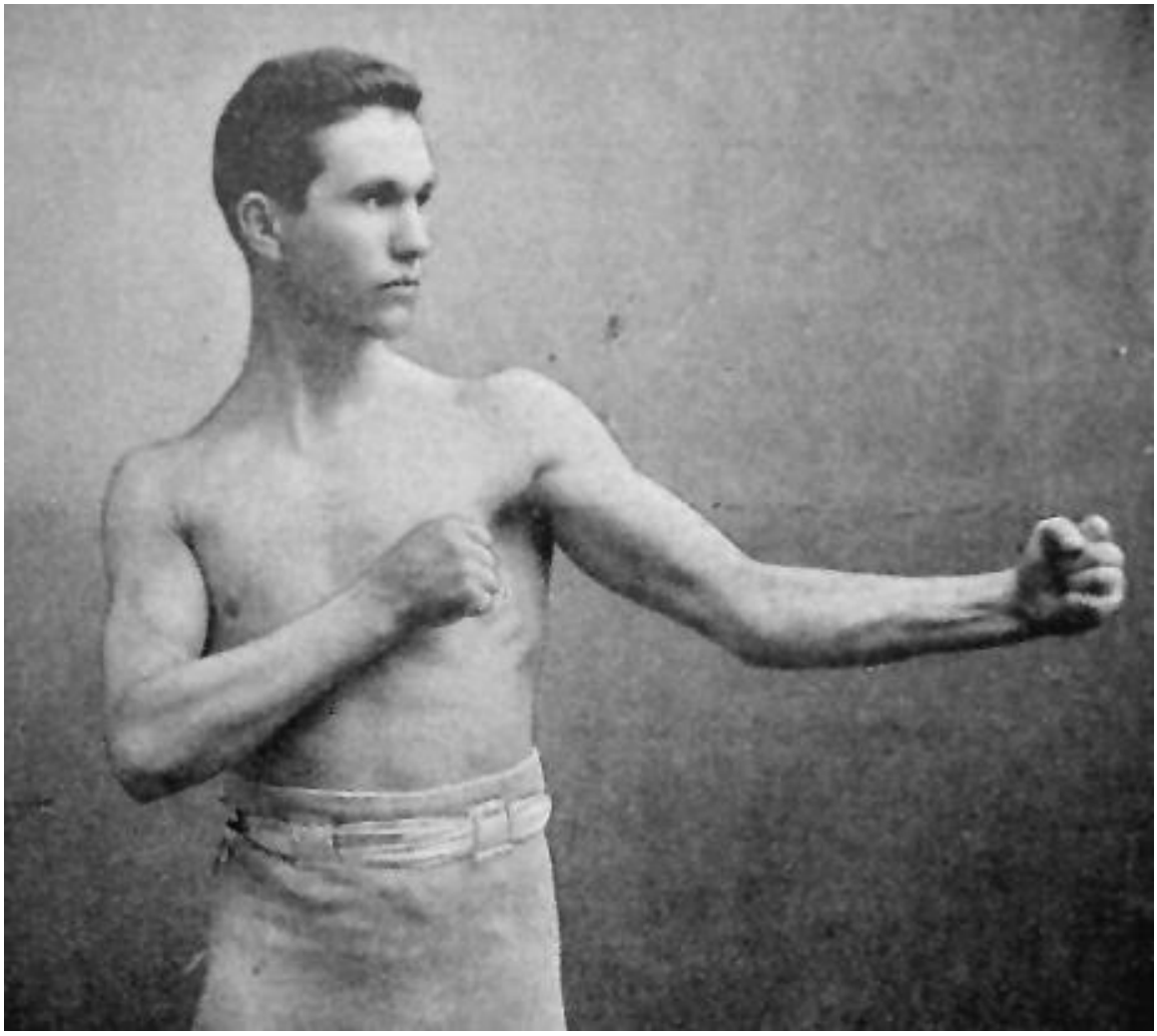

Danny Needham

Minnesota's All-Time Iron Man

Boxing has always been a sport filled with hardened men; men cut from a mold that society would rather forget exists. And when this mold emits a man with a pit bull mentality and the resolve in which to unleash his weapons, things can get brutal inside the prize ring. But within the sport known for its blood and glory, there exists a small section of fame for the "baddest of the bad"—the toughest of the tough; and each generation has had their own claim to such a fighter. These are men who eat nails for breakfast and crap buckshot before dinner; men who sprinkle arsenic in their coffee because it tastes sweet, and date women in garter belts because they can't feel the difference. You know the type; and it is just that type that we fork over our money to see on full display in the ring. In 1880's America, a love affair with fisticuffs was in full-swing and the

playing field was thick with young talent, all hoping to earn the big purses that would give them a fast track to fame and the good life. Among all the talent, stood a 5' 8" Lightweight whose temper and fighting abilities were widely-known from coast to coast. Contrary to history, which states he was born someplace between Hell and Hades, he was actually born in Saint Paul, Minnesota—his name was Danny Needham and this is his story.

Though pugilism has always been a tough way to make a living, it was never more so than in the late 1800's America where 4 oz gloves were considered "sissy" and referred to as "pillows". For this reason, many fights used only 2 oz. gloves and when no agreement could be had on the amount of rounds, parties simply agreed to fight to the finish. To say that one needed a chin in 1880's boxing would be an understatement, but do not also discount the incredible amount of stamina and conditioning a fighter then had to possess as compared to today. London Prize Ring Rules were gone by this time (for the most part) and the same rules that apply today also were used then; those being the Marquis of Queensbury Rules which call for 3 minute rounds with 1 minute rest. Can you imagine fighting a 20 or 30 round fight? Neither could Needham; try 43, 76, and 100 rounders, which were his three longest bouts. He had ditched pre-lim fights early on, and had fought a 27-rounder in just his fourth pro fight. It would have been longer had it not been interrupted. Though these kind of stamina-test fights were not unheard of, they were by no means the norm either, as most fights did have a set amount of rounds to them, which is precisely why Needham developed a reputation very early in his career as an "iron man", in that he could not be outlasted or broken—eventually you'd get tired or get careless and when you did, Needham would be right there ready to take you down. In fact, of Needham's reported 47 fights (most historians acknowledge he had more) he had 11 that were 20 rounds or greater, including one of the longest fights on record, that being a 100 round fight with Patsy Kerrigan in which Needham broke his hand in the 5th round, fighting the remaining 95 one-handed and in pain for the almost 7 hour slugfest. But before we go anymore into the accomplishments and feats of one of the sport's all-time Iron Men, and certainly Minnesota's greatest Iron Man, let's start at the beginning.

The man who came to be known as, "The Saint Paul Terror", was born of Irish and English heritage on Saint Paul's east side on May 20, 1867, but it would be the Irish genes that would probe to define his character for the rest of his life. He and his brothers: James, Anthony, and Mike were constantly in trouble on the streets of the capital city; their biggest habits being pick-pocketing and street fighting. Danny excelled his brothers at both arts and was known as one of the biggest trouble-makers of the Saintly City. When the World title fight between Tommy Danforth (a man who historians contend that boxrec is missing a good 50 fights) and Tommy Warren took place in late September of 1886, Needham, who was already an established amateur boxer, had made a remark to his friends that was overheard by many that he could beat either one of them. Though the title fight between Danforth and Warren ended in a Draw, Danforth later learned of Needham's desire to test his wares against him, and agreed to give the 19 year-old cocky, aspiring, pugilist his shot. It would be Needham's pro debut, and

against a world-famous fighter to boot. The fight was well-advertized and received much publicity as most Twin City experts thought Needham was clearly too big for his britches in taking on such a seasoned veteran as Danforth in his pro debut. Still, Needham's amateur backers were giving him an excellent chance, as they had all believed him to be a blue-chip prospect, as his left hook was his most noted punch, and had put many men to sleep in the simon-pure ranks. Danforth had surely heard of Needham's power, and set the conditions of the fight quite stiff indeed for a fighting a kid with no professional experience, as he called for 8 ounce gloves to be used with the only way that Needham could win a decision would be to win by knockout over the course of eight rounds. Also, Needham would be required to forfeit $250 cash (about $6,000 today) if he failed to stop him. *Danforth had no idea what he was in for.*

Besides his power, Danny Needham was already known for his explosive Irish temper. It would prove to be his undoing throughout many points in his eventful and colorful life, but Needham was known for getting himself extremely worked up before fights, making terrible facial expressions in efforts to psych himself up. This habit led to his moniker of, "The Saint Paul Terror". During their fight, Needham gave every ounce of his skill and gave a beating to his elder contender. At the end, Danforth's face was bloody and distorted, and many thought Danny had gotten the better of his famous opponent, but since he could not knock him out, Danforth was declared the winner. What did Needham do then? He challenged the defending St. Paul champion Charlie Webber to a fight the following month, losing a close six round decision. That would be the last time that Danny Needham would taste defeat for the next two years, as Needham developed his skills to such a point where he quickly became known as one of the leading challengers for the title. In just his fourth pro fight, he re-matched Webber to a Draw over 27 brutal rounds, followed by a string of six consecutive KO wins, including laying claim to the Lightweight Championship of the Northwest by beating William Edwards in July of 1887. A few months later, he faced Tug Tousley in St. Cloud. Tousley was a known wrestler, and a middleweight at that. He received a boxing lesson from Needham and grew so frustrated and embarrassed in front of his hometown crowd that he began to resort to rank foul tactics, which led to his disqualification. During the fight, Needham broke a bone in his left hand. Needham's hands would prove to be a trouble spot for him throughout his entire career, as he broke his hands no less than 7 times.

After the win over Tousley, Needham took some downtime. This inactivity was never a good thing for the spunky Needham, as he began hanging out with his brother Anthony, who besides being an alcoholic, was also a notorious thief. Stories began to circulate that Needham had been involved in some petty thefts, to which he always denied. But he was beginning to re-claim his old reputation outside of the ring as a man not to be trusted—with the guys at least. His reputation among the St. Paul women was something else entirely. Like all hustlers, their ability to lie and persuade usually met with beneficial results with weak-minded women, and boxing was not the only activity Needham was proving to be the Northwest Champion of—that is, until he met May Skinner.

May Skinner was a dazzling beauty, all of 16. She was a new face to St. Paul, as her family had recently moved there from Decorah, Iowa where her father had done well for himself. In addition to their wealth, the Skinners had big plans for their dazzling daughter, hoping for her to be married off to some well-to-do suitor, but then into their lives came Danny Needham—a pugnacious prizefighter. Needham was enamored with the 16 year-old beauty, as were many men, and he went after her with the same gusto that propelled his ring career. May was attracted to his fame and his suaveness. He may have been a terror on the streets and in the prize ring, but to her he was sweet and romantic, and she fell heavy for him. Her parents vehemently disapproved of the relationship and did everything they could to dissuade her, introducing her to other fine men whenever possible, but to no avail. Few men had the stones to try dating her, as all knew she was Danny's girl. But by the close of the year, Danny had other things to worry about than May's parents, for there was one man who was repeatedly calling him out at every opportunity—Jimmy Griffith.

Jimmy Griffith had been telling the papers for months that he could lick Needham any day of the week, and Needham had grown tired of it. Finally their handlers were able to arrange for a match to take place in the small town of Norwood, Minnesota. It took place upstairs of a saloon that was crowded but fit a few hundred, and the fight would prove to be a brutal affair with both men landing well and busting up the other. But it would be Griffith that would wilt under the non-stop barrage of offense which Needham always brought with him, finally getting caught in the 11th round with one of "The Saint Paul Terror's" wicked left hooks—his signature punch.

After the Griffith fight, Danny packed his bags for a trip to Ashland, Wisconsin. Ashland was a small little hotbed of pugilism in those days. It was surrounded by lakes and doing tours there was like taking a vacation for most fighters; hence its popularity. While there, Danny faced and beat James Connolly and John W, Curtis; the first by KO, the latter by DQ. When he returned to Minnesota, he faced Spike Trainor in a 10-rounder, whipping him thoroughly, but busting up his hands yet again in the process. While Danny was recuperating, his manager Patrick Shanley was busy negotiating for a match with the Lightweight Champion of America, Billy Myer. It would be for 20 rounds and was to be held in Minneapolis at the Washington Roller Rink with 2 oz gloves. Needham ditched his long-time trainer, Tom Manning, in favor heavyweight contender, Pat Killen. It would prove to be a very close fight, and the crowd booed loudly when referee Joe Mannix awarded the decision to Myer, as Myer was a bloody mess, while Danny showed little effects of the fight, using his expert counter-punching skills on his adversary all night long.

After his controversial loss to Myer for the Lightweight Championship of America, Needham's life was about to get hairy. Always known for carrying a revolver, Needham had lent his prized sidearm to friend James Scanlon. Scanlon then went on to murder notorious madam, Pearl Wilson and then turned the gun on himself in a very well publicized case of murder-suicide. Police quickly traced the gun back to Needham and called him into court to testify about his involvement in November of 88'. He was accused of providing a weapon to a

man that he knew was going to use it to commit a crime. Needham convinced a jury that he had no idea what his friend would do, and maintained that he could not be held accountable for being an accessory. The jury believed him and he was released. This would prove to be just another of the many brushes with the law that Needham would have during his colorful life.

After the close call with the law, Needham closed off his 88' campaign with a KO win over Frank Smith in Milwaukee. He then opened the new year with wins over John Wallace and Paddy Harrington, knocking both of them out in 5 rounds or less. These victories set up a show-down with the dangerous Harry Gilmore. Gilmore had tried to maintain that Northwest Lightweight title was vacant, as Needham had held it but lost to Billy Myer. Needham's backers claimed that the title was not on the line in that fight, and that the Myer bout was to see who would become the Lightweight Champion of America. Either way, their March battle was billed as being for the Lightweight Championship of the Northwest. It would prove to be a dull affair at times, with Gilmore showing a lot of respect to the dangerous left hook of Needham; instead, choosing to counter-punch the entire night, allowing Needham to do all of the leading. But late in the fight Needham's left hook came through and landed straight to the neck of Gilmore, dropping him in the process. He would rise, only to be felled by a wicked right cross which finished things. Needham's stamina had once more brought him to victory with a KO in round 20.

After the big win over Gilmore, Needham quickly reeled off two KO wins over Con Keefe and Frank Besow before traveling out to Ohio and losing in an upset to Louis Bezenah via 15-round decision. Upon his return, he again found trouble; being accused of stealing money during a card game at Pat Killen's saloon. Needham again beat the rap, but future his in-laws were growing restless with the constant bad press that their daughter's man was attracting. But Danny was good to May, and that was all that mattered in May's mind.

About this time, Needham took on new management, hiring J.P. Herman and Charles Feller. Feller arranged for them to do a stint out in San Francisco. In his first match there, he fought a tough one with Paddy Smith before ending things in the 17th round via the KO route. About this time, Danny was beginning to find it hard to make the confines of the Lightweight limits and Feller and Herman thought it best that he make the jump to Welterweight. This move set up a major showdown with Patsy Kerrigan in February of 1890. Danny weighed 139 for the fight, while Kerrigan came in at 145. It would prove to be the second longest fight in boxing history, lasting just under 7 hours and going into the 100th round (you read that correctly). Some fans were reported to have left and came back a few hours later, only to find the two still fighting! Finally, referee Joe Mannix declared that neither man could continue due to the condition of their badly mangled hands and the fact that neither had thrown a punch in the last 11 rounds due to extreme physical exhaustion, they had merely circled one another, making an occasional feint, but both possessed iron wills despite their depleted conditions and broken hands, and neither wanted to quit, hence Mannix's actions. It would go down in the record books as a 100 round Draw verdict for

both. This fight almost killed each man, with Needham needing almost three months to fully recover and Kerrigan taking an entire year off from the ring.

After recuperating, he fought a 4-round no-decision fight with Billy Shannon to take the rust off, before taking another tough fight with the dangerous Billy Mahan. Though it did not compare to the 100 round Kerrigan fight, it was a still a fight to the finish, and Needham was in for yet another grueling trial, as it took 43 long rounds to put the tough Mahan away. About this time, people began talking about matching the two top Welterweights to determine the world's champion. They were talking about Needham vs. Tommy Ryan. It would be held on February 17, 1891 at the Twin City Athletic Club in Minneapolis, using 2 oz. gloves and it was to be to the finish. Unknown to most, Needham had injured both his hands while sparring and feared that someone else might be asked to fill in for him if he were to disclose his injuries, so he didn't; entering the fight with two bad hands but plenty of determination. It would be an all-time classic, and yet another one of boxing longest battles on record. Needham hired Mysterious Billy Smith to train him for the affair. The purse was $800 to the winner, $200 to the loser. A capacity crowd of 1,200 spectators watched as 76 bloody rounds transpired between them before Needham's corner threw in the sponge. Little did Needham's handlers know, Ryan was about to quit himself. The fight lasted over 5 hours and both men were a sight at the conclusion. Sporting men from both Minneapolis and Saint Paul applauded their gritty warrior for an unforgettable performance despite taking the loss. Many remarked that there was no better conditioned fighter in the entire world than Needham, as his staying powers and heart were simply remarkable. Ryan later maintained his entire life, that his fight with Danny Needham was the toughest one of his entire life, even coming back to Minneapolis years after his retirement to re-tell the tale of his fight with, "The Saint Paul Terror".

Needham then fought a stay-busy fight with Johnny Van Heest, winning a 4 round decision, and a few days later faced World Middleweight Champion, Bob Fitzsimmons in a 3-round exhibition in St. Paul. After the bout, Needham said, *"The long fellow is a wonder. You can't tell where he's coming or when. I believe he's a world-beater."* This would be the last time Danny Needham ever put on the gloves again in his home state. He traveled out west for a rematch with rival Bill Mahan, again knocking him out; this time in the 29th round in yet another lengthy battle. Needham's handlers then arranged for him to get a title shot in a rematch with Tommy Ryan to be held on March 1, 1892 down in Louisiana, but at the last minute, Ryan fell ill and his trainer Texas Jack Burke took his place, and was stopped in 10 rounds by Danny. He then fought 29 hard rounds with the man no Welterweight wanted to face, George Dawson. Dawson was death in fights, and known for his fearsome KO power, but Needham was giving him a boxing lesson until his chin failed him and he was KO'd in the 29th round in San Francisco. Needham's next two fights were equally as unforgiving, as he was stopped by former trainer, Mysterious Billy Smith and Billy Shadow Maber, as Smith stopped Danny in 14 rounds, and Maber in 35 long ones.

After these losses, many wondered how much Needham had left. For a man who had a little more than 30 fights under his belt, he had fought the

equivalent of almost 3 careers, given the amount of rounds and record-placing fights he was involved in. But Danny wasn't close to being done. He lived for long and arduous fights, almost as if he thrived off of the physical brutality of such lengthy encounters, as he next faced the highly regarded Charley Johnson, fighting out a 40 round Draw. Needham then beat Mike Ryan by KO and then fought Louis Groeninger for the Welterweight Championship of America, winning a points decision over only 5 rounds, as the police broke it up, prompting the referee to make a decision early, and he decided in favor of Danny. But the fortune was short-lived, as Danny was seriously contemplating retirement at this point, moving to Kimball, South Dakota where he started a sheep ranch with his wife May. The Needham's enjoyed the quiet life of South Dakota, but it was short-lived, as later the same year they moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas where Danny opened a state of the art boxing gym and took on the role of big-time fight promoter. And he did quite well too, staging successful shows every few weeks, and turned down many offers to defend his title, claiming he was semi-retired. One fight he did agree to was out in Cincinnati in a re-match with Billy Shadow Maber. Needham exacted his revenge and whipped Maber like a dog, but both he and the crowd were said to be beside themselves when the referee awarded the victory to Maber. The newspapers called the verdict, "a robbery".

Needham liked Southern living. He was making a good living and enjoying the warmer weather, and more importantly, staying out of trouble. But the offers kept coming in; including one to face the infamous Kid McCoy in April of 1895. The fight never ended up happening due to insufficient funds backing the purses and the side bets. It was supposed to have been a 15 round affair. In retrospect, it was probably a blessing in disguise, as Needham's skills were definitely on the decline. He was no longer the man he used to be, and his night life was also taxing on him as well. He had also begun walking the line of the law once again as well, making the papers while traveling in Memphis in May of 1895. He was arrested for assisting in the escape of a criminal out of jail. Danny only served a short sentence, as his lawyers did the rest to free him from further punishment. When he returned, he returned to an unhappy wife. As much as he enjoyed the South, his wife May did not, and wanted to move back to Minnesota or else out west to the dryer air of California. Danny opted for the latter, moving them to Oakland in 1896. Once there, he made himself take a few fights here and there at different places, winning a few, losing a few, and earning a few Draws as well; but for all practical purposes, he was through as a boxer. He opened a very popular saloon there, and provided a nice living for himself, May, and their 4 year old son, John. He also helped train fighters there as well; his most noted pupil being Sailor Tom Sharkey, including seconding Sharkey for his fight with James J. Corbett in 1896.

Despite earning a nice living from his saloon, Danny joined forces with some friends who were making a trip up to the Alaskan Klondike in search of gold in 1898. He left May and John with a chest of cash and promised to be back in a few months. But the time away would prove to be treacherous ones for the Needhams. In late 1898, May developed a stalker by the name of Louis Kihlmeyer. Despite her being married, he continually pursued her. Always

rejecting his advances, she wrote letters to Danny telling of her discomfort. Danny promised to be home soon to deal with the situation. When May informed her stalker that Danny would be looking for him upon his return, Kihlmeyer's attitude shifted. One night he waited outside her home and when he saw her shadow by the blinds of a window, he fired a shot at her, missing her by a few inches and hitting the family bible across the room. The police later arrested Mr. Kihlmeyer but were forced to release him on a lack of evidence. When Danny arrived home a few weeks later, he went after Kihlmeyer. He found him in a 9th Street tavern. Sensing a bad situation he retreated and left the bar, only Kihlmeyer and his friends followed after him. When Danny noticed this, he became enraged and struck at his wife's stalker, knocking him to the ground. But Kihlmeyer got up and ran, shouting profanities at Danny while doing so and a chase ensued. Kihlmeyer ran back into the bar, but Needham was right behind him, and drew his revolver and fired a shot, just missing his antagonist. He tried firing several more shots but his gun kept miss-firing and Kihlmeyer barely escaped with his life.

But the more life seemed to slow down for Danny, the more bored he became. Troubles of the old sort seemed to become attractive once more. He was arrested in February of 1899 for attacking and mugging $97.00 from William Mullins and was sent to the county workhouse for a few months. After things settled down, Needham took to training fighters once more. He began working with Frank McConnell and was even arrested in 1899 after McConnell killed Jim Franey in a prizefight. He was later exonerated of all charges, as was McConnell; as the death was completely accidental. It just seemed that trouble had a way to being attracted to Danny Needham, and poor May stood by him through every step of it. Embarrassed by all of the ill-fame, the Needham's moved to Chicago in the latter half of 1899. Shortly thereafter, May was diagnosed with cancer. She later died in December of 1901. Danny was said to have suffered a breakdown after her death and precious little is known of him thereafter. For many years, he was believed to be dead, until on November 3, 1918, newspapers across the country ran headlines that read, "Danny Needham is Alive, but Busted". Despite a lifetime ban from St. Paul for conduct unbecoming, Danny had apparently resurfaced in the place he knew best. No one seemed to care, as the city officials that once banned him were no longer in power and the new chiefs were sympathetic. He was flat broke and in a poor mental state, being cared for by old friends. He then disappeared again and for decades no one knew what happened to him.

Danny Needham never knew what it was like to take money for an easy fight. I have yet to find the fighter who competed in as many fights that lasted as many rounds as Needham did. It's a crime that the World Boxing Hall of Fame and the International Boxing Hall of Fame have not called his name after all of these years. Perhaps they know it is because his name is no longer a known commodity and will not draw fans to attend the Induction banquets; or on the other hand…maybe their voters simply don't know him at all. But one thing is certain in this crazy, but entertaining sport we love; Danny Needham was an all-time great who at one time held the Lightweight Championship of the Northwest

(a huge title in its day) and also the Welterweight Championship of America. He was a fighter, a trainer, a promoter, a criminal, and yet was a loving husband and father. His likeness may never be seen again, as it is quite rare to find a fighter with the chin, stamina, heart, and counter-punching skills of "The Saint Paul Terror", Danny Needham.

UPDATE:

In writing this story, I personally undertook an effort to find out what happened to our great Iron Man known to all as, "The Saint Paul Terror". After a few weeks of digging, I was able to do it. He spent the final two years of his life at the St. Peter state mental hospital in St. Peter, Minnesota. He died there from throat cancer on September 12, 1922 at the age of 55. I have since updated his boxrec profile to reflect my findings.

NOTE: As of this writing, the Minnesota Boxing Hall of Fame (www.mnbhof.org) is currently researching the whereabouts of the final resting place of Danny Needham, as the hospital where he died has stated that he was not buried there on the hospital cemetery plot, and that their records are not intact as to who claimed the body and where it ended up.