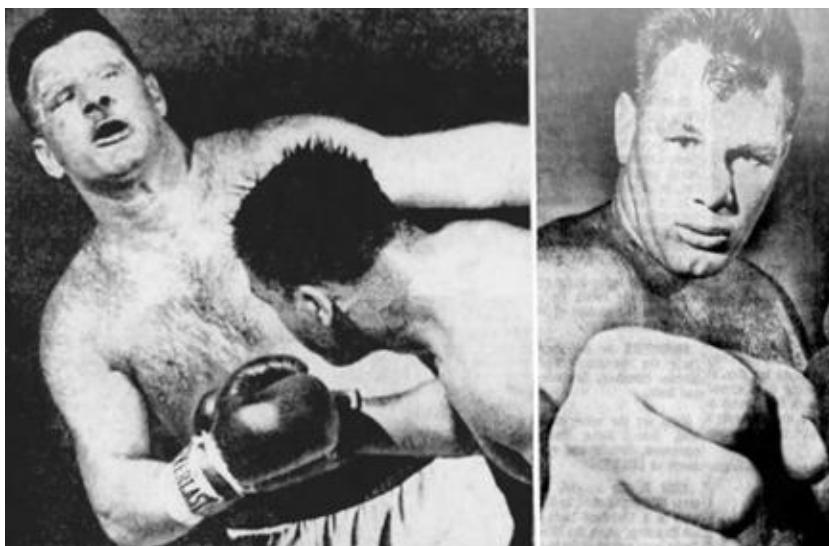


Tugboat the Scuffler

By Pete Ehrmann



“I think he could be developed into a real good fighter,” former heavyweight champion and guest referee Rocky Marciano said of Tugboat. “He needs lots more experience and he needs someone who can teach him some of the tricks of the trade.”

“Scuffy the Tugboat and his Adventures Down the River,” written by Gertrude Crampton in 1946 and today one of the best-selling children’s books ever, is the story of a toy tugboat convinced he is “meant for bigger things” than floating in a bathtub — until a harrowing voyage to the sea persuades Scuffy that the tub is just right for him after all.

This is about another Tugboat who hankered to make a bigger splash. His tub was North Carolina, where even before he had his first professional fight Waban “Tugboat” Thomas was considered one of the top boxers in Tar Heel State ring history.



But, said Tugboat the Scuffler, “I always dreamed of the day I would become a great fighter.” So at the advanced age of 28 he weighed anchor for the high seas of big time boxing — and like his Little Golden Book counterpart ended up way over his head.

Specifically named and generically nicknamed after the tugboat captained by his father in the port of Charleston, South Carolina, Waban “Tugboat” Thomas grew up in the fishing village of Calabash, North Carolina, which kisses the border between the two states. Area historian Susie Carson wrote that at Shallotte high school in the late 1940s Tugboat was president of his senior class, a Glee Club member, and recognized as “Most Athletic, Most Class Spirit, Best All-Around and the Biggest Flirt.”

Around that same time he started adding amateur boxing titles to the list. Before fighting in one tournament Tugboat used his Glee Club chops to belt out the National Anthem. For the next decade the 5’10”, 215-pound “apple-cheeked heavy who leaves himself wide open but who barrels in like a tank, fists flying, from bell to bell” (Asbury Park, NJ Press) racked up Golden Gloves championships, and in ’57 made it to the quarter-finals of the Eastern Golden Gloves tournament

in New York City. His fulltime job was at a Charlotte gas station when Tugboat knocked out Bruce Peele in his first pro fight on April 25, 1957.

“Thomas said he intends to ‘go to the top’ as a pro,” it was reported. “He is 28 and says, ‘I’ve got to move fast.’”

After two more KOs, Tugboat and Neil Wallace, the Carolinas’ top heavyweight before him, hooked up at the Charlotte Park Center on August 20, 1957 for the “Southern heavyweight championship.” More than 3,000 fans turned out (with hundreds more unable to get in) and saw them go at it, according to local reporter Dwight Frady, “like two mad elephants locked in mortal combat.” Ringsiders, Frady wrote, held up newspapers to protect themselves from blood splatter. Thomas won by TKO when Wallace couldn’t answer the bell for round nine. Later Tugboat recalled that after the brutal fight “they pulled him in on one bed at the hospital and they pulled me in on another.”

A rematch three months later drew 5,717 to the Park Center. Tugboat knocked Wallace out in six for his sixth straight win. “I think he could be developed into a real good fighter,” former heavyweight champion and guest referee Rocky Marciano said of Tugboat. “He needs lots more experience and he needs someone who can teach him some of the tricks of the trade.”

(Some divined similarities in the ring styles of Tugboat and Rocky. “The difference,” noted NASCAR mogul Humpy Wheeler to Dan Cuoco of the International Boxing Research Organization, “was that Waban got hit about 50 times as much.”)

Tugboat got a lesson he hadn’t counted on when veteran Art Swiden of Pittsburgh trounced him so handily over 10 rounds that a Carolina boxing savant called it “real comical, like a little boy fighting a man.” A month later, Oscar Pharo knocked Thomas out. Tugboat won a rematch, and after barely getting past journeyman Ollie Wilson in mid-’58 the plan was to match him with 175-pound champ Archie Moore. But former heavyweight contender Bob Baker of Pittsburgh sank Tugboat in four rounds at the Charlotte Memorial Stadium on September 30, 1958. (It was one of the first interracial matches in Charlotte, and later Baker recounted that due to “ominous crowd noises” he hastily exited the ring as Thomas was counted out.) Then Charlie Jones and Charley Norkus nailed the lid on Tugboat’s big time aspirations by beating him successively in early ’59.

“Waban is strong,” said Norkus after their fight, “but anybody with any ring savvy at all shouldn’t have too much trouble with him.”

Over the next few years Tugboat fought sporadically, mostly on the Dukes of Hazzard circuit, mostly losing. On October 30, 1963, 5-0 Amos Johnson took him out in four at Akron, Ohio. “Thomas’s demise,” wrote the Akron Beacon Journal’s Tom Melody (who called Tugboat “Smokey the Bear” on account of his heavily furred torso), “was indeed brutal. You could see it coming from the opening gong.”

In ’66 Tugboat sailed to Peru and lasted seven rounds against native son Roberto Davila.

Five months later came the call from Houston. Undefeated (16-0) Buster Mathis Sr.’s opponent in a six-round preliminary on the undercard of the February 6, 1967 Muhammad Ali-Ernie Terrell heavyweight championship fight at the Astrodome had dropped out. Was Tugboat available?

“Here it is and I’m old and just about over the hill,” moaned 37-year-old Thomas. “Here it is and they call me just one week before the fight. Yes, I know they are putting me up for common

fodder. They think I'm going to get killed out there, that he can embarrass me. This boy is really good ... but I'll give it everything I've got. He'll have a fight on his hands."

It lasted about two-and-a-half minutes. The reviews were cruel.

Jerry Isenberg: "Waban Thomas came out at the opening bell in a crouch so low he looked like a wounded armadillo. As he shuffled forward, moving directly toward the left hook which would end this travesty, the crowd in the Astrodome laughed out loud."

Red Smith: "At one sight of Mathis undraped, Thomas genuflected. Buster struck him in the middle of his haircut, and Tugboat was one with Nineveh and Tyre."

Milton Gross: "In his training camp Buster daily punches at a mattress on which is sketched the outline of a man. It is called 'Willie' ... (Thomas) looked more like the mattress than 'Willie.'"

Mark Kram: "Who can ever forget big Buster in against Waban Thomas, that pitiful figure wearing short, green dress socks, waiting for Buster on shaky legs lined with varicose veins?"

For the next decade Tugboat loaded trucks and worked as a bouncer. Then someone had the brainstorm to get him and 51-year-old Neil Wallace back together in the ring 20 years after the blood-soaked match that sent them both to the hospital. Forty-seven-year-old Tugboat admitted the \$2,000 purse would come in handy. Wallace hadn't fought since '57, and said he was eager "to come back one more time and show the people what natural ability looks like." The Charlotte boxing commission reluctantly went along when the promoter "pointed out that under the 1964 Civil Rights Act Thomas and Wallace could get in a ring and hit each other if they wanted to."

Geezer boxing was so new back then that Thomas-Wallace III at the Charlotte Coliseum on December 14, 1977 got widespread media coverage. It ended when the ringside doctor sent the battered Tugboat to dry-dock after eight rounds.

Gertrude Crampton's Little Golden Book ends with Scuffy the Tugboat dreamily sailing back and forth in his bathtub. "This is the place for a red-painted tugboat," he says. "And this is the life for me."

In 1985, Calabash's "Best All-Around" went back home. "Waban will forever be Calabash's hero and champ," wrote historian Susie Carson.

Said Tugboat the Scuffler: "I'm just happy here fishing."

A charter member of the Carolina Boxing Hall of Fame and born 88 years ago this October 26, Waban Thomas died on September 6, 2009.