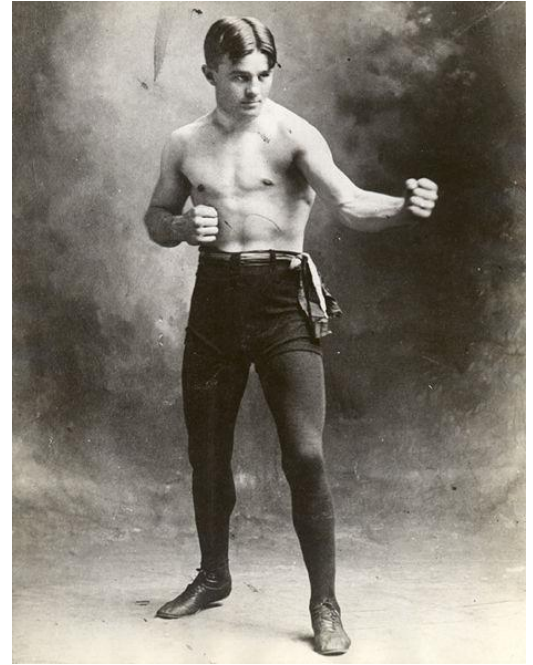


BILLY PAPKE BOXING'S ENFANT TERRIBLE

By Larry Carli

The term *Enfant Terrible* is a French term which loosely translated means a person who behaves in an unconventional or controversial way. This definition could also be used to describe former middleweight boxing champion Billy Papke.

The name Papke is infamous in boxing circles. He has been vilified by both boxing fans and writers alike. He is known for singlehandedly being the reason that fighters today are instructed to shake hands before going back to their corners instead of shaking hands in midring after the first bell. He is considered by many people to only being a champion because they claim that he punched Stanley Ketchell, when Ketchell attempted to touch gloves before the start of their second fight. Papke is also infamous for murdering his wife in California in 1936 before turning the gun on himself and pumping three bullets into his chest and committing suicide near where his wife lay. To be fair there is much more to the Billy Papke story than these much-publicized events.



Papke was born to German immigrant parents in Spring Valley, Illinois in 1886. When barely into his teen years, he went to work in the coal mines where he developed a hard rock body, packing 155 pounds onto his 5-9 inch frame. The young blond haired Papke entered the tough man contests put on by the coal miners. He frequently gave away up to 50 pounds when knocking out all comers in the bareknuckle contests. His violent temper and mean disposition made him a natural for the prize ring.

It was not long before he caught the attention of well-known boxing manager Tom E. Jones. Jones refined Papke's talents in the ring and realized that his fighter had incredible stamina and punching power. Papke modeled his aggressive style after former bantamweight and featherweight boxing champion Terry McGovern. Papke turned pro in March 1906 and went undefeated in his first 27 fights, including wins over top middleweight contenders Tony Caponi and Hugo Kelly. The Kelly fight set up a non-title match with middleweight champion Stanley Ketchell in Milwaukee in June of 1908.



BILLY PAPKE AND HIS FRIENDS.
SOME SPORTING MEN OF KEWANEE, ILL., WHO WILL BACK THIS AMBITIOUS BOXER AGAINST ANY
MIDDLEWEIGHT IN THE COUNTRY FOR \$5,000-#T. E. JONES IS HIS MANAGER.

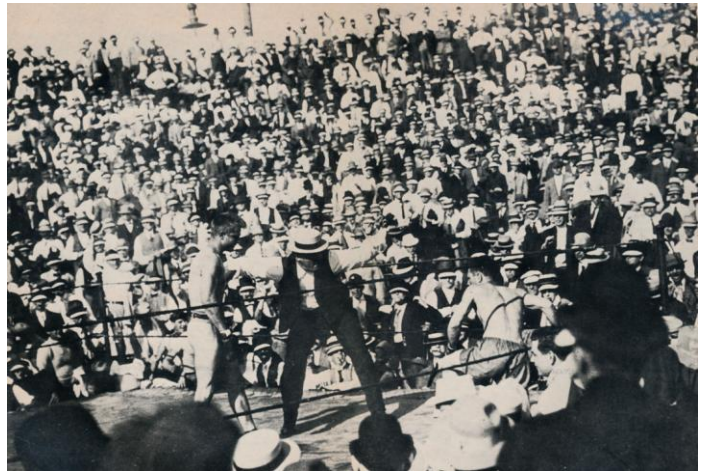
Papke was a huge underdog in the fight, and put up a surprisingly excellent showing against the champion going the full 10 rounds in a competitive fight. Papke

would later claim that Ketchell took advantage of him at the beginning of the fight. He claimed that when he went to touch gloves before the fight at midring that Ketchell slapped one glove away with one arm, and punched him with his other hand. Papke called it the "milwaukee double cross" and vowed to be ready for the start of their next fight.

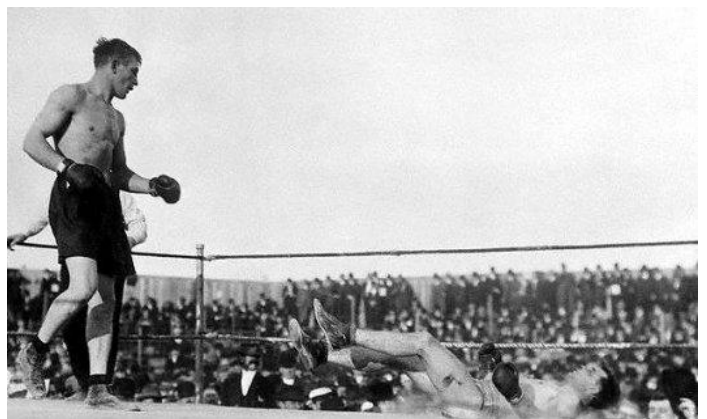
Papke tuned up for his title fight against Ketchell with a one round knockout of top contender Frank Mantell in August of 1908. This victory set the stage for his title fight against Ketchell in September in Los Angeles.

The fighters received their instructions at mid ring before the start of the title fight. Ketchell appeared to be loose and relaxed during the picture taking before the fight, but Papke appeared deadly serious and annoyed by all the attention.

The bell rang and the fighters met at mid ring. Before anyone knew what happened Ketchell was on the floor. Ketchell was knocked down a total of 5 times in the first round and took a terrific beating until taking the full count in the 12th round. Cries went up immediately by the Ketchell camp that he had been punched by Papke before the fight when Ketchell attempted to shake hands. Some newspapers reported that Ketchell had been fouled while others such as the associated press made no mention of any fouls in their coverage of the fight. Papke claimed that he was not about to fall for Ketchell's tricks in the second fight, and that he should have been ready to fight from the beginning. Ketchell vowed revenge in a return match



Papke returned to Illinois a champion, and immediately bought a home and farm in Spring Valley. Papke unlike many fighters of his day invested his money wisely and had a sharp business mind. He was slated to defend his title against Hugo Kelly in Milwaukee, when the state of Wisconsin decided to outlaw professional boxing. His manager Tom Jones then surprisingly agreed to a quick rematch with Ketchell. Their third fight was set for November of 1908 in San Francisco. Papke had a purse dispute with his manager before the fight, and always claimed that he was not in top shape for this fight. Ketchell became the first man to regain the middleweight championship when he totally dominated Papke for 11 rounds before knocking him out with a right hand. Papke would later claim that he could not hear the count due to crowd noise, but it was apparent to all that he was a thoroughly beaten fighter at the end of the contest. This was to be the only time that Papke was knocked out in his career.



Stories were written that Papke's wife did not even recognize him when he came home. The fact was that Papke was not even married until 1910. To show Papke's durability, 3 weeks after the Ketchell fight, he fought a 25 round draw with Jim Flynn in California.

Papke demanded a fourth match with Ketchell still not convinced that Ketchell was the better man. Papke had to first defeat top contender Hugo Kelly to qualify for another chance at the title. The elimination match was set in May of 1909, and Papke literally destroyed Kelly in knocking him out in the very first round. Papke went into serious training for his fourth match with Ketchell. He fired Tom Jones as his manager, and became self-managed.

On July 5, 1909, Papke stepped into the ring to face Ketchell for the fourth and final time. There would be no handshaking before the start of the contest. Both fighters came out aggressively in the first round and continued to battle at close range non-stop for the whole 20 rounds of the fight. Ketchell started out strongly in the fight, but Papke came on in the second half of the fight to make it close. It was a classic savage battle where neither fighter took a backward step for the entire fight. This was the only fight of the four fight series that was filmed. The film shows that both fighters are blood stained and fought at close quarters for the whole fight.

In a close battle, the decision went to the champion Stanley Ketchell. Both fighters felt that they had won the battle but to most ring observers the decision appeared to be fair. Papke never willing to accept defeat at anything felt that he should have received no worse than a draw, but would one day if given another chance finally defeat his nemesis Stanley Ketchell again.

Billy began the road back to a title fight by signing to take on perennial top contender Willie Lewis in Paris in March of 1910. Papke's temper got him into trouble again as he punched Lewis' diminutive manager Dan Mckentrick at a boxing charity fundraiser before the fight. Apparently, Papke took offense to a comment that he attributed to Mckentrick that Ketchell was the best middleweight in the world. Papke had to literally run out of the event to escape an irate group of French press and Lewis supporters from ganging up on him.

Papke stepped into the Paris ring for the Lewis fight amid a chorus of boos from the French crowd. Papke avoiding any chance of being disqualified for body punching used a devastating attack to the head to knock Lewis out in the 3rd round.

Papke returned to Illinois after the fight and beat Jack Twin Sullivan in a 12 round fight in Boston. Papke took the summer off to marry Canadian socialite Edna Pulver. Pulver came from a wealthy Canadian family heavily involved in manufacturing in the Hamilton-Ontario area. Papke had saved his ring earnings, and could be considered a millionaire by today's monetary standards.

Rumors had it that Papke was considering retirement after his marriage. These rumors proved to be false as he signed to fight Ed Williams in Australia in October. Two weeks before the Williams fight Stanley Ketchell was shot dead by a jealous farmhand in Missouri for allegedly making advances on his girlfriend. With Ketchell's death, the title

was declared vacant. And various fighters claimed the title.

The Australian promoters upon Ketchell death declared that the Papke-Williams fight would be for their version of the middleweight title. Papke stopped Williams in the 6th round to gain the Australian version of the title. Papke's title rein was short lived as he was decided by Cyclone Johnny Thompson in a 20 round bout in February of 1911. Papke had always had a problem with slick boxing stylists and Thompson was a veteran of over 100 fights. Thompson was a champion for only a couple of months when he vacated his claim to the title due to weight making problems.

Continuing on his worldwide tour Papke was matched with Jim Sullivan in London in June of 1911 for the British version of the middleweight title. Papke wore Sullivan down with a vicious body attack and stopped him in the 9th round.

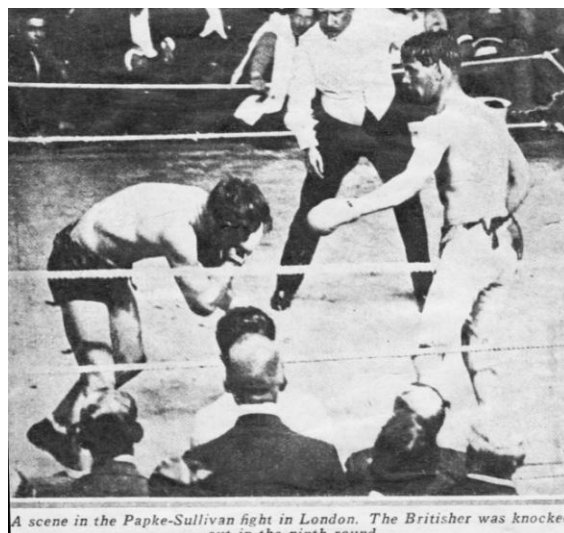
Papke returned to France in June of 1912 and stopped Frenchman Marcel Moreau in the 16th round to claim the French version of the middleweight title. Apparently, all had been forgiven from the Willie Lewis incident the year earlier and he became a favorite of the French fighting public with his aggressive body punching style of fighting.

Papke had now gained Australian, British, and French recognition as middleweight champion, but had not yet been recognized as the universal world champion.

Papke returned home only to become involved in another boxing fiasco. Philadelphia newspapers reported that before his sixth round non-title bout with local boy Leo Houck, he was seen in his dressing room slamming his gloves into a concrete wall thus slicing them up before the fight. Houck's corner asked the referee to look at the gloves, and Papke was ordered to put on a new pair before the fight. Papke irate because of the glove change became involved in a foul filled bout where he was thrown out of the ring, only to return and butt Houck in the head. Both corners became involved in the fracas, and the bout was declared a no decision.

Papke return to France after the Houck fiasco, to defend his share of the middleweight title against young French idol Georges Carpentier in Paris. Carpentier was thought to be too fast for Papke and the French crowd packed the stadium to root there French idol on to victory.

Carpentier started fast and had built up an early lead over the first 10 rounds. Papke began to wear Carpentier down with his steady body punching, and the Frenchmen was showing signs of slowing down. Carpentier received a severe eye cut in the 16th, as Papke was coming on strong. After a vicious pounding Carpentier could not come out of his corner for the 18th round, and Papke was declared the winner of the fight. The Carpentier victory was probably Papke's greatest fight next to his victory over Stanley Ketchell in 1908.



A scene in the Papke-Sullivan fight in London. The Britisher was knocked out in the ninth round

At the age of 27 Papke was showing signs of wearing down, as his style of aggressive fighting and the willingness to take punches, in order to land his own, did not make for a long career in the ring.

In 1913, Papke returned to France to take on Frank Klaus for the vacant world title in the last significant fight of his career. Papke fought one of the most undisciplined fights of his career, and he continually fouled Klaus until the referee had no choice but to disqualify him in the 15th round. Klaus who had fought both Ketchell and Papke would state in later years, that he felt Papke was a much more dangerous and treacherous opponent than Ketchell.

After a few more meaningless fights, Papke moved to California with his wife and three sons in 1919. Papke would invest heavily in real estate in Southern California buying orange and citrus farms.

The Papke's enjoyed the good life in sunny California in the 1920s with Billy refereeing boxing matches, and playing bit parts in Hollywood movies. He would serve as a host at restaurants, and tell customers tales of his fights with Ketchell, and reminding them that if he had just one more chance he would have beat Ketchell again.

The great depression hit the country in 1929, and although Papke took a financial hit, he was still able to hang on to most of his real estate. He began to train his oldest son Billy junior who grew to be a light-heavyweight. Even though Billy junior turned pro and had a winning record, he was not an excellent fighter, and he could not duplicate his father's accomplishments.

Papke came from a hard working German immigrant family, and his wife from a wealthy Canadian family. His wife's newfound liberation did not set well with Billy at home. Papke's accusations of his wife's infidelities led to frequent arguments at home which resulted in her leaving him in 1935 after all three of their boys had left home. It could also be concluded that some of the beatings he took inside the ring may have contributed to some form of pugilistic dementia in his change in behavior. Whatever the case, instead of celebrating his 25-year wedding anniversary, he found himself being sued for divorce in the California courts.

Papke, who like Ketchell did not like to lose at anything, did not take the divorce well and began making threats towards his wife. He began drinking heavily and took up residence with his sons. He would tell friends, that his wife would not have any other man other than him.

He began to plead for his wife to go back with him, and when this failed, he drove to her residence on the Balboa Island section of Newport Beach on Thanksgiving Day of



1936. When his wife opened the front door, he shot her dead, and then proceeded to pump three bullets into his chest. When the police arrived, they found the bodies next to each other near the front door of her residence.

The name Papke was again in the headlines in the sports pages, where the allegations were brought up again about him fouling Ketchell before the start of their second bout.

Papke, like Ketchell were hard men who grew up in hard times. Ketchell needed Papke to be a great fighter, just as Muhammad Ali needed Joe Frazier to push him to greatness.

Whether he is famous, or infamous the name Papke is legendary in boxing circles. People to this day still talk about his fights with Ketchell, and whether he did or did not foul him before the start of their second fight.

Papke was a tough two-fisted aggressive brawler, who would do just about anything to win in the ring. He was finally inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2001. Should he have been inducted in the hall of fame? Based on his accomplishments in the ring, I believe the answer would be yes. Was Papke a great human being? Like Carlos Monzon, and Charles kid McCoy after him, who also murdered spouses, I would say no to that question. Papke was a product of his times, and based upon his pugilistic ability he most definitely deserved his place in the hall of fame.

Larry Carli is the author of "The Illinois Thunderbolt" the life story of former middleweight champion Billy Papke.



BILLY PAPKE, Kewanee's Middleweight World Champion (1908-09) pictured with his Kewanee supporters. Front, from left, Papke's manager Tom Jones, who also managed Heavyweight Champion Jess Willard, Walt Parlier, Papke, Buck Neward, and Cully Faulkner. Middle, from left, Art Lundine, Hugh Hill, George Cullenbine, Dinny O'Donnell and Al King. In back are Ed Moran and John P. Brady. (Picture donated by C.U. Verstraete and Herb Kuster.)