the fire of 1898 and the remnants of the building were removed in the mid-1930s to make room for parking spaces (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 27, 1935).

The champion and challenger both arrived at Allegheny City on the morning of September 18 and were met at Union Station by a large crowd of supporters, after which they were escorted to the Central Hotel. Building of the platform for the ring inside the Coliseum had been completed the night before and tickets (costing \$2 general admission and \$5 reserved) had nearly sold out for the 3,000-seat capacity building. Press coverage of the fight’s previous cancellations had generated moral objections in Allegheny City as well. A group of local clergy lobbied Allegheny City’s Mayor Wyman and Chief of Police Murphy to revoke the event license for the fight “in the interest of law and order.” Managers on both sides along with local event promoters had already decided on a second secret location to carry out the fight later that evening if the petition was successful. Chief Murphy’s office received reassurances from the promoters of the fight that it would be a “sparring match for scientific points.” (*Buffalo Commercial*, September 18, 1886) The group arrived at the Mayor’s office at 9am that morning to demand the revoking of the license, only to learn that Mayor Wyman was in Cleveland at the time. A telegram conveying the group’s protest was sent but received no response, thus the fight was cleared to continue as planned.



Doors opened at the Coliseum at 7pm sharp and featured several local undercard bouts with the main event entering the ring at 10pm. Sullivan entered first to a huge ovation with Herald receiving a more lukewarm response. Ringside accounts noted that even the official 20lb difference between the two men (Sullivan at 205lbs and Herald at 186lbs.) seemed

to be a low estimate, with Sullivan appearing to be the much bigger man. The gloves, weighing only four ounces each and appearing small even for the era, indicated to most observers that well-protected sparring was not the intention from the outset (*Pittsburgh Daily Post*, September 20, 1886). The contest opened with a few minutes of careful maneuvering, but quickly devolved into the brawl that most fans had expected all along. Sullivan delivered

one of his trademark sudden aggressive lunges at Herald, almost knocking him over the ropes. Determined to answer, Herald returned to his feet and countered rapidly with a barrage of punches, one landing to Sullivan’s nose while receiving a countering body blow from Sullivan. Herald, for the moment, had felt the power of Sullivan and stood his ground, one newspaper remarking that round 1 had concluded with “. . . Herald apparently afraid and Sullivan wary.”

Both men emerged from their stools to begin the second round with blood showing on their faces. Herald, showing further desperation, lunged again at Sullivan and tied him up in a clinch followed by several scoring blows to the champion’s face. Sullivan had been known to lose control when strongly tested in the heat of battle, reportedly even coming to tears on several occasions after unleashing his prolonged offensive attacks. Ringside accounts that night stated that after enduring Herald’s offense to open the second round, Sullivan “lost all control of himself, going at his opponent with a fearful passion.” (*Burlington Free Press*, September 21, 1886) Herald slipped to the floor during the melee, only to recover and receive the fight’s decisive blow – Sullivan’s signature straight right hand to the chin which sent him down to the canvas.

Again, determined to show the champion and onlookers that he was down but not out, Herald rose to his feet. He charged once more at Sullivan and both men abandoned what semblance of “scientific sparring” had been upheld in the contest. As it became clear that the two combatants were now reduced to acting in violent desperation, Chief Murphy along with ten of his policemen entered the ring and ordered the contest stopped, pulling the two men apart. Even after Sullivan and Herald had both been confined to opposite corners of the ring,

they made several attempts to lunge at each other and continue fighting. At one point, Sullivan even attempted to attack Eugene Comiskey, part of the Herald corner, who reached into his pocket and produced a revolver but was quickly disarmed by the police.

After things settled down, the decision was left to the referee Johnny Newell who declared Sullivan the victor, much to the dismay of Herald's team and supporters in the crowd. A calmed Sullivan then stepped to the middle of the ring and delivered a customary victory address to the crowd:

"Gentleman: There is one man among you tonight who, through the columns of his paper, has grossly black-guarded me. I think he must now have a better opinion of me. Though this fight has been decided in a manner that may not please Mr. Herald or his friends, it has been decided justly. I think better of Herald now more than ever and he should be satisfied with making even a fair show against one of my calibre. I want to state in conclusion that I am still and always will be ready to

defend my title as Champion Pugilist of America." (*Burlington Free Press*, September 21, 1886)

As exciting as the short affair between Sullivan and Herald had been, the fans and sporting press were upset with the early police intervention and what was perceived as a poor decision by the referee in awarding Sullivan the victory after the stoppage. Many argued that Herald had given a more spirited effort against Sullivan than even Dominick McCaffrey had a year prior, though most allotted that based on the pattern of Sullivan's previous performances a brutal knockout was most likely on the way. Sullivan fought on for the next six years, eventually losing the championship in what would be his final fight to "Gentleman" Jim Corbett in September 1892, while Herald faded into relative obscurity, retiring from the sport in 1894. It would not be until 1951 that the heavyweight championship would make its second and final (to date) appearance in the Pittsburgh area at Forbes Field in Oakland when "Jersey" Joe Walcott captured the title from Ezzard Charles.

Union Dale Cemetery Excursion

Ruth McCartan

Saturday, September 21 dawned a beautiful early fall day with the tree leaves highlighting the funeral statuary of Union Dale, one of the earliest rural cemeteries in Western Pennsylvania. Years ago, ACS had conducted a tour of Union Dale Division One, the former Mount Union Cemetery. Today we were conducting a guided walk through the former Hilldale Cemetery now called Division Two. The two cemeteries were combined in 1867 forming Union Dale.

Over the years the Society had always wanted to explore the history of the residents of this "City of the Dead," but not until Board member Sarah Schneider decided to lead the project was the idea moved forward. After several days of walk-through planning sessions over the summer, the final course was determined. Every headstone in the cemetery has a story and it was



difficult to select only 22 for further research. The cemetery staff welcomed our plans and helped with the historical investigation especially Lisa Akardas, administrative assistant.

On the day of the tour, Mr. Frank Nagode, cemetery vice president, gave opening remarks and a brief history of the cemeteries. Various Board members then told the stories that they discovered during their research. Civil War veterans killed in battle, Lt. Col. James Hull and Captain Boisel; Thiel College founder Louis Thiel, a former butcher; Mary Junkin Buchanan Cowley, educator and early kindergarten advocate; the Cruickshank family, manufacturers of Jellies and preserves; the builder of the Western Penitentiary, John Schreiner; and the notorious madam of the North Side, Nettie Gordon to name only a few of the notable citizens resting in Division Two.

The Union Dale Division Two walking tour was a great success leading the Board to think about looking at Division Three as a future project. Stay Tuned!



Christmas Memories

North Side holiday traditions recalled

Carole Ashbridge

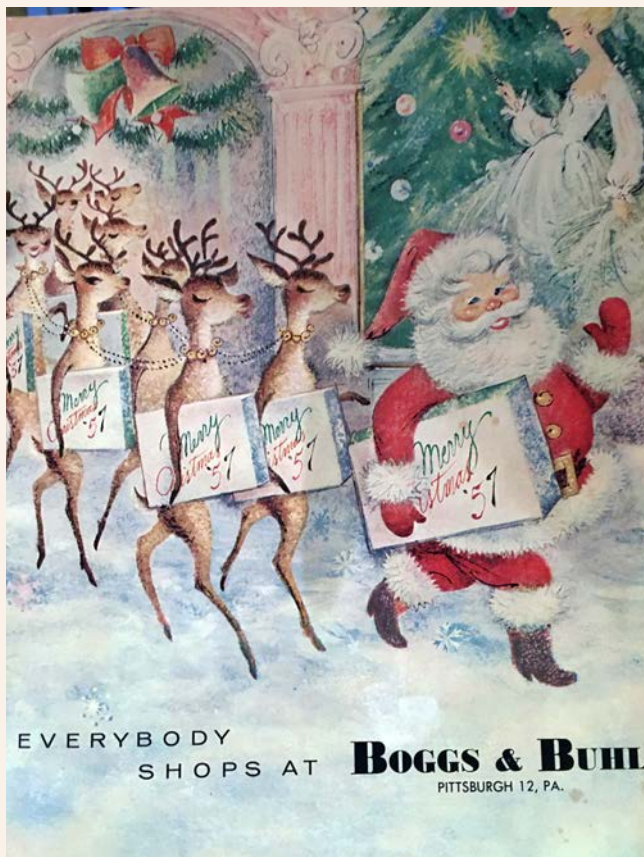
Christmas time always brings back a flood of memories – the year you got that special Chatty Cathy doll, your very first radio so you could listen to Wendy and Ed King’s Party Line, or your first roller skates. Christmas morning was the culmination of what seemed like an eternity of time after the Thanksgiving turkey had been eaten. For this baby-boomer born in December, the highlight was the visit to Santa Claus. It usually occurred some time close to my birthday, which was only 11 days before the big day. On that day, I would be dressed up in my winter’s finest and my mother and I would take the bus in from the North Hills Dairy and meet my father after his workday. We crossed the river to the North Side and Boggs & Buhl Department Store. It was there that I, and a few years later, my brother would enter into a magical world. Not only did we get to sit on Santa’s lap, but we were able to enter a winter wonderland. There was usually a small line to board the Christmas train right next to where Santa sat. On this journey, with an elf as the engineer, we entered in to a pitch black area that was lit only by the twinkling lights of Christmas. The train clacked along the tracks and wove its way through winter scenes. It was one of the few times I was



able to go on a journey without being under the watchful eyes of my parents. And the journey to a four- or five-year-old was just enchanting. There were forest scenes with animals, houses containing lit Christmas trees with presents underneath, and a Christmas sky.

From the department store we walked up to the Buhl Planetarium where we feasted our eyes on the magnificent Christmastown train display. I think it was there that my father got many of his ideas for our train platform at home. He would lift me up so I could see the working cars, the village scenes and the trains rolling around the tracks.

The evening ended with a short drive up to Mt. Troy to my grandparents’ house where a treat of Isaly’s spiced cookies and cocoa waited for us. The perfect end to a magical and most memorable evening.



For more on the miniature railroad at Buhl Planetarium, see Brian Butko’s “Christmas at Buhl Planetarium and Its Miniature Railroad: Heinz History Center.” Home, December 5, 2017. www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/western-pennsylvania-history/christmas-at-the-buhl-planetarium-miniature-railroad

A Walking History Tour

Before and Between PNC Park and Heinz Field

Craig Britcher

Thirty-five or so baseball history fans gathered Saturday, October 19 for the Allegheny City Society's "Before and Between PNC Park and Heinz Field: A Walking History Tour," organized by ACS Board member, Craig Britcher. Scheduled just prior to this year's World Series, a focus of the tour was Allegheny City's Exposition Park which hosted the very first World Series in 1903. Nine historic sites or "innings" served as stops where different speakers shared their expertise. Several stops offered the chance for excellent photo opportunities for attendees to pose on the exact spot where historic moments happened. While not a SABR (Society for American Baseball Research) event, many SABR members were in attendance and spoke, enabling many members of the two organizations to meet.

Artist Kathy Rooney batted lead-off in front of her uncle Art's statue outside of Heinz Field and eloquently summarized his early life on the North Side and baseball playing days. Craig Britcher next led the group to the nearby first professional football game state historical marker (played six or so blocks north of the site at Recreation Park) and recounted baseball's earliest days in the area, beginning on West Commons in 1857, then Union Park which was renamed Recreation Park in 1885. Walking towards PNC Park, attendees next listened to ACS Board member Carole Ashbridge near Three Rivers Stadium's second base where Roberto Clemente doffed his hat to the crowd after his 3,000th hit. Carole movingly recounted Clemente's career, her recollections of attending the 3,000th-hit game in 1972, and the extreme grief upon learning of Clemente's passing. Ballpark historian Len Martin subsequently detailed his work in surveying the Three Rivers Stadium base locations. He is coordinating their permanent markers in conjunction with next summer's commemoration of the stadium's 50th anniversary. Second base is very close to the spot in which Franco Harris caught the Immaculate Reception, so, while not baseball related, the



monument was a necessary local sports history stop. Jim Haller expertly detailed the intricacies of the play (initially planned as Chuck Noll's "66 Circle Option") and its important legacy.

Walking towards PNC Park, but before the Ft. Duquesne bridge overpass, the group next came to Exposition Park's former footprint, which partially overlapped Three Rivers Stadium's. Craig provided an overview of the early days of the Alleghenys at Exposition Park (1882-1883), its interceding seasons as a horse racing venue, followed by the team's second stay when they gradually became better known as the Pirates, starting in 1891.

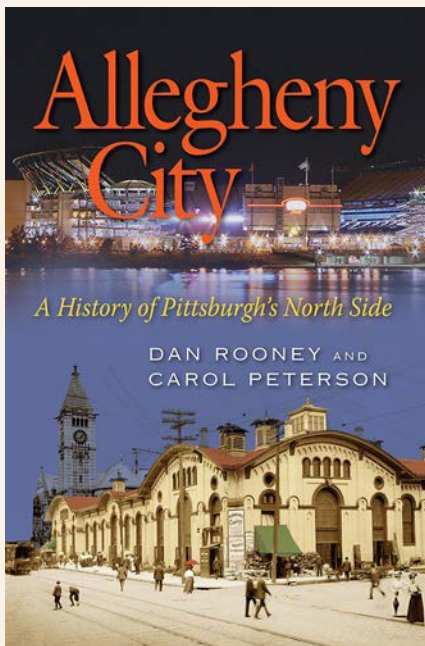
Andy Terrick provided interesting detail of the first modern World Series (in 1903 against Boston) in front of the historical marker on West General Robinson Street. Len Martin closed the tour well in our "ninth inning" as we visited his stainless-steel permanent Exposition Park/First Modern World Series home plate marker.

Deep appreciation and gratitude is extended to all of the speakers for lending their time and expertise. Hopefully if you did not make it, you too will consider visiting these historic spots. You may wish to enjoy an "extra inning" or two at Southern Tier Brewing's bar while seated in front of a white stripe marking Exposition Park's former left field foul line.





Allegheny City Society
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Allegheny City Book Club

Thursday, January 9 at 7pm
Unitarian House at 1110 Resaca Place
(behind Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church)

Come to the third meeting of the new Allegheny City Book Club! Based on Pittsburgh's North Side, we read and discuss local history and local authors with gatherings on the 2nd Thursday every other month.

Two complementary books to read for our January discussion. The first is *Allegheny City: A History of Pittsburgh's North Side* by Dan Rooney and Carol Peterson. The second is *Pittsburgh Irish: Erin on the Three Rivers* by Gerard F. O'Neil.

Program begins at 7pm and will wrap up by 8:30pm.
Light refreshments will be served.

A program of the Allegheny City Society,
learn more at www.alleghenycity.org.

Questions? Contact Mark Tomlinson at
info@alleghenycity.org