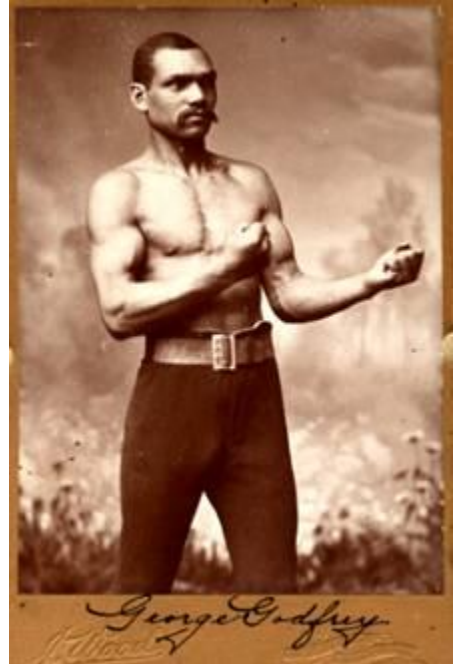


## THE "REAL" GEORGE GODFREY By Lou Eisen

It was quite common at the beginning of the last century for up and coming boxers to adopt the names of famous boxers from the past. Therefore, boxing history is littered with such names as Baby Joe Gans, Young Jack Johnson, Young Corbett, Young Sullivan and so on. In one of those odd quirks, which seem to happen more so in pro boxing than in any other sport, there were two black professional prizefighters named George Godfrey. The more well-known George Godfrey was, ironically, an American boxer, whose real name was Feab Williams. He was known as the Leiperville Shadow. He is in the prestigious International Boxing Hall of Fame, whereas the man from whom he took his nom de guerre, the original George Godfrey, who hailed from Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, is not an inductee of the International Boxing Hall of Fame. This is an oversight which needs to be corrected posthaste. There can be no doubt that, based on his career achievements, the original, Canadian George Godfrey, in every way, merits induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.



The real George Godfrey was born to Sarah Byers and William Godfrey (who were married in November of 1846) in Charlottetown, the capital city of Canada's smallest province, Prince Edward Island. Old Chocolate (Godfrey's nickname) was born on March 20, 1853 in an exceptionally poor, rural area of Charlottetown's West End, known as, The Bog. George, and his two closest siblings, Mary Ann and Thomas were the eldest of eight children born to the Godfrey family. George, Thomas and Mary Ann were all baptized on June 14, 1853, at St. Dunston's Basilica.

Most of the citizens of The Bog were former American slaves who had come to Charlottetown in 1780, during the American Revolutionary War. The Bog was known for its illicit activities, such as prostitution, bootlegging, gambling and various other crimes. The year after Godfrey was born his father William was convicted of petty larceny and served two weeks in jail for stealing a cow. He took the cow only as a last recourse in order to provide fresh milk for his growing young family.

In 1815, a member of Godfrey's mother's family, Peter Byers, was hanged for the crime of breaking into a tobacco shop and stealing five pounds. Only twelve years earlier, Peter's brother Sancho had been hanged for stealing a single loaf of bread and a pound of butter. They were not hanged because they were black. They were hung because those thefts were considered capital offenses under Canadian law at that time. Safeguarding of personal property was considered a God given right back then and, in those Colonial times, theft and burglary were thought to be particularly egregious crimes, punishable by death. Many citizens of Prince Edward Island, white and black, were hung for similar crimes.

(Perhaps the most remarkable thing about that impoverished, crime-ridden area of Canada, is the fact that on June 25, 1872, another all-time great African Canadian fighter and "Colored" world champion was born in "The Bog." His name was George "Budge" Byers. Both men would win the "Colored" middleweight and heavyweight world titles. Byers was a descendant of Sarah Byers (Godfrey's mother) family tree. The African Canadian population in Charlottetown during the nineteenth century can best be described as infinitesimal at best, and yet, within two decades of the latter half of the 1800's they produced two African Canadian "Colored" world champions.)

Godfrey, and Byers for that matter, were as good if not better than their white counterparts but, because of the racism endemic to the era in which they fought, they were always considered to be only "Colored" world champions. Even when you factor in the virulent racism under which they labored, such bigoted logic, even in that era just does not hold up to scrutiny. By this same logic, John L. Sullivan and other so called "world" champions should only be considered as the best "White" world champions. It's not really possible to categorically declare Sullivan as the only world heavyweight champion because he assiduously avoided the best black heavyweights of his day, such as Peter Jackson and George Godfrey. The same holds true for other white "world" champions who refused to face the best black boxers of their eras.

There were instances when such outstanding black fighters faced good white fighters but rarely did such occurrences take place with any titles at stake, with a few exceptions, of course. Thus, Godfrey, Byers and the great lightweight boxer, Jack Blackburn were systematically denied shots at world titles, which they very much deserved based on their talent and records. To make matters worse, when great black fighters, such as George Dixon, and many others, were given that rare opportunity to face first rate white fighters, they had to endure racist taunts, as well as opponent's cornermen and fans hitting them in the knees and legs with bats, pipes and knives.

This does not include, of course, the oft-stated fact that they were not allowed to fight back until the later rounds lest they score a quick knockout and ignite a riot in the process. These wonderful black boxers had to metaphorically wear handcuffs until the later rounds, when they were permitted to legitimately fight back. These were the egregious conditions under which the best black prizefighters had to agree to in order to ply their chosen trades.

Godfrey was also considered to have several physical disadvantages while fighting in the heavyweight division. In his prime, the original Godfrey stood 5'10 1/2" tall and weighed 175 pounds. He would be considered a light-heavyweight by today's standards. He also didn't really start his career until he was 27 years-old, which is rather late for a heavyweight fighter to embark on a successful career. Then again, with some exceptions of course, heavyweight fighters take longer to develop than fighters in the smaller weight classes. Nevertheless, Godfrey's superior conditioning and ring smarts more than made up for him being an undersized and older heavyweight in that era.

Godfrey had a very well-muscled body and was always in great physical and mental shape. He had a big moustache. He looked like an African Canadian version of

George Clooney, if Clooney wore a moustache. Life was hard for everyone living in, "The Bog," in Charlottetown, but not surprisingly, especially so for African Canadians. Racist verbal slurs and indiscriminate physical attacks were a common daily occurrence for African Canadians all across Canada, but such attacks seemed to be much more pronounced in the Canadian Maritimes.

Like most young children of color all across Canada and the United States at that time, Godfrey was the victim of bullying in his poor area of town. However, he possessed a certain flair and an eagerness to fight anyone that dared to try and take advantage of him. Godfrey displayed a genuine grace under pressure. He was almost preternaturally relaxed and level headed under duress. Godfrey was a very calm, affable, genial man but he demanded respect from everyone he met. Godfrey caught the eye of local African Canadian boxing instructor Dick Cronin (himself a highly regarded boxer), during one of his schoolyard scraps. As fate, would have it, Godfrey enthusiastically took his first boxing lessons in Charlottetown from Dick Cronin. Cronin took the young and inexperienced Godfrey under his wing and patiently taught him the finer points of the manly art of self defense.

Like many Islanders before him, Godfrey moved to Boston, in 1870, to work as a porter while furthering his boxing prospects. This was a route that was soon to be followed by George "Budge" Byers, George Dixon, Sam Langford and, the "Mysterious" Billy Smith, (all of whom were from the Canadian Maritimes) years later.

Godfrey worked as a porter upon his arrival in Boston, to make ends meet. He played baseball to stay in shape, and trained regularly in a gymnasium, where he continued his boxing education with a "Professor" Bailey, who worked to refine Godfrey's style while maximizing his strengths and teaching him to defeat his opponents with his brains as much as with his fists. It was an 1879 win in the heavyweight class at a local boxing competition in Boston, that led to Godfrey becoming a professional, fulltime prizefighter. Despite being considered too old to begin professional boxing and somewhat light for the heavyweight division, he went on to become the "first U. S. colored heavyweight champion" boxer and one of the leading heavyweight fighters in the world during his era.

Godfrey made his ring debut on January 1, 1879, in New York City, facing the very dangerous "Professor" Charles Hadley, whom he fought to a draw. Godfrey then scored four consecutive knockouts, over Joe Doherty, Mose Laborn and Tommy (Han) Williams (back to back knockouts). This was followed by three consecutive draws, first, over Jake Kilrain, who had lost a 76-round bout to John L. Sullivan, (Sullivan was considered THE undisputed world heavyweight champion. However, Sullivan's claim cannot be considered absolute as he refused to face the best black fighters of his time, specifically Peter Jackson and George Godfrey) and then followed that up with two more stalemates in a row with Hadley. Kilrain was still considered one of the top five heavyweights in the world at that time and to fight him to a draw gave Godfrey's career quite a boost as his prestige in the sport began to grow.

So, in his first eight professional fights, Godfrey had four wins, no losses and four draws. That was considered a pretty good record by the pugilistic standards of the

day. Most top level white fighters drew the color line back then. Kilrain stands out as an anomaly for fighting anyone, regardless of race, creed or color.

Godfrey won the "Colored" World Heavyweight title in only his ninth pro fight. He captured the title by knocking out the heavily favored Hadley in the sixth round on February 23, 1883, at Cribb Hall in Boston. Perhaps more impressive than his win was the manner in which he won. Fellow fighter Billy Edwards said that Godfrey won the title by, "Skillful (ring) generalship, undoubted courage and more than ordinary (ring) science." Godfrey spent part of his career trying to achieve wider fame by endeavouring to entice the recognized world heavyweight champion, John L. Sullivan, into the ring, to decide once and for all who was indeed the best heavyweight fighter in the world.

It was thought at the time that Godfrey's hand and foot speed, lateral movement and ring smarts would stand him in good stead with Sullivan. Sullivan drew the color line, as many fighters did back then, declaring, "I never have and I never will fight a negro in the prize ring."

Two years before Godfrey won the Colored World Heavyweight title, in 1881, there was a story that emerged from Boston that, in fact, Sullivan had agreed to face Godfrey in a bare knuckle non-title heavyweight match. The match never took place and there were several reasons given as to why this match fell through. One of the stories that surfaced at that time was that Sullivan was not aware that Godfrey was black, which seems highly unlikely. The story continues that both men met on a barge, which would then sail out of Boston waters (as boxing was illegal then in Boston) where the fight would take place. Supposedly, Godfrey removed his robe to reveal his gleaming black musculature. Apparently, Sullivan took one look at Godfrey's superb physique and immediately backed out of the fight.

The second story about the proposed bout between Sullivan and Godfrey is much more plausible. The second story states that the police stepped in to prevent the match because boxing was illegal at that time in the state of Massachusetts. We do not know unequivocally if either story is true or false. What we know for sure, however, is that the rumor of such a fight and Sullivan's reticence to go through with it, greatly enhanced Godfrey's reputation and fame in the world of boxing. Ironically, Godfrey's career reached new heights due to a fight that never actually took place.

Boxing historians have debated for years who would have won a match-up between Sullivan and Godfrey if they had been allowed to meet each other in the ring. Sullivan was a much bigger and stronger man than Godfrey, who never really weighed much more than 175 pounds in his prime. Sullivan and Godfrey both stood 5'10 1/2" tall; however, Sullivan was considerably heavier than Godfrey and packed a much harder punch. It is impossible to say who would have won had they faced each other in the squared circle.

The fame achieved from the non-fight with Sullivan helped Godfrey earn big money match-ups with some of the top heavyweights in the world at that time, such as Peter Maher, Jake Kilrain, Joe Choyinski and the other magnificent Black heavyweight fighter of that era, Peter Jackson. Godfrey beat some of the best

fighters of his generation such as his first-round knockout of Jimmy Doherty in Boston in one minute and 25 seconds.

Probably the most famous fights of his career were his two close draws with McHenry Johnson AKA, The Black Star, which took place in Boston in 1883 and 1884. Godfrey then took on the incomparable Peter Jackson of Australia in 1888, for a purse of \$2000 at the California Athletic Club in San Francisco. The fight took place five years after Godfrey had annexed the Colored World Heavyweight title from Hadley in 1883. Godfrey was by that time 36 years of age, and past his prime but still gave it his all against the man considered to be the best fighter in the world at that time. Godfrey fought his heart out against the younger, taller and stronger Jackson, eventually losing his Colored World Heavyweight title by succumbing to Jackson in 19 brutally hard fought rounds via technical knockout. It is worth noting that Jackson held a three-inch height advantage while outweighing Godfrey by 45 pounds.

After fighting former Sullivan title challenger Jake Kilrain to a draw, Godfrey faced the much bigger Kilrain twice more, losing by knockout each time. By this time Godfrey was in his late 30's and not as skilled or fast as he was in his younger days. Still, Godfrey fought 15 more times after his loss to Jackson, losing only three times, to Jake Kilrain, Joe Choyinski and Peter Maher. He also had four draws, one no contest and six victories in his last 15 fights. Godfrey's career record was a respectable W23 (KO18) L6 D14.

Godfrey's biggest ring payday was for the amount of \$5000, which he earned twice in his career. First, against the powerful Jake Kilrain in San Francisco, in a gloved contest on March 13, 1891, that lasted 44 tough rounds (two hours and fifty-five minutes), and resulted in a knockout loss to Kilrain. The second time Godfrey was to earn such a sum occurred on October 31, 1892, when he faced the highly skilled Joe Choyinski. The match lasted 15 rounds (59 minutes) and Godfrey earned every cent of his pay, as Choyinski knocked him out in the 15th round. Godfrey retired in March of 1896, having blazed a trail for the great Canadian fighters that came after him and found fame in the rings of the United States. Men such as George "Budge" Byers, George Dixon, Sam Langford and the "Mysterious" Billy Smith all owe a great debt to Godfrey.

Godfrey died of tuberculosis on October 19, 1901 at his house in Revere, Massachusetts, which he owned outright. He was 48 years old. Godfrey was an innately intelligent man. He was also an anomaly in the sport. During his career, he had saved and shrewdly invested all of his ring earnings. He made his money work for him in order to provide a comfortable financial cushion on which he and his family could depend on, long after his retirement, for many years to come. It is precisely because of Godfrey's wise investments of his ring purses, that he and his family owned rather considerable real estate holdings in both Revere and Chelsea Massachusetts at the time of his death. He had successfully provided for his family's long term future. He was survived by his wife Clara J. Godfrey and his son, George Godfrey Jr.

He was inducted into the Prince Edward Island Sports Hall of Fame on June 24, 1990.