

BLOODBATH!

The 1912 War Between Abe Attell and Harlem Tommy Murphy

By Kenneth Bridgham

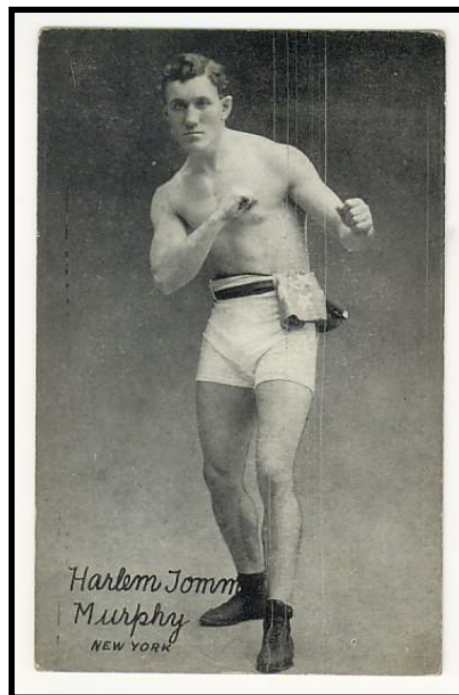
"I was born on Washington's birthday, twenty-eight years ago, and my mother named me for Abraham Lincoln." Such were the words of Abe Attell, one of the most skilled and respected prizefighters of his generation, to a reporter as he reflected on his career the day before entering a boxing ring with Tommy Murphy, an experienced and rugged fighter out of New York.



Attell had a right to be reflective. He was back in his old hometown of San Francisco, the city where he had fought his first bouts in a club on Sixth Street, back when the twentieth century was just as new as his boxing career. Twelve years later, he was a veteran of well over one hundred fights, fourteen of them in defense of his claim to the featherweight championship of the world. Behind him were victories over the likes of George Dixon, Johnny Reagan, Harry Forbes, Jimmy Walsh, and Johnny Kilbane. No boxing champion had previously dominated his division so thoroughly. Known for his defense, movement, and crafty tactics, he was regarded by fans, reporters, and fellow boxers alike as a marvel of the ring, a professor of ring science, and an artist of the squared circle. "It's been a pretty good game," he reminisced. "I'm just as good as I ever was, and I've had a mighty good time."

His match with Murphy was expected to test whether Attell truly was as good as he still thought he was. He had lost his championship just two weeks earlier in a second match with the crafty but hard-hitting Kilbane, who afterward accused Attell of desperately using all kinds of dirty tactics to hold onto the crown. Kilbane's victory via a twenty round decision was a tremendous upset.

Now here was Harlem Tommy Murphy, a natural lightweight looking to secure his own shot at a title. The muscular New Yorker had been fighting almost as long as had Attell. He had also bested some of the most revered little men in the sport, including George Dixon and Owen Moran (albeit controversially), when he entered the ring with Attell for the first time two years earlier. That fight had ended without an official referee's decision in accordance with the laws of Murphy's native New York State, but most had felt that Murphy had done enough to win. A month later, they did it again, and



again there was no official decision, though the newspapers reported that Attell was the better man that time. Murphy was considered a versatile fighter with fast hands and a warrior's heart. Despite all his success in the ring, he had yet to pick up a world championship.

Betting odds on the day before their third fight were narrowly (10 to 8) in Attell's favor. Though Attell was now an ex-champion going into a third fight with a capable man who would outweigh him by 11 pounds, his name still engendered respect within the fight community, and he was fighting in his own hometown this time. The promoter was Sunny Jim Coffroth, the first boxing promoter to make himself more famous than many of the world's boxing champions. Flamboyant, politically connected, and ambitious, Coffroth promoted almost all of boxing's biggest fights in the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly those that happened in his native California. The crowd and promoter would certainly be on the side of the hometown fighter. And the motivation was there: Just days earlier, Kilbane had announced that he was willing to give Attell a return shot. Rumor had it that the ex-champ had wagered every penny to his name on victory.

The third fight between Abe Attell and Harlem Tommy Murphy was held on March 9, 1912, in Coffroth's open air Mission Street Arena in Colma, just outside of the jurisdiction of the San Francisco authorities. The railroad attached extra cars to handle the anticipated crowd. The huge turnout was expected, but less expected was the presence of several female spectators, a rather scandalous fact of which newspaper writers took note. Jack Welsh was on hand to referee. An excellent, experienced choice, Welsh was known for letting the fighters work and had officiated over Attell fights before. He was best known for handling the historic title bout between heavyweight champion Jack Johnson and middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel back in 1909.

In the prelims, welterweight Willie "Knockout" Campi put Tommy McCarthy to sleep with a right to the jaw in the second round; then two local lightweights, Lee Johnson and Manuel Rivera entertained the crowd with a ten-round barn burner. The fight, with its changing momentum and fierce competition, was so good that the spectators didn't even mind the referee's verdict of a draw. But it was a mere appetizer for the spectacle to follow, which would go down as maybe the bloodiest fight in boxing history.

The main event was competitive from the start. Attell shocked many by trading with Murphy at the opening bell. The New Yorker was not known as a hard puncher, but a steady and willing one, while Attell had previously been known as a defensive master. Instead, Attell dug into Murphy's body and drove him back. Murphy fired back but could not escape the ropes. At the round's close, Attell returned to his corner confident that he had won the first, but with a badly bloodied nose to show for his efforts.

Murphy would be warned for holding repeatedly throughout the fight, beginning in the second round; the crowd jeered the tactic, but he routinely returned to it. Attell almost went through the ropes in the second, but managed to fight his way back. Still, Murphy was the aggressor through the majority of round two. Attell returned to his stool unsteadily, "bleeding freely," and sporting a badly swollen left eye. Throughout the crowd, talk began to circulate that Attell was finished as a championship caliber fighter. Round three looked to be more of the same punishment for the ex-champion until he landed a devastating hook toward the round's end that surprised and staggered

Murphy. The moment seemed to re-energize Attell, who came out guns a-blazing to the body once more in the fourth, and by the round's end, Murphy was spitting up blood. To save himself, Murphy returned to his holding tactics in the fifth and mauled Attell against the ropes, despite boos from the audience. The combined effects of shoving and a right uppercut to the face put the ex-champ through the ropes, but he somehow clambered back in before he could be counted out. Afterward, it seemed neither corner could stem their man's bleeding.

The brawl briefly became a chess match in the sixth round as both fighters probably waited for a second wind. Attell, always the thinking man's fighter, took advantage of the slower pace and displayed some of the boxing precision of old. Clearly realizing that a scientific boxing match was not the way to go, Murphy came out aggressive once more for the seventh and mauled Attell from corner to corner throughout. A three-punch combination caused Attell's nose to "fairly spurt" blood. Murphy came out just as fiercely for the eighth, but this time was met with a more determined opponent. Attell landed two great shots to the New Yorker's mid-section, and people in the ringside seats could hear Murphy's grunt. Attell looked over at the opposing corner and gave them a cheeky wink from his one good eye before sending home two more hard shots to the gut just as the round closed. The crowd erupted in cheers of "Good boy, Abe!" They would be even more encouraged by what they saw in the ninth. Attell boxed and moved beautifully, making Harlem Tommy look foolish with one missed punch after another. Again, Attell dug into the body and smiled mockingly at Murphy's corner. It was Abe's best round, and his hometown fans were ecstatic.

At the opening of round ten, Attell suddenly seemed spent, and it was Murphy's turn to dig down deep and dominate, landing lefts and rights incessantly to the ex-champ's face. At one point, both fighter's exchanged hard right hands, but it was Murphy's that drew still more blood from his opponent. Between every round, Attell's corner now seemed panicked over their man's bleeding, which refused to relent.

As the fight entered its second half, both fighters showed grit and determination, fighting desperately. Attell resumed his attack to the body while taking repeated blows to his blood-spattered face. At the start of round twelve, it seemed both fighters were exhausted. Not a single blow was landed in the first two minutes, but eventually Murphy came on and landed a series of punches to the head of his weakened opponent. Then, in yet another astounding change in momentum, Attell came alive in round thirteen. The pair slugged it out for most of that frame, with little between them, until a series of hard body shots pushed Tommy back, giving Attell his best round since the ninth. Still, his corner men seemed at a loss to stop the claret streaming from his nose. His entire face and torso were by now covered in red.

Attell spent the first part of round fourteen dancing circles around Murphy "like a jumping jack." When the New Yorker did catch up, he could do little but hold and catch warnings from referee Welsh. Towards the round's end, the pair slugged it out on mostly even terms. To open the fifteenth, Attell landed three hard shots to Murphy's body once again, each of them hard enough that the impact was heard by people in the stands. He began "chatting" with Murphy's corner. At this, Murphy started throwing punches back, and the pair returned to slugging, though Attell seemed the fresher of the two at this point.

A huge right hand from Murphy resounded with an audible whack to open the sixteenth and changed the fight's momentum yet again. Murphy pushed his stunned opponent back to the ropes, with Attell capable of almost no defense or resistance. He managed to survive, and once Murphy tired, seized his chance. Abe slugged his way to the center of the ring, where he landed several left hooks to Tommy's face and opened a huge gash on the New Yorker's lips, which were already red anyway from the blood he had been coughing up. Once again, both fighters were bleeding all over each other. As they battled their way to the end of the round, Attell now seemed to have once more gained control of the action. Still, many could not help but wonder why the master tactician was engaging in trench warfare with a bigger opponent.

Murphy wrestled for much of round seventeen and then landed two big blows to the jaw that sent Attell's head "back a foot each time." That prompted what one ringside reporter described as "one of the fiercest rallies of the fight," with Attell doing a shade better in execution. Murphy turned things around yet again in the eighteenth, forcing Attell to hold at least once, and nearly putting him through the ropes again with a left to the jaw later in the round. Though Attell tried to fight back, Murphy was hitting him at will by the time the round ended. It was more of the same in the nineteenth. Attell continued to try to hang in there by landing punches to the body, but it was clear he was fading badly. Perhaps more humiliating for the hometown fighter, the crowd was now cheering Harlem Tommy Murphy.



As the twentieth and final round opened, both men knew they had been in a close fight. Murphy had dominated the previous two rounds, but he had to close the show against a star of Attell's caliber. The boxers "fought like a pair of tigers" on the inside. The crowd's cacophonous roar seemed just as animalistic. Three successive blows from Murphy sent Attell's head back, and the drained ex-champ finally relented and fell into a clinch. Murphy walked his man back to the ropes, broke his arms free, and let loose with constant lefts and rights, chasing a knockout. Sensing the end, the crowd again erupted, some cheering Murphy's assault, others trying to encourage Attell to

fight back. It was clear that Abe could not even muster a single punch; his arms hung helplessly at his sides. "Murphy's lack of hitting power saved him," reported *The San Francisco Call*. Attell fell into another clinch and desperately held on until the final bell.

Ad Wolgast, the reigning lightweight champion of the world, was ringside. "It was the hardest fight I ever saw, and I didn't think Abe could stand the punching," he told a reporter. Referee Welsh, the sole judge of the fight, gave his verdict to Harlem Tommy Murphy, awarding him the upset victory. The winner walked over to Attell's corner to find the man crying. He reached out to shake his hand, but Attell looked at him with disgust and refused. *The San Francisco Call* writer considered Attell "a sorry sight." "If Abe did not sport a cauliflower ear," mused another reporter, "it was because there was no room for one, all the available space being occupied by other tributes to Murphy's punching power." Both fighters were so badly bloodied that they were barely distinguishable from one another. Attell's cornermen continued to try to patch him up on his stool while newspapermen swarmed him. "No statement, no statement," was all he would say.

The day after the fight, Jim Coffroth revealed to the press that Jim Buckley, Murphy's manager, had notified him before the fight that Attell had repeatedly approached Buckley looking to pay Murphy to get himself disqualified during the match, offers which were refused. Of course, Attell denied these allegations and quickly filed a \$20,000 defamation suit against Buckley, the results of which are not known.

Newspaper writers surmised that Attell had not trained properly, and that his conditioning gave way under Murphy's aggression and weight advantage. On August 3, he battled Murphy for a fourth time at the Mission Street Arena. This time, all felt Attell was in better shape, and there were no accusations of foul play. It was another hard-fought struggle, and referee Jim Griffin could not choose between the two, declaring a twenty-round draw. That would be the last hurrah for Attell as a topflight fighter. He managed to book a few more big-name fights, but his performances were disappointments, and he never got another shot at Kilbane. After an ill-advised comeback fight in 1917, he hung up his gloves for good with a record of 91 wins (53 by KO), 9 losses, 18 draws, 51 no-decision fights, and 2-no contests. In 1919, he re-entered the headlines due to his alleged involvement in the fixing of baseball's World Series but was not convicted. Like many retired boxers, he owned a bar in his later years. Abraham Attell passed away on February 7, 1970, in Libertyville, New York at age 85. Still considered one of history's finest featherweights, he was posthumously inducted as part of the inaugural class in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990.

As for Harlem Tommy Murphy, he continued to battle the best lightweights in the world for years to come, adding men like Wolgast and Packey McFarland to his resumé, though he did not always come out on top. On April 17, 1914, he finally got his shot at a championship, but lost a twenty-round decision to reigning lightweight champ Willie Ritchie. Once again, the papers praised his courage in a hard-fought bout. Like Attell, he called it quits in 1917. His record stood at 20 wins (12 by knockout), 5 losses, and 7 draws, with 65 no-decisions. In later life, he operated a real estate business out of the Flatbush neighborhood in Brooklyn. Tommy Murphy passed away on November 26, 1958, in Brooklyn at age 73. He was among the very best lightweight contenders of his generation.