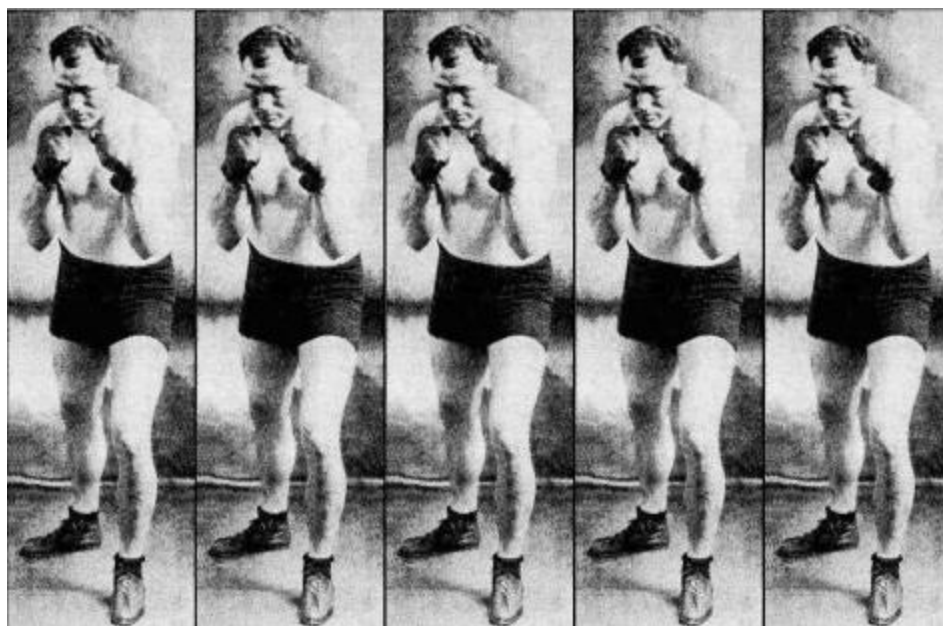


The downward spiral of the Kansas Cyclone

By Pete Ehrmann



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Located in south-central Kansas just above the state line, the city of Hunnewell has fewer than 70 residents today, down from a peak population of 350 when it was a booming cowtown in the early 1880s. Since then Hunnewell has been in the headlines three times: when it was the scene of a deadly gunfight in 1884 that was quickly forgotten because nobody famous was involved; when a woman named Ella Wilson was elected mayor in 1910, a decade before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the right to vote, and the all-male city council wouldn't have anything to do with her; and in 1928 when a local heavyweight boxer called the "Kansas Cyclone" blew himself away.

Ralph W. Brooks' suicide by bullet was attributed to a broken heart inflicted by a girlfriend, but by then the pride of Hunnewell was already reeling from the realization that in the ring he was destined to be a punching bag and not the second heavyweight champion to rise up from America's breadbasket.

"The state that gave Jess Willard to the pugilistic world to bring back the heavyweight title to the white race is sending Ralph Brooks out into the boxing colony to bring back to Kansas the crown that Willard lost to Jack Dempsey," proclaimed a 1924 newspaper story about the wheat farmer-turned-boxer.

The 6-foot, 200-pound Brooks' qualifications for the undertaking, it was said, included winning the "heavyweight championship of the Army of Occupation" in post-World War I Europe, although evidence of this achievement does not come readily to hand. The first newspaper articles about him I exhumed were from early 1922, in which he was called

“Battling” Brooks when he knocked out a Jack Clark in a Hoisington, Kansas main event. One article said, “Battling Brooks won the championship of the Army of Occupation and stayed five rounds with Bob Roper in a boxing tournament held at Paris. Roper was champion of the AEF.” There is no record of Roper having met Brooks in Europe.

The article two years later that painted Brooks as the second coming of Jess Willard provided this: “Brooks says that while overseas he entered the allied army of occupation tournament and either knocked out or decisively defeated the best heavyweights that England, France, Belgium, Australia and Ireland could offer, in addition to several American boxers. The final bout of the tournament, he said, was staged at the Cicle track in Paris July 4, 1920, and he knocked out Frank Thomas of Australia in eight rounds. General Pershing congratulated Brooks immediately after the bout. Brooks was discharged from the service in 1921 and entered the professional ring.” If it happened, it didn’t make the papers stateside.

A definite crock was the claim that by late 1924 Brooks had engaged in more than 60 fights without a single defeat, when in fact since ’21 he’d had only 16 bouts against mostly nondescript opposition, and lost at least three of them.

The sudden public emergence of Brooks as a heavyweight colossus was undoubtedly the handiwork of his manager, Mickey Curran, nicknamed “Ballyhoo,” who’d set up shop in Kansas after the boxing commission in New York gave him the boot following a December 1922 bout in which Curran’s bantamweight, Phil O’Dowd, was determined to have been drugged. No charges were filed, but both Curran and the manager of O’Dowd’s opponent got indefinite suspensions.

After Curran got ahold of him, Brooks’ profile briefly rose with successive knockouts of shopworn Joe Downey and Andy Schmedler, but on February 27, 1925 Bob Roper cut him down to size in eight rounds.

The Kansas Cyclone’s most riveting feature in the ring turned out to be his ability to lap up punches. A close second was a physique whose focal point bulged over the waistband of his boxing trunks.

“Ralph Brooks has a fighting face but from the neck down doesn’t look like one,” said the Hutchinson (Kansas) News. “He carries considerable poundage ordinarily termed excess, but it happens that with the Hunnewell boy it is not excess. He cannot keep his strength when he trains down to the point that the flabby flesh disappears.”

He tried it against the biggest name on his record, but being “lighter than ever before (from) working seven to 10 hours a day to get in perfect condition” (Hutchinson News) didn’t keep the Kansas Cyclone from being overwhelmed by a Pittsburgh Windmill on July 27, 1925. Brooks hung in there all 10 rounds, though, and afterwards middleweight champion Harry Greb told a ringsider, “I gave him everything in the bag. I think I hit him harder than I ever hit anyone, and all he would do was shake his head.”

It was the same story a few months later against Chuck Wiggins. “...What a grand little catcher (Brooks) was,” reported the Indianapolis Star. “Chuck pitched ‘em from all angles and

the Kansas Cyclone scooped ‘em in, taking ‘em high and low. Chuck has the reputation of being a remarkable boxer, but he did not need all his skill. A blind man could not have missed the Cyclone’s midsection... A baseball statistician would have figured that Chuck made at least 950 safe hits and no putouts. Brooks fanned each time he tried to make a hit.”

The dream of reclaiming the heavyweight title for Kansas having gone up in smoke, the pride of Hunnewell decided to put his talent for taking a beating to the next best use. “Ralph Brooks, Kansas heavyweight, left today for Denver, where he will join the training staff of Jack Dempsey,” it was reported on February 10, 1926. The heavyweight champion was touring the country fighting exhibition matches, but the trouble with Dempsey was he didn’t know how to pull his punches. “Just how long a man can hold a job as sparring partner for Mister Dempsey and still refrain from making paper dolls, has never been estimated,” mused Bob Shand in the Oakland Tribune. “Taking them on the chin every night is not conducive nor even sanity.”

Presumably Brooks was one of the five unidentified sparring partners flattened by the heavyweight champion in Denver on February 14. From there Dempsey and an entourage consisting of Brooks, Farmer Lodge and Joe Lavigne headed east, the champion going to Wilmington, Delaware with his wife, Estelle Taylor, to visit her family, the others to Richmond, Virginia, where exhibition matches with Dempsey were scheduled at Grays Armory on February 18.

On the train to Richmond, Lodge and Lavigne later told the cops, Brooks “seemed to be brooding over his troubles which hinged about a love affair in which he was disappointed six months ago in Kansas City.”

Just after noon on February 17, after the other two left him in the Richmond hotel room they shared, Brooks took out a nickel-plated revolver and shot himself in the head. He died an hour later on the operating table.

It was his 28th birthday.

Described as “visibly affected” by news of Brooks’ suicide, Dempsey dispatched his personal secretary, Eddie Connors, to Richmond to arrange for Brooks’ corpse to be shipped back to Kansas at Dempsey’s expense. Atop the coffin all the way to Hunnewell was perched a “beautiful wreath designed as a boxing glove,” also courtesy of the heavyweight champion.

The show went on as scheduled in Richmond. When Dempsey got to town there was a telegram waiting for him. “Appreciate kindness,” it said. “Am sure you have done everything possible.” It was signed by Mrs. C.M. Brooks, mother of the Kansas Cyclone.

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Pete Ehrmann's work as a boxing journalist/historian over the past 40 plus years speaks for itself. Pete's first by-line appeared in The Ring magazine at age 14, and ever since he has written about the sport (and other matters) for newspapers, magazines and websites. Pete has been a valuable member of the IBRO since April 2013.